

Can organic still be sustainable?

Katherine DiMatteo and Grace Gershuny are two long-time organic advocates in the US, currently working as consultants. Here they give their thoughts on sustainability standards and the direction of organic standards.

Forty-two years ago the first Earth Day was held; and twenty years ago the Rio Earth Summit was convened by the United Nations. Yet despite the numerous declarations, plans and goals, evolution toward a sustainable world has been incredibly, and unacceptably, slow. With the Rio +20 conference taking place this month, civil society will have another opportunity to advocate for environmental sustainability and social equity and perhaps, to redefine prosperity for this century.

Michael Renner, Senior Researcher, writes in the Worldwatch Institute State of the World 2012 Report that 'A new global solidarity for sustainability must take root, ensuring that no one – no country, no community, no individual – is left behind. Unlike the conventional pattern of economic competition that produces – and indeed is expected to produce – winners and losers, the quest for a green economy needs to focus on win-win outcomes that render economic activity sustainable everywhere.'

The outcome of Rio +20 is, of course, unknown (when this article was written); but one can hope that there will be a commitment to ending the business-as-usual economic, social, and environmental policies, and especially government priorities. Already the IAASTD report in 2008 made this declaration in regard to the world's food and agriculture system.

Likewise, in the past year both the FAO Greening the Economy papers and the UN Agroecology and the Right to Food report, substantiate the fact that the one-size-fits-all approach to farming, which still dominates global solutions, still continues to fail. The reasons the documents give are because the current system disregards biodiversity; relies too much on chemicals and other external inputs that small farmers cannot afford, ignores women farmers and doesn't consider traditional food culture and knowledge.

One can also hope that the UN DPI/NGO conference declaration from 1400 Civil Society Organizations, which was approved at the Bonn meeting in September 2011¹, will be incorporated into the final Rio +20 document. The declaration lists the targets for 2030:

- Global agricultural production is transformed from industrial to sustainable.
- Chemical inputs, herbicides and pesticides are largely replaced with organic and biological alternatives.
- Interspersed natural areas are protected and restored as sources of pollination, pest control and soil fertility.
- Food for export is secondary to food for local consumption.
- Cultivated crop strains are diversified, as are production techniques and the mix of agricultural producers.

- Best management practices are introduced that reduce erosion by 90% and nitrogen runoff by 50% or more.

These are certainly positive attestations of all that the organic community has been campaigning for. It is encouraging to know that IFOAM has been an active participant in the preliminary meetings and discussions leading up to Rio +20, and will be a leading voice for organic agriculture. However, the future requires a more sustainable agricultural system with a broader scope, more flexibility and accessibility than certified organic systems. Therefore, even the IFOAM comments on the draft document for Rio + 20 call for: ‘... the strengthening of affordable (low-cost) biodiversity based sustainable agricultural practices, which are [a] means of mitigating and adapting to climate change and that can be readily implemented through a range of proven Sustainable Land Management (SLM) technologies, such as agroforestry, integrated crop-livestock systems and organic agriculture systems.’

In the US a committee has been convened to develop national standards for sustainable agriculture, the LEO-4000 Sustainable Agriculture Standard (see page 3). The developers of this standard are having to pursue this goal – that of carefully treading the line between engaging representatives of the conventional agriculture perspective and resisting the pressure to allow ‘business as usual’ to anoint itself as sustainable.

We are proponents of organic agriculture because we want to shift the

paradigm from a resource-intensive, prescriptive and yield-driven agriculture to an environmentally responsible, socially and economically-just agriculture. However, certified organic agriculture seems to have strayed from its origins as a change movement. Young, idealistic aspiring farmers shy away from being identified as organic, and complain about the takeover of the sector by corporate interests. We attribute this shift to the fact that consumer expectations of organic farming and products increasingly drive organic standards. At least in the United States, where we are based, there is a real probability that organic production will never expand much beyond its current niche, and although successful now this niche could even retract. The obsession with organic purity – the prohibition of anything that is synthetic or the result of a chemical change even if benign and an effective alternative; the intolerance for residues even if unintentional or adventitious; the refusal to accept processing aids, and anything that is man-made or manufactured – is a result of food scares and false expectations perpetuated by consumer interest organisations.

Instead of a process-based certification system, which was the intention of the Organic Foods Production Act, the National Organic Program (NOP) Rules are becoming product-based compliance regulations. Many certified organic operations will be forced out of production because our system is market-driven, not policy-driven. A fact made obvious by the proposals from those in the US Congress, who believe that market

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prices can and will replace government support, to cut out the small subsidy for organic certification costs and the beginning farmer and rancher programmes in the USDA Farm Bill. While at the same time the organic sector frets about why consumers prefer 'natural' and 'local' products – even though the majority of those shoppers believe that those products are organic² – the obvious reason is retail price and the lack of costly compliance.

Therefore, we now have to look outside of certified organic standards for a systems management approach to agricultural production that measures outcome within the context of continuous improvement. Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes and similar concepts are not market or government driven but responsive to the communities that they serve. The LEO-4000 Sustainable Agriculture Standard is responding to market pressure, and offers a producer-oriented scheme that emphasises what is practical to achieve at the farm level, rather than establishing consumer expectations as the benchmark for sustainability. The expectation is not that all requirements are to be met simultaneously and immediately, but that different starting points can be accommodated. As standards move up the value chain they incorporate a diverse set of criteria, such as packaging, carbon footprint, fair trade, fair labour, and community improvement, as well as agro-ecological practices. In this way the issues are not ignored or forced upon operators, but are addressed in a less intimidating way with results that are attainable.

What is the answer?

So can organic also mean sustainable?

Although organic standard-setting has taken a direction away from farm-level orientation in its more recent development, the original vision of the organic movement still lives in many aspects of the international organic community. The imperative towards changing agriculture and food production to become increasingly sustainable becomes ever more critical and acknowledged by all levels of government, and the organic movement has certainly laid the groundwork for this shift. Organic producers and businesses still have much to contribute, and should be actively engaged in shaping the continued evolution of organic standards to encompass a broader concept of sustainability.

The importance of more decentralised production and markets, and community control over its own sustenance is a driving force in the demand for locally produced foods, and this increases consumers' awareness of the practical realities faced by farmers. In turn, the complex interrelationships of social, economic and ecological factors in the food system are more widely appreciated. As this understanding grows, organic standard-setting must grow and change to incorporate it, or remain forever a niche market for the purist. ■

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¹ www.un.org/wcm/webdav/site/ngoconference/shared/Documents/Final%20Declaration/V3.pdf

² A Leatherhead Food Research market survey in 2011 found that 'natural' or 'all-natural' was the top priority for food choices in five developed countries including the US, while organic ranked ninth. When asked to define 'natural', 58% of those surveyed said it meant organic.