

ORGANIC AGRO-PRODUCTS AND CONSUMERS' PERCEPTION AND ATTITUDE TOWARDS THEM AS AN OPPORTUNITY OF DEVELOPING ROMANIAN EXPORT AS A NEW EU MEMBER

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Introduction

Considering the hypothesis that development and success of organic agriculture in Eastern and Central European countries depends mostly on the consumers' perception on such products, the authors of this project will focus on possibilities of developing the internal market, as well as the export possibilities.

As an explanation of interest for this theme: the organic products production in the EU satisfies only 27% of the demand. Therefore, in the new context of integration in the EU we notice the opportunity for the development of Romanian organic agriculture, especially because the organic products production will not be contingent in the EU and also because of the low price of land and labor force, which will probably lead to new European investments in Romanian agriculture.

Firstly, we would like to clarify the usage of the terms as it follows:

- the term **organic** (Great Britain);
- the term **biologic** (France, Italy, Belgium, Greece, Luxembourg, Hungary, Bulgaria, etc.);
- the term **ecologic** (Germany, Austria, Spain, Denmark, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Finland, **Romania**, etc.).

Organic products are products with guaranteed and controlled quality, obtained through sustainable agriculture systems, guaranteed, controlled and certified. The quality of such products is refereed to characteristics such as the small harmful residual contents, together with the nutritional quality, sensory, technological, aesthetical and remarkable ethical qualities. This is why we will summarize the key-words defining sustainable (and therefore, organic) agriculture: CONTROL, QUALITY, CERTIFICATION, also SUSTAINABILITY, ENVIRONMENT, HEALTH, FOOD SECURITY and TRASABILITY (the principle „from the farm straight on the table!”).

The worldwide market of organic products was worth 23-25 billion USD in 2003, while the predicted value for 2006 was 30 billions USD¹ [4].

The largest European producer of organic products is Italy with over 1.3 million ha and about 50000 farms.

The largest organic products consumers are USA, Japan and Germany (worldwide), while in Europe we distinguish: Germany, Denmark and Switzerland.

The organic products market in the EU comprises all types of agricultural products: vegetables, fruits, cereals, bread, wine, meat, dairy products, oil, fish, clothes, honey, eggs, etc.

Organic products are usually up to 25-30% more expensive than a conventional product, but sometimes when 400% more expensive.

Nowadays, in Europe, there is a designated label to mark certified organic products. The logo for organic products in the EU should be used as a marketing tool, this giving a sense of security and confidence to organic products' consumers.

After 17 year its integration in the EU, Spain has started a restructuring of its internal market, while before this she used to export almost everything on the North European markets.

It is believed that the countries that have recently joined the EU will need about 10-15 year after integration to be able to structure an internal market for organic products. Countries such as Romania and Bulgaria will need to identify and orient themselves firstly to cover the areas of products deficiency on the EU market. It is also clear that the EU countries have stated to significantly decrease their production in areas which demand a large labor force.

Research method

In order to achieve the objectives of this study we choose the focus-group method which would enable us to find authentic information regarding the consumers' behavior on the market. Many authors consider the focus group as the most suitable method to deepen the research.

Other reasons for choosing this method are determined by the practical advantages shown, the available literature being full of references [1][8]. We will summarize the advantages of this method below:

- studying consumers' basin needs in order to find new product ideas; studying the consumers' attitude and behavior; testing certain research tools (questionnaire);
- the possibility to obtain detailed data on organic products, based on reasons to buy them, the various problems that clients, sellers, quality controllers are confronted with, different perceptions associated with organic products;

¹Dobrescu M. Emilian –(2003),„Impactul agriculturii ecologice asupra dezvoltării mediului rural românesc”, studiu Academia Română, Institutul Național de Cercetări Economice, p.6

- when organic products are concerned, the perception, attitude and buying and consuming behaviors are influenced by peers (groups), norms and medical prescriptions; in such circumstances, we will determine how reality is seen and interpreted by individuals.

