

Towards farmer principles of health

The four principles of organic agriculture, as laid down by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM, 2005), are not so well known among farmers or scientists, and the understanding and interpretation of these principles is often rather vague. A main statement of the principle of health is, for example, that 'Organic Agriculture should sustain and enhance the health of soil, plant, animal, human and planet as one and indivisible'. One of the aims of our recent HealthNetworks project was to identify which principles farmers have developed that make them successful in developing healthy farming systems. What personal philosophies and visions of best practice do farmers follow to improve the health of soils, plants, animals and humans? Anja Vieweger reports on the project's findings.

Over a period of two years, we have worked with a group of farmers in Austria, Germany and the UK to establish farmers' own principles of health. We evaluated if there are commonalities among different farmers and farming systems, but also between countries, climates, markets and cultures. We aimed to establish an international network of farmers and scientists, to jointly develop new and more holistic approaches to health measurement and health research in organic farming.

Finding farmers for the project

The farmers were selected in a two-step process, initially through an online survey in each country, followed up by talking to experts familiar with the particular farms (advisors or consultants, representatives of farmer organisations, etc.). We have developed a list of criteria for the final selection of five farmers in each country: e.g.

1. They should have a clear vision of the health concepts on their farm (a clear view of what makes the farm healthy);
2. They should be aware of the impact of their actions and practices on health (health effects and outputs of their system); or
3. They should be aware of where there are health deficiencies in the system, and be prepared to continually improve them, etc. The selected farmers (male and female) in Austria, Germany and the UK came from a large variety of agricultural systems (large and small scale, mixed farming, dairy or beef farms, arable and horticulture, organic and biodynamic, etc.) and as such, contributed to the project from diverse perspectives and experiences.

Drafting farmers' philosophies and visions of health

The project team searched the 74 survey responses for patterns, underlying themes and commonalities. It was then possible to recognise the farmers' visions, philosophies and strategies to promote health. This resulted in a list of 12 farmer statements of health, which were presented to the three groups of farmers in the respective countries to see if they could be agreed upon, or if they'd prefer to change or add some statements, or replace them entirely.

Agreeing farmer principles of health

During a series of workshops in Austria, Germany and the UK, organic farmers described and compared their personal visions of making their farm and its outputs healthy, and the individual strategies they follow when promoting health and managing a healthy farming system. After discussing the 12 farmer statements in each country individually, in February



Group discussion with farmers and scientists

2016 we organised an international workshop which brought the 15 farmers together to try and agree on a list of joint principles that could be transferable to other farmers.

Some statements were agreed relatively quickly as they were broadly aligned with the perspectives of all the farmers (e.g. that soil health is central, and the basis for health in all other domains of the farm). However, several 'new' principles were defined by the farmer groups of the project, principles which are normally not often addressed and spoken about in the sector, and which are not yet communicated and explicitly stated as guidelines for organic farmers. These were identified by the farmers to be of particular importance and they include 'softer' and more holistic approaches such as:





- Developing intuition and the ability for self-observation and self-reflection (and taking time to do so);
- Knowing one's own resources and those of the farm;
- The responsible organisation of capacities on the farm, taking its complexity and different processes into account, sharing responsibilities; or
- Awareness that best health is achieved when soils, plants, animals and humans are all considered and integrated in the (health-) management of the farm.

Discussions around intuition and awareness

The importance of intuition, self-awareness, self-reflection and the ability to listen to gut feelings was first raised in the German workshop. Being aware of gut feelings, but then trusting them and daring to listen to them and follow through, regardless of 'what the neighbours might think' was described as a crucial component of running a healthy farming system. The discussions around several of the other statements often came back to intuition and awareness, one farmer stating that "we're always talking about things that are not actually tangible in almost every point. Today we have so many people looking for numbers and measurements, but this is something older, something that we have almost lost, like intuition. It is clear that this plays a role. This inner voice, intuition, awareness, a feeling. In my mind it should be the first point concerning the importance for health". The group of German farmers then decided to add a new statement to the list, describing this overarching principle of intuition.

A similar discussion occurred in the Austrian farmer workshop, where the importance of self-reflection and self-awareness was also highlighted. The ability of the farmer to know his/her own strengths and weaknesses and actively building on this knowledge when managing the farm system was seen as highly important; as well as knowing one's own resources and those of the farm – knowing and respecting the boundaries of the system. The Austrian group also added this as an additional statement to their list.

For the international workshop, these two additional statements were combined and discussed jointly. During this exchange, the UK farmers realised that they too had addressed and evaluated such underlying principles of trust, intuition and self-awareness in their individual national meeting, but somehow hadn't put it into words or included it as an additional statement. They wholeheartedly agreed with it though as many aspects of their discussions about running a healthy farm, from making strategic business decisions to soil management or animal husbandry were related to these 'softer' principles of intuition, self-observation and awareness. They stated, for example, that having the confidence or the "ability to take a step back and let nature and biodiversity sort things out" was in their opinion highly relevant for a healthy farm.

Results - farmers' principles of health

Below we present a selection of these ten jointly agreed farmers' principles of health; the direct outcome of the workshops developed by the farmer groups. The full list of ten statements is freely available online as a booklet *Towards farmer principles of health – 10 key statements of farmers to improve health in organic agricultural systems*. If you are mailed the Bulletin you will have received a hard copy.

