

Organic World Congress 2021

Pre-conference: Policies driving sustainable food systems

7 September 2021

SUMMARY

Governments are beginning to recognise the urgent need to transform our food systems. This has been made even more pressing by the current health and economic crisis caused by the COVID pandemic in addition to the already prevalent crises such as food insecurity, climate change and biodiversity loss, all of which our current food systems are major contributors to. There is a growing number of innovative policy examples around the world however, that try to show a way out of these crises and which are introducing and implementing the principles of organic agriculture and agroecology.

The main idea behind the event was to give the audience a comprehensive overview of these policies from all corners of the world presented by the policy makers themselves or experts deeply involved in these. Experiences were shared about policies that have gone a long way by now such as Sikkim or Denmark and which are brand new like Uganda or Sri Lanka. The driving force of good policies from the regional level in the African and the European Union to the level of municipalities such as New York City, Bogotá and cities and villages in Asia was demonstrated.

The conclusions and messages drawn from the Preconference did not only feed into the sessions of the Organic World Congress, but also the Food Systems Summit called by the UN Secretary General for 23 September 2021.

Main Topics

- Experiences and challenges in innovative policy making
- How can policies at the level of districts and municipalities bring positive change for people and food systems
- Using the power of public contracts and procurement
- Developing organic and agroecological action plans
- Building a coalition of the willing and linking it with existing networks
- Debating policy making that considers the true cost of goods
- How to mainstream progressive policies on organic and agroecology and highlight them in global processes such as the UN Food Systems Summit

Objectives

- Advance the development of policies driving sustainability in agriculture and food systems
- Facilitate peer-to-peer exchange and strengthen the links among local, national and regional-level policymakers and experts on best practices and experiences
- Offer hands-on experiences of progressive policy-making for the members of the Food Policy Forum for Change
- Utilize participants' experience to provide strong examples and connect to networks in all continents

KEY MESSAGES

In the opening speech, Frank Eyhorn pointed out the key position of the policies in agroecology by referring to their influential power both in the consumer market and decision-making processes.

Raymond Auerbach, An overview of national and regional policies in Africa

Raymond Auerbach framed the recent advancements in organic agriculture in Africa and stated that the shift to organic policies is unexpectedly and remarkably going well. Government policies and the agroecological movements, particularly in Madagascar and Uganda, are succeeding in bridging the gap between North Africa and the rest. Despite the very little support from a lot of governments, he expressed his belief in the promising future of organic agriculture in Africa.

Kesang Tshomo, Bhutan and its path toward fully organic farming

Kesang Tshomo outlined the steps taken in Bhutan after the decision to be the first fully organic country in the world. Despite the small size of the country, their experience and aspirations set a precedent for the world. She summarized developments on organic at the governmental level starting from 2007. In this transition period, Bhutan's mountainous landscape that led to small and fragmented farming areas, labor shortage, and low budget for research and development are the biggest challenges.

She mentioned the need for a holistic approach for a successful transition rather than focusing on one challenge of farming.

Silvana Winstanley, Huancavelica to be Peru's first organic region

Silvana Winstanley shared the experience of Huancavelica Region of Peru since deciding to take the 100% organic path. Since it is the first such systematic initiative, all the achievements and challenges are extremely valuable in policy making at the national level.

Adopting food consumption patterns have been challenging, due to people's access to less nutritious, but cheap non-regional food.

Paul Holmbeck, Denmark: working together for more organics

Paul Holmbeck shared some of the lessons learnt during the process to get Denmark's National Organic Action Plan adopted, as an inspiration for participants from other corners of the world. He also explained some of the challenges and solutions in detail, so that these can be transferred to other local contexts. He highlighted the continuous support from Danish political parties due to the political awareness of the benefits of organic agriculture and the will to deliver on the SDGs. In this regard, the EU's goal of reaching 25% organics is now leading a fast development process.

