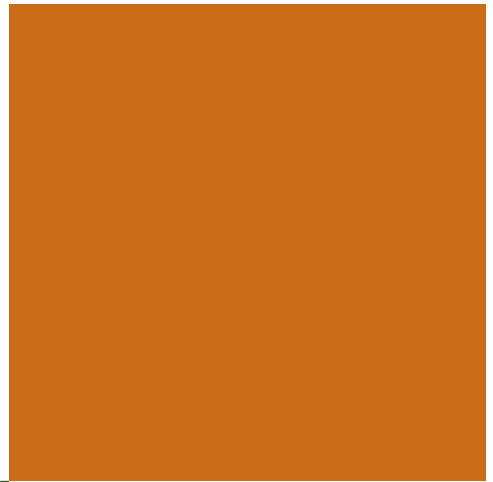


copa\*cogeca

european farmers

european agri-cooperatives



# The role of Organic Farming in European Agriculture



# The role of Organic Farming in European Agriculture

## 1. COPA-COGECA: THE VOICE OF EUROPEAN FARMERS AND AGRI-COOPERATIVES

Copa and Cogeca are the organisations that represent European farmers and agri-cooperatives – be they conventional, organic or integrated. They speak on behalf of some 30 million farmers and their families and over 40,000 agricultural cooperatives. Many of these are organic farmers and agri-cooperatives.

For example, in Austria, Denmark and Finland, Copa-Cogeca represents all certified organic producers. In Germany it represents roughly 65% and in the UK more than 35% of certified organic producers.

## 2. THERE IS NO FOOD WITHOUT FARMERS

Farming in Europe is extremely important, as it produces food, which is essential for life. Farmers produce raw and processed agricultural products and provide raw materials for the food, feed, energy and textile industries. Farming also keeps rural areas alive, preventing a rural exodus to cities. Finally, it contributes to environmental preservation through the regulatory provisions included in the CAP, voluntary agri-environmental measures and environmental requirements included in voluntary certification schemes. An example of such schemes is organic farming.

Farmers and their cooperatives are the key players in the food chain and – regardless of farming type – share a number of concerns and interests. Farming is an economic activity; farmers therefore need to receive fair prices for their products. This is why it is important to make sure that margins are distributed fairly across the food chain.

In an increasingly liberalised market, it is also important to inform consumers about the characteristics of European agricultural production. Production standards from imported products, be they conventional or organic, may be lower than those applied to European products. Promotional measures which support EU production standards enable consumers to make informed choices. Consumers should also be informed of the types of products (conventional, organic, integrated, etc) that are available to them in the market. Demand for organic products is growing in the long-run and must be the driver of European organic production.

## 3. ORGANIC FARMING ADDS VALUE TO EU AGRICULTURE

Like any type of farming, organic farming is an economic activity and, as such, needs to be viable. Moreover, organic farming has a number of special qualities when it comes to environmental protection and can pass valuable know-how on environmentally-friendly farming practices on to other types of farming. In recent years there has been increasing consumer demand for organic produce. All aspects of organic production need to be developed further in Europe in order to meet this increasing interest.



### 3.1 What is organic farming?

Organic farming is a holistic production system based on the management of natural resources which restricts the use of non-renewable and external resources on the farm, strictly limits the use of chemically-synthesised inputs and rules out the use of GMOs.

This type of production encourages preventive rather than curative measures and mechanical and physical growing methods rather than the use of chemicals. It also favours the selection of varieties and species which are adapted to the conditions inherent to each production area as well as closed farming cycles through the recycling of farm effluent and by-products of plant and animal origin.

Organic farming therefore has a number of special characteristics when it comes to the production of wholesome and tasty food, animal welfare and the preservation of the environment.

At present, European legislation on organic farming<sup>1</sup> covers live or unprocessed agricultural products, processed agricultural products for use as food, feed and plant propagating material and seeds for cultivation. **Copa-Cogeca believes that the scope of the legislation should be extended to include non-food farm products, like textiles and cosmetics, and “catering” products (for restaurants, canteens, schools, etc.).** Some of these products are already on the market. They are, however, covered by different private rules and are not subject to harmonised European minimum standards. Harmonisation at European level is needed in order to improve the running of the market and to guarantee that all organic products bought by consumers provide a certain basic quality.

### 3.2 Organic farming<sub>2</sub> is an increasingly important way of producing

With 7.8 million hectares, Europe, after Oceania, is in second place when it comes to organic production throughout the world. Organic production in the EU is slightly increasing. In 2007, it covered almost 4% of EU agricultural area.

