Non-certified organic agriculture: an opportunity for resource-poor farmers?

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Abstract: *Drawing upon a case study from Argentina, this paper focuses on social actors who cannot be formally included within the organic movement: non-certified organic farmers. Even when they grow, consume and sell organic products, they are unable to become certified organic farmers, mainly for economic reasons. This paper analyses the main features of this group and the socioeconomic significance and impact of their farming strategy on the livelihoods of resource-poor farmers.*

Keywords: *organic certification; organic agriculture; agroecology; resource-poor farmers; local markets; Argentina*

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Organic agriculture has experienced remarkable development during the last decade. This process has been particularly evident in industrialized countries, where the economic importance of organic agriculture is growing rapidly. Europe and the USA are the main consumers of organic products, accounting for 95% of the retail market in 2001 (Kortbech-Olesen, 2003). At present, organic farming is the fastest-growing segment of agricultural production. In Western Europe it has been growing at an annual rate ranging from 10 to 40%, depending on the country (Tamm, 2001). In countries such as the UK, consumers are showing an increasing interest in organic products, and even when the growth rate of the market has been very steep, the supply cannot keep pace with consumers' demand (Barrett *et al*, 2002). The latest estimations suggest that in 2003 the retail sales will rise to US$10–11 billion in Europe and to $23–25 billion worldwide (Kortbech-Olesen, 2003).

Along with the emergence and development of organic agriculture, a social movement has developed worldwide, drawing upon principles and practices rather different from those of industrial agriculture, and advocating a sustainable approach to farming. Some of the social actors who belong to this movement also conceive the organic approach to farming as one facet of a whole new way of conceiving nature, markets and society (Buck *et al*, 1997; Browne *et al*, 2000; Kaltoft, 2001).

However, the organic movement is far from being homogeneous (Kaltoft, 1999). Within it, a broad range of social actors coexists, holding very different interests, farming approaches and power. The most common social actors within this movement are the traditional organic farmers, who run small, family-managed farms. Organic farmers tend to be socially very active and committed, and embody the classical ecological and social ideals and code of ethics of organic agriculture. At the other end of the spectrum, agribusiness is also getting involved with organic agriculture. In several industrialized countries, conventional agro-food companies are moving rapidly into organic farming, trying to develop an economic niche and pursuing the high profits that this style of farming can generate (Buck *et al*, 1997; Guthman, 1998; Lyons, 1999). Between these two ends of the spectrum, a wide range of intermediate situations can be identified.

However, some organic farmers cannot be formally included within the organic movement: these are the non-certified organic farmers. These farmers are different from those producing non-organically certified 'green products' or 'specially cultivated crops' in countries such as Japan (Kortbech-Olesen, 2003). The latter grow their products using a reduced input of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, and therefore do not produce organic products. Non-certified organic farmers produce, consume and sell products that fully meet the requirements of organic agriculture, but for a number of reasons they are unable to go through the certification process and become certified farmers. Their products are sold directly from the farms (Bruinsma, 2003) or in local markets for local consumption. El-Hage Scialabba and Hattan (2002) point out that there is a growing number of non-certified

farmers who seek better markets for their produce, especially in domestic urban centres. They are developing alternative certification methods and marketing channels that rely on community organization, usually more appropriate to their ecological and socioeconomic reality. However, little attention has been paid to them in the literature.

This paper focuses on a case study of a group of non-certified organic farmers in Argentina. A brief discussion on the current situation regarding organic agriculture in that country is presented, the main features of this social actor are analysed, and the socioeconomic significance and impact of this farming strategy on the livelihoods of resource-poor farmers are considered.

