STOAS - Assessing sustainability in organic farming

STOAS
SUSTAINABILITY TRAINING FOR ORGANIC ADVISORS

Date:	Saturday 15 February
Time:	10.00 - 11.00
Venue:	room Nizza, NCC-Mitte, BioFach 2014
Moderator:	Antje Kölling (IFOAM EU)
Speakers:	Mark Measures (Organic Research Centre), Matthias Stolze (FiBL), Stephanie Fischinger (Bioland)

Farm advisers have a prominent role to play in further increasing the sustainability of organic farming. By helping farmers to come to grips with sustainability goals and their own objectives, they can motivate farmers to go beyond the minimum organic criteria. In this session, senior farm advisers will present a number of tools for sustainability assessment in organic farming and provide guidance for the implementation of these tools in your own organisation. The session draws on the experience of the STOAS project, during which assessment tools were tested at diverse farms across Europe. The project ran from 2012 to 2013 and was funded by the Leonardo da Vinci programme of the European Commission.

STOAS Memorandum

The STOAS project ("Sustainability Training for Organic Advisers") has involved organic farm advisers and teachers from seven European countries in developing the concept and use of sustainability assessment tools and providing curricula for training workshops. This memorandum has been written based on the experiences made in the project.

The STOAS partners consider organic agriculture as a development process of ever increasing sustainability. They see two ways of supporting this development. The dominant way is raising the standards of the organic regulation. Whilst regulations offer advantages such as assuring a level playing field (fair competition) and consumer trust, they do not acknowledge the differences between farms. Indeed, farms are all different. Each one has its history, its climatic conditions, soils, markets and a combination of people running it with their own values and aims. Because the regulations focus on only a limited number of parameters, they often constrain the development of organic agriculture leading to standardised practices and inadvertently discouraging the adaption of best practices. The STOAS partners conclude that regulations only offer an extrinsic motivation for change. Therefore organic farmers are too often not motivated to go further than the minimum necessary.

The STOAS partners promote an alternative way for increasing the sustainability of the organic sector, namely by motivating farmers through advice, training and offering information. This is a dynamic, more progressive approach, and leads to more diversity and more satisfaction. It requires that farmers take responsibility and get involved. Farmers will need a deeper understanding of all aspects of their farm: social, financial and governance as well as environmental. The STOAS partners advocate a change in paradigm from extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation. **Whilst regulations are necessary to set a common baseline provided they are concise and comprehensible, farm development should primarily be achieved by motivating farmers and enhancing their skills (production techniques, entrepreneurship).**

Linked to this discussion is the upswing of sustainability labels (EU eco-labelling, private schemes). These labels do often not acknowledge the fact that to reliably measure sustainability on farm level is a very complex and time consuming process. Most of the methods applied are not transparent and have a limited scope or methodology. They do not take account of the specific conditions of the farm. **Instead of product-based sustainability assessment (e.g. eco-labelling), the STOAS partners propose a process of farm evaluation, support and development that includes social, environmental and economic aspects of the farm. This process will be more effective in delivering a genuinely sustainable agriculture.**

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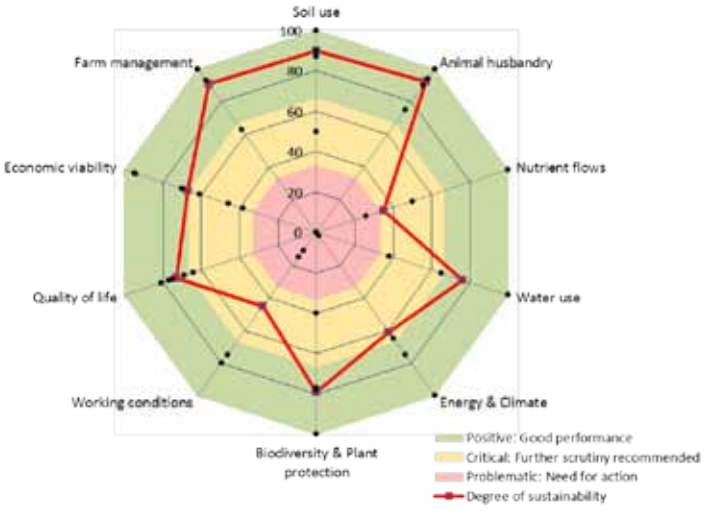
Sustainability assessment

In the STOAS project three tools for sustainability assessment were tested: RISE, FAST and the Bioland tool.

RISE stands for Response-Inducing Sustainability Evaluation. Based on an extensive interview with the farmer, the RISE model calculates 68 sustainability parameters and summarizes them in 10 indicators. It was developed at the Swiss College of Agriculture (SHL) to assess the sustainability of farms in the tropics. FiBL is now developing a version for organic farms in temperate climates.

The Farm Sustainability Tool or FAST was developed by the Organic Research Centre. It is designed to provide a simple, measurable and accessible way to show the "public goods" that result from the farming system and management. As with the RISE tool, the results of the assessment are presented in a cobweb diagram that can quickly be understood by the land manager. Both are particularly useful as advisory tools to identify how a farm is doing, to identify priority areas for improvement and assess changes over time.

The Bioland tool aims to raise awareness about the seven Bioland principles of organic farming (base agriculture on natural cycles, promote soil fertility, respect animal specific behaviour, produce high-quality food, promote biodiversity, protect natural resources and promote quality of life). Whilst also being understandable by the general public, all three tools are designed to achieve active engagement of the land manager. Rather than providing ready solutions, they stimulate farmers to find solutions themselves.



RISE cobweb

Impressions from the partners

The STOAS project provided two courses. The first course served experienced advisers responsible for organisation management, while the second course was targeted at practising advisers or inspectors working with farmers. Here are some impressions:

STOAS inspires the Danish organic advisory service

Anke Stubsgaard and Erik Fog

The STOAS project really has inspired the participants from the Danish Agricultural Advisory Service. Two organic advisers have tested RISE and FAST on organic farms in Denmark. Both the advisers and the farmers were positive about the tools. They are easy to use, though they require an interview with the farmer of at least two hours. The output presented in cobweb diagrams is very easy to read. The farmers found the results of the assessment very useful for the further improvement of their farm practices. However, to make the tools useful in a Danish context they have to be translated and adapted to Danish conditions. The Knowledge Centre for Agriculture will therefore apply for project funding to make tools as RISE and FAST operational in Denmark, improve the sustainability of Danish organic farms and increase consumer confidence in organic products.

Impressions from Bio Austria

Eva Marthe

End of May 2013, we met for the final part of the STOAS course in Denmark. I found the discussion on how we can motivate farmers to implement sustainability measures very interesting. The advisors play a main role in this regard, because they are so close to the farmers. However, it is necessary to find a method adapted to the national conditions. Therefore, our next step should be to find financial resources for training and motivating the advisers in Austria.

More information

Contact *Bram.Moeskops@ifoam-eu.org* or visit *www.stoas-project.eu*

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