The development of organic production and consumption varies greatly from one EU Member State to the next. Italy, Spain and Germany are the countries with the largest amount of land devoted to organic farming, with 1,150,253 ha, 988,323 ha and 865,336 ha respectively. The main consumer countries are Germany (5.3 billion euros turnover), the UK (2.6 billion euros), France and Italy (both with 1.9 billion euros).

In terms of percentage, Austria is the main producing country, with 15.76% of its agricultural area under organic production<sup>3</sup>.

1 Regulation 834/2007

2 Data from 2007 (EU-27). Source: FIBL

3 Austrian Ministry of Agriculture





### 3.3 Organic farming responds to consumer demand

Conventional farming covers several types of farming practices and systems from highly-specialised to low-input agriculture.

Organic production is defined by both European legislation and national certification schemes. Both share the principles mentioned in point 3.1.

In the following sub-chapters, we analyse the characteristics of this type of production from an economic, environmental and social (health and welfare) point of view.

#### 3.3.1 Economic aspects

Organic production is recognised by the Commission as a quality scheme, together with Protected Designations of Origin (PDOs), Protected Geographical Indications (PGIs) and Traditional Specialities Guaranteed (TSGs).

More extensive production methods and sometimes lower yields in organic production can mean higher costs for farmers, resulting in higher prices for consumers. It is important to communicate to consumers the reasons for these potential extra costs. EU supermarkets have been dedicating more and more space to organic products on their shelves over recent years to attract the attention of their target groups.

At the same time, some European organic production is sold through short distribution chains. Products are sold on street markets or directly by the farmer or the cooperative through their shops or consumer buying groups. Since these chains directly benefit farmers and cooperatives, they gain a profitable margin for their produce. Given that many organic farmers and cooperatives also produce processed agricultural products - cheese, yoghurt, jam, etc. - they are able to receive higher margins from the added-value of these products. Short supply chains can also bring down final prices for consumers due to efficiency, and highlight the value of farmers' work. **In Copa-Cogeca's opinion it is necessary to promote short distribution chains alongside other distribution chains when marketing European agricultural produce.**

The potential for developing organic farming further depends on consumer demand. While some consumers cannot afford to buy organic products because of the price, others are simply not informed of the characteristics of this type of production. **Copa-Cogeca is of the opinion that information and promotion campaigns are needed to better inform European consumers about organic production and to boost its development.**

In Copa-Cogeca's view, consumer confidence in this type of production is the key to its development. Consumers would not understand a relaxation in production rules that would weaken the difference between conventional and organic production. **Organic production standards and production methods should continue to evolve to meet organic consumers' expectations. In this context, it is necessary to invest more funds into research that enables farmers not to make use of derogations and to foster improvements in production techniques. Copa-Cogeca wishes to reiterate the fact that the organic farming cannot be developed by jeopardising the economic viability of this type of production (i.e. by reducing the prices paid to producers).**



### 3.3.2 Environmental aspects

As indicated in the European legislation, the preservation of the environment is one of the objectives of organic production.

In this context, **there is an opportunity for organic farming, as the front-runner in agriculture, to pass on specific know-how in order to allow conventional farming to continue to improve environmental protection. This is why there is an increasing need for cooperation between both types of farming.**

The benefits of organic farming for the environment are as follows:

- **Soil**

Organic production is based on “the maintenance and enhancement of soil life and natural soil fertility, soil stability and soil biodiversity preventing and combating soil compaction and soil erosion, and the nourishing of plants primarily through the soil ecosystem”<sup>4</sup>.

Organic farming systems are characterised by a relatively high organic matter in soil. Organic matter is maintained and improved through crop rotation, pulse crops that fix nitrogen from the air in the soil, green cover, manure and mixed farming systems. These agricultural practices are encouraged in organic production because production rules restrict the use of external inputs and chemically synthesised fertilisers.

The supply of organic material from plant residues and manure provides favourable conditions for biological soil activity (earthworms). Earthworms improve the soil’s physical properties (porosity), mobilise nutrients by breaking down fresh residues and reduce the risk of soil erosion.

- **Water**

Restrictions in the use of chemically synthesised pesticides, the ban on the use of mineral nitrogen fertilisers and low farm animal stocking rates help reduce leaching rates and water pollution in general.

Further benefits can be achieved by some practices not included in the legislation but which are well known to farmers, such as timing tillage properly in order to reduce nutrient leaking or keeping animals on straw in order to absorb excrement.

