

Organic Farming in Greece 2001

by Nicolette van der Smissen

1. Agriculture in Greece

In order to understand the problems of agriculture in Greece, one has to bear in mind several facts on agriculture in Greece in general.

In 1995, there were 774,000 farms in Greece. The total agricultural area was 5,148,000 hectares in 1997. The average farm size is about 6.6 hectares. Bigger farms are created through leasing. This is the same case for organic farms. There is a sharp difference between irrigated and rain-fed agriculture, which is more important than differences in soil and climate. Water is the main determining factor with respect to crops and yields. Rain-fed crops involve a higher cultivation risk and lower income. Therefore, only a small range of crops is cultivated on fields that can not be irrigated (cereals, pulses, some fodder crops, sesame, olives, wine).

Irrigated crops are cultivated according to the pattern of conventional agriculture all over the world: with a high application of chemicals. To a great extent, rain-fed agriculture has been spared the massive advertising campaigns of the chemical industry. Therefore, traditional practises of cultivation can still be found. Older people still know about crop rotation, green manure and traditional crops (pulses, rain-fed fodder crops). Models of traditional cultivation which could be referred to as organic have, however, vanished.

Many people believe that it should be easier to convert extensive cultivation to organic farming than intensive cultivation systems. This is not the case. The main problem is that farmers consider extensive agriculture to be organic already. Due to the lack of information and training, there is no understanding of the demands of organic agriculture. One should bear in mind that only 5.7 percent of Greek farmers have attended an agricultural training programme of one year or more.

Crop and animal production in Greece are traditionally separate from each other. Animals, mostly sheep and goats, graze on harvested fields and public land, including woodland, grassland and barren land. In the winter, grazing is supplemented by animal feed produced by the same farmer or purchased in the region around the farm. There are, however, big animal farms similar to those in western and central Europe producing eggs, milk and meat for the centres of consumption exclusively from purchased animal feed.

The system of integrated plant and animal production on the same farm as it is known in northern Europe has no tradition in Greece and other Mediterranean countries. That is the reason why this system will be difficult to implement even in organic agriculture. In most cases, a steady cooperation will develop between farms producing animal feed and others producing animal products and manure.

2. History and Development of Organic Agriculture in Greece

Organic agriculture in Greece has its roots in the ecological movement at the beginning of the 1980s. The first organic farmers were mostly amateurs who experimented with different organic cultivation methods, e.g. according to Steiner, Fukuoka and others.

Commercial organic agriculture started in 1982 with the demand for organic currants (sultanas) from a Dutch firm. A consultant for organic agriculture working in cooperation with the Dutch certification organisation Skal laid the basis for the conversion of some farms in Aegio, a region between Patras and Korinth. From 1986 onward, a German firm supported the production of

organic olives and olive oil for export.

Individual farmers converted their farms in the following years, supervised by foreign certification and inspection bodies ([Skal](#), [Soil Association](#), [Naturland](#)). Their main products were olive oil, citrus fruits, wine, cereals, kiwis and cotton.

There is no official data on organic agriculture for the period from 1982 to 1992. According to estimates, there were about 150 producers cultivating a total area of 200 hectares. EU-Regulation 2092/91 brought about a major change. Many farmers officially converted their farms to organic agriculture. A second expansion took place after the introduction of hectare subsidies in 1996 with the adoption of the EU-Regulation 2078/92.

Organic agriculture has rapidly expanded since its official establishment, with annual growth rates of between 50 percent and 120 percent; slowing down to 20-30% in 1999-2000. In 1999, both the share of organically utilised area as well as the number of organic farmers reached 0.6 percent of the overall country total.

3. Statistics on the Development of Organic Agriculture

Official data on the number of organic producers and hectares for the years 1994, 1996, 1998 and 1999 were collected by the [Ministry of Agriculture](#). Data for the years in between were supplied by the certification and inspection bodies as far as they were available (table 1).

■ Table: Development of Organic Farming in Greece

4. Organic Agriculture Organisations

There is no central organisation for organic agriculture in Greece. If necessary, the various organisations meet for discussion.

