Working with the Swiss to improve sustainability assessment

ORC has been working with the Swiss Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL), pooling our expertise to further develop methods for sustainability assessment and monitoring for organic farms. ***Susanne Padel****,* ***Catherine Gerrard****,* ***Laurence Smith*** *and* ***Bruce Pearce*** *from ORC, and* ***Christian Schader****,* ***Lukas Baumgart*** *and* ***Matthias Stolze*** *from FiBL summarise the conclusions of the Ekhaga Foundation-funded project.*

Why we did it

In recent years there has been a great deal of interest in assessing the sustainability of agriculture in terms of its social, environmental and economic impact. This interest has led to the development of sets of indicators (which can be split into 'themes' such as biodiversity, air quality, water management, etc.), and a variety of tools which combine indicators to carry out sustainability assessments. Indicators can be outcome related e.g. number of butterfly species present, or management related e.g. percentage of fields with margins growing wildflowers to attract butterflies.

Given its underlying ethos, the organic/ecological agriculture sector should aim to be at the forefront of sustainability. The development of assessment approaches and recent discussions within the movement have identified continuous improvement towards best practice in sustainability to be one of the important features of the new direction. Positive environmental impacts are seen as one of the most important reasons for the financial support given to the organic sector, and as one of the reasons for consumers' willingness to pay a premium for organic food. This project aimed to provide practical recommendations on the suitability of the available sustainability assessment frameworks, themes, tools and indicators for the organic sector and to help consider and further develop sustainability assessment approaches.

What we did

A review of tools, indicators, themes and sustainability assessment methods was carried out. The opinions of organisations and individuals from within the organic sector were obtained through an international workshop and an online survey. Synergies and trade-offs between indicators were investigated using the database of FiBL's SMART sustainability assessment tool to investigate the relationships between themes.

What we found

1. **Choose indicators according to importance of theme.**
   Choosing the most promising indicators for the organic sector needs to be driven by the importance of the sustainability theme as well as the suitability of the method. Choosing indicators solely on the basis of desirable goals may lead to a subjective and non-transparent indicator selection which cannot be externally verified. On the other hand, assessing the quality of indicators alone appears to be too much driven by method and the choice of tools will also need to be influenced by data availability and/or cost of data collection.

2. **Include indicators for social sustainability and good governance.**
   The inclusion of indicators that assess areas within social sustainability and good governance (e.g. corporate social responsibility) should be encouraged within existing tools. This should build on recent frameworks provided by, for instance the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) and OECD (e.g. SAFA, guidelines on social life cycle analysis, DFID Sustainable Livelihoods Framework). Indicator development should also consider stakeholder views and perspectives (perhaps using, for example, the European Innovation Partnership Programme to contact stakeholders) and decide on threshold values that indicate poor, acceptable and good performance.

3. **Farms with good governance perform better on other aspects.**
   The assessment of synergies and trade-offs has illustrated that farms with good performance with regard to governance are likely to have positive performance on most environmental, social and economic aspects. This highlights the importance of good corporate management at the farm level. Further work on synergies and trade-offs using samples of farms is urgently required. In addition, trade-offs between economics and environmental and social dimensions may need to be accepted at the farm level. There is scope, however, for these to be addressed by policy makers, to help farmers set the right priorities. Substantial trade-offs also exist within the environmental dimension (for example between greenhouse gas emissions and animal welfare) which might be more difficult to resolve. Priorities need to be set depending on the specific context of the farm.

4. **Communicate the sustainability strengths of the organic sector.**
   Areas of sustainability that are perceived by those within the organic sector as being potential strengths were identified. These could be harnessed in terms of communicating the benefits of organic production. These key strengths include biodiversity, ecosystem diversity, soil quality and greenhouse gas emissions. Although such key strengths may seem obvious to those working within the sector and for several there is some good scientific evidence available, it is likely that the benefits are not widely-known or publicised and that further development of the evidence base is required.

Publications resulting from the project

A number of papers and publications have resulted from the project and can be accessed from the ORC project page. http://tinyurl.com/Ekhaga-SA