- **Biodiversity**

One of the objectives of the organic farming production system is to achieve a high degree of biodiversity<sup>5</sup>. Organic farming has a positive impact on biodiversity both in terms of domesticated species and floral and faunal diversity on the surface and in the soil.

This type of production relies greatly on traditional varieties and breeds that are adapted to local conditions and therefore more resilient to pests and diseases. The use of crop rotation and the high diversity of crops under rotation also

---

4 Regulation 834/2007

5 Regulation 834/2007





favours the biodiversity of domesticated species.

On the other hand, organic farming systems help preserve floral and faunal diversity in field margins and neighbouring biotopes. This is due to restrictions in the use of chemically synthesised pesticides, the ban on mineral nitrogen fertilisers and the maintenance of natural elements – strips, hedgerows, etc. – as part of the local ecological balance, which provide a reservoir for the predators of crop pests.

- **Climate change**

Climate change is not mentioned in the objectives of the organic farming legislation, yet it is a very important issue for organic farmers and for farmers in general.

Farming and forestry are the only production sectors that have a positive impact on carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), acting as a carbon sink. The gas is absorbed by the plants through photosynthesis and is stored in the soil's organic matter. Since organic farming has a high organic matter content in the soil, it has a very positive impact on CO<sub>2</sub> reduction.

Organic farming also produces low methane (CH<sub>4</sub>) emissions from livestock on a hectare basis due to the low stocking density. Nevertheless, there is still potential to increase organic farming productivity in order to improve CH<sub>4</sub> emissions on a yield basis and reduce production costs. There is also the potential to reduce CH<sub>4</sub> emissions by changing ruminants' diets and by improving manure management.

**Specific research in the area of climate change is needed in order to further reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to improve energy efficiency in organic farming systems.**

### ***3.3.3 Social aspects***

This document analyses the social aspects of organic farming from the point of view of animal and human health and animal welfare.

- **Human health**

Organic production “shall apply without prejudice to other community provisions or national provisions, in conformity with Community law”<sup>6</sup>. This means it has to comply with all existing agricultural regulatory provisions in terms of food safety and traceability (exceptional measures in the event of a health crisis –i.e.: avian flu; maximum plant protection product residue levels,<sup>7</sup> etc) and with requirements included in the organic farming legislation. Organic farming objectives include the production of “foods and other agricultural products [...] by the use of processes that do not harm [...] human health”<sup>8</sup>.

---

6 Regulation 834/2007

7 A plant protection product (i.e. potassium bicarbonate) has to be recognised under the general legislation on pesticides and under the organic farming legislation to be allowed for use in organic production.

8 Regulation 834/2007

Food has an important role to play in human health. Eating food that complies with adequate food safety standards and having a well-balanced diet (fruit and vegetables, bread and cereals, meat, fish and dairy products), i.e. that contains fibre, vitamins, minerals and the fatty acids needed to maintain optimal nutrition, are important prerequisites to good health and well-being.

In Copa-Cogeca's view, organic farming, as an integral part of European agriculture, provides consumers with a large variety of delicious food which is easily accessible and which can form part of a healthy and balanced diet. However, the lifestyle choices, including dietary habits, are influenced by many different factors around us: e.g. family, friends, colleagues, working hours and conditions, the media and access to information and products. This is why, **in Copa-Cogeca's opinion, the food that farmers and agri-cooperatives supply has to be accompanied by educational and information campaigns on healthy eating habits.**

- **Animal welfare**

Organic animal husbandry has to comply with general agricultural rules on animal welfare. In addition, organic legislation includes a number of practices aimed at achieving "a high level of animal welfare" and meeting "species-specific needs".

According to organic production rules, animals must have permanent access to open air areas, thus enabling them to exercise regularly and interact amongst themselves. Production has to be linked to soil, meaning that landless production is forbidden. Stocking densities are kept low both inside buildings, to ensure the comfort and well-being of the different species, and outside, in order to reduce nitrogen inputs.

Animal health is promoted by encouraging animals' natural immunological defences and by selecting appropriate breeds. The prophylactic use of antibiotics and hormones is prohibited.





**Copa-Cogeca**

European Farmers and Agri-Cooperatives

61, Rue de Trèves  
B-1040 Bruxelles

Tel. 00 32 (0) 2 287 27 11  
Fax 00 32 (0) 2 287 27 00

[www.copa-cogeca.eu](http://www.copa-cogeca.eu)

ABI(09)1756:5