

2024 EU ELECTIONS - ORGANIC MOVEMENT'S MANIFESTO

AN EU WITH VIBRANT RURAL AREAS AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

Organics Europe hereby presents a manifesto that articulates a vision for vibrant European rural areas where agriculture is sustainable, resilient, and just. Organic farming stands at the heart of this vision, embodying practices that are not only environmentally beneficial but also economically viable.

Organic is part of the solution to the challenges confronting European agriculture today. It is a sector marked by growth and resilience, with nearly 420,000 organic producers across the EU and retail sales reaching €45 billion in the EU. Organic farming is well known by EU consumers, and it is the only legally defined and certified sustainable food production system. As such, the European Green Deal acknowledges organic agriculture as playing an important role in the transition to a sustainable food system in Europe. Beyond its environmental benefits—such as enhancing biodiversity, sequestering carbon, and fostering soil health—organic farming brings substantial socio-economic advantages such as revitalizing rural economies, creating employment, and promoting healthier lifestyles. For instance, the Food and Agriculture Organisation confirmed that a 10% demand shift from conventional to organic farming is expected to result in a net gain of almost 44,000 jobs. As such, in addition to its proven environmental benefits, organic also has the potential to boost employment in rural areas, helping to revitalise rural economies across Europe. Stronger rural economies will result in increased food security, protecting Europe from geopolitical shocks that affect food supply and demand.

Current farmers' protests and ensuing political discussions highlight the need to address legitimate concerns about unfair pricing and competition in European agriculture without misdirecting frustrations against environmental legislation. The objectives laid out in the European Green Deal are essential yet often wrongly blamed for the struggles of farmers, as most environmental legislation was blocked or diluted with minimal impact on farmers to date. This misdirection as well as the focus on techno-fixes overshadows the broader systemic issues, such as the need for fairer compensation and support for farmers, particularly those transitioning to truly sustainable practices.

Organic farmers, who are at the forefront of advocating for a transition to sustainable food systems, demonstrate a collective willingness among farmers to embrace environmentally friendly practices. Therefore, it is vital for policymakers to ensure that the transition to sustainable agriculture does not overly burden these farmers, but rather supports them adequately to continue their important role in evolving the sector towards sustainability.

Organics Europe proposes the following six priorities that must be addressed during the next political mandate to transition towards sustainable food systems and vibrant European rural areas.

REIMAGINING THE COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY TO PROMOTE BIODIVERSITY & SUPPORT EXTENSIVE PRACTICES

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) should enhance farmers' living and working conditions, alleviate the administrative complexity for both farmers and public authorities, and better align with the European Green Deal's objectives. The CAP must recognize the role of organic farming in delivering environmental and socio-economic benefits and offer organic farmers a comparative advantage proportionate to their contributions to public goods. At the same time, conventional farmers should be incentivized to move towards more sustainable practices.



Within the current CAP, the area-based support scheme fails to adequately reward the environmental contributions of farmers. The implementation of eco-schemes, intended to address these shortcomings, is mostly ineffective due to restrictive access for organic farmers because of alleged "double funding" issues and the lack of ambitious criteria across all Member States. These factors result in organic farming being unfairly compensated compared to conventional practices that meet fewer environmental ambitions.



To rectify these issues, the CAP post-2027 must set more ambitious environmental, biodiversity, and climate goals as well as financial incentives that move away from untargeted payments not linked to environmental outcomes. A proposed model for future CAP payments involves linking them directly to the level of environmental ambition, with organic farming positioned at the highest tier. This model would be based on assessing farms across four key environmental aspects: soil, climate, water, and biodiversity, ensuring harmonized implementation across Europe. This approach aims to reward sustainable practices and provide a clear transition path towards higher environmental standards for all farmers.

STRENGTHENING THE ECONOMY & THE SUSTAINABILITY OF FOOD SYSTEMS THROUGH SUSTAINABLE PROCUREMENT



Sustainable Public Procurement of food:
Strategic lever to systemic change, 2023



Procurement is a strategic market development tool to increase the demand for organic, healthy and sustainable products and can play a crucial role in financing the transition to sustainable food systems. It is a myth that it costs more to have organic than conventional food in canteens. It is rather a matter of “converting” the canteen and the way things have always been done, with a sufficient amount of training. Specifically, this means cooking more from scratch, consuming more plant-based products and less meat, and making sure that food waste is prevented both in the kitchen and on plate.



To make sustainable public procurement a reality, we need minimum mandatory criteria that mandate the inclusion of organic products in all public institutions (schools, hospitals, etc.) through specific quota requirements in public food procurement policies.

Mandatory criteria should not only exist for public canteens. After all, citizens buy and consume most of their food outside of the context of public canteens. Transitioning to sustainable food system must be a collective effort that includes the whole supply chain. The aspirations of the EU code of conduct on responsible food business and marketing practices must be translated into mandatory criteria with adequate enforcement.

IMPROVING CONSUMER CHOICE THROUGH RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT THE TRUE COST OF FOOD AND PROMOTING ORGANIC



Consumer-facing communication is key whether these are campaigns with clear messages for consumers about the true cost of food production or whether these are about showing how organic addresses issues they care about, e.g. health or the environment. Organic agriculture saves taxpayers the costs associated with mitigating pollution caused by synthetic pesticides, showcasing its role in internalizing externalities. For instance, the cost on ground water pollution for a hectare of conventional potatoes amounts to 1.298,00 euros, while it amounts to 0.4 euros for a hectare of organic potatoes.

Initiatives that reflect the true cost of food production in consumer prices promote sustainable consumption and production patterns. The organic action plan sets out that the Commission will carry out a study on the real price of food with a view to developing recommendations.

Such a study should assess the externalities of food production, including environmental, health, and social costs, and develop policies to internalize these costs in food prices, e.g. through taxation.



Specifically, there is a need to support targeted campaigns that raise awareness about the benefits of organic agriculture and its positive impacts on health and the environment. Promotion policies are one of many tools to achieve this, and it is therefore important to maintain a ringfenced budget for organic and overcome barriers to the organic sector's participation in EU promotional programs by e.g. adjusting co-financing rates and application criteria for organic sector participants in EU promotional programs and acknowledging the sector's specificities.

IMPROVING CONSUMER CHOICE THROUGH ADDRESSING GREENWASHING



The European Commission has proposed legislation to limit greenwashing which has highlighted the importance of methodological choices in substantiating environmental claims. These choices are inherently political and can influence the direction of agricultural policies towards either sustainable systems or further intensification. For instance, the Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) methodology is inadequate in assessing the environmental performance of agri-food products due to its simplistic approach and inability to differentiate between methods of production.



Zooming in on the limitations of the PEF methodology for agri-food products, 2022



Methodological choices must be carefully considered and be aligned with the transition to sustainable food systems.



The term "regenerative agriculture" is increasingly misused to brand practices with minimal environmental benefits or to sell the merits of an environmentally friendly practice, while other degenerative practices are applied as well. This leads to greenwashing, consumer confusion and hinders the transition to truly sustainable food systems. Current proposed legislation against greenwashing does not propose solutions to this issue. Consumers are increasingly concerned with where their food comes from and how it is grown and organic certification allows consumers to understand exactly how and where their food has been produced, giving them reassurance that their food has not contributed to environmental harm.



Position Paper: Regenerative Agriculture & Organic, 2023



Consumers must be aware that the EU organic logo is the only one representing a legally defined sustainable farming practice in the EU, as well as about the environmental ambition of other sustainability labels which may be used for greenwashing purposes.

ENCOURAGING FARMER-LED INNOVATION BY PROMOTING BIOCONTROL



IFOAM Organics Europe's recommendations on the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Regulation (SUR, 2023)



Synthetic pesticide use has negative effects on both biodiversity and human health. Despite the withdrawal of the Sustainable Use of pesticides Regulation (SUR), there is a broad political consensus on the urgency of developing and using alternatives to synthetic pesticides. Biocontrol avoids the environmental release of synthetic chemicals, targets specific pests without affecting non-target species, and enhances both farmer and public health. While a systemic approach that minimises the use of inputs should be favoured, biocontrol methods should be available for use if needed. Currently, the adoption of biocontrol methods is hindered by limited product availability and a lack of knowledge about their proper application.



To address these challenges, a more conducive legal environment to expedite the integration of biocontrol solutions into agricultural practices must be developed. This includes revising legislation for the swift approval and authorization of natural substances. Indeed, the withdrawal of the SUR should not prevent the adoption of a new legal initiative that would put into law a clear definition of natural or naturally derived substances allowed in organic farming as per regulation (EU) 2021/1165.

Also, financial incentives and technical support should be available for farmers transitioning to biocontrol methods, and funds must be available to research biocontrol solutions tailored to different European agro-ecological zones.

Finally, there is a need for enhanced monitoring and data collection mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of pesticide reduction strategies in Europe. The current HRI-1 indicator is inadequate and should be replaced with more appropriate measures that do not unfairly discriminate against natural substances used in large quantities but are benign in terms of health and environmental impacts. This improvement in monitoring is vital for informed policymaking and the successful reduction of pesticide use.

ENCOURAGING FARMER-LED INNOVATION THROUGH EDUCATION, INNOVATION AND KNOWLEDGE



Farming is technically demanding, and organic farming in particular is knowledge intensive. Organic combines tried and tested methods with new and evolving techniques that strengthen the health of soils and the functioning of ecosystems. The importance of knowledge exchange and innovation in maximizing the development potential of the agriculture sector through an Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) cannot be overstated. The effectiveness of an organic AKIS largely hinges on institutional support and the involvement of key institutions committed to the organic sector. Currently, the support for organic farming within conventional AKIS frameworks, if it exists, is often limited to production issues, neglecting broader educational needs in organic farming practices.



There is a need to establish robust national policies and funding mechanisms to support knowledge creation and dissemination in organic farming and specifically foster the establishment and growth of organic farming networks at national and EU levels, facilitating peer learning and the exchange of innovative practices. For instance, through enhancing funding and support for organic research within the framework of European innovation partnerships and Horizon Europe. Digital platforms and tools specifically designed to disseminate organic farming knowledge and innovations should be put in place.

Furthermore, developing independent support structures for organic processing and retailing would enhance market development, and should involve access to expertise, policy support, innovative research, and effective networking and cooperation among stakeholders.

IFOAM Organics Europe is the European umbrella organisation for organic food and farming. With almost 200 members in 34 European countries, our work spans the entire organic food chain and beyond: from farmers and processors organisations, retailers, certifiers, consultants, traders, and researchers to environmental and consumer advocacy bodies.