We chose this method because it focuses on the group, being a qualitative technique. The activity was made of establishing a discussion focused on organic products and their importance for nutrition. Using this group discussion we wanted to obtain detailed data by stimulating participant interaction.

We decided to set up a minimum of two focus group activities, although the expenses are relatively high. We organized the first focus group in Oradea (OR group), and the second one in Constanta, following the partnership agreement with Ovidius University of Constanta (CT group).

The members of the research team have defined the problem and the objectives for setting up a focus group with the following interest: „The issue of organic products and the consumers' attitude towards them”.

Defining the focus-group sample (target): the section was set up so that persons with different ages, professions, experiences in analyzing foods would be part of it. The organizers look for people with knowledge of: agricultural and foods technologies, food control procedures, food trading, having different levels of experience as a consumer and entrepreneur in the food business. Participants are part of different social and professional areas, and do not know each other beforehand (an important feature of the focus group). The participants are interested in communication and have such abilities of interpersonal and group communication, being selected using this criteria.

Recruiting participants was done by applying these criteria to a large list of people and by the organizers decision regarding who from the list are best suited to be part of the focus group. The selected persons were verbally invited a month ahead, and asked to confirm their presence one week in advance.

The focus group OR (Oradea) took place in June 2006, while the CT (Constanta) group took place in October 2006. The day is not a religious holiday, and no major sports, cultural or social events of importance took place on that day.

In both cases a special attention was given to the way group talk took place. The location is nice, bright, without any interfering factors or loud noises. Beforehand, the activity guide was prepared. Also, the questionnaires that had to be filled in by the participants were prepared, as well as some presentation materials, such as video projections of the subjects. The discussions were taped and analyzed afterwards.

The method allowed researchers to gain access to information obtained by contribution of the members to the talks, being animated from the participant point of view. Also, the participants made sure to bring out their profound believes regarding the debated issues, the subject of alimentation being analyzed from the medical, nutritional, cultural, religious points of view, and also from the point of view of costs, business opportunities and quality standards.

The results of the focus group method from both Oradea(OR) and Constanta (CT) are synoptically presented in the following table:

Profile

Focus group/zone	OR	CT
Gender	12(8M; 4F)	10 (3M; 7F)
Age		
Under 20 years old	-	-
Between 20-30	2	-
Between 30-40	5	5
Between40-50	3	5
Between50-60	2	-
Education		
High-school	-	4
Higher Education	8	5
Postgraduate	4	1
Monthly income (RON)		
500-700	-	2
700-1000	-	1
1200-1500	4	-
1500 -2000	5	1
over 2000	3	6
Number of family members		
1	3	-
2	2	2
3	5	4
4	2	3
more than 4	-	1

Findings

Focus group/zone	OR	CT
Main reasons to buy organic products?	75% are healthy 16,66% are natural 8,33% health and healthy environment 8,33% food safety	100% due to health taste 20% are trusted/trustful 10 % are controlled 10% are promoted 10% are balanced 20 % long term investment 20%
How much would you be willing to pay for organic products?	Same price: 0% 10% more: 8,33% 20% more: 0% 30% more: 16,66% 40 % more: 8,33% price doesn't matter: 66,66%	Same price: 0% 10% more: 20% 20% more: 10% 30% more: 10% 40 % more: 30% price doesn't matter: 40%
Buying frequency	Very rarely 0% Rarely 25 % Quite often 50 % Frequently 25 %	Very rarely 10% Rarely 50 % Quite often 30 % Frequently 10 % (say

Focus group/zone	OR	CT
		very often?)
What kind of products? The frequency of the answer:	50 % vegetables and fruits 83% dairy products 8,33 % fish 33,33 % bread and pastries 40 % meat and associated products 8,33 % cosmetics clothing is also brought up	40 % vegetables and fruits 70% dairy products 10% bread and pastries 30% eggs 40 % meat and associated products textiles and cosmetics are also mentioned
Is there enough information about organic products?	100% No, not enough information	90% No, not enough information
Do you believe that a campaign to educate the consumer to use such products should be realized?	100% YES	It is necessary and there are strong recommendations for it

