



IFOAM Organics Europe
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Contribution of organic farming to rural development

Organic farmers and processors, in addition to producing quality food and managing ecosystems in a sustainable way, also boost the economic and socio-cultural development of their territory. Therefore, they represent key actors contributing to the economic revitalization of rural areas and constantly interacting with other communities (rural tourism, nature preservation, environmental education...)

The presence of organic businesses stimulates rural economic development. Organic farms are known to employ more people than conventional farms, but also to enhance the health of soils, plants, animals, and humans, as defined in the four principles of organic agriculture. They have played a key role in the development of '[sustainable rural development](#)', where economic growth, improvement of social conditions and conservation of natural values are equally important.

Organic farming enjoys a dynamic growth, both in terms of demand and market, and in terms of production in many EU countries. Organic farming and short supply chains have gained even more attention with the COVID19 crisis. It creates synergies between urban and rural communities and represents an important element of innovation in rural areas. This potential could be further developed with the help of different instruments such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the new Organic Action Plan (OAP) and EU's research policy Horizon Europe.

The Biodiversity and the Farm to Fork strategies put organic farming at the heart of a transition to sustainable food systems, with a target to reach 25% organic land on average at EU level by 2030. This objective is ambitious but achievable with the right support policies in place to develop both organic production and demand for organic products (e.g. through targets in Green Public Procurements and promotion policies), and it will greatly contribute to the revitalisation of our rural areas.

Key drivers of change in rural areas will be better funding of public services, generalised uptake of digital technologies, ensuring generation renewal and promoting bio-districts.

Public services and digital technologies: two essential components for dynamic rural areas

Rural areas have a lot to offer, including in a post-COVID world where people might look for a closer proximity to nature, less pollution and locally produced food. These areas offer general lower costs of living and housing, as well as a healthier environment. Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis might have a positive impact on rural-urban linkages. In many European countries, due to the generalization of homeworking, many people have fled urban congestion to spend the lockdown in rural areas.

However, one of the main barriers preventing people to settle down in those less-populated zones remains accessibility to health, social, education, transport, cultural and other key public services, as well as generalised access to digital technologies.

Broadband and high-speed internet access are key for information, knowledge-transfer, collaboration and daily lives of farmers and rural communities. Digitalisation can also help to create shorter supply chains, one of the objectives of the [Farm to Fork Strategy](#).

IFOAM Organics Europe recognizes the work achieved through EU Actions for Smart Villages that helped to map the challenges in rural areas. In particular, the Pilot Project initiated by the European Parliament highlighted the role of digital technologies as [‘lever to enable Smart Villages to become more agile, make better use of their resources and improve the attractiveness of rural areas and the quality of life of rural residents’](#).

Progress is still needed in including further rural areas in the process of digitalization and creating a favourable environment for innovation. Education and training, including through Erasmus+, will play an important role in increasing digital skills among rural communities.

Young farmers and intergenerational solidarity in rural areas

Throughout the EU, the age pyramid is such that conversions to organic farming will not be enough to meet the objective of 25% organic farmland by 2030 mainly because the current national policies regarding young farmers’ setting-up or the transmission of a farm to a new farmer are not tailored to develop organic.

As keeping young farmers and/or attracting new players in rural areas is one of the biggest challenges, EU instruments such as the Organic Action Plan and the CAP shall better support the transmission of organic farmland and the setting-up of young farmers in organic. Member states shall establish legal and fiscal framework to incentivize the maintenance of organic farmland in organic when an organic farmer retires and transmits his/her farm to a young farmer. Moreover, CAP Strategic Plans of Member states shall prioritise the project of young farmers willing to set-up in organic and ensure that young farmers get an additional reward if setting-up in organic.

With the help of the CAP second pillar, more efforts should be done to increase intergenerational solidarity, and collective actions in rural areas should be further promoted through CAP instruments such as LEADER, cooperation measures and investments.

Advisory services are critical to organic farming and rural development and should ensure equal rights and opportunities for all farmers and beneficiaries, including the promotion of equality between men and women. Specific advisory units specializing on organic farming should be encouraged towards new farmers willing to set up in organic. [As underlined by the European Parliament in the Strategic Plans Regulation](#), Member States should allocate at least 30% of Farm Advisory Services’ (FAS) budget to climate and environmental objectives.

Creating synergies and revitalizing rural areas: the ‘success story’ of Bio-districts

Different developmental paths are available to rural areas in Europe, and IFOAM Organics Europe believes that the sustainable and participatory approach should be the preferred one. Concepts like Bio-districts can be an efficient tool to increase the attractiveness of rural areas and to revitalise them around a coherent and empowering project. The creation of bio-districts should be supported by policy instruments in all Member States.

Bio-districts represent a new rural development model based on the preservation of agricultural landscape and biodiversity, the cultural heritage and gastronomy, related to organic agriculture and food production. One of the first bio-districts was launched in Italy in 2009 inside the Cilento National Park, showing how organic farmers preserve and enhance natural resources and food heritage.

In order to keep rural areas attractive and to promote the creation of bio-districts, different local conditions should already be present: a context where natural resources, agricultural production, SMEs, local government and local communities can provide a specific and recognizable differentiation of the area in terms of products, services and related cultural and historical heritage. On top of these pre-conditions an already existing local orientation towards organic agriculture and sustainable models of development should be present; the presence of local leaders catalyzing these different elements is an important condition to stimulate a bottom-up approach.

The project *‘Creating a European Network of Bio-Districts to achieve a True Territorial Renaissance’* (CENTRE) helped to further involve farmers and citizens in local decision-making processes through different project events. Increased research about these innovative approaches could help to boost organic production and the economic, social, and cultural development of rural areas.