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ORGANIC AGRICULTURE AND THE COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY

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Agriculture is a major issue in the European Community both in politics and in public discussions. Given that the two decades of application of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) have resulted in some significant problems, the reform introduced in 1992 in CAP was specifically intended to re-address the following:

- * Reduction of the agricultural budget
- * Maintenance of farm incomes
- * Reduction of surplus production
- * Making agriculture more market-orientated
- * Protection of the environment.

Organic farming has the potential to provide benefits in these and other areas:

- * Environmental protection and reduction of pollution
- * Conservation of non-renewable resources and energy
- * Improvement of food quality
- * Protection of underground and surface waters
- * Reduction of the output of surplus products
- * The re-orientation of agriculture towards areas of market demand (Lampkin, 1990).

In recognition of this, some European governments have been encouraging farmers to adopt organic farming practices through direct financial incentives.

The result has been a rapid expansion of organic farming throughout Europe, but from such a small base that on average the current level of activity still amounts to less than 1% of the agricultural industry.

What is meant by the term "ORGANIC AGRICULTURE"?

Before the adoption of Community Regulation No 2092/91 the situation was not very clear; although the term "organic farming/agriculture" seems to be a familiar one, most people have rather a vague idea of its meaning and scope. This is because organic techniques have emerged very gradually, and in most countries there was no legislation or specific definition of the term for many years.

The variety of terms in existence which were used to qualify the methods considered to be organic/ecological/biological, as well as the different schools of thought in different countries with their different basic inspirations and philosophies, resulted in the various approaches that have been adopted to the sector in the past. It shows that there was no clear distinction between the concepts of natural, ecological, organic, biodynamic and quality products and to some extent explains the confusion that may still arise in the mind of the consumer.

Therefore, in accordance with Community rules, organic farming can be defined as:

"A system of managing agricultural holdings that implies major restrictions on fertilizers and pesticides. This method of production is based on varied crop farming practices, is concerned with protecting the environment and seeks to promote sustainable agricultural development."

The objective of sustainability in its widest sense which includes resource use, both environmental and social, as aspects at the heart of organic farming and is one of the major determinants in the evaluation of the acceptability of specific practices. "Organic" has less to do with the type of inputs used and more to do with treatment of the farm as an organism in which the component parts - soil minerals, organic matter, micro-organisms, insects, plants, animals and humans - interact to create a coherent whole.

Organic farming differs in a variety of ways from conventional farming. It has been pointed out that organic farming:

- * Protects the long term fertility of soils by maintaining levels of organic matter in soils, fostering biological activity in them and through careful mechanical intervention
- * Increases biological diversity among both plant and animals
- * Makes full use of natural, local and renewable resources
- * Uses low - energy input and thus reduces the external dependence of farming
- * Effects weed, disease and pest control by reliance primarily on crop-rotations, natural predators, diversity, resistant varieties and minimal thermal, biological and chemical intervention
- * Pays a careful attention to the impact of agricultural activity on the wider environment.

Organic farming also differs from other alternatives such as "integrated" farming; it appears that organic farming is an amalgamation of many initiatives from around the world, which have been developing since the 1920s (Steiver, 1924).

It is only recently that it has fused into a coherent concept which is now recognized and enshrined in EU Regulation 2092/91. This not only defines standards but also a statutory framework for the inspection of organic food production and preparation.

Organic farming is also identified as being eligible for support under EEC Reg. 2078/92. The Agri-environment Programme recognizes the environmental benefits it provides.

Organic farming, by avoiding certain practices, tends to internalize some of the costs which are properly evaluated and taken into account.

The main objectives of EU Regulation 2092/91 are:

- * To establish fair conditions of competition between producers of organic farm produce in the EU
- * To ensure free movement of organic products in EU
- * To enhance consumer confidence in such products
- * To encourage a type of agriculture which is in line with consumer demand and which also has a beneficial impact on the environment. It lays down the principles for organic production and rules that must be followed for the processing and importation of organic products.

Inspections are carried out at all stages of production and marketing under a compulsory scheme, officially recognized and supervised by the Member States, which involves regular checks on all operators.

Organic products are identified through specific labeling according to rules intended to provide the consumer with the best possible guarantee of origin, preparation, processing and packaging.

There is no specific Community aid to organic farming but some of the structural instruments provide substantial support in the sector.

Unquestionably, organic farming has major development potential and a bright future, although the data available give the idea of an underdeveloped agricultural system, due to the minimal research and development funding that it has received to date.

Organic farming at its current level of technology and understanding, can deliver many of the environmental and other benefits which the CAP reforms are intended to address.

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