- [Certification and Inspection Bodies](#)
- [Farmers', Consumers' and Scientific Organisations](#)

Certification and Inspection Bodies

The following certification and inspection bodies exist in Greece:

- "Dio" was founded in 1993. ("Dio" is the poetic name for Demeter, the goddess of fertility).



- "Soge" is part of "Soge – Syllogos Oikologikis Georgias Elladas" ("Association for Organic Agriculture in Greece"); the association was founded in 1985 and the inspection body with the same name was founded in 1993.



- "Fysiologiki" ("The Natural One") was founded in 1994.



These organisations publish magazines (see chapter 12) and books, inform about related subjects (e.g. genetically modified organisms) and hold informational meetings for farmers and consumers. The members of the certification and inspection organisation "Dio" created the independent "Dio" ("Scientific Institute for Organic Agriculture") in order provide specialised information (e.g. research results, information on EU programmes and legislation concerning organic agriculture) to companies, farmers and other bodies.

The Scientific Institute "DIO" publishes the legislation on organic agriculture in Greece, which is constantly updated. "DIO" is a non profit organisation, whereas FYSILOGIKI is a limited liability company (Ltd.) and SOGE will soon transform itself into a public limited company (PLC) / stock corporation under the name of BIO ELLAS.

Farmers', Consumers' and Scientific Organisations

- The "EEBE – Enosi Epangelmaton Biokalliergiton Elladas" ("Union of Organic Farmers of Greece") represents Greek organic farmers at large exhibitions, fairs and at the [Ministry of Agriculture](#). Its main activities during the last years have been the lobbying for registration of biological inputs at the agricultural Ministry in Greece (e.g. traps, biological pesticides) and the organisation of weekly markets for fresh organic products in Athens.
- "Rea" (English: Rhea), the "Scientific Society for Organic Agriculture" connects ecologically interested agricultural scientists in order to support and inform them about organic agriculture. "Rea" is the name of the daughter of the gods Earth and Heaven, symbolising good hopes for the continuance of life.
- For quite some years, the "Ergastiri Oikologikis Praktikis" ("Workshop for Ecological Practice") has organised lectures and fairs about ecology and organic farming in Thessaloniki. In recent years, it joined the "Network for the Preservation and Exchange of Local Varieties and Native Animal Breeds". Their activities concentrate on disseminating information and organising seed exchanges on an amateur level.
- The "Union of Consumers of Organic Agricultural Products", the "Network of Actions against Pesticides and for Organic Agriculture" as well as some other organisations deal particularly with consumer information.

In Greece there is a coordination of the [IFOAM](#) members. The head office of the national IFOAM group is located at the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Chania (MAICh). The Greek representative in the IFOAM EU group is Dimitris Dimitriadis, who is in charge of collecting and passing on information from the European Union group to the members of the national group and vice versa. His deputy is Dimitris Sotiropoulos.

5. Regional Distribution of Organic Farms

Most Greek organic farms are situated in southern and central Greece due to the main Greek organic product, the olive ().

■ Table: Regional Distribution of Organic Farms 2000

6. Land Use, Animal Husbandry

The main organic products of Greece are olive oil and olives, followed by vine, other tree crops (especially citrus) and arable crops ([see table](#)). The main share of the industrial crops referred to is cotton.

Currants are listed only by Dio (196 ha). Crocuses for saffron account for the bulk of herbs listed by Fysiologiki .

Organic olive production is not very different from extensive, rain-fed, conventional olive production. The difference is in fertilising practice (green and animal manure) and Dacus fly protection (traps instead of spraying). There is enough know-how for this crop, the costs for organic cultivation practices are not much higher than the conventional costs, and the hectare subsidy is high. Demand for organic olive oil as a typical Mediterranean product is high, especially from foreign countries, and many producer groups have found ways to sell their products at good prices. In the last years, however, as the number of producers is increasing, marketing olive oil has become more difficult.

Wine, the second major product after the olive, is a typical Mediterranean crop, too. Organic know-how with respect to vine cultivation has reached quite a high level. The increase in organic viticulture is also a consequence of the high hectare subsidy and restrictions on conventional wine production. Marketing organic wine depends not only on the organic certification of the product but especially on the know-how involved in the wine-making process. The flavour of the wine and personal preferences are often more important for the consumer than the fact that the vine was organically grown.

