

IFOAM and Organic Farming in the World

Herve La Prairie and Bernward Geier
President and Executive Director, Respectively
International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements
Daoulas, France and Tholey- Theley, Germany

Introduction

Organic farming is much more than a food production method; with its holistic approach to agriculture it represents a different way of life. This is the conviction of the 500 member organizations and institutions that comprises the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) and which represents the organic agriculture movement in more than 100 countries worldwide. This paper discusses the role and purpose of the IFOAM organization as well as its goals, current activities and future prospects.

IFOAM's Major Goals and Activities

The principal role of the IFOAM Directorate is that of coordinating the network of organic agriculture movements worldwide. IFOAM is a democratically-structured organization with duly elected officers. Activities within IFOAM or co-sponsored by IFOAM are carried out by our World Board of Directors, various committees, working groups and task forces. Our major goals and activities are:

- to exchange knowledge and expertise among our members and inform the public about the merits of organic agriculture;
- to represent IFOAM in parliamentary, administrative and policy-making forums (e.g., IFOAM has consultative status with the United Nations organization);
- to establish and regularly revise the "IFOAM Basic Standards of Organic Agriculture and Food Processing (these standards are translated into some 17 languages); and
- to ensure the quality of organically-grown products worldwide through The IFOAM Accreditation Programme.

Opportunities with IFOAM

IFOAM offers many opportunities for information exchange at numerous international, continental and regional IFOAM conferences, and through our publications such as the magazine "Ecology and Farming" and conference proceedings. Our increasing international outreach activities (e.g., with UNO, CSD, UNDP, FAO, IUCN, Green-peace, WWF) give the organic movement a voice and influence which can no longer be ignored by those responsible for agricultural policy.

Through our directory "Organic Agriculture Worldwide," and also our network of international contacts we can link with partners in any area of organic agriculture. The worldwide organic movement has now progressed beyond being merely a niche for production and marketing; thus, further growth and extension of IFOAM's network and partnerships are essential. The Federation offers many opportunities for cooperating and benefiting from our worldwide movement and network.

Organic Agriculture: A Rapidly Growing Reality Worldwide

A close look at IFOAM and its membership provides an interesting insight about the growth of the organic agriculture movement. IFOAM was founded in 1972 and by 1987 (some 15 years later) had evolved into an "umbrella" federation of 100 member organizations and institutions in 25 countries. During the last 8 years, we have experienced an al-most "explosive" development in the organic agriculture movement worldwide, as evidenced by a five-fold increase in our IFOAM membership which now includes more than 500 member organizations and institutions.

There are a number of reasons for this dynamic development, but it is primarily due to the growing interest in organic farming by a) both developed and developing countries in the southern

hemisphere and b) emerging countries of eastern Europe that were once part of the communist “Eastern Block”. The interest in organic farming is primarily “market driven” because of concerns for food safety and quality, and human health; although environmental concerns are also paramount.

Conversion from Conventional Agriculture to Organic Farming

The rapid conversion to organic farming is most apparent at the farm and production level. An example of the dramatic shift from conventional agriculture to organic farming is what has happened in Austria which in 1992 had some 2000 farms that were practicing organic or biodynamic farming methods. By 1995, this number had increased tenfold to 20,000 farms, including those in transition from conventional to organic farming. In the Austrian states of Salzburg and Tyrol, approximately 25 percent of the total agricultural area is farmed organically.

A similar situation has occurred in Denmark where the expansion of organic farming is largely based on consumer demand. Most supermarkets in that country now stock a wide variety of organically-grown vegetables and dairy products. Some estimates predict that in the near future, some 20 percent of the food products marketed in Denmark will be supplied from organic farms.

In Sweden, the parliament has passed a resolution to develop 10 percent of the agriculture into organic enterprises during the next five years. England, Finland and Iceland have now established similar goals. Similar developments are occurring in Germany, Switzerland, Mexico and the USA. In Mexico, for example, some 100,000 small farmers are now involved in the production of organically-grown coffee for the fair trade market.

Market Development for Organic Foods

Thus far, the development of markets for organically-grown food products has kept pace with the rapid conversion from conventional to organic farms. The market value of certified organic products sold annually in the USA has now reached some \$3 billion USD.

In Germany, there are more than 3000 natural food shops and “Reformhauser” selling organic foods, which are also increasingly being sold through German supermarkets. Many of the organic farms market their products directly to consumers at the farm gate or through local farmer’s markets. A good example that organic farming is being widely accepted in Germany is the baby food sector. The leading baby food company in Germany, with some 1000 employees and gross annual sales of 350 million DM, recently stated that they would only be using certified organically-grown products in processing baby foods. Currently, about 60 percent of their raw food stock is from certified organic sources. This decision will likely force competitors to do the same.

Rapidly growing consumer demands for organically-grown foods are reported from countries such as Japan, Argentina and Australia. IFOAM is also assisting developing countries (i.e., so-called “Third World countries”) in establishing local markets for organic producers. In this regard, we have taken steps to ensure a close cooperation between organic agriculture and the fair trade movement.

Future Prospects for Organic Agriculture and IFOAM

Based on the few examples presented here, there are good reasons for optimism concerning the future expansion of organic farming worldwide and the development of stable markets for organically-grown products on local, regional and international levels. Sound scientific research continues to support and enhance the credibility of the organic agriculture movement. Research has shown that organic farming is adaptable over a wide range of agroecological, agroclimatic, and socioeconomic conditions. Moreover, organic farming offers highly acceptable, and cost-effective solutions to difficult problems confronting agriculture and the environment.

While the pioneers of the organic movement were often considered to be “extreme” and “revolutionary,” they laid the foundation that has allowed us to demonstrate the potential that organic farming has to offer. The growing reality of our movement has ensured that international institutions and governments can no longer ignore this “natural” and holistic approach to farming.

IFOAM will continue to promote the concept and practice of organic farming worldwide and ensure that “organic issues” will be on all future agricultural policy agendas. The future aspects to be bright.