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Is organic agriculture, under pressure from consumers, turning into the central element of the transition from a conventional “chemical” agriculture towards a more sustainable agriculture?

The answer to the question is : **yes**.

Organic agriculture has been following an extremely dynamic trend, reaching a total world turnover of almost \$90 billion in 2016. Annual growth has been double digit in most rich countries, with peaks above 20% for organic retail sales being observed in France and Ireland.



Organic agriculture covers now almost 58 million hectares worldwide (5 times more than 15 years ago) or 1.2% of total agricultural land. It is the source of livelihood for more than 2.8 million producers (14 times more than in 1999) out of a total of more than 500 million. 40% of these organic producers live in Asia and 27% in Africa. Two-thirds of the land classified as organic is made of grassland or grazing areas. Area under organic farming has been increasing by around 15% in 2016, particularly dynamic products being citrus, dry pulses and grapes. The number of producers has also increased by 11%.

Australia is the country where the largest area under organic farming can be found (27 million hectares), followed by Argentina (3 million hectares) and China (2 million hectares). Tanzania is the country with the largest organic area in Africa, while it is Spain in Europe. The crop for which the proportion of organic land is highest, is coffee (8.5% of total coffee area).

The biggest markets for organic products, are the US (\$ 43 billion), Germany (\$10 billion) and France (\$8 billion). Biggest consumers per person are the Swiss and Danish. Countries where the share of organic market was highest are Denmark (10%), Luxembourg (9%), and Switzerland (8%).

Growth observed in demand for organic products generates concern about the capacity of supply matching it.

Another major issue in the sector is that whereas there were 87 countries with organic standards by 2017 and 18 more are in the process of developing theirs, there is great variability and an urgent need for harmonisation.

These data and many more detailed statistics can be found in a book published by the [Research Institute of Organic Agriculture FiBL](#) and [IFOAM – Organics International](#) entitled "[The World of Organic Agriculture Statistics and Emerging Trends 2018](#)".

Growth observed in the consumption of organic demand is the sign of a higher awareness that results from increased concern not only for consumers' own health, but also for the respect of the environment, animal welfare, job promotion and territorial development, as illustrated by data collected in France [[read](#)]. This concern advocates for adopting policies that ease the transition towards organic agriculture easier.

From society's point of view, organic agriculture has several advantages: it generates more value than conventional "chemical" agriculture, has less negative externalities because it pollutes less and produces less greenhouse gasses. It has positive externalities as it contributes to building up organic matter in the soil, makes better use of ecosystem services and enhances functional biodiversity at a time when there is increasing concern about the level of biological activity in the soil and loss of biodiversity (bees, birds, earthworms, etc.) [[read](#)]. It also is a way to increase farmer incomes, particularly in the case of small farmers who currently experience great difficulties in many countries. Moreover, it also creates jobs.

These two last points are particularly well illustrated by a recent [study](#) of INSEE (French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies) on the economic performance of organic farms in 2013. Although smaller in terms of area and number of animals than their conventional "chemical" counterparts, organic farms have generally had a higher profitability by unit of product and invested capital. They also create relatively more jobs: while organic farming covers 5.7% of total utilised agricultural area, it represents 10.8% of agricultural employment. Part of the higher labour intensity is due to the fact that organic farms are more present in labour intensive activities such as viticulture, horticulture and milk production.

According to the authors of the report, the higher economic performance of organic farming may have several explanations: higher produce prices that compensate for lower productivity; lower production costs in terms of inputs; specific subsidies in some cases and more frequent use of short food supply chains.

We can only hope that, based on this information, the EU members countries will reform their inefficient “greening” policies and reorient effectively their subsidies to ensure a transition towards a more sustainable agriculture. [[read](#)]

There has been a long lasting controversy around organic agriculture, and particularly on whether it could be the way forward towards a more sustainable agriculture, and whether no efforts should be spared to facilitate a rapid transition from conventional “chemical” to organic agriculture. The main argument against this transition is that organic agriculture supposedly would not be able to meet food demand in the future.

A study by a group of scientists published late 2017 in Nature, entitled “[Strategies for feeding the world more sustainably with organic agriculture](#)” gives very convincing arguments in favour of organic agriculture by concluding that “*a 100% conversion to organic agriculture needs more land than conventional agriculture but reduces N-surplus and pesticide use. However, in combination with reductions of food wastage and food-competing feed from arable land, with correspondingly reduced production and consumption of animal products, land use under organic agriculture remains below the reference scenario*”. In other words, organic agriculture can feed the world in a more sustainable and climate-friendly way without having to expand cultivated area, if we cut food waste and consume less animal products in the future. With this conclusion in mind and considering that conventional agriculture has been giving clear signs of unsustainability, the choice should be straightforward, and straightforward should be the decision to changes food and agricultural policies.

We can only support this conclusion that is consistent with what [hungerexplained.org](#) has been saying for years. [read for example [here](#) and [here](#)]

To know more:

- H. Willer and J. Lernoud (Eds.), [The World of Organic Agriculture Statistics and Emerging Trends 2018](#), Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL), Frick, and IFOAM – Organics International, 2018, Bonn.
- M-S. Dedieu *et al.*, Les exploitations en agriculture biologique : quelles performances économiques ? in [Les acteurs économiques et l’environnement](#) (p.35-44), 2017, INSEE, Paris. (in French only).

Earlier articles on [hungerexplained.org](#) related to the topic:

- [Are industrial megafarms the solution for feeding the world?](#), 2018
- [What future for the European Union’s Common Agriculture Policy beyond 2020?](#), 2018
- [Our food system: some reasons for hope...](#), 2017
- [Climate is changing - Food and Agriculture must too](#), 2016
- [Researchers show that organic agriculture generates more economic value than conventional agriculture](#), 2015
- Thirteen myths about hunger debunked: [Myth 12: Organic agriculture will never be able to feed the world](#), 2012.