The fact that there is no EU regulation for organic wine-making makes the organic certification process quite difficult. The inspection does not include the wine-making process. Most producers try, however, to avoid non-ecological additives. DIO has been testing standards for organic wine-making since 1999. As soon as the dialogue with farmers and officials is finalized, the standards will be officially adopted. This will take place probably in 2002.

The demand for fresh fruit and vegetables, especially for the external market, has caused the area under organic cultivation to increase. Marketing these products, a central factor for profitable production, is in its early stages.

Products from animal husbandry started to be marketed since the last months of 2000. The market offer includes eggs, feta cheese and meat of sheep and goats. Within the next year (2002) there will also be dairy products (e.g. yogurt) and small quantities of pork and veal. The demand for food for organic animal production already raised the area cultivated with arable crops and especially fodder crops.

Other organic arable crops (e.g. sunflowers, sugar beets, industrial tomatoes, pulses, sesame, herbs) are mainly hindered by the lack of processing possibilities, the low level of know-how and low prices for these products on the conventional market.

The situation is improving as more and more processing firms decide to get certified organically.

■ Table: [Greek Organic Products According to Certification Bodies \(including areas in conversion\)](#)

7. Standards and Certification, State Regulation

The only standards for certification are Council Regulations (EEC) 2092/91 and (EC) 1804/99. State regulations for organic agriculture do not exist.

DIO creates its own standards for various areas which are not included in the EEC regulations, as there are e.g. wine-making, retail trade, sales at weekly markets, animal food and others. Some of these standards will be implemented in 2002.

8. Implementation of Council Regulation (EEC) No. 2092/91

The Bureau of Organic Products, Department of the [Ministry of Agriculture](#), is responsible for everything in terms of organic agriculture concerning EEC Regulations, including supervising the

implementation of EU regulations, participating in meetings and discussions at the EU level, transferring the regulations into Greek law and supervising the certification and inspection process.

A new body, partly independent of the Ministry of Agriculture, was established to deal with the certification of a series of quality labels (regional, integrated pest management, etc.) under the name of "Agrocert". Considering organic production, this body will take over some tasks of the Bureau of Organic Products.

Three certification and inspection bodies, Soge, Dio and Fysiologiki, were recognised in 1993 and 1994, and each has its own label.

As of December 31, 1999, DIO controlled 54% of the organic area in Greece, SOGE 39% and FYSILOGIKI 7 %. Up to now, only DIO is certified officially by the standard of EN 45011. DIO applied also for the IFOAM certification and the confirmation of equivalency by the USDA. SOGE is about to change its organisation form into a stock corporation/public limited company (PLC) under the name of BIO ELLAS.

The [Ministry of Agriculture](#) supervises the inspection and certification process by collecting figures from the certification bodies and checking archives and data. Since the implementation of the EU Regulation 2078/92, district departments of the Ministry of Agriculture have started to make random checks on organic farms.

9. State Support, Policy Initiatives

Organic Agriculture was never supported by the Greek government apart from the implementation of EEC programmes.

The EU Regulation 2078/92 first made it possible for organic farmers to receive subsidies for organic farming. The regulation was transferred into a national regulation in 1996. Organic farmers could apply for financial support from spring 1996 until spring 1997.

Afterwards, the regulation was changed. A new application period started in autumn 1998 and is still going on. It aims for a more even distribution of organic farms all over the country, concentrating around ecologically important areas as well as in certain regions in order to create "organic farming communities". Each of the 56 districts had to declare regions and products to be subsidized. For many farms, that means that only part of their crops will be supported financially, depending on the district subsidy plan. The government budget was calculated to cover 1,000 hectares in 1998, 8,000 hectares in 1999 and 5,000 hectares in 2000 in addition to 7,200 hectares which were subsidized until 1997 (the overall area to be subsidized until 2000: 21,200 hectares).

10. Implementation of Agenda 2000

The new rural development regulation under AGENDA 2000 caused major changes concerning organic as well as conventional agriculture.

