

*On 10 June the organic world heard the sad news of the sudden death of Dr Rainer Bächli, founder and Director of the Institute for Marketecology (IMO). In 2003 Dr Bächli wrote a comment piece for TOS, seven years later it is still relevant.*

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## Regulated organic agriculture system turns against farmers

### *A critical review of international development*

*An increasing number of countries have started to regulate the organic sector to protect consumers from fraudulent products and to protect the local farming industry. However, implementation of this good intention is in danger of becoming an ill-fated burden to farmers. Further, development of an eco-friendly agrosystem may be trapped in a deadlock if a solution to over-regulation cannot be found.*

In 1991, the European Commission's organic regulation came into effect. The move caught many governments and organic movements worldwide by surprise. For some it was difficult to come to terms with the fact that the organic sector was no longer based on private initiative and market potential. The regulation meant that there was now a law involved, and that it was the EU Commission that sets the minimum rules – life started to be very different!

In one move the European Regulation created a huge 'domestic' market for organic certification. Certification, which previously had been a voluntary quality control system, became mandatory. Europe as the most prominent market for organic products attracted an increasing number

of suppliers all over the world. These supplies, of course, had to comply with the European Regulation. A number of certification bodies, such as the Institute for Marketecology (IMO Control), began to specialise in international certification for the EU market. Thus, the Regulation (EEC) N 2092/ 91 became an international 'regulation' for organic production systems.

Over the same period, IFOAM's system of offering international organic norms and accreditation, supported an international mutual recognition of certificates for private organic seals. This was implemented

quite separately from the EU Regulation. Nevertheless, the two systems facilitated compliance and participation of producers worldwide to both regulatory and market requirements. This achievement is one of the major reasons for the continuous and fast growth of the global organic industry. So far so good.

### **A global market of organic rules**

Today, countries such as Japan, the US, Turkey, India, and some fifty others, have set or are planning to set national organic regulations. In the meantime, globalisation, GATT and free trade agreements have resulted in tremendous pressure being applied on conventional agriculture in western countries where production costs are very high. As national protectionism decreases, thousands of small farms in these countries are losing economic viability and closing down. In the EU and elsewhere extensification schemes, intended to reduce overproduction whilst providing farmers with a survival income, have been initiated. Countries have realised that ecology, health, farming and tourism are closely interlinked and that agriculture is not only a food production system but also a vital basis for the wellbeing of society. Consequently, organic agriculture has become a subject of public

Organic agriculture has become a subject of public interest.

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### ORGANIC RELEASE AT A PREMIUM

Until recently, the Soil Association's (SA) aim to eliminate the use of non-organic processing aids, including release agents, threatened to make it impossible for bakeries to meet the SA organic standard. Release agents enable bread and pastry products to be removed easily from pans, and to be divided and cut with no particles remaining on the knives.

Bakeries can now heave a sigh of relief as Bio Release, an organic release agent together with Bio Division 75, a dividing and cutting oil have been launched by Sonneveld, a Dutch based bakery ingredients supplier. The products, produced using organic sunflower oil, is 100% vegetable based and contains no additives, which means it meets the organic and clean label demands. However, as currently the only organic release agents on the market, they will be priced at a premium. ■

Source: *FoodProductionDaily.com*

For more information please see [www.foodproductiondaily.com/Processing/Organic-release-agents-fulfill-urgent-market-need-Sonneveld/](http://www.foodproductiondaily.com/Processing/Organic-release-agents-fulfill-urgent-market-need-Sonneveld/)

interest, and subsidies and support to farming are being linked with conditions for eco-friendly and organic production methods.

### New trade barriers

What is more, many governments, following the lead of the European Commission, have discovered that regulating eco-friendly production systems is a way to set new trade barriers. Strong national or regional label schemes, offering special support of local, regional and national farming communities, have evolved. The organic movement has not been immune to this, and the global approach to organic production and marketing has broken down into fractions, even within the EU. For instance, additional national regulations such as label schemes in France, England, Switzerland and Germany, are inhibiting a free exchange of organic goods. Although harmonisation of standards increases communalism, regional protectionism and bureaucracy in the international organic industry, it is heatedly discussed within the international organic movement.

### Vicious spiral

Regulating appears to be a self-perpetuating development. In 1991, the EU Regulation was a small booklet. It has since developed into a 'bible' of over a hundred pages, including details such as how much housing space a hen must be given, or the way a transaction certificate has to be printed. There is no agriculture system that is as comprehensively regulated as organic farming. While everyone says they support eco-friendly farming, organic farmers are being suffocated by bureaucratic rules and regulations in a way that innovative development and adaptations to local situations is becoming almost impossible.

Unfortunately, when regulations increase the tendency to cheat increases. A decade – and a few food scandals – after the introduction of the EU Regulation, Germany has just changed its Ministry of Agriculture into the Ministry for Consumer Protection. This heralds a complete turnaround in focus. Government policy is no longer about assisting farmers to grow food. It is about protecting the urban population from hazards of agricultural production and the potential dangers of natural products.

### Control... control... control

As well as numerous restrictions and conditions, regulations result in rigorous control and constant monitoring of farming activities. The farmer has to ask the control body, whether he may use manure or not. In India, he is not allowed to use simple ayurvedic medicines without special permission. The farmer has to keep records of everything he does on his farm, and may not buy or sell without the inspector checking his books. The auditors are at his heels, tracing him, and squeezing him, even in the remotest areas of the world. The farmer's reward is a certificate and a considerable invoice!

For an increasing number of organic farmers, the burden of bureaucracy and cost of control are becoming unbearable. With the world supply of organic food substantially increasing and the prices of products, now sold by supermarket chains, dropping some farmers are turning their backs on certified organic and are following less complicated farming systems.

