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Organic Food: Where Do We Go from Here?

By Elizabeth Henderson

Hydroponics and tiny chicken “porches,” are the latest in the watering down of the National Organic Standards opening the industry to big agribusiness and monocultures, confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs), and giant retail. Their decades-long niche closing quickly around them, organic family farmers are searching desperately for a strategy that ensures their survival. Additional organic labels that indicate organic purity beyond the National Organic Standards like “Real Organic” and “Regenerative Organic” are among the proposals to differentiate the family-scale farming (that established the organic sector in the first place) from industrial-grade organic farming. But labels alone aren’t enough.

Longtime organic farmer and farm justice activist in the organic movement, Elizabeth Henderson argues that while it makes sense to protect the integrity of organic labels, this move is temporary and will be ineffective without bringing in fair pricing for farm products and high labor standards for farmworkers. The larger strategic question is: Can the organic farm movement survive without joining ranks with agrarian movements for farm justice and with the farmworkers and food workers who want to change the food system?—*Eric Holt-Giménez, Editor*

However, I cannot agree that farms are *really* organic if they do not place a high priority on being fair workplaces.

Family-scale farms in the United States have benefitted from the legitimacy resulting from the National Organic Program (NOP), but ultimately the program has not saved them from the national farm crisis. Our movement has invested exorbitant resources fighting for organic label integrity. The missing piece from organic standards since the feds took over—is fairness (see Box #1). For farmers this means fair prices; for farmworkers, it is living wages, respect, safe working conditions, and decent benefits. What we need is a system of locally controlled participatory guarantees. To end the growing farm crisis, organic farmers need to ally with other food workers to create a food system worth sustaining.



Migrant workers harvesting at Lakeside Organic Gardens, Watsonville, CA: Photo Courtesy of USDA / Bob Nichols

In 1989, I was opposed to the idea of putting an organic program in the hands of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA, *viz* the department of agri-business), but I lost that fight and then switched to working to make the NOP livable for family scale organic farms and small certification programs like the Northeast Organic Farmers Association's (NOFA).

That fight is valuable, but not enough: we need to think more strategically

about the certified organic farms as a small, but important, part of family-scale farming in this country—farming that has been in crisis for most of my life. When I was born, there were more than 5 million farms. Today there are 2 million, and farms continue to go out of business, their land gobbled up by extractive industries, housing sprawl or by bigger, industrial farms. There are too many obstacles to establishing viable farms for young people who do not inherit wealth. As a movement for a more just and sustainable food and farming system, it is our responsibility to come up with solutions not just for organic farmers, but for the many other farmers who are struggling to survive in the brutally ruthless capitalist markets as climate change and unreasonably complex food safety regulations make it ever more challenging.

The “buy local” campaign has been tremendously successful—we sold all of the food from our farm within a radius of 60 miles. We mainly sold directly through our Community Supported Agriculture project (CSA). Being part of the organic movement while also leveraging social capital, I was able to make a very modest living based only on farming income for over 30 years. But where buy local has been most successful—parts of Vermont for example—it still only accounts for 10% of the food that people buy. Ninety percent of the food people eat still comes through third parties. The farms that sell through middlemen, and the consumers who buy that food, depend on a label with integrity.

For the immediate future, creating add-on labels as our short term survival plan

makes sense. While we continue to struggle (and lose ground) defending the NOP label, we must continue to use it, with our add-on labels signaling to consumers that these products are Really Organic or even Regenerative Organic, going beyond the NOP organic label in important ways.

Large parts of the public are only just catching up to the value of organic—and wanting to buy in. And I must add—where certification is done by our farming organization certification agencies, the increase in the number of farms has been greater than in states where departments of agriculture do the certification. The integrity of these programs is strong and they do not certify as organic hydroponic operations or chickens on porches.

Connecting Organic with Justice

However, I cannot agree that farms are *really* organic if they do not place a high priority on being fair workplaces. Likewise for stores/brands that do not pay farmers fair prices. I have been working on an add-on label for more than 20 years: “Food Justice Certified.”



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Box 1: International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM): Principle of Fairness

"Organic agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities. Fairness is characterized by equity, respect, justice and stewardship of the shared world, both among people and in their relations to other living beings.

This principle emphasizes that those involved in organic agriculture should conduct human relationships in a manner that ensures fairness at all levels and to all parties – farmers, workers, processors, distributors, traders and consumers. Organic agriculture should provide everyone involved with a good quality of life, and contribute to food sovereignty and reduction of poverty. It aims

to produce a sufficient supply of good quality food and other products. This principle insists that animals should be provided with the conditions and opportunities of life that accord with their physiology, natural behavior and well-being.