The 1257/99 referring to organic agriculture is implemented since Feb. 2001 onwards. Each farmer has to pay for his own agronomist-consultant who will be responsible for annual cultivation programmes and reports as well as for a detailed Environment Treatment Plan. In order to make it worthwhile applying for the programme, the annual subsidy must be higher than the payment for the agronomist. This is the case for farms bigger than 6-10 ha vine or 15-20 ha arable crops or olives. The average organic farm size, however, is 4,3 ha. Therefore, this condition excludes small organic farmers from funding.

Other problems of the programme are the small subsidy for arable crops and especially horticulture, the limitation of the programme to a 5 year conversion period and the high demand for documents and data from the farmer. The 1257/99 programme is believed to be one of the most difficult EEC programmes to apply for - especially if one takes into account the small amount of money, which a small organic farmer will be paid.

The main problem, however, is not so much the constant changes in legislation and the general shortage of funds, but the poor level of information, the negative attitude towards organic agriculture and the difference in the interpretation of the national regulation by most of the local departments of the Ministry of Agriculture. These are some of the reasons why in 1996 only a little bit more of 2/3 of organic farmers were supported by the 2078/92 programme. This percentage will deteriorate as the 2078 is running out and the 1257 is gradually taking over.

In some regions of Greece, certain investments and activities of organic farmers were subsidized through the EEC Regional Programmes. As Agenda 2000 brought about an overall orientation towards the production of quality products, organic production gives advantages to applicants in all investment programmes (Leader, Youthstart, Processing of agricultural products etc.). In some cases (wine making, processing of olive oil), the existence of organic raw material is the only possibility to get subsidies out of EEC programmes.

Agenda 2000 demands crop rotation programmes as well as nature protection and reduction of fertilizers even from conventional farmers. These obligatory means of "good agricultural practice" pushes conventional farmers towards more friendly methods of land cultivation. It is not sure, whether this will help them in order to convert easier to organic agriculture.

11. Marketing

Organised marketing of organic products is just starting with marketing organisations coming up and expanding within the last years. Most products are exported, especially fresh fruit, olives, olive oil and wine.

Organic food shops have opened during the last years in the large cities of Greece (Athens, Thessaloniki). Even some smaller cities now have organic shops.

As the production in Greece is limited (small quantities, seasonal, small variety of products), many organic products are imported. A certain number of specialised stores buy and sell organic products on a wholesale basis, too.

A lot of the big chains of super markets installed an "organic corner", usually together with wholefood and health products, some even sell packed fresh fruit and vegetables. Most of the products, however, are imported. Therefore, the price of organic products in super markets is usually very high (about double of the conventional price). Supermarkets with organic sections are mainly located in large cities.

Organic products can be found scattered in conventional supermarkets and health food shops according to the extent of the interest of the shop owner and the ability of several organic farmers to launch their products as products of higher quality (e.g. wine, fruit, vegetables).

There is a weekly market in a different location in Athens every day at which only organic products are sold. Recently, a weekly organic market opened in Thessaloniki. Many farmers, however, sell their products among conventional farmers at the local weekly markets in their districts or directly from the farm.

The difference between products in conversion and organic products is often not well understood, neither by most consumers nor by shop owners. As the supply of organic products

(including products in conversion) is very limited, there is usually no price difference between organic products and products in conversion.

12. Training

Up to now, there has been very little official training in organic agriculture. In 1998, a postgraduate programme for agronomists that specialised in organic agriculture was set up in Iraklion, Crete, including two months of lectures, two months of practical training and two months of study on a topic concerning organic agriculture. The programme was carried out at the TEI Heraklion (a college), in co-operation with the Ministry of Education and the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Chania (MAICh). Due to limited funds, the programme will probably not be continued.

A four-year study programme started in 1999 in Argostoli on the island of Kefallinia, finishing with an agronomist's diploma specifying organic agriculture. The body responsible for this programme is the college TEI Epirus.

Many seminars on organic agriculture subsidised by the EU are held all over the country and are targeted at unemployed people. The main problem is that the teachers in most cases know very little or nothing about organic agriculture or are even opposed to it. This is true even for some teachers in the postgraduate programme. On the other hand, many participants in the training programmes are not interested in organic agriculture or agriculture at all.

Hopefully, this will change in the coming years with the increase in organic farming and a broader basis of information.

Already, many colleges and even Universities have included optional lectures on organic agriculture and animal production into their study programmes.

