



MULTI-STAKEHOLDER ORGANIC INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE WATER QUALITY

BACKGROUND

Organic farming helps to protect and enhance water resources by applying a range of agro-ecological practices beneficial to the sustainable management of our natural aquatic ecosystems. In the EU, the positive contribution of organic farming to meeting key EU environmental objectives of the Water Framework and Nitrates Directives legislation is recognised by policymakers in the *Action Plan for the future of Organic Production in the European Union* (2014). In 2009 organic farming was legally recognised by the French government as a key system approach to reduce water pollution and protect water resources for human consumption in water catchment areas.¹ Capitalising on this recognition, a number of local stakeholder-led initiatives have emerged to support sustainable water management using organic farming in different regions across France. These bottom-up projects have been supported by the French national federation of organic agriculture - *Federation Nationale d' Agricultures Biologique* (FNAB) – who set up a national working group comprising a number of national authorities, chambers of agriculture, research organisations, and civil society groups to stimulate further local initiatives.

ACTIVITIES

Since 2010, 12 stakeholder-driven pilot projects have been set up in different French regions to support conversion to organic farming and its development in the area. These projects are coordinated by FNAB, in cooperation with the French Ministries for Agriculture, and Ecology, Sustainable Development and Energy and regional Water Agencies. 2-3 times a year working groups composed of representatives from the different pilot projects, meet to share experiences, exchange on practices and actions being developed at local level, and analyse issues concerning methodology and operations.

The main aim of these pilot projects is to support organic farming development by guiding farmers and rural actors who are interested in organic conversion. A special focus is given to farms that are located in sensitive zones of water catchment areas.

As part of the initiatives, interested farmers are brought through the different stages of organic conversion including conducting a feasibility study of the farm's needs prior to conversion, establishing connections with a certification body and market actors, for example processors, advice on initial steps in the conversion process, as well as development of organic management practices to ensure long-term farm sustainability.

Other project activities include information and training sessions on the impact of organic farming practices on water quality; the promotion of best practice examples in sustainable water management implemented by organic farmers in different regions; and individual counselling and



support with potential convertors and farmers already in conversion on production issues and technical aspects related to certification and access to the organic market. Farmers are also provided with guidance on financial incentives such as land area payments and the support for certification costs under CAP rural development programmes for converting and maintaining land under organic methods, as well as market premiums offered by processors for organic produce. All activities seek to facilitate exchange between conventional and organic farmers through regular meetings and on-farm visits. In several pilot projects, actions seeks to create new processing and marketing chains for organic products. Establishing local markets and local organic food supply chains are seen to be the best way of facilitating conversion to organic farming as farmers secure a market for their organic produce. In some projects, local authorities have decided to introduce local organic produce into public kitchens and canteens, while in other pilot projects, water managers have worked with agricultural cooperatives collecting and processing agricultural raw materials to support them in the creation of processing and marketing chains dedicated to organic products. As a result these projects bring together all actors in the food chain and innovative examples that link protection of water quality with the development of organic production and the sustainable consumption.

RESULTS

Between 2010 and 2012, the total area of agricultural land under organic production has increased by over 6% in 8 of the 12 territories where a pilot project has been initiated. For example, in the catchment zone of the Vanne valley – which serves the water resources of the city of Paris - the number of organic farmers has grown to 22 increasing the total area of agricultural land under organic production from 1% to 6%. Similarly, in the surrounding area of Avesnois Regional Park in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region, organic conversion initiatives have resulted in the number of organic farmers in area rising to 66. This has led to a six-fold increase in organic farmland around the protection perimeter of the park, accounting for 4,000 ha out of 84,000 of the total agricultural area.²

LESSONS LEARNED

The outcomes of the projects to date show not only that such initiatives can promote common collaboration and generate greater awareness amongst a wide of local actors and stakeholders about sustainable water management, but also that such participatory approaches are helping to change the perceptions of organic farming amongst conventional farmers. At the same time, despite significant increases in the total area of land under organic production as a result of the conversion initiatives, results remain variable across all regions and it can take several years of engagement and investment for local actions to foster and develop.

Where	France
What	Promotion and implementation of organic farming conversion and development to support sustainable water management
How	Establishment of multi-stakeholders working groups supported by the French Ministries for Agriculture, Ecology, Sustainable Development and Energy and Water Agencies
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[1] French Republic. Law No. 2009-967, Programming law relating to the implementation of Grenelle Environment, 03.09.2009
 [2] FNAB. 2013. Water and Organic: Collection of Experiences – 12 Territorial Pilots. Coherent actions for preserving water quality and developing organic farming.

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