Argentina's potential for organic agriculture

As occurs in other non-industrialized countries, two very different kinds of agriculture coexist in Argentina. On the one hand, in areas with high productive potential (ie the pampas), the focus is on the production of commodities and cash crops for export markets. This is a high-yield, capital-intensive kind of agriculture that demands a strong artificialization of the ecosystems and relies on the intensive use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, transgenic seeds and modern machinery. On the other hand, in less productive non-pampean regions, a more traditional agriculture prevails, with an extensive approach to farming that barely uses external inputs and modern technologies, and usually results in lower yields. However, the production arising from this kind of agriculture cannot necessarily be considered as 'organic', because it sometimes uses inputs or practices not allowed for organic farming. Nonetheless, these low-external-input farming systems can be converted into organic agriculture without much difficulty. This explains why Argentina has the second largest certified land area for organic production (about 3.2 million ha: Table 1). This represents 14% of the world's total area under organic management. Most of this land, however, corresponds to extensive grasslands located in dry areas and subject to traditional management (FAO/ITC/CTA, 2001). Just 2% is used as cropland (Puppi and Ramírez, 2002). The very large area devoted to organic agriculture is in stark contrast to the relatively small number of farms managed under this system. There are just 1,900 organic farms in Argentina (Lernoud, 2003), representing a meagre 0.35% of the total number of organic farms worldwide. Unlike what occurs in other countries where the farms are relatively small (ie in Western Europe), both small and very large organic farms coexist in Argentina. For instance, in Patagonia the company Benetton alone has 600,000 ha devoted to organic lamb and wool production (Lernoud, 2003).

During the last decade, organic agriculture has had considerable support both from the Argentine national government and the private sector. The government has not directly financed farmers, but has consistently promoted the development of organic regulations and standards. At present, Argentina and Costa Rica are the only countries in the Americas that have fully implemented organic regulations (Herrmann, 2003), and Argentina is the only Southern country to have obtained 'Listed Country' status with the EU. This greatly facilitates export procedures, since certification systems of listed countries are considered to be equivalent to EU standards (Parrot and Marsden, 2002). In the private sector, the Argentine Movement for Organic Production (MAPO) and the Argentine Board of Certified Organic Farmers (CAPOC) are the main farmer organizations fostering organic agriculture. Moreover, several accredited certification bodies have been created during the last few years, two of which meet International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement (IFOAM) accreditation standards (Herrmann, 2003) and can provide certification for external markets.

Table 1. Countries with the largest land area under organic management.

Country	Area (million ha)	% of world's organic area	Cumulative %	% of world's organic farms
Australia	10.5	46.03	46.03	0.35
Argentina	3.19	13.99	60.02	0.47
Italy	1.23	5.39	65.41	14.14
USA	0.95	4.16	69.17	1.74
UK	0.679	2.94	72.55	1
Uruguay	0.678	2.97	75.52	0.08
Germany	0.63	2.77	78.29	3.69
Spain	0.48	2.12	80.41	3.91
Canada	0.43	1.88	82.29	0.82
France	0.41	1.84	84.13	2.6

Source: adapted from Yussefi and Willer, 2003.

Although these facts place Argentina as one of the countries with greater potential for organic agriculture within the non-industrialized world, the country's potential for this kind of production is still underestimated. The figures in Table 1 do not include non-certified organic farmers. As discussed below, their production, although irrelevant in the international context, is important for local markets, and their numbers have been growing steadily over the last years. Therefore, questions immediately arise on the situation and prospects of non-certified organic farmers within the national context.

Non-certified organic farmers

The challenges faced by non-certified farmers can be analysed using a case study from the province of Misiones (north-eastern Argentina). This is a subtropical region with an annual rainfall of 1,900 mm and a mean temperature of 20.8ºC. Despite the rugged terrain and nutrient-poor soils, abundant rainfall and mild temperatures allow many different productive activities. Almost 54% of the farmers in the area are resource-poor peasants, and they occupy only 10.9% of the land (SAGyP, 1995). These farmers have developed very diversified agricultural systems, including a large number of crops, animals and trees (Cáceres, 2003a). Some of them grow as many as 54 different species (Cáceres, 2003b). The technology used is very basic and

relies mainly on family labour, draught animals and the use of fire to clear up the forest. Farm facilities are basic and most peasant families are unable to fulfil their basic needs.

Some of these peasants are non-certified organic farmers. They converted from traditional low-input agriculture into high-external-input tobacco growing during the 1970s. Later, when this sector faced a crisis in the 1990s, they abandoned tobacco and embraced organic farming. This conversion was possible due to the support of several peasant organizations, NGOs and governmental programmes fostering agroecological practices, environmental protection, and improved health and food safety. Agroecological practices spread rapidly among peasants, and several grassroots organizations emerged (Cáceres, 2002).