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- Farmers who aim to run healthy farming systems develop the intuition and ability for self-observation (e.g. (dare to listen to) inner voice, gut-feeling) as part of the observation process of the farm; and they are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses and know their own resources and those of the farm (e.g. social network, basic trust).
- Farmers who aim to run healthy farming systems ensure the manageability and overview of land and processes (diversity, integrity and sustainability), their responsible organisation (design) and optimal organisation of capacities on the farm, so that the complexity and size of the farm does not negatively affect health (also social and societal health). Different scale farms require different processes and organisational structures to achieve health.
- The main goals of farmers who aim to run healthy farming systems shift away from mass production towards quality production. In place of maximising productivity (e.g. with high performance breeds), optimal yields are aimed for. By selecting appropriate breeds and varieties suitable for the site and the farm, qualitative values and multiple outcomes can be achieved; such as quality, optimum yields, resilience, animal welfare, biodiversity, etc. Aiming for high productivity when it comes to achieving multiple outcomes.
- Farmers who aim to run healthy farming systems are aware that they not only contribute to human health through their high quality food products, but that they also deliver highly valuable outputs in other areas (e.g. environment protection, public goods, cultural landscape, water quality, etc.). They get across the story and value of the product and the farm through close communication with, and involvement of customers, consumers, retailers, processors, etc.

Next steps

And finally, in September 2016, a second international workshop was organised, this time linking the farmers with scientists and advisers from a wide variety of disciplines (e.g. soil science, veterinary science, cropping systems, phytopathology, nutrition, social sciences etc.). The aim was to discuss the ten farmer health principles, and to establish the implications and possible next steps for new and interdisciplinary approaches for health research and implementation of the principles in organic agriculture. Together, a variety of research needs emerged and new project ideas for future collaboration within this international and interdisciplinary network were identified during this meeting.

During these discussions, for example, one Austrian farmer commented: "These living principles were formed out of a creatively enriching farmer group, they are very well matured and all farmers that were present are behind the wording and formulations. I am not sure that all scientists can fully share this vitality with us farmers (and they don't have to, they are scientists and not philosophers!)." Another German farmer stated: "The most interesting thing for me is that these 16 farmers have been able to talk about these things in the first place, and that they were able to write them down. For me, these statements are there now, as they are, as developed by the farmers, and they are very important. I think that farmers see themselves in a process of being more and more aware, looking at things differently



and gaining more knowledge and experience. So this is a completely 'floating experience thing' and it is nothing that you can tear apart or build a thesis around."

A scientist added during the final workshop: "I think it is very important to connect with official organic movement representatives for this. But at the same time, I feel there is, as with every movement and sub-movement, a certain risk involved. If you roll this out, if you expand it, it will be diluted as you include more people. Because in the end, the original principles that were identified here, might lose their value if they are shared with so many new people, with completely different ideas and interpretations of what the principles might mean; diluting their idea and perhaps their power." The discussions during this meeting highlighted that the ten health statements and their validation for a wider application in the farming sector need to be 'rolled out' very carefully and slowly, step by step; first to smaller groups of farmers, understanding and testing the principles in practice, and then steadily expanding to a wider group and other stakeholders.

This project had set out to increase the collaboration and networking among farmers and scientists to jointly think about and create new, more holistic approaches to health measurement and health research in ecological agriculture. The research needs and project ideas from the final workshop are seen as a successful first step in developing this interdisciplinary network of farmers and scientists to jointly design such improved approaches. Through the identification of farmers' own principles of health (in their own words), the project has provided a sound basis for such new 'thinking-patterns' and was able to stimulate and inspire a wide range of farmers and scientists to review and challenge their own philosophies and sometimes unconscious perspectives of health. The collaboration between farmer groups from different countries was particularly fruitful, as the exchange and detailed discussion, comparison and matching of their own personal perspectives with colleagues in the same country, but also with those from different countries, from different backgrounds and farming environments, was seen as highly inspiring and thought-provoking.



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Feedback from the UK farmer group

"Since being involved in the HealthNetworks project and the subsequent publication of the booklet, *Towards farmer principles of health*, I have found myself referencing the booklet on several occasions when making important short, medium and long term changes to our farming practices to investigate whether or not they satisfy the statements that we as a group agreed were important to the general principles of farm health. I have found this incredibly useful, especially when making long term decisions about how we manage our soil and how we conduct ourselves on the farm, as well as how we treat employees or contractors who are part of our farming family."

John Pawsey, Shimpling Park Farm, Suffolk

"I enjoyed taking part in the HealthNetworks project. It made me think hard about my business, and about the organic movement in general; it was fascinating to meet farmers from other parts of the EU and hear their opinions, and get an understanding of their motivation also."

Adrian Steele, Chapel Farm, Worcs

"The focus on health has been inspirational; indeed everything that we do on the farm can be condensed down to one word - health."

Richard Gantlett, Yatesbury House Farm, Wilts

"The process of reflection, and doing a presentation of our farming at Cow Hall was useful; and while not resulting in changes as a direct result, has strengthened our perspective and ambition for the health of the livestock and the environment. As an adviser, I am always conscious that there are many ways in which a farm, with its particular system and practices, can deliver the core principles defined by organic farming. However, the concept of health should feature much more strongly in our understanding of those core principles and consequently influence farming."

Mark Measures, Cow Hall, Shropshire

"I have enjoyed being a part of the project and I think I now think of health in a much wider context. It has been very encouraging to share thoughts and concerns from a UK perspective and then hearing the same sorts of things from our European neighbours. It has also highlighted the difficulty of coming up with a definitive list of things to do to achieve the health outcomes we all are striving for. It has made us as a farm more aware of what we contribute to the local environment and community and we will continue to build on what we are doing."

John Newman, Abbey Home Farm

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