IFOAM EU GROUP | MAKING EUROPE MORE ORGANIC

International Federation
of Organic Agriculture Movements
EU Regional Group

Press briefing: Organic farming and biodiversity

20 MAY 2020, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

On 20 May 2020, the European Commission issued its long-awaited Farm-to-Fork and Biodiversity strategies as part of the European Green Deal. This highlights the need to increase the environmental ambition of the EU and to move towards sustainable food systems. According to IFOAM EU, the Farm to Fork Strategy should build on the success of organic farming and its potential to transform agriculture to provide EU citizens with a credible and engaging vision for a sustainable food production system in 2030.

Organic farming is a system that has many benefits. Its main benefits for biodiversity are:

- 50% more abundant wildlife, with up to 34% more species on average on and around the farm, including almost 50% more pollinator species and 75% more plant species[i] as well as more resilient systems
- Organic uses no synthetic pesticides, many of which are harmful to flora and fauna, including pollinators[ii]
- Organically managed soils show a greater abundance of soil microorganisms, along with more carbon and nitrogen transformation activities than in conventionally managed soils. Also, soil organic carbon sequestration is higher in organic than conventional agriculture on average. Living soils, in turn, provide a good basis for coping with climate uncertainties, such as heavy rains or droughts, while the good soil structure of organically managed soils reduces the risk of water logging and soil erosion[iii]
- **Organic farming is a viable option to reduce agricultural intensity while at the same time fulfilling biodiversity protection goals.** Farmland biodiversity also provides many ecosystem services that in turn are important for agricultural production itself, such as pollination, pest control and nutrient cycling

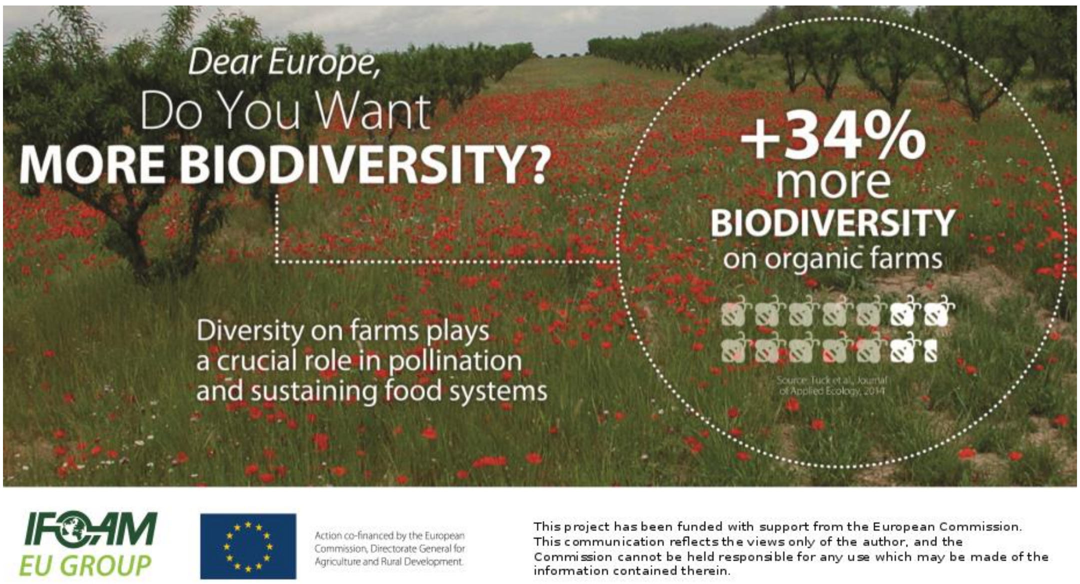

Figure 1/1: Organic delivers. Available on the IFOAM EU website.

For more detailed information and references, please consult the rest of this briefing.

Organic's contribution to biodiversity

Organic farming has a positive impact on both above-ground and below-ground biodiversity, positively influencing the functioning of ecosystems, human and animal health as well as climate change adaptation and mitigation.

