

**What makes organic agriculture move – protest, meaning or market?
Handling different perspectives on organic agriculture and its future development**

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Why does organic agriculture move in the direction(s) we observe? Is it a kind of inertial motion that is based on the historical roots of organic agriculture as a protest movement? Or is it a living, self-directed organization that moves according to its own will and meaning, in accordance with its basis values and principles? Or is it a market object, which is transformed and developed to meet changes in consumer demand, following the trends and megatrends of a market society?

Obviously, all three types of causes have some merit in explaining the dynamics that we see. The really interesting question is how to handle this diversity. Is it a sign of disintegration or lack of integration, and should we search for one homogeneous cause that explains the dynamics of ‘the real’ organic agriculture? We don’t think so. We find that this heterogeneity is deeply rooted. There are different perspectives on organic agriculture ‘within’ organic agriculture, so to speak, with different logics and different strategies for acting, and we need tools to handle this heterogeneity.

Example: a Danish knowledge synthesis on the future of organics

In the spring of 2007 the Danish Ministry of Food asked ICROFS to carry out a fact finding work on development, growth and integrity in the Danish organic sector (Alrøe and Halberg 2008). The objectives of the work were to synthesise available knowledge on opportunities and barriers and evaluate alternative strategies to support a continued growth in organic production in consideration of the organic principles, consumer wishes and quality, and including demand, production, processing, distribution and trade.

The development of organic agriculture is a very complex and heterogenic dynamic process. Many different actors are involved, including farmers, advisors, processors, traders, retailers, researchers and policy makers, and they have different views about what organics is, and different, more or less explicit organic goals and strategies. Moreover, globalisation, structural development and increasing international trade create new challenges and opportunities for organics and make new demands in relation to consumer trust and the credibility of organic products.

The organic standards do secure a fundamental agreement between the organic practice and consumer expectations. But within the rules there is a large scope to develop the organic practice, and it is evident that the organic actors act very differently. Furthermore, the organic standards themselves are constantly being developed in a balance between promoting growth by improving the conditions for efficient and large-scale operations and safeguarding organic agriculture as a real alternative for consumers, politicians and the agricultural and food industries. The knowledge synthesis has

deliberately addressed this heterogeneity to ensure the coherence and relevance of the results to all the principal interests in the sector.

Different perspectives on organic agriculture and organic actor strategies

Through our work on multidisciplinary research on multifunctional farming and on the dynamics and governance of organic agriculture, we have developed a polyocular approach to observing and handling different perspectives on an object (Noe et al. 2008, Alrøe and Noe 2008). The main point is that different perspectives often cannot communicate directly with each other, because their concerns and logics are different and they use common terms in different senses. Therefore, there is a need for a separate, reflexive process that can provide a multidimensional space of understanding and enable communication by observing the different perspectives and adding the cognitive context of each perspective to what is said from that perspective.

Alrøe and Noe (2008) identified three predominant perspectives on the dynamics and governance of organic agriculture, protest, meaning and market, in relation to the revision of the EU regulations on organic production. They described how some current issues in organics look like from each perspective: the relation to conventional or mainstream agriculture, growth and trade, conventionalization and the viability of organic agriculture, the role of non-certified organic farming, and the purpose of standards and principles.

Based on this work, we have identified three archetypical actor strategies, *mainstream*, *alternative conservative* and *alternative innovative*, that represent a substantial part of the heterogeneity in the organic sector (Alrøe and Halberg 2008, chapter 17). The heterogeneity and the relevance of the strategies have been substantiated in the Scenario Game, where 70 actors from all parts of the sector played out their strategies in two of the scenarios prepared in the knowledge synthesis (Alrøe and Halberg, chapters 18 and 19).

The three strategies are ‘archetypes’ in that they are simplified and in some sense extremes, intended to stretch out the space of goals and perspectives that are found among the organic actors. It should be noted that the strategies represent certain perspectives – ways of seeing, reasoning and acting – and not groups or persons. Actors and groups can change perspectives and to a certain degree combine different strategies (though their concerns, logics and concepts are often in conflict). The three strategies are described below and compared in Table 1 in relation to some important challenges to the future development of organics.