13. Advisory Service

There is no official advisory service in Greece. A small number of self-employed agronomists deal with training and extension work concerning organic agriculture. Some companies employ agronomists who are responsible for the organic production on farmer and processing level.

Many agronomists who sell pesticides have started to inform themselves about organic agriculture because of clients who need permitted organic fertilisers as well as the means to cope with production problems.

Magazines on organic agriculture try to reduce the information deficit for farmers and consumers of organic products.

There are four such magazines in circulation:

- "Dio - Magazine for Organic Agriculture" (Published quarterly by Dio)
- "Organic Agriculture and Sustainable Development" (Published quarterly by Fysiologiki)
- "New Moon" (Published quarterly by Nea Kinotita (New Community))
- "The Ark" (Published annually by "Network for the Preservation and Exchange of Local Varieties and Native Animal Breeds")

Finally, a lot of official and semi-official bodies hold meetings and issue publications and informational leaflets on organic agriculture in order to inform farmers and consumers.

14. Research

Part of the research under EU-regulation 2078//92 is carried out by the National Institute for Agricultural Research (N.AG.RE.F - Ethniko Instituto gia Agrotiki Erevna). The programme deals with the description and providing of statistical data on organic farms in Greece. Soil analyses have been carried out concerning soil parameters as organic matter, pH, carbon content, soil nutrients as well as pesticide residues. A small number of researchers are employed by Branches of the Institute in Southern Greece. Their research topics are directly connected with organic agriculture (soil improvement, fertilizing, plant protection in different crops).

Universities and governmental institutions usually deal with research topics concerning the reduction of chemicals in agriculture and the development of environmentally friendly techniques of agricultural production.

In many cases, the results can be used in organic agriculture as well. This research greatly depends on a small number of persons who have adopted the ideas of an environmentally sound agricultural system. However, there are a few researchers, usually working at the University, concerned almost exclusively with topics concerning organic agriculture (green manure, organic fertilizing, marketing of organic products).

The main research topics are: the fight against the Dacus fly in olive production; organic fertilising and green manure; alternatives in coping with fungal diseases in olives and wine; integrated pest management; chemical residues in the environment; and consumer behaviour.

15. Challenges and Outlook

Organic agriculture in Greece seems very small-scale in comparison with many other European countries. However, the progress made in the last years is impressive. In the early 1990s, nobody took organic farming seriously. Since the adoption of Council Regulation (EEC) No. 2092/91, things have changed. Some politicians even praise organic agriculture as the solution for agriculture in mountainous areas, although at the governmental level the attitude towards organic agriculture is quite different. There may be the will to support organic agriculture, but no financial possibilities. In order to fulfil the conditions for entry into the Economic Currency Union, the Greek government cuts expenses wherever possible.

The factors which stimulated organic agriculture in other European countries (national labels, national laws, subsidies for farmers, trade and processing, consumer and farmer information, state research) are just coming up in Greece. Many government employees in charge of the 1257/99 programme still try to dissuade farmers from organic agriculture. Organic farming is often considered just one of the many other proposals and EEC directives for the production of high quality food. As it seems, many government officials prefer the IPM approach to organic agriculture as it is easier to implement. Consumers are less informed and have less money to spend than their counterparts in Northern Europe.

Organic farmers, processors and tradesmen have to afford not only the conversion costs but also the costs for informing consumers, building up marketing channels, training their partners, etc. etc. This is an enormous effort considering the low level of training of farmers in particular, the small farm size and the lack of government support.

The development over the last years shows that in spite of bad conditions, organic agriculture is gaining ground. Especially in the training, marketing and research sector, the past two years marked a major progress. Through the general orientation towards environmentally friendly and high quality production in agriculture in the EEC under Agenda 2000, there will be a steady progress among farmers, too.

Author

Nicolette van der Smissen works as an inspector for DIO, one of the three Greek Control and Certification Organisations.

Address: Dipl. Ing. Agr., M.Sc.Agric.Nicolette van der Smissen, Dio, Kikonon 31 , GR 68100 Alexandroupoli, Phone. 0030 551 25625 Fax. 0030 551 88684, e-mail <mailto:%20nicoletav@axd.forthnet.gr>

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