Introduction to Sustainable and Organic Farming

Sustainable and organic farming have been discussed in our last article and definitions provided. We would now like to answer the most frequently asked questions regarding farming systems. This will enable farmers to have enough information to decide which of these systems suits better their needs.

Further articles will provide guidelines for organic certification as well as for sustainable farming practices.

What is the main difference between Sustainable and Organic farming?

Organic is a certification, this means it is a certified label regulated by a national Institution or Body. Although they might differ among countries, they should be based on the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements Norms for Organic Production and Processing.

Therefore, farmers that want to sell their products labelled as organic must follow and respect these standards. They must approach the pertinent institution in their country.

Sustainable, although it is measurable, it is currently not a label. Products cannot be labelled or certified as sustainable despite the fact that they might have been produced in a sustainable way. Nevertheless, the farmer and producer will benefit from such practices in different ways.
**What are the labels such as Eco or Bio?**

**Eco** is the diminutive for *ecological*, and it is the adjective for the word *ecology*, the science of the relationships between organisms and their environments. Eco-products should hence tend to benefit or cause minimal damage to the environment.

**Bio** is the diminutive for *biological*, it pertains to biology, the natural science that study the **life** and **living organisms**. The so called bio-products or bio-based products are materials, chemicals and energy derived from biological resources.

However, **eco and bio are not internationally recognised certifications**. In some countries **bio can be used as a synonym** of organic whereas other countries might allow eco as synonym of organic.

In some countries eco and/or bio have been prohibited to avoid that farmers market their product under names that entail positive connotations but do not respect any official regulation. Tip: when buying or selling always check the regulation of your country!

**Is organic always sustainable?**

Organic farming is not always sustainable. The certification of organic does not comprise many aspects of sustainability within the certification such as the use of alternative energies, efficiency of the production or methane emissions. Besides, it prohibits some techniques that can increase the production with minimal effects on the environment (use of urea or dung as protein source for ruminants). However, many practices of the organic certification process are sustainable.
Although this is not always true, an organic certified product is better (produced in a more sustainable way) than a non-organic certified product.

**Which one is better?**

Both systems have positive and negative sides. Organic is regulated and therefore farmers can benefit from labelling their products as organic. However, organic is sometimes too traditional and strict. Under harsh environmental conditions (dry areas, infertile soils, low carrying capacities...) it might be hard to have a profitable organic production.

Sustainable farming tries to conciliate innovation and tradition, it is less strict and easier to be adopted by farmers living in the tropics. Farmers could benefit from higher profits and social acceptance of their products.

**What can we conclude?**

Organic, as a certification, does not necessarily mean sustainable. Many corporations and farmers try to accomplish the minimal organic certification requirements in order to benefit from government help and higher price of the products. On the other hand, there are many small and commercial farmers that have not certified their production, although it could be certified as organic, due to lack of knowledge and of the benefit of this certification, lack of capital for the registration etc.

Nonetheless, organic, if understood as a philosophy that goes beyond the certification, is positive and very close to sustainable. Farmers and consumer should buy and produce organic products responsibly promoting sustainability.
The organic certification is a nice starting point to promote sustainable techniques but it should not stop there. Governments and institutions should find out further ways to ensure that organic products are produced in a sustainable way and they should start thinking to a new certification label: sustainable.