

TP ORGANICS – Technology platform for organic food and farming: A vision to set the organic research agenda of tomorrow

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Scientific research is one of the main driving forces behind the endeavour to find solutions to key problems and challenges, and the development of innovations. Setting research priorities is therefore like taking a strategic decision for the respective area and setting the mid- to long-term framework for further development. This is certainly also true for research in the organic fruit sector.

A major project initiated by the IFOAM EU Group and ISOFAR is the establishment of a research platform for organic food and farming, the so-called Technology Platform Organics. TP Organics is a platform that brings together the efforts of all different kinds of stakeholders: industry, science, farming and civil society. The main objectives of TP Organics are to identify research needs for the further development of organic food and farming, to thereby define organic research priorities, and to promote these priorities to the authorities and the European Commission.

European Technology Platforms (TPs) are recognised by the Commission as useful in defining research and development priorities, timeframes and action plans for important issues impacting Europe's future growth, competitiveness and sustainability objectives. A total of 38 TPs have been officially recognised and have a major influence on the research priorities of the EU Research Framework Programme. The recent EU Framework Programme FP7 (2007 to 2013) bundles all research-related EU initiatives under a common roof in order to provide support for research and development activities covering almost all scientific disciplines. The existing TPs cover an enormous range of topics including information technology, clean energy production, pharmaceuticals and biotechnology.

TP Organics to highlight role of organic

TP Organics therefore highlights on the one hand the huge potential of organic food and farming to tackle major future challenges - from climate change and biodiversity loss to food security and the whole range of socio-economic challenges facing rural areas. On the other hand, it develops concrete plans for research ideas, their implementation, and the further development of the sector.

TP Organics is a growing bottom-up initiative of 20 EU umbrella organisations, several enterprises, and national and EU level public and private actors from within and outside of the organic sector. The process of forming this coalition of partners started in June 2007 when several organisations from the organic sector got together to discuss different scenarios for agriculture and food systems up to the year 2025. The result, after two years of intensive consultations, is the publication of:

- A Vision for an Organic Food and Farming Research Agenda 2025
- A Strategic Research Agenda highlighting 61 research ideas based on the main areas outlined in the Research Vision

The Vision and the Strategic Research Agenda take the whole scope of organic food and farming into consideration and are therefore of general interest also for the fruit growing sector. Further, some of the project proposals directly or indirectly address the principal research needs of the sector.

Vision for Organic Food and Farming research

In December 2008, TP Organics officially published its Vision for Organic Food and Farming 2025.¹ This important undertaking was coupled with the launch of this TP, at whose core was the goal of streamlining organic research into agreed priorities translating these priorities into funding for concrete research programmes and projects.

Up to that time, research projects and national framework programmes in organic agriculture have focussed on immediate technology gaps in organic agriculture and food production. This has been politically expedient and has answered the need for development of the production and professional skills necessary to serve unexpectedly rapid growth in consumer demand for organic goods. Thus, many organic research projects had a short term perspective only. In contrast to this, TP Organics takes a long-term perspective.

The Research Vision comprises three strategic research priorities:

(i) Eco-functional intensification of food production:

“By 2025, new concepts, knowledge and practices will halt or even reverse migration from rural areas to urban centres. A diversified local economy will attract people and improve livelihoods. Organic agriculture, food processing and eco-tourism will become important drivers of the empowerment of rural economies. The dialogue between urban and rural populations will improve considerably and intensified forms of partnership between consumers and producers will emerge.”

(ii) Empowerment of rural areas and economies:

“By 2025, the availability of food and the stability of food supply will be noticeably increased through eco-functional intensification, and access to food will be considerably improved thanks to revitalized rural areas. Knowledge among farmers about how to manage ecosystem services in a sustainable way will be much greater, and animal welfare and environmentally sound farming will be cutting-edge technologies in food production.”

(iii) Production of food for health and human wellbeing:

“By 2025, people will have more healthy and balanced diets. Food and quality preferences will change: fresh and whole foods will be the ultimate trend and processing technology will produce foods with only minimal alterations to the intrinsic qualities. The specific taste and its regional variation will be more appreciated than artificially designed.”

Organic agriculture is strongly and explicitly based on ethical values based on the underlying principles of health, ecology, fairness and care.² These principles provide a unique basis for developing complex assessment and decision-making tools and for modelling future sustainable food and farming systems in a practical context in which stakeholders along the whole food chain are able to participate.

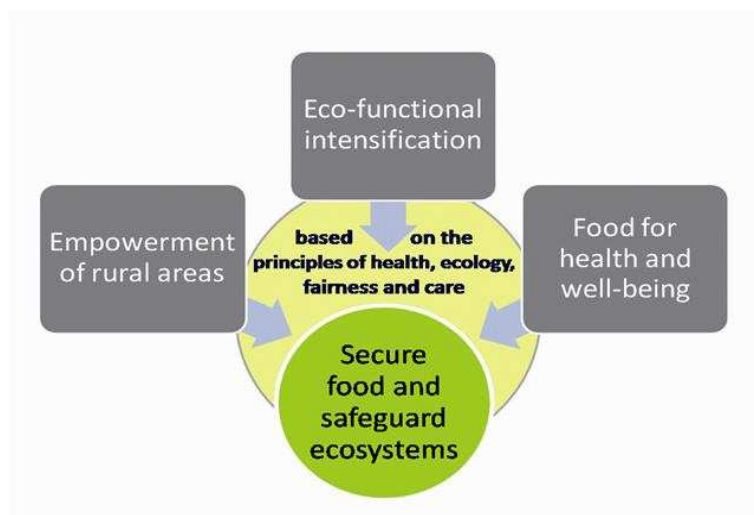


Figure 1: Vision for 2025: Strategic Research Priorities for food and farming research

TP Organics Strategic Research Agenda to 2025

Following the publication of its Research Vision, TP Organics created the so-called Strategic Research Agenda (SRA) to define detailed research proposals. The SRA was finalised in December 2009 and is available on TP Organics website. The purpose of the Strategic Research Agenda (SRA) is to put the Research Vision into practice. It was developed through a dynamic consultative process that ran for more than one year and involved over 300 experts in formulating and/or reviewing descriptions of research goals and topics.

Beside the three main research priorities from the Research Vision, three cross-cutting societal challenges were identified and considered separately: climate change, biodiversity loss and water scarcity. A further horizontal cross-cutting issue is that of knowledge management and communication. In each of the three Vision themes, Key Challenges were identified, and for these up to six research goals and research topic descriptions were worked out. These descriptions include information about the goal, the rationale behind it, the research questions, the expected impact, the priority, and possible funding sources. Altogether 61 detailed research goals and detailed topic descriptions have been formulated, including some of strong relevance to organic fruit growing (e.g. designing resilient cropping systems for organic fruit production, multidisciplinary breeding approaches).

Outlook

TP Organics will in 2010 develop an action plan outlining how the research needs identified should be put into practice. Further, communication with the European Commission and Member States will be enhanced. There is hope of securing official recognition of TP Organics by the new Commission (which recently took office) and the European Parliament (elected in summer 2009). The chair of the Agriculture Committee of the European Parliament officially supports the initiative.

The fruit growing sector is invited to actively participate in TP Organics and to benefit from the research priorities.

References

- 1 – http://www.tporganics.eu/upload/TPOrganics_VisionResearchAgenda.pdf
- 2 - http://www.ifoam.org/about_ifoam/principles/index.html