



# CONSUMER-FARMER HYBRID FORUMS



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## KEY INSIGHTS FROM FORUMS

- Improvements in organic farming must **include the whole supply chain** and take a **systems approach** to farms, beyond replacement/substitution of particular contentious inputs
- **Increased transparency** important across all types of farming – this will help drive improvements, but also carries risk
- **Plastic packaging** and **antibiotics** initially viewed as most important, but learning more about other contentions generally increased perceptions of importance
- Given the **economic precarity** for sustainable producers, particularly small-scale, any improvements in organic standards which make compliance harder for farmers must also be coupled with measures to increase financial stability
- Introducing additional 'organic-plus' labels seen as less effective than improving baseline for current organic labels
- Varying national emphases: Italy - sustainable food '**valorisation**'; UK - locality and **farmer welfare**; Norway - imported feed and **imported organic produce**

## BACKGROUND

The Organic-PLUS Hybrid Forums consisted of a series of joint farmer and consumer sessions aiming to enable engagement between experts in the practicalities of food consumption and production. Bringing together consumers and organic farmers in this joint-up way allowed clearer understanding and communication and provided a space for discussing improvements in organic food which make sense for these crucial but often under-heard groups.

Through a series of discussions, presentations, creative engagement and group exercises, farmers and consumers were encouraged to work together as a **competency community** to explore perceptions of 'organic', to feed into the Organic-PLUS project and add their voices to the future development of organic food.

## METHODS

The Norwegian group consisted of 3 farmers and 10 consumers primarily recruited from a local CSA. In Italy and the UK consumers were recruited through a survey distributed via Facebook adverts and completed by 306 (UK) and 440 (Italy) respondents.

1. 'Good food'

2. Organic

3. Contentious input

4. Participants' choice

5. Modelling

6. Implementation

Figure 1: weekly hybrid competence group session topics

This survey enabled the formation of groups covering a range of regions, demographics, organic consumption/production levels and opinions about good food/food problems. Both groups consisted of 9 consumers and 5 organic/'organic-plus' farmers (i.e. not using a contentious input).

The Hybrid Forums consisted of a series of 4 or 6 two-hour long sessions with farmers and consumers, replicated in the UK, Norway and Italy. In an aim to flatten the hierarchy of scientific expertise/perspectives over experiential expertise, farmers and citizens discussed their own perspectives first, before hearing from conventional 'experts' and sessions built up from everyday issues toward more complex/technological issues to develop participants' confidence in their own viewpoints (see [Figure 1](#)). To encourage participation from a range of backgrounds and levels of interest in organic food, participants were paid for their time.

## IMPORTANT CONTENTIOUS INPUTS

The top contentions from each country are shown in [Table 1](#). **Plastic packaging** and **antibiotics** were consistently among the most important contentions across the three countries, although this was clearer in the national consumer survey data than the hybrid forum groups – perhaps because these also included farmers, or because they allowed more space for informed discussion and understanding of the issues involved.

**Table 1.** Most important contentions in organic agriculture - hybrid forum voting exercise results. Numbers in brackets indicate position in national survey.\* indicates was a specific focus of a session.

## Impacts of increasing transparency about contentious aspects of organic

Increased transparency across all types of farming will be crucial to driving improvements – but this carries risk. What do the perception changes over these sessions suggest about the impact of opening-up some of the contentious details of organic farming to broader public scrutiny?

The contentions which were a substantial focus of the sessions tended to have increased in importance by the final prioritisation exercise - indicating that knowing more about contentions increases perceptions of the importance of addressing them. For some, enhanced awareness of the complexity involved in certification increased their trust in the integrity of organic, but at least one consumer reported learning about the breadth of contentions had shaken his confidence. In all countries most participants in the reflective survey/interviews commented that they intended to make some change in their purchasing practices in light of what they had learnt – mostly in terms of either buying more organic or from local/small-scale farmers.

		UK	Norway	Italy
1 <sup>st</sup>	Farmer wellbeing*	Antibiotics (1)	Antibiotics (1)	
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Food miles / local production*	Transportation (5)	Plastic food packaging (3)	
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Antibiotics (2)	Fossil fuels;	Imported feed	
4 <sup>th</sup>	Plastic packaging (1)	Scale (non-industrial)	Plastic mulches	
5 <sup>th</sup>	Plastic mulches*	Plastic packaging (2)	Copper fungicides	

## BEYOND CONTENTIOUS INPUTS

### The role of organic labelling

Perceptions of the value of labelling differed across countries. Trust in organic labels and certification was high. The UK and Norwegian groups – though there were doubts over the effectiveness of labelling for behaviour change:

*"When you're going shopping, you don't have time to read War and Peace on everything" (consumer, UK).*

By contrast, the Italian group had much less trust in organic labelling – seeing buying organic food as an act of faith more than trust in a functional certification, and leading some 'hardcore' organic farmers to give up the label and reach out directly to consumers through farmers' markets and CSAs.

All three groups regarded having separate 'organic-plus' label(s) as less effective than improving the baseline standards for organic certification.

*"Our main problem is not to introduce more labels. It is to clarify and promote those we already have" (consumer, Norway).*



### Whole system sustainability

*"We are paying for the past choice of focusing on specialists, losing the holistic view and the connections between things. Organic is not just a prohibition, a ban, it is rather the awareness that certain behaviours are harmful for the planet, for life, etc. We have to get back to... the holistic view" (farmer, Italy)*

When asked what the problems were in organic agriculture, the participants focused much more on the **whole picture of production** rather than on isolated individual inputs. Their organic systems encompassed the locality of production of seeds and animal feeds, the people growing the food, packaging and how far food travelled once produced.

### 'Valorising' organic production

Improving consumer awareness was a large focus of discussion in all groups, with participants from every country independently advocating for greater space for sustainable agriculture as part of formal schooling. In Italy this was framed in terms of the 'valorisation' of produce by farmers and retailers: taking steps to communicate the **proper** value of an organically produced product to consumers and so justify its price.

### Improving the economics of organic

All groups were united on the economic precarity for sustainable producers, particularly on a smaller scale, and that any improvements in organic standards which made compliance harder for farmers, must also be coupled with measures to increase their **financial stability**. Changes to tax and subsidy systems were seen as effective means of supporting action on contentious inputs.

## WEBSITES

[www.improvingorganic.wordpress.com](http://www.improvingorganic.wordpress.com)  
[www.organic-plus.net](http://www.organic-plus.net)

