

Organic farming between professionalisation and conventionalisation

The need for a more discerning view of farmer practices

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Abstract – The recent changes in organic farming practices (e.g. larger farms, simplification of crop rotations, organic farms without animal husbandry) are sometimes seen as a first indication of conventionalisation of on-farm practices. Although conventionalisation is possible, changes in organic farming also need to be seen from an evolutionary perspective: change is necessary to adapt to a changing environment. It might thus be useful to take a closer look at the changes taking place, distinguishing between first order changes, i.e. changes that do not undermine organic farming's principles (e.g. professionalisation) and second order changes, i.e. changes that may lead organic farming onto the same development trajectory as conventional farming.¹

INTRODUCTION

Organic farming is based on principles meant to inspire action, e.g. those stated by IFOAM (2005): the principles of health: "organic agriculture should sustain and enhance the health of soil, plant, animal, human and planet as one and indivisible"; ecology: "organic agriculture should be based on living ecological systems and cycles, work with them, emulate them and help sustain them"; fairness: "organic agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities" and care: "organic agriculture should be managed in a precautionary and responsible manner to protect the health and well-being of current and future generations and the environment". These principles have a strong ethical component and display a much wider view of agriculture than the Good Agricultural Practice which guides conventional farming. Although a proposed revision of the EU regulation on organic farming (EC 2005) would include objectives and principles, so far the values underlying organic farming have not been codified in rules and regulations. It has been argued that the dominant regulatory focus on inputs is likely to encourage entrants who can substitute allowed materials for disallowed materials (Rosset and Altieri, 1997), allowing for a rationalisation and simplification of organic meanings (Allan and Kovach, 2000).

Most observers would agree that organic farming is undergoing profound changes as it is growing out of its niche. With its inclusion in conventional food

chains, organic farming has expanded from agricultural products sold at regional farmers' markets to include industrially processed food purchased in supermarkets. Given the interconnectedness of the food chain, it is likely that on-farm practices are influenced by the commercialism that is driving the growth of the organic sector.

WHAT IS CONVENTIONALISATION?

According to the conventionalization scenario, organic farming is becoming a slightly modified version of modern conventional agriculture, replicating the same history, resulting in many of the same basic social, technical and economic characteristics (Hall and Moggyorody, 2001). Organic farming could thus be subjected to 'modernisation', i.e. the creation of scale economies at the farm level (larger farms), increased reliance on purchased non-farm inputs (machinery, fertilizers, feed, agrichemicals) and resource substitution (capital for land and labour).

Guthmann (2004) has shown that organic farming can be subject to conventionalisation, as exemplified by high value crops (e.g. salads) in organic commodity chains in California. There, even alternative-oriented farmers are being pressured to adopt a number of conventional cropping, labour and marketing practices to survive, unleashing the logic of intensification.

This argument has sparked considerable debate regarding the nature and direction of current changes in organic farming. Various authors have presented empirical evidence from a range of countries and discussed whether these developments had a universal and unavoidable character (e.g. DuPuis, 2000; Hall and Moggyorody, 2001; Campbell and Liepins, 2001). The studies suggest that organic farming is developing in distinct ways in different national contexts. The speed, degree and type of change seems to be influenced by the state support organic farming receives and by the farm structures on which it has been built.

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

If the type of change exemplified by conventionalisation can undermine organic farming's principles, it does not imply that organic farming must remain unchanged, fossilised in the way it was practiced by the 'pioneers'. Change is an integral part of organic farming, which after all is not a luddite movement seeking to turn back the clock. In many of the ar-

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guments around conventionalisation, what organic farming is and what it should remain is not clearly defined. It is seen as a given, perceived as self-evident and the departures from "it" are discussed. The danger is to reify an idealised image of "the" practices on organic farms, practices which may never have existed as widely as sometimes implied.

An example might be the concept of organic farms as being mixed crop-livestock farms so as to ensure closed nutrient cycles. As pointed out by Sundrum (2005), animal husbandry was not an integral part of organic farming at its origin. Whereas in bio-dynamic farming animals have always been and remain an integral part of the farm, this is not the case for organic farming as initiated by Sir Albert Howard or Lady Eve Balfour who focused on soil fertility and humus management. Also, it was only with the EU the regulation for organic livestock production – adopted in 1999, eight years after regulating crop production – that many aspects of organic animal husbandry were operationalised. Indeed, the regulation is much more detailed than the IFOAM or other organic farmer association defined so far (Sundrum 2005). Not least, the definition of animal welfare within organic farming is still being discussed (see Lund and Röcklingsberg 2001).

The example of animal husbandry shows that what is now perceived as a core element of organic farming has changed in the past. This is mirrored in the fact that the wording of the IFOAM principles has changed over time. The question then is what changes are a necessary, acceptable and even desirable part of the development of organic farming and what changes may be seen as detrimental, e.g. because they undermine the principles it is based on.

It may be useful to draw on a fundamental distinction in the meaning of the word "change", as was noted by Watzlawick et al. (1974:10). They point out that there are two different types of change: 'first order change' that occurs within a given system which itself remains unchanged, and 'second order change' whose occurrence changes the system itself.

First-order change in the organic farming context would thus include change in behaviour while leaving the organic farming system intact. It can be illustrated by the differences between organic and bio-dynamic farmers: although their practices and approaches show a number of differences, they both comply with the principles of organic farming. In other words first-order change covers adaptations which may change behaviour, but do not affect organic farming's organisation and fundamental values. This could be termed professionalisation.

Second-order change involves a shift from one way of behaving to another and entails a discontinuity. It is a change in the rules that govern behavioural patterns, resulting in a fundamental reorganisation and permanent changes in interactions. This may be exemplified by conventionalisation, where organic is just another quality product range taking advantage of a lucrative market. The values of organic farming are at best instrumentalised as a marketing strategy.

If the distinction between first- and second order change is to be helpful in analysing the differences

that can be observed on-farm, a clearer picture must be drawn of what they mean in terms of concrete farming practices. Since the distinction is related to the principles guiding organic farming, it seems important to take a holistic approach of farm practices instead of limiting the analysis to easily measurable indicators such as farm size or the purchase of off-farm inputs, which can be meaningless if seen in isolation (e.g. in the case of purchased compost).

CONCLUSIONS

The point is not to downplay the role conventionalisation can play to divorce organic farming practices from its principles. However, not all change in organic farming practices are in and of themselves problematic. To the contrary: organic farming should be expected to adapt to a changing environment. The question is: where does professionalisation stop and conventionalisation start?

This has implications beyond a purely academic debate on what label to put on an observed phenomenon. It has implications whether organic farming is seen as solely equating the (sometimes biased) perception of farmers and practices that characterised the pioneers, or if organic farming is defined in a more inclusive way, thereby potentially attracting a wider range of farmers.

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