The main lesson that could be taken from the Danish experience is the importance of building a political system that is positive towards organic. To do so, Paul recommended to engage with all political parties, not making politicians choose sides, and building long-term alliances with those involved in decision-making.

Alex Lwakuba, How is Uganda implementing its freshly adopted organic policy

Alex Lwakuba presented the recently adopted National Organic Agricultural Policy (NOAP) in Uganda, which aims to harness the country's potential in organic agriculture by ensuring a regulated sub-sector that contributes to national development. The formulation of the policy was initiated by the National Organic Agricultural Movement of Uganda (NOGAMU). Key elements for the national validation of the NOAP were the involvement of strong partnerships at all levels with the willingness to go through such a long-term effort. Challenges encountered during the policy formulation were mostly associated with low productivity, low capacity to meet certification costs, and low investment in the organic sector.

Vijay Kumar, A farmer-centered approach towards agroecology in India

Vijay Kumar presented Community Managed Natural Farming in Andhra Pradesh, India. He drew the attention to the positive impacts of their initiative, such as less water consumption, resilience to floods, etc. In addition to that, he emphasized the necessity to fight with the belief of the impossibility of farming without chemicals. The importance of setting precedents by model farms or transforming a village to organic are seen as key to implement the strategies but also bringing scientific and indigenous knowledge together.

1st PANEL DISCUSSION:

What are the similarities and differences between the Natural Farming initiatives run in Andhra and Himachal Pradesh?

Rajeshwar Chandel: There is not much difference between them. Our knowledge resources are the same. We are working on the same lines, specifically for the natural farming program.

In this three-year program, we did not work to upscale the costs for farmers. Instead, we went to farmers just to show them models. We organized pieces of training on these 'modal demonstration farms' where farmers allow to express their demands and ask questions.

In the latter stage, we organized farmers to farmers discussions where they can exchange their experiences. So far, farmer interactions have worked a lot. In the last stage of the action plan, we created a new innovative certification system and are planning to outlets and district headquarters. Thanks to full government support, there is no challenge in this process.

How can the AU support the developments in organic agriculture?

Raymond Auerbach: West Africa has a long history of organic agriculture. There are many projects there. AU has done a great job with East Ecological Organic Agriculture Leadership.

What would you identify as the main risks in sustainability in food systems in Bhutan?

Kesang Tshomo: Diversity in food production is a real challenge for a small country like Bhutan. To promote diversity, they need money. Therefore, we need to scale up production in the country so as to trade certain crops. Unless the farmers have market-led production, investment in organics would not be sustainable.

What is your vision for the whole of Peru based on what has been achieved in Huancavelica?

Silvana Winstanley: Once people are empowered and they believe what they are doing is actually for their health and well-being. Once this is done, sustainability will be guaranteed for the whole of Peru.

Organic Denmark is very offensive in the climate debate, how do you think we can set a climate agenda nationally and globally?

Paul Holmbeck: We need to work at all levels, integrate organic as a central pillar of climate policy by working with the opinion-makers, and spread the best practices within organic farming to get better results for the climate.

What message do you think I should bring to my policymakers and how we can walk together to boost organic agriculture in East Africa?

Alex Lwakuba: The only advice that I can give is to do more advocacy. I see advocacy and lobbying as the most crucial drivers of change. We must identify the drivers, the champions of decision-making processes and get great partnerships. Getting in touch with a member of parliament who is enthusiastic about organics would help a lot.

What should be the key to keep your farmers constantly engage in organic agriculture?

Vijay Kumar: The extraordinary results on the ground give a lot of hope to farmers. They see the increase in efficiency, resilience to floods. These changes in their lives are the ones that are motivating them.