For certification bodies, farm unions and government officers, for whom to dominate and regulate can be a satisfying hobby, a new legal and accepted way to govern the farming community has been found. What a

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### CCOF TRACKS CONSERVATION

The US National Organic Program requires farmers to use production practices that maintain or improve the natural resources of their operation. To encourage improvement on natural resource conservation, California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) recently introduced a new 'Natural Resources' section in its Organic System Plan (OSP). The OSP addition is designed to assist organic farmers with documenting on-farm practices that support biodiversity, maintain native ecological systems and conserve natural resources. ■

*For more information on the new Natural Resources Section of the OSP, see [www.ccof.org/biodiversity.php](http://www.ccof.org/biodiversity.php)*

*Source: CCOF*

*For more information please see [www.ccof.org/pdf/PR\\_052110\\_NaturalResourceOSP.pdf](http://www.ccof.org/pdf/PR_052110_NaturalResourceOSP.pdf)*

### GOTS REVISION

The Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) is now under revision. The first round draft of GOTS 3.0 and the corresponding Manual for the Implementation of GOTS are now open for a 60-day comment period, which started on 24 June 2010. ■

*Source: IFOAM*

*For more information please see [www.ifoam.org/press/press/2008/20100630\\_GOTS\\_Comments.php](http://www.ifoam.org/press/press/2008/20100630_GOTS_Comments.php)*

satisfaction it must be, to prescribe to the organic farmer every little detail of what he has to do.

### The 'Transparent Farm'

The organic farm with complete transparency and traceability is being incarnated. So what? Organic farmers have nothing to hide. The 'Transparent Farm', in principle, should pose no danger to a responsible operator. Nevertheless, transparency and traceability requirements impose a heavy financial and organisational burden to organic farmers. It worsens their economic disadvantage to conventional colleagues. Moreover, when market problems arise, traceability allows organic farmers to be quickly identified, and leaves them open to punishment, while conventional farmers are protected by anonymity. In a global business environment that lacks ethical standards and behaviour, transparency only puts organic farmers further at the mercy of bureaucrats and business moguls.

### Fate and sufferings

There are numerous examples demonstrating the devastating effects of our present cumulative bureaucratic 'quality assurance' approach. A recent case involves a pioneer tea estate in India, which has been under organic management for more than ten years. Following the Nitrofen residue scandal in Germany, minute amounts of DDT were found in a sample sent to a prominent tea importer. The analysis was sent by the importer's certifier to the competent authority of the German state and the importer was

warned not to sell such 'contaminated' produce on the organic market.

The authority then forwarded this information to colleagues in other German states, the German national ministry, authorities in other European countries, even the European Commission. Suddenly, the Indian tea estate was branded all over Europe as a producer of DDT-contaminated tea. Its products were questioned by authorities in other German states, Austria, Denmark, England and France. A new scandal was on its way, particularly as one of the laboratories involved had interpreted the residues as originating from 'active use' of DDT.

Despite this pressure, IMO, the tea estate's original certifier, was not persuaded to change its original certification decision. Whilst temporarily stopping exports of the organic tea in question, IMO initiated in-depth investigations. Samples were taken from different materials such as green tea leaf, soil, construction wood, cleaning dust and others. Comparisons with earlier residue analyses were also done. The investigation revealed that the traces of DDT (known for its very slow breakdown rate) were based on environmental pollution and could not be traced to any active use since the tea estate's conversion to organic management. It also found that the interpretation by the laboratory was inconsistent with other findings, and that analytic technology has so improved in the past few years that at first glance the situation would appear to be far worse than it actually was.

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Regardless of this information, one of the German state authorities requested IMO to prove that DDT was an environmental problem in the production region. It took further effort to convince the authority that environmental scientific research is not the task of organic farmers or certification bodies, especially in cases where there is enough evidence to clarify the problem.

IMO also received enquiries from the Indian government as to why it was certifying 'false' organic produce and harming the name of Indian organic exports: in the course of a meeting with the European Commission in Brussels an Indian representative had been informed of the DDT residues found in organic tea. So even after the case had been solved in favour of the organic industry, implications still rumbled through numerous offices and kept many people busy.

This case resulted in enormous costs and losses to the importer, the certifiers, many government agencies, and above all, to the producer. These costs were primarily due to incompetent handling of information and therefore absolutely unnecessary. The parties involved did not study the chemical analyses carefully to understand its real information and value. They showed no real interest in the situation or the fate of the organic producer – there is enough tea on the world market, who cares?

### **A different approach is needed**

Transparency and traceability is a disaster to the organic industry, if it is not paired with a new approach in quality assurance and ethics. The approach today is more and more focused on investigation and the control of others! It is a power game: Show me what you do – and I will tell you what to do!

Under the pretext of consumer protection, and hidden behind legal papers, bureaucracy and anonymity, more and more regulations and restrictions are being produced – be they government or private. It spells the end of the organic road and of a humane society!

The global consumer society is asking for 120% safety and security, but at the lowest price possible. If organic agriculture is to have a future, we have to focus on a new approach in quality control. Control has to be combined with responsibility. Decisions must be reasonable and plausible. Security has to be considered relative to the risk. There is less risk involved in organic agriculture than in conventional production systems. Why ask so much more!

Regulatory mechanisms are certainly needed, but they must be different from today's policing system. Certification must again become the helping link between consumers and producers instead of being a threat to organic farmers. Accreditation should be about the competence of organic certifiers instead of a false competition playground between private and government accreditors. National regulations should facilitate international equivalency of organic products and not be misused as new trade barriers. Regional quality oriented production systems must find support in justified differences and diversification instead of being disallowed by global harmonisation.

We really have to understand, that we only have a future together and not against each other! Only if we change our policies will there be a great future in organic agriculture! ■

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