The mainstream strategy works in a businesslike manner within the borders set by the present rules of organic agriculture. The key goals are higher economic efficiency, rational marketing, international division of labour and thereby lower prices and a good foundation for market based growth. This strategy is an important reason why Denmark today is one of the world leaders with regard to organic production and sales of organic food. But it also leads to dilemmas with respect to the organic principles, problems of credibility and risk of subsequent backlashes in organic sales. An important question is therefore how this strategy can secure growth in the long run.

The alternative conservative strategy works from tradition-bound norms and rules, with biodynamic agriculture as the prime example. Key considerations are respect for the integrity of life, diversity and the social and cultural life in and around agriculture. This strategy maintains a distance to the conventional food system, which makes it easy to indicate differences in the market and to preserve credibility and consumer confidence. It has remained a small niche in Denmark, in spite of the growth in organics, but food scandals etc. have given cause to a renewed interest. An important question is therefore what role this strategy can play in a continued market growth of the Danish organic sector.

The alternative innovative strategy works towards a dynamic development of organics, rooted in the organic principles, seeking innovations, new alternative developments, new technology and new ways of producing public goods. The explicit focus on the organic principles supports consumer confidence and gives rise to suggestions of stricter rules and the development of rules in new areas. This strategy often has difficulties in succeeding in an established organic market, which is dominated by the mainstream, and where some innovations are picked up and implemented at an early stage by the mainstream or in conventional products. An important question is therefore how this strategy can survive in the short run.

Discussion and conclusions

The future development of the organic sector depends on a range of possibilities and barriers – challenges to organics, which have been described in the Danish knowledge synthesis – as well as on the strategies that the organic actors apply to address these challenges. The three actor strategies or perspectives described here, have allowed us to work with scenarios for the future of organics in a nuanced and realistic way instead of working with ‘the organic actors’ as one, homogeneous group. It is significant that these three strategies are not strategies for the whole organic sector. At sector level a mixture of different actor strategies is found, and presumably no single strategy will be able to secure the future growth and development of organics. Historically, the ability to keep finding new ways of cooperation between different organic actors has proven very important to the growth of the organic market in Denmark. We think successful strategies for the future development, growth and integrity of organics will have to consider how different organic perspectives and actor strategies can coexist and cooperate.

References

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Table 1. Comparison of three archetypical actor strategies in the organic sector and their perspectives on challenges to the future of organics.

Challenges to organics	STRATEGY / PERSPECTIVE		
	MAINSTREAM	ALTERNATIVE CONSERVATIVE	ALTERNATIVE INNOVATIVE
Coherence in the organic sector	Does not reproduce the alternative, challenges integrity and confidence	Preserves the alternative, confidence and integrity based on tradition	Preserves confidence and integrity, develops the alternative dynamically
Enrollment of new actors in the organic sector	Big companies, 'business men'	Small. On the basis of 'protest', 'wholeness' and 'quality'	'Fiery souls', entrepreneurs, 'professional challenges'
Economy and growth	Economics of scale, short run growth and competitiveness, risks in the long run	Small niche, stable or slowly rising	Innovation, basis for long-term growth and competitiveness, risks in the short run
Globalization	Uses and promotes the global market	Opposes globalization, works locally	Sceptical accept, develops fairer forms of commerce and trade
Energy and climate	Uses the most economical energy sources	Promotes implicitly through management form and local sale	Promotes explicitly through new green technologies
Nature and environment	Operates within the present rules	Promotes on the basis of respect for life	Promotes based on organic principles, develops new public goods
Use of conventional feed and manure	Indicates the needs for using it	Does not use slurry or conventional feed	Seeks to reduce and remove the usage of conventional inputs
Animal welfare	Operates within the present rules	Animals are an integrated part of the farm, cattle is not dehorned	New management forms with more animal welfare in the organic sense
Product range	Market oriented innovation, large batches of standardized goods	Stable number of traditional products, varies with place and season	Rising number, new products, often based on primary produce qualities, new areas (e.g. clothing, shoes)
Food quality	Uniform good quality, industrial norms of quality	Fresh, local produce, diversity	Taste, aesthetics and ethical principles
Processing	Large, often multi-national companies, mainstream capital	Integrated production, processing and sale	Mostly small companies, green capital
Organization	Organised in ordinary organisations together with conventional	Self-organised, not much cooperation with conventional	Dynamical model – both cooperation and conflicts
Sale	Anonymous sale in supermarkets	Often physical nearness via direct sale or specialist stores	Different sale channels, perceived nearness by way of the internet