



Health in organic farming systems

Intuition and other soft skills crucial for translating organic principles into practice

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ABSTRACT

Since 2012, ORC has been investigating health concepts within organic food and farming systems. As health is one of humankind's greatest goals, and a prime argument for buying organic food products, we explored crucial questions such as: 'How do we define health?'; 'How do we measure health?' and 'How do farmers increase health in their farming systems?'.

After our qualitative literature analysis found significant variation in health criteria within different scientific disciplines¹ (e.g., soil science prefers to describe health with terms such as *sustainability* or *function*; veterinary science on the other hand, uses the term less, and tends to describe health rather as *productivity* or *resistance*)²; we wanted to find out how farmers deal with this variation and how they themselves describe and measure health.

Taking the IFOAM principle of health³ as basis for this work, we worked with farmer groups in Germany, Austria and the UK to jointly identify their own strategies and philosophies for running healthy farming systems and increasing the health of soils, plants, animals and humans. The groups initially developed their own 'principles of health' in each country, and later worked together to agree the most 'accurate' formulation to merge these 10 statements⁴.

The "Farm System Health in Practice" project built on these findings, using participatory multi-actor approaches to collaborate with the established international network to develop a concept for farmer-to-farmer learning, defining the most appropriate conditions and methodologies for the transfer and multiplication of tacit farmer knowledge around health.



INTRODUCTION

The pressures on our food systems, including climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental contamination, and global health crises to name a few, call for a comprehensive and holistic approach to finding solutions, linking up individual disciplines and working together towards transformative change.

The international group of farmers collaborating on this project series agreed a list of 10 statements that describe how they achieve health on their organic farms. Although several of these 10 statements are already commonly known, widely accepted in the organic sector and in line with the IFOAM principles, some of the farmer statements are addressed much less often and describe more holistic and softer approaches. While the identified required 'soft skills' scarcely feature in the organic regulatory or advisory framework, these skills were highlighted by the farmers as being of particular importance for running a healthy farm, producing healthy food and collaborating in healthy value chains¹.

A LEARNING PROCESS

Now that the perspectives and philosophies of farmers were written down in their 10 statements of health, we wanted to find methods and suitable approaches to share this tacit knowledge with other farmers and together develop this continuous learning process further. A joint learning process seemed to be particularly challenging for the softer skills such as self-awareness, self-reflection, or intuition. However, all three national farmer groups stated that such skills are crucial for running healthy farms, and that they can be trained and practiced. They identified peer-to-peer exchange as being especially valuable.

The final project in the series brought the three farmer groups together again in each country, UK, Germany and Austria; and together they established three individual concepts for a farmer-to-farmer learning process to spread awareness about their own principles of health. Many aspects of the three learning concepts were quite similar:

1. The exchange with other farmers needed to happen on a farm, to exemplify and demonstrate the meaning behind the statements.
2. The core-group farmers needed to be involved/facilitate at least the initial exchange events in order to 'get the message across' and to explain the process they went through that brought them to these conclusions and statements.
3. The farmer co-learning groups needed to be of a particular size (optimal group size to ensure engagement and room for each member to build up trust, confidence and engagement), although this size was determined to be quite different in the three countries: UK groups were said to ideally count around 20 participants, 10-15 in Germany and a maximum of 10 in Austria, including the three host farmers.

But above all, the farmers unanimously agreed that this was a *long* learning process, that such courses or exchange events could not, and should not cover the entirety of this subject in just two or three events. The full potential of these 10 statements was seen in their ability to inspire other farmers to reflect and review health concepts on their own farms, and to find parallels or highlight areas where they needed to increase their efforts to foster better health.

There is no silver bullet that can be applied on each farm, each farm needs to be seen within its individual environment, economic and social circumstances. Through a plan of regular meetings within a specific 'working group for farm health', over several years, the farmers expected to enable a sound basis and common ground to learn and develop together, from each other and jointly drive their individual pathways, skills and growth towards healthier and sustainable food systems.



CONCLUSION

Implementing the organic principle of health on organic farms is a complex and multifaceted task which requires individual approaches on each farm. Transferring knowledge on how to promote health on organic farms can therefore not be based on a simple roll-out of recipe-like recommendations. Instead, it needs a dynamic process based on intensive social interaction with peers, personal engagement and self-reflection, and open-ended questions more than quantifiable health metrics. While this process may be slow, our results and experiences with the organic farmer workshops show that this approach is more appropriate for bringing about and handling the system shifts required for better health on organic farms.



REFERENCES

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