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XXIII Congress of the European Society for Rural Sociology

Held in Vaasa, Finland, on 17-21 August 2009

Theme 2: The Rural Bites Back – Working Group 2.6

http://www.esrs2009.fi/2_6.html

Conventionalisation? Organic farmers bite back!

Convenors of the working group:

Julien Blanc, Ika Darnhofer, and Stéphane Bellon

The development trends within organic farming and especially the thesis of conventionalisation have been debated for over ten years, yielding various viewpoints and empirical evidence to support them. Most authors contributing to this debate report that in many countries a number of certified organic farms display a range of practices closely resembling those on conventional farms. Although conventionalisation has so far not been identified as the dominant trend, does it represent a threat for the development of organic farming? Among others, would it compromise organic farming's ability to implement ecologically sound farming practices and to fulfil the expectations as to its contribution to rural development?

To counteract this threat, and strengthen organic farming's transformative potential, the debate must move beyond its focus on the bifurcation between artisanal and conventionalised organic actors, to understand better the complexity of organic farming and propose more reliable descriptors of conventionalisation processes.

This working group seeks to assess the implication of developments within organic farming for rural areas and identify the range of options used by organic farmers to fight against the 'dilution' of organic farming, fight against a reductionist understanding of organic farming limiting it to the legal requirements. We aim to concentrate on three major areas of debate:

The perception of organic farmers: Some fear that organic farming might lose its identity and become little more than a production method, thereby losing the holistic concept embodied in its principles. How does the increasing number of actors in the organic sector affect the self-identity and self-perception of organic farmers? More generally, how do different views among stakeholders affect the dynamics of the organic movement?

The organic practices: Although 'conventionalisation' is widely used as a term it lacks clear criteria that can be used to assess what is or is not conventionalisation, much less the degree of conventionalisation. Can criteria, indicators or assessment methods be identified? What examples are there that best illustrate social and production practices that fulfil legal requirements but are in stark contrast with organic principles?

Future options: New regulations and incentives at various scales tend to redefine the roles of organic farming and its contribution to rural development. Would they open new avenues to extend organic food and farming in alternative patterns? How would they participate in designing other options beyond bifurcation? Which way forwards can be identified? How can organic farming keep its distinct identity yet be able to adapt to change and integrate new opportunities?

If you have worked on one of these issues, please send us an abstract and contribute to the debate during the XXIII Congress of the European Society of Rural Sociology in Vaasa!

Key dates

28 Feb.: Deadline for submitting your abstract (max. 250 words). Please send it per email to: ika.darnhofer@boku.ac.at and jblanc@mnhn.fr

10 March: Deadline for us to notify you of acceptance of your abstract