

**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON  
ORGANIC AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SECURITY  
3 to 5 May 2007  
Rome, Italy**

**Announcement**

**Conference venue**

The International Conference on Organic Agriculture and Food Security will be held from 3 to 5 May 2007, in FAO's Headquarters (Green Room) in Rome, Italy, in connection with the 33<sup>rd</sup> Session of the Committee on Food Security (7-10 May 2007).

**Conference organizers**

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, through its Inter-Departmental Working Group on Organic Agriculture, in partnership with: the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI), World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Third World Network (TWN), Research Institute for Organic Agriculture (FiBL) and World Watch Institute (WWI).

**Conference participants**

The Conference is open to all interested colleagues, including government, academic institutions, civil society and private sector institutions interested in organic agriculture and food security. The target audience are the government delegates attending the 33<sup>rd</sup> Committee on Food Security and country representatives to FAO. Invitations for attendance will be only electronic, through dedicated websites (see below).

**What does the term "organic agriculture" include?**

Organic agriculture as a holistic production management system that avoids use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and genetically modified organisms, minimizes pollution of air, soil and water, and optimizes the health and productivity of interdependent communities of plants, animals and people. The non-use of external agriculture inputs which results in natural resources degradation (e.g. soil nutrient mining) does not qualify as "organic". On the other hand, farming systems which do not use external inputs but actively follow organic agriculture principles of health and care are considered organic, even if the agro-ecosystem is not certified organic. On the market place, the organic claim requires certification and related products are distinguished by an organic label. Organic labels can originate from both third party certification and participatory guarantee systems. The term "agriculture" is used in the wider sense to include forestry and fisheries; therefore, organic aquaculture and organic harvesting of non-timber forest products are covered by the Conference. Finally, agricultural harvest includes food, fibers, medicinal and cosmetic raw materials.

## **Background**

Predictions about population growth, growing demand for food, increasing pressure on the environment, and persistent hunger and poverty raise questions on the way in which food is produced and accessed and the need to develop improved agricultural production and distribution systems. A large proportion of the world's food producing areas, including most of Africa, consists of small family farms relying on erratic rainfall that have little, if any, access to inputs and limited institutional space (in terms of access to inputs, credit and markets) for capital-intensive farming. Conventional systems of production have often generated high environmental costs, and their reliance upon externally supplied inputs creates barriers to access amongst the poorest segments of the population.

There are claims that organic agriculture based upon low-cost, locally available materials and technologies provides an important alternative in the search for an environmentally sound and equitable solution to the problem of food security. Other studies claim that a large-scale shift to organic farming would not only increase the world's food supply, but might be the only way to eradicate hunger, especially in poor, dry, and remote areas where hunger is most severe (World Watch Institute, May 2006). Analysis of organic agriculture also refer to the potential of alternative markets and short supply chains on food choices and food sovereignty (Michael Pollan, 2006).

On the other hand, there are also claims that organic management is inefficient, requiring more land than other farming methods and failing to meet food needs, especially when practiced on poor soils and when the products are sold to elite consumers. Some opponents go so far as to state that "the greatest catastrophe that human race could face this century is not global warming but a global conversion to organic farming – an estimated 2 billion people would perish" (John Emsley, Cambridge University). Attacks to organic agriculture also refer to environmental unfriendliness (such as destruction of the rainforest) and transportation and distribution inefficiencies resulting in more food miles and carbon emissions (Economist, 7 December 2006).

However, it is a fact that organic food remains the fastest growing food sector, with a market of US\$ 30 billion in 2005 and an annual growth of 15%. This sector continues to attract the interest of governments, agribusiness executives, farmers and consumers, while the impact of this expansion remains poorly understood. The lack of a reliable global dataset, comparable models and systematic analysis, as well as flawed arguments on the contribution of organic food supply systems to global food security, fuel heated debates within the scientific community and in FAO.

There is an urgent need to better understand whether and how organic models in different socio-economic and biophysical settings maximize returns on farmers' knowledge, labour and capital, especially in poor and marginalized areas where people are in the quest of food security. More information is necessary on the opportunities and constraints associated with organic agriculture, particularly amongst resource-poor producers.

There is a need to clarify the contribution of organic agriculture to food security and to demystify this subject so that FAO can provide objective and informed advice to its member countries. Organic agriculture offers a rich arena for research and debate about the future, and FAO offers a unique forum for this knowledge exchange.

## **Conference objectives**

The overall objective of the Conference is to shed light on the contribution of organic agriculture to food security, through the analysis of existing information in different agro-ecological areas of the world. The Conference will identify organic agriculture's potential and limits in addressing the food security challenge, including conditions required for its success.

The outcome of the Conference will be a thorough assessment of the state of knowledge on organic agriculture and food security, including recommendations on areas for further research and policy development. The Report of the Conference will be submitted to the 33<sup>rd</sup> Session of the Committee on Food Security, for information and further action.

Therefore, the Conference' specific goals are to:

- Comprehensively review existing information and evaluate the contribution of organic agriculture to food security;
- Create a platform for information and knowledge exchange between the organic community and FAO's governing bodies on food security policies;
- Identify measures and actions required to enhance the performance of organic agriculture.

## **Preliminary agenda**

Thursday 3 May, 9-12 hours: Organic agriculture and food availability

Thursday 3 May, 14-17 hours: Organic agriculture and access to food

Friday 4 May, 9-12 hours: Organic agriculture and stability of food supply

Friday 4 May, 14-17 hours: Organic agriculture and food utilization

Saturday 5 May, 9-12 hours: Organic agriculture and food security and sovereignty

Discussions will be held in Plenaries simultaneously in French, English and Spanish. Each session will include:

- Presentation of the agenda item synthesis document and a few related case studies;
- Panellists views (3 persons);
- Discussions from the floor.

Presentations will include a synthesis of published information and case studies offered by participants through the Conference Call for Papers (see below).

## **Communications**

The FAO website on Organic Agriculture ([www.fao.org/organicag](http://www.fao.org/organicag)) will serve for information dissemination throughout the preparatory process of the Conference. The Conference will be also advertised through different specialized websites, including the websites of the Partner Organizations and the FAO meetings page dedicated to the 33<sup>rd</sup> Session of the Committee on World Food Security.

The Conference is free of charge. The Registration Form and dedicated Conference webpage will be available on-line, in February 2007, on the FAO website on Organic Agriculture. For further information, please contact Nadia Scialabba ([nadia.scialabba@fao.org](mailto:nadia.scialabba@fao.org)).