

Key differences between organic and sustainable farming

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There is a lot of information on internet on the differences between organic and sustainable farming. However, this information is not always very precise and in some cases can lead to misinformation.

In this article we decided to focus on the most important [aspects that differentiate these two farming systems](#) and analyse them in deep to avoid misunderstandings.

Certification

Organic products are regulated and must respect certain standards for [organic certification](#). Organic products are often sponsored by the government and several countries have an official body that is in charge of the certification. Although regulations might differ within countries, they are all based on the [International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements Norms for Organic Production and Processing](#).

Unfortunately, [sustainable is not a label](#), it does not required any official certification process and it cannot be officially recognised.

Water and energy use

It is commonly said that one of the differences is that sustainable farming pursues water efficiency while organic farming doesn't, however this statement is not completely true.

While the importance of using water efficiently is mentioned in the IFOAM Norms, very little attention is given to water use in the certification process. In other words, water efficiency is an organic farming principle, but farmers could get their products certified without

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using water efficiently. In addition to this, nothing is said on the use of non-renewable energies (fossil fuels) in the farms.

Sustainability is a philosophy that describes planet protective actions that can be continued indefinitely, without causing damage to the environment, hence the use of water efficiently and the use of energy renewable fuels are a must in sustainable farming.

Farm size

It is commonly said that small farms are more sustainable than big farms. But, as land size is not regarded as part of the requisites for organic certification, big corporations can also certify their products as organic.

It should be understood that this is only a general rule. Usually big farms are less sustainable because tend to focus only on one production type (crop production or animal production) and usually just one specie (wheat production, maize production, cattle production...). Sustainable and organic farming imply crop rotation, integrating crop-animal production systems... and this is a more common practice in small farms. Besides, big farms produce more and might need to transport their products very far for selling, which adds extra fuel consumption.

However, it must be understood that this is only a general rule and there are places where the carrying capacity is extremely low and farms are necessarily bigger. Bigger farms that promote crop rotation, integration of animal and crop production, reutilisation of waste, etc... can be also sustainable!

Animal Welfare

Animal welfare is regarded in both, sustainable and organic farming. However, once again not all the organic products that have gained the organic certification might be respecting animal welfare as much as they should. On the other hand, in organic farming outdoor access is essential but some farms might produce their animal sustainably without exposing them to outdoor, whereas organic farmers might not ensure the quality of the outdoor space provided.

It has been proved that respecting animal welfare increase the total production since stress and mistreatment have negative effects in the production.

Artificial Hormones and Antibiotics

The use of artificial [hormones and antibiotics as growth promoter are forbidden](#) in both systems. The use of antibiotics to cure illness is more restricted in organic farming where allopathic substances and traditional medicine is preferred.

Nevertheless, if proven that the animal's illness cannot be cured with any other method, the use of antibiotics under the surveillance of a vet is permitted.

Social Justice

Social justice is part of both, organic and sustainable farming. It is frequently said that organic farming does not take social justice into account while sustainable farming does. This sentence is again not totally truth. Since organic farming operations can be run by corporations and

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sustainable farming operations are commonly run by small farms (commonly the whole family) people tend to think that the social aspect is not considered in organic farming. However, let's have a look at the following sentence taken from the INFOM Norms: "Social justice and social rights are an integral part of organic agriculture. The fairness principle of organic agriculture emphasizes that those involved in organic agriculture should conduct human relationships in a manner that ensures fairness at all levels and to all parties involved", "Organic operations should make a positive social and cultural contribution over and above legal obligations" "Production that violates human rights and social justice requirements in this chapter cannot be declared organic".

Once again, we must not confuse the principles of organic farming with the organic certification process.

Emissions, Transport, processing and packaging

As we have said several times, the motto of sustainable farming is to develop a farming system that ensures that the activities can be continued indefinitely in the time, therefore low greenhouse gas emissions, reduced transport and [use of environmental friendly packaging materials](#) are a must in sustainable farming. Sustainable farming encourages that products are sold as near as possible to the production site.

Organic farming only regards the processing and packaging and encourages those techniques and materials that have minimum adverse impact on the environment. It also recommends to avoid Polyvinyl chloride (PVC) and aluminium.