

# Why regionality is an important value in organic agriculture: the case of the Netherlands

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**Abstract** -. Organic agriculture is a system of production and consumption in which values play a prominent role. The new IFOAM principles reflect the current worldwide consensus on the most important values of organic agriculture. Regionality or proximity is not explicitly mentioned in these principles. Also in the present EU-regulation on organic agriculture hardly any standards are formulated concerning this issue. On the other hand, some private organic labels do have extra standards - concerning for instance the origin of organic feed - while both producers and consumers of organic products often mention regional production as an important value. The question is whether, and if so why regionality is an important issue to be dealt with in the upcoming reformed EU-regulation on organic agriculture. To answer this question, the consequences are evaluated of the development of intensive, large-scale organic animal production in the Netherlands in the light of the value of regionality.<sup>1</sup>

## ORGANIC AGRICULTURE : A VALUE-DRIVEN MOVEMENT

From the very beginning, the founders of organic agriculture emphasized different values as the basis of the movement. This diversity of values has recently been integrated into four Principles of Organic Agriculture by IFOAM: health, ecology, fairness and care. With the rise and growth of organic agriculture, it became important to establish minimum rules and standards. This enabled some actors in the organic chain to adhere to these rules, showing no concern for their underlying values. For these actors, organic agriculture is no more than a market-niche. Alroe & Noe (2006) distinguish this market-niche view from two other perspectives: on the one hand organic agriculture as a protest movement, and on the other as a value-driven logo-poietic perspective. In a research on different perspectives within organic agriculture, Meeusen et al. (2005) consider the value-driven 'responsible chain' as currently the most important in organic agriculture, although they assume that the market oriented 'calculating organic chain' has the highest growth potential. In this article, we consider values as highly important for the future development of organic agriculture.

## REGIONALITY AS AN ORGANIC VALUE

Earlier, IFOAM mentioned that 'to foster local and regional production and distribution', constituted one of the 'principle aims of organic production and

processing'. In the Principles (accepted in August 2005), regionality is not explicitly but only somewhat cryptically, mentioned as part of the Principle of Ecology: 'Organic management must be adapted to local conditions, ecology, culture and scale'.

In a research on values of organic stakeholders in five European countries (Padel, 2005), regional production was mentioned as one of several important values which are 'not covered in detail by the new IFOAM principles'. In this report, Padel concludes that 'for many it appeared that close proximity between production and consumption was seen as a natural progression from other organic values...'. The dimensions of proximity mentioned by stakeholders include: farm income, traceability, trust, communication, food miles and product quality. However, these values are also important outside the organic movement. So, if regionality is considered to be an important value, this should not only come from the opinions of stakeholders but we should also be able to derive it from the IFOAM principles.

## REGIONALITY IN RELATION TO CURRENT IFOAM PRINCIPLES

The organic value of regionality is primarily closely linked to the Principle of Ecology in which a wider cluster of values is involved (natural cycles and ecological balances, renewable resources, reducing external inputs, conservation of (bio)diversity). The basic case here is that if production cycles become too extensive, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep nutrient cycles as closed as possible, while it often involves higher energy use.

Other important dimensions of regionality are implied in the Principles of Care and Fairness:

- Enlarging production cycles reduces the possibilities of communication, traceability and, in the process, trust. As a result this might also negatively affect product quality;
- In order to feel responsible (to care) for the environment, the animals (health) and the people (fairness) in the organic chain, it is important to create and maintain transparency and to ensure that all stakeholders feel involved.

For some consumer products, negative effects of reduced transparency may also be overcome by new communication methods (based on unique product codes and web-based product information; see for example [www.natureandmore.nl](http://www.natureandmore.nl)). Still, for intermediate bulk products such as animal feed (but proba-

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bly also food ingredients), this seems to be virtually impossible as too many actors are involved, processing and mixing the original product several times.

#### A CASE : ORGANIC PIG AND POULTRY PRODUCTION IN THE NETHERLANDS

The following case of the Netherlands shows that a lack of explicit regulation of regionality can have serious negative effects on the performance of organic agriculture regarding several IFOAM principles. Approximately until 1995, organic poultry and pigs in the Netherlands were mainly kept in relatively small production units, often integrated on mixed farms (with dairy and/or arable production). From 1995 onwards, veterinary rules became more tight, hindering the small-scale production of pigs and poultry. Simultaneously, marketing possibilities for organic meat and eggs (especially abroad) grew, and processing and retail companies increased their product specifications. In 2003, more than 50% of the Dutch pig production had already been concentrated on specialized farms with 100 sows plus belonging fattening pigs, or more than 13,000 laying hens. Since then, the total number of laying hens has doubled, and the main pork-processing industries stopped collecting small numbers of pigs. Production in the Netherlands is now dominated by relatively large-scale, specialised farms, mainly owned by recent converters with hardly any land of their own (on average around 7.5 ha). They sell a major part of their manure production (which is around 540 kg N per ha).

This development could take place because no standards had been formulated concerning the origin of pig and poultry feed, in contrast with the standards for organic dairy production, where at least 50% of the feed should be home-produced. As a result, most of the feed is from organic origin (>80%), but only a minor part (<10%) is produced at the pig and poultry farms themselves. Moreover, most of the animal feed concentrates (>70%) originates from abroad, with a growing percentage of concentrate feed coming from distant areas such as Latin America and the Far East. If all animal feed were to be produced within the Netherlands, more than the total present area of organic arable production would be required (Prins, 2005). Through all this, the structure of the organic sector has become highly comparable with that of conventional agriculture in the Netherlands.

This development has negative side-effects, such as:

- an increasing conflict with the consumer image of organic products and production;
- environmental problems as a result of inefficient nutrient utilization by high concentrations of animals kept loose (high phosphate loads and a contribution to the acidification of natural areas due to ammonia evaporation);
- higher energy consumption for feed production due to transport: Bos (2005) calculated that a pig ration with 100% inland-produced feed requires 25% less energy compared to a current ration with only 15% inland feed ;
- few and highly standardized human-livestock interactions. Large animal numbers limit the possibilities for adequate individual animal care, which is

likely to be essential in order to improve animal health status in organic production without extensive use of medicines and preventive measures hamming the integrity of the animals (such as debeaking hens to prevent feather picking and cannibalism).

#### CONCLUSIONS

The development of the pig and poultry production in the Netherlands described above has been possible because it is not in conflict with the official regulations and standards, even though it is not in harmony with the values of organic agriculture. Regional production based on proximity and nearness is an important value for many stakeholders in the organic chain, and is implied by the IFOAM Principles. It is important partly for ecological reasons (closed cycles and reduction of energy use), but also because it is more difficult to 'care' and to allocate responsibility when production cycles become too extensive. Worldwide production, distribution and marketing systems tend to become less open and transparent. It also becomes increasingly difficult to attain and uphold values such as sustainability, securing farm income and fair prices. The health and well-being of animals is likely to be negatively affected, too, by the trend towards large-scale production, facilitated by large-scale feed transports.

Whether this is considered to be bad or not depends on the perspectives held concerning organic agriculture. If organic agriculture is defined as a market-niche only, the consequences may not be seen as 'negative', although it could diminish market perspectives for organic products if the distinction with conventional agriculture becomes too small.

If, on the other hand, organic agriculture is seen as a value-driven approach, which it is and should be in our opinion, these consequences cannot be tolerated and require complementary standards. When it is the intention of EU Regulation to take values more seriously, then the value of regionality (nearness) should get a more prominent place than it has now.

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