

# Building Farm Resilience: The Prospects and Challenges of Organic Farming

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**ABSTRACT.** The concept of socio-ecological resilience is applied to agricultural systems in general and to the farm level in particular. Resilience has three defining characteristics: the amount of change the system can undergo while maintaining its functions and structures, the degree of self-organization, and the capacity for learning and adaptation. To assess the resilience of a farming system, various elements that can build resilience are identified. Using these elements, the paper assesses organic agriculture using the IFOAM Basic Standard. The analysis shows that organic farming has a number of promising characteristics building resilience. However, when analyzing the current development of organic

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farming practice in light of the effects of government regulation and market dynamics, there is a danger that this quality is lost. Therefore, conversion alone may not be enough to ensure farm resilience. The ability of organic farming to realize its resilience building potential will depend on the ability of the organic movement to adapt and learn from the current experiences. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Sustainability, resilience, organic farming, IFOAM, socio-ecological systems, standards, regulation, market pressures

### INTRODUCTION

Concern about the environmental effect of intensive farming has led to increased demands for environmentally friendly agricultural production methods. In particular, public attention and policy makers have focused on organic farming as it can provide a combination of environmental, social and economic benefits. This has resulted in a widespread agreement that organic farming displays many elements characterizing a sustainable farming system (see Rossi and Nota, 2000; Stolze et al., 2000; Hansen et al., 2001; Rigby and Cáceres, 2001).

When considering sustainability, there is a growing awareness that in our world, where rapid change seems to be the norm (Meppem and Gill, 1998), the ability to adapt to ongoing change and cope with unpredictability is decisive both for a farming system as well as for an individual farm. Despite this recognition, and the fact that most definitions of sustainability do not preclude this dynamic aspect, it is seldom the center of attention. On the other hand, resilience focuses explicitly on the capacity to change and reveals the shortcomings of a focus on stability and the accompanying command-and-control approach of classical resource management (cf. Holling and Meffe, 1996). To emphasize the adaptive capacity required to achieve sustainability, we focus on the concept of resilience as defined by Holling (1973), i.e., the magnitude of disturbance that can be experienced before a system moves into a different state with different sets of controls. Or, in the words of van der Leeuw (2000: 359), socio-ecological resilience is the “capacity to lead a continued existence by incorporating structural change.”