- Organic farming systems rely on positive interactions with the landscape, farm diversification, mixed farming, crop rotation, closed nutrient, and organic matter cycles as well as on nitrogen fixation in plants[v]
- Organic farmers can only use (under strict conditions) a small number of pesticides, all of which are naturally occurring and carefully selected and approved[vi], which ensures a greater biodiversity on and around the farm[vii]
- Organic farming has beneficial effects on the restoration of biodiversity and ecosystem services and the climate, and more biodiversity equals more resilient systems[viii]
- Organic farms often have more semi-natural habitats, which help to protect and manage biodiversity[ix]
- Organic farming increases the abundance and range of biodiversity[x] and has a higher abundance of insects and weeds than conventional farming[xi], which has a positive impact on bird populations[xii]
- Organic soils host more earthworms and have more microbial diversity than conventional soils[xiii]. This below-ground biodiversity can have a significant effect on the water-infiltration rate (on permanent grassland with more than 10-year organic management), which can in turn reduce peak-flooding by 30%[xiv]
- In 2018, French think tank 'Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations' (IDDRI) presented an evaluation of the potential of a generalisation of organic farming, associated to changes in diets, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It concluded that the "the TYFA scenario is based on the generalisation of organic farming (abandoning synthetic pesticides and fertilizers), the extension of agroecological infrastructures and the adoption of healthy diets, to feed 530 million Europeans by 2050 (despite a 35% drop in production). It leads to a 40% reduction in GHG emissions (35% for direct non-CO2 emissions), offers a potential for soil carbon sequestration of 159 MtCO2eql/year until 2035, and a reduction of bioenergy production to zero. The scenario is thus not easily compatible with the objective of carbon neutrality, but offers many co-benefits: biodiversity, natural resources, adaptation, health."[xv]

Resources

- The benefits of organic agriculture (infographics)
- How organic contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals (infographics) and EOSTA's full report
- Organic market and production data (interactive infographic)
- For full publications, visit IFOAM EU's library

About organic in the EU and Europe[xxv]

Production

- **Organic land** increased by 1.25 million hectares in Europe (8.7%) and by one million hectares in the EU (7.6%) between 2017 and 2018. France reported over 290,000 hectares more and Spain over 160,000 hectares more
- **Organic farmland** in Europe constituted 3.1% of the total agricultural land and 7.7% in the EU in 2018. In Europe (and globally), Liechtenstein had the highest organic share of all farmland (38.5%) followed by Austria, the country in the EU with the highest organic share (24.7%)
- There were almost 420,000 **organic producers** in Europe and almost 330,000 in the EU in 2018, with the largest numbers in Turkey (almost 80,000) and Italy (more than 69,000). The number of producers grew by 5.4% in Europe and 7.2% in the EU in 2018

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Consumption

- The European **organic market** recorded a growth rate of 7.8% between 2017 and 2018. France recorded the highest growth with 15.4%
- In the decade 2009-2018, the value of the European and EU markets has more than doubled
- **Retail sales** in Europe were valued at €40.7 billion and €37.4 billion in the EU in 2018. The largest market was Germany (€10.9 billion). The EU represents the second largest single market for organic products in the world after the United States (€40.6 billion)
- **Annual per capita consumption** of organic food was €50 in Europe and €76 in the EU in 2018. Per capita consumer spending on organic food has doubled in the last decade
- European countries had the highest share of organic food compared to the entire food market in 2018. Denmark had the highest share (11.5%), individual products and product groups hold even higher shares
- There were almost 76,000 **organic processors** in Europe and almost 71,000 in the EU in 2018. Almost 5,800 **organic importers** were counted in Europe and more than 5,000 in the EU. The country with the largest number of processors was Italy (more than 20,000), while Germany had the most importers (more than 1,700)

More information is available in Willer. H. & Lernoud J. eds. (2020) and our organic interactive infographic.

References

[i] Tuck et al., 2014, Bengtsson et al., 2005
[ii] Müller et al., 2016; UN, 2017
[iii] Müller et al., 2016
[v] de Porras et al., 2018
[vi] IFOAM states that the reason only natural pesticides are allowed is: *The precautionary principle acknowledges that our understanding of the impact of synthetic pesticides on our agroecosystems, the wider environment and human health can never be exhaustive. In contrast to synthetic substances there is a longer experience of natural substance use within the natural environment. Therefore, unpredictable risks coming from the release of molecules (e.g. "synthetic" pesticides) and organisms (from genetic engineering), not existing in nature, are rejected by the organic sector. As a result, inputs in organic production are only limited to naturally occurring substances.*
[vii] Müller et al., 2016; UN, 2017
[viii] UN, 2017; Aubert et al., 2019; Schätzen, 2019; Müller et al., 2016
[ix] Norton et al., 2009
[x] Tuck et al., 2014; Bengtsson et al., 2005
[xi] Niggli, 2014
[xii] Kragten & de Snoo, 2008; Goded et al., 2018
[xiii] Lori et al., 2017; Mäder et al., 2002
[xiv] Sutherland et al., 2012; Wibbelmann et al., 2013
[xv] Aubert et al., 2019 (page 1)
[xxv] Willer. H. & Lernoud J. eds. (2020). Do note that the available data in this publication is from 2018.

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