Results and interpretation

The first question was set to underline the attitude and buying motivation for organic products. (What comes in mind when you hear about „organic products“?). The following answers came up:

- Health, with a simple motivation that these products do not interfere with natural, biological processes, being good to the human organism;
- Health. My area of expertise;
- “Clean” products, meaning healthy. Because these products should, at least theoretically, ensure the consumer to be safe and rich in useful substances for the body;
- Healthy products, natural, no preservers or additives, naturally made, that help preserve health;
- Products with less Es, additives, only with basic elements, so healthier products, mostly because it is believed that these products are more thoroughly verified, not necessary in the production process, but in the post-production stage;
- Happiness, you are what you eat;
- Products naturally made, no chemicals and no genetic modifications;
- Healthy products, no Es, no synthetic substances, no pesticides, products that should be more present on the market. They are not bad for your health and don't degrade the environment;

- Food products that are not harmful for health are made in an ecological system all the way, from primary production to processing and finally a good. These products are not posing any risks towards health;
- Products that don't harm your health; it is generally believed that products that have additives have a negative impact on ones health, especially on long term.

Declared reasons for buying:

- Are healthy and nutritious, contribute to diminishing negative effects on health, disease prophylaxis.
- Their extraordinary importance for health.
- Interest towards the environment. The desire that our children will enjoy an unpolluted, clean nature.
- The belief that they are truly natural. Affordable, accessible price.
- No health hazards.
- Tastier, natural.
- Decrease in number of patients.
- Better physical condition and state of mind.
- Food safety.

How much are they willing to pay?

Apparently the group in Oradea is more prone to buy such products, with a 66.66% declaring that the price does not matter. This is in part explained by the educational profile and the fact that in this area the income is higher.

What kind of products?

Respondents say that they would buy fruits and vegetables (50%), dairy products (83%), fish and meat products (8.33%), bread and pastry products (33.33%), clothing and cosmetics (8.3%).

After analyzing the data obtained using the focus group method, in both centers, the conclusions draw after questionnaire seemed more complete:

- The public authorities, both at a local and regional level, should get involved to promote the norms regarding food products;
- The necessity to label organic products as to be easily identified and promoted;
- The necessity to get schools involved in raising awareness about organic products and their benefits;
- The necessity of organic products quality control/ controlling their organic features;
- Any discussion on this is more than welcomed;
- The necessity to educate consumers about alimentation, and also about organic food.

CONCLUSIONS

The information obtained using questionnaire as previous step are confirmed by those one obtained using the focus group method. The differences are explained by cultural differences between the two areas where the focus group was set. The differences are not significant, but in case the project will be carried on, they must be considered as they could be a basis for educating the consumer regarding organic products consumption. We distinguish the following conclusions:

- Development of organic agriculture and trading its` products are good opportunities;
- The organic products market has a spectacular growth;
- High potential;
- The internal consume will grow as consumers are educated;
- The growth tendency to export these products, because the EU authority did not fixed quotes for this type of products.
- The public authorities, both at a local and regional level, should get involved to promote the norms regarding food products;
- The necessity to label organic products as to be easily identified and promoted;
- The necessity to get schools involved in raising awareness about organic products and their benefits;
- The necessity of organic products quality control/ highlighting the control of their organic features;
- Any discussion on this is more than welcomed;
- The necessity to educate consumers about alimentation and also about organic food.

For Romania, the development of organic agriculture and trading its` products are opportunities that should be taken advantage of.

Knowing this profile it can be developed the suitable strategy for the market. We consider these types of products a truth opportunity to develop the Romanian export on UE market.

Resources

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