Natural and environmental resources that are used for production and consumption should be managed in a way that is socially and ecologically just and should be held in trust for future generations. Fairness requires systems of production, distribution and trade that are open and equitable and account for real environmental and social costs." (IFOAM Principles 2005)

The little group that developed the Agricultural Justice Project knew that we would not live long enough to insert standards for fairness to farmers and food workers into the NOP so we drafted social stewardship standards, translating the abstract notion of social justice into the concrete terms of pricing for farm products and working conditions for workers on farms and in other food businesses. Then we added fair trading standards among businesses. The basic premise of this project is that supportive relations of mutual respect and cooperation among the people who grow and sell food will result in a triple win for farmers, food workers and ultimately the people who eat the food.

Organic Farming's Agrarian Question

The organic label has helped a lot of us dodge many of the crises of over production and low prices that plague family farmers practicing conventional agriculture. When agricultural land was still financially accessible, the organic label helped many new and young farmers get their family business going. It was easy to see ourselves as separate from conventional family farmers, and many of us felt the organic sector was protected from the toxic agrarian dynamics that spread across the farming heartland. But, the label was also the entry to the food industry and the supermarkets that dominate the food chain. While organics transformed farming practices,



Photo by United Soybean Board (CC BY 2.0)

it didn't transform the food industry, and the relaxing of organic standards reveals that it is now transforming us.

If we are honest, we have to admit that social relations in organic agriculture now mimic those of the dominant industrial food system, and organic farmers, even farmers who sell direct in local markets, have a hard time making ends meet. While some farmers may be building equity in their farm businesses, many farmers are in debt and the farm family that lives entirely on farm earnings is rare. Farmers who want to provide a middle-class income for their families depend on the off-farm earnings and health insurance from a family member's job. Few farmers pay living wages to the people who work on their farms—though a few at least have been determined to prioritize this.

We must begin to address fairness in any add-ons we create or we are not building a food system that is worth sustaining. We are just replicating the unequal social relations in the industrial

food system that we claim to oppose, a system that grew out of the slave plantation and continues to thrive by using undocumented, exploited, desperate workers and squeezing farmers as hard as possible. We will not reach the promised land of sustainability based solely on the environment and humane treatment of livestock without also addressing human relationships. Farmers and farmworkers, the people who do the work of farming, must have justice.

By stretching towards fairness, the organic movement can take its rightful place in the struggles for freedom and justice. We must step out of our bubble into the world of serious political conflict and come up on the right side, gaining as allies the farmers and working people who are the most energized in opposing the current crisis. Together we can create real alternatives that solve the long list of inadequacies and injustices of the capitalist food system. Our program would include prices that cover the costs of production *for all farmers*, living wages with respectful treatment and decent benefits for farm workers *on all farms*, so that farm work is a desired occupation. There are many conventional farmers ready to cross over to organic farming if we build a common bridge of agrarian demands.

But we must also demand reparations to African Americans and Native Americans, regenerative land use practices, access to healthy food at

BOX 2: Participatory Guarantee Systems: a process that empowers, educates and builds community

I suggest we look to the examples of [Participatory Guarantee Systems](#) (PGS) fostered by IFOAM. PGS initiatives exist in 66 countries. In 2017, IFOAM estimated that there are at least 241 PGS initiatives worldwide of which 115 are under development and 127 are fully operational, with at least 311,449 farmers involved and at least 76,750 producers certified. An outstanding example is Natur et Progres (Nature and Progress), a federation of 30 local chapters. Natur et Progres is the oldest French organic organization founded in 1964 and they

have maintained a participatory system through which peasants, consumers, doctors, retailers, and processors created a common charter including ecological, economic and social objectives to which all subscribe. The charter is a guide to moving towards a society that respects humans and all living things. Natur et Progres is a network of local groups of volunteers and the name Natur et Progres functions as an [independent collective brand](#). Inspections are done by local committees that include both farmers and trained non-farmers.



Photo Courtesy of USDA / Bob Nichols

reasonable prices for low income people (both urban and rural), and access to the resources of land and equipment to all who want to farm.

We can write this program together with our allies, and this country can fund it by ceasing the endless wars in which we are engaged. At the same time, for the sake of organic farming and food, we need to begin serious work to take labeling into our own hands by

co-creating a Participatory Guarantee System (see Box #2). An effective PGS would be a huge challenge and would inspire us to build cross-sector alliances and intensify our local networks. Setting a new, participatory system would help educate both farmers and eaters, involving technical people—scientists, physicians, and others—in the process, so we can learn and organize the kind of ecological and agrarian society in which we want to live.

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