2ND PART

Zhejiang Zhou, Working with local governments and districts - introducing ALGOA and GAOD

Zhejiang Zhou presented the work undertaken so far to establish and strengthen the Association of Local Governments for Organic Agriculture (ALGOA) and the Global Alliance for Organic Districts (GAOD). He reiterated the importance of connecting all actors to make the change possible. In this context, summits and workshops held in the continent play a key role in the exchange of knowledge, ideas, resources, projects.

Thilak Kariyawasam, How to bring a bold decision to success? - the case of Sri Lanka:

Thilak Kariyawasam presented the challenges as regards the recent government declaration on a total shift to organic agriculture. The lack of structure in the implementation of the program creates inconsistency between theory and practice. The government subsidies to the chemical sector are kept, which make organic development difficult. Control of chemical sector in agricultural knowledge systems, top-down approach, lack of clarity in policy program and economic constraints are also obstacles for organics in Sri Lanka.

Runchi Wang, Organic agriculture development in China:

Runchi Wang gave an overview of policies to promote organic agriculture development in China. She touched upon commitments to organics on the political level, current organic policies and the impact of these policies in local production.

Hugo Rojas, Building trust and reconnecting people to agriculture - the role of farmers' markets during COVID times:

Hugo Rojas presented the achievements of the municipality of Bogotá, Colombia. Their scheme promotes an alternative way of consumption. For the maintenance of the supply chain during the COVID-19 crisis, innovative measures such as home delivery applications and online shops are included in the supply chain. Thereby, the existence of organic products is guaranteed during the pandemic.

SECOND PANEL DISCUSSION:

Promising developments in the EU! How much do you think the rhetorics in the Farm to Fork Strategy are now in contradiction with the hard facts of the Common Agricultural Policy? What has been happening at the political level in the EU?

Silvia Schmidt: The EU Commission published the EU Green Deal. This vision of achieving climate neutrality is reaching food systems, with a view to make them more sustainable. The initiatives such as reaching 25% organic land in the EU, publishing the 2023 Sustainable Food Systems Legislative Framework are the most pertinent in this context.

Production is 90% organics in Sikkim, but is the local consumption also organic? Could you give us more details of food systems in your region and the share of organic?

Sundar Anbalagan: Organic food in the domestic market is insufficient for the population. Considering the size of arable land in Sikkim, the production is at a small scale. Therefore, domestic consumption is dependent on imports.

How might the activities at the municipal level make a change in the federal policies strategy development?

Laura Edwards-Orr: The federal government buys quite a lot of foods, especially the Department of Defense and the Department of Agriculture. Working with the Federal Purchasing agency for the food purchase of these State Departments might boost our local production.

What is your advocacy strategy to handle a situation where organic has been blamed for a crisis in Sri Lanka?

Thilak Kariyawasam: Our strategy is based on educating the farmers and collaborating with other NGOs in advocacy. For instance, a growing number of kidney diseases caused by agrochemical usage are threatening human life. We need to create awareness of such cases.

Concluding remarks: Gábor Figeczky, IFOAM – Organics International

As we know from a recent report, the public is providing more than \$1m per minute in global farm subsidies, much of which is driving the climate crisis and destruction of wildlife and just 1% of the \$700bn (£560bn) a year given to farmers is used to benefit the environment.

Today we heard from a vast collection of innovative approaches that can change these perverse policies and subsidies. What they have in common is that they take mostly the principles of agroecology and organic agriculture as the basis for this change.

The various tools used can range from support for organic inputs, sustainable public procurement, for extension and research to institutional development by strengthening sustainable agriculture/food movements, support to PGS, connecting farmers to markets, consumer campaigns and banning chemicals.

All these are actually nicely collected in the IFOAM Policy Toolkit that we developed for policy makers to have an overview of possible measures nicely decorated with examples from all over the world and it is also accompanied by a Decision-Making Aid.

The most important thing is policy coherence, meaning we don't just create policies that create a little niche for sustainably produced products, but also break down all those policies that work against this. This is what would ensure that gov'ts do not cherry-pick any of the SDGs, but deliver towards all of them!