The new approach positively affected farm management, allowing farmers to produce more food for their families and some surpluses for sale in local street markets. The latter has proved to be a crucial point in their strategy, since it allows farmers to replace the cash income generated by tobacco, indispensable to the purchase of goods and services not produced on the farm. During the last seven years, 35 street fairs have been created in Misiones, and about 2,000 peasant families participate in them (Carballo *et al*, 2001). In a recent interview published in a local newspaper, one of the leaders of 'Movimiento Agrario Misionero' – the main peasant organization – pointed out that about 2,500 peasant families were at that time involved in 41 different street fairs (Escobar, 2003).

Although their production is not certified, only peasants who produce organic products are allowed to sell their produce at the fairs. Altogether they offer hundreds of different goods, which include a wide range of fruits and vegetables, meat, dairy and bakery products, jams and pickles (Cáceres and Cerviño, 1998). Fairs are usually open to customers once a week and are served by the farmers themselves. A recently created peasant organization, 'Comisión Interferias', formed by the representatives of every fair, is in charge of the internal regulations to be met by all participants. This organization also assesses the progress of the fairs, and articulates them with other peasant organizations, NGOs and government organizations, forming them into a wider strategy for the sector. Local municipalities provide authorization and some institutional support to the fairs, impose some regulations and administer erratic and incomplete sanitary controls.

The conversion to organic farming and the development of a profuse network of street fairs seems to be consolidating. Their relative success mainly relies on peasants' capacity to develop their organizations, the technical support provided by external actors, and their ability to devise and implement a suitable development strategy. The latter includes a variety of components such as peasant training in organic practices, the development of appropriate technologies, the creation of a set of internal regulations and controls, the appropriate management of small revolving funds, strong communication between peasants and consumers, and the promotion of democratic practices fostering peasants' organization and empowerment.

What are the main features of the street fairs?

What follows is a description and analysis of the main aspects governing the operation and success of Misiones street fairs.

(a) Quality of the products offered. There is wide agreement among researchers on the high quality of the goods offered in the street fairs (Schmidt, 1997; Cáceres and Cerviño, 1998; Fernández, 1999; Carballo *et al*, 2001). They are usually fresher and healthier than those sold in regular shops. The fact that each farmer is allowed to participate in the fair just once a week has a favourable impact on the freshness of the products offered.

(b) Nature of the products. In contrast to regular shops, the products sold in the fairs are very diverse and in some ways unique. The diversity in the supply of goods stems from the wide diversity of peasants' farming systems. The uniqueness of the products offered is related to two aspects. On the one hand, many products cannot be found in regular shops; on the other hand, peasant production has the charm of homemade, low-scale, environmentally friendly production.

(c) Price. Product prices are agreed among farmers themselves during weekly meetings. Therefore, peasants selling the same goods have similar prices. These are usually 10% cheaper than those found in regular shops (Fernández, 1999). This is an interesting aspect of their trade strategy, since unlike what happens with organic products elsewhere, farmers here do not seek premium prices for their products. This is linked to two main aspects: (i) they do not sell certified-organic products; and (ii) the overwhelming requirement that the peasants need to sell their products in a small, economically depressed and sometimes oversupplied market.

(d) Personalized assistance. One of the main reasons for the success of these fairs is the great attention paid by farmers to their relationship with their customers. This is an explicit policy among them. Customers are perfectly aware of this and certainly do prefer this kind of relationship. This is reinforced by the fact that fairs are located in small cities where many customers have relatives or friends who are currently farmers, or the customers themselves have been farmers before moving into urban areas. This has developed strong links between farmers and consumers and is fostering solidarity and more responsible patterns of both production and consumption.

Why have these organic farmers not become certified organic farmers?

The main obstacle faced by these peasants in order to become certified organic farmers is economic rather than linked to the production process itself. The fees charged by certification bodies are high for them, particularly considering the nature and size of their participation in the markets. What follows is a very simple comparison between peasants' income from their participation in the street fairs, and the fees charged by the main certification bodies in Argentina.

The gross income of these non-certified organic farmers varies greatly. It mainly depends on the location of the fair, the kind of product sold by each peasant, and the

fluctuations of both supply and demand throughout the year. However, peasants selling produce usually have lower gross incomes than those trading meat or dairy products.

A comprehensive study of the economic value of the products sold in these street markets is not yet available. Cáceres and Cerviño (1998) analysed the income of 31 farmers at four different fairs and estimated a weekly average income of $34 per farmer. Fernández (1999), considering just one fair, estimated peasants' weekly income at between $7 and $40, with average values ranging from $8 to $12. Carballo *et al* (2001) estimate that the annual sales of all the fairs where non-certified farmers sell their products are about $1.6 million. Considering that there are 2,000 peasant families participating in the street fairs, it is possible to calculate a weekly income of $15. On the basis of these three sources, the annual average income is estimated at about $1,022 per family.[1]

It is difficult to estimate accurately how much the certification fees cost, because they change according to the nature and size of the farm, the volume of sales and the work incurred by the certifying body (Rundgren, 2001). Also, as these are private companies, they usually have different criteria for calculating fees. In addition, fees may vary between years, and are sometimes higher during the first year. In order to estimate these fees, the main certification bodies operating in Argentina were contacted and asked how much would they charge to certificate a farm with the productive profile of those managed by Misiones' peasants. The results of this enquiry are summarized in Table 2.

According to the information provided by the certification bodies, the average amount charged to an individual peasant during the first year is about $621. This includes the annual fee, three farm inspections (between two and four are required for this kind of farm), the sales fee derived from the gross annual income calculated above, and an estimated $100 as payment of 'extra fees'. The latter includes a wide range of costs such as travel expenses, chemical analysis of samples taken on the farm, translations, posting and handling, special meetings of the certification board, and unannounced farm inspections.

Group certification can reduce certification costs. For instance, one of the certification bodies consulted informed as that 12 beekeepers certified as a group, were charged $100 per year. This sum considers just the annual fee and two farm inspections (sales fees and extra fees are not included). It is necessary to highlight, however, that beekeeping is simpler to monitor and demands fewer inspections than the complex farming systems of Misiones peasants. Therefore, considering the particular characteristics of these systems and that some fees are not included for the beekeepers, the cost of certification for grouped peasants in Misiones is estimated around $200.

Certification fees in Argentina are less expensive than in other countries, where inspector visits alone can cost more than $300 per day (Parrot and Marsden, 2002; Barrett *et al*, 2002). However, they are still too high for most Misiones peasants. Even if they ask for group certification, farmers with an annual gross income of $1,000 will hardly be able to pay for certification fees. In particular, they face problems in financing the transition process from non-organic to organic farming, because their saving capacity is close to zero, and they have very limited access to credit. Besides, during this 2–3-year transition period, although they must pay for the certification fees, they are still unable to charge premium prices because their production cannot yet be labelled as organic. Within this context, probably the only options for Misiones non-certified organic farmers to become certified farmers are either by receiving subsidies from NGOs or international organizations such as IFAD, or to become attached to the agroindustry and transform themselves into organic contract farmers. The latter is actually the case for approximately 700 small farmers that have been recently integrated into agroindustry, producing organic sugar. A third option would be to obtain a subsidy from the government. However, this seems unlikely under Argentina's current economic crisis.

In addition, some farmers think that it makes little sense to pay certification fees and then sell their products in small domestic markets heavily stricken by a profound economic crisis, where consumers' willingness to pay premium prices is low. The fact that the certification process itself is bureaucratic and requires a considerable amount of paperwork poses an extra obstacle (Barrett *et al*, 2001; Parrot and Marsden, 2002). This is particularly difficult for many peasant communities with low literacy levels, such as those in Misiones (Cáceres, 2002).

Barrett *et al* (2001, 2002) argue that smallholders in developing countries willing to export organic products can lower the cost of their certification fees by choosing local certification bodies, organizing producer groups, acquiring external funding and/or selling on contract. But this is not the case for the peasants observed in this paper. Because they are not aiming at external markets, they are unable to obtain financial support to pay certification fees. Even if they consolidate as organic farmers and their organizations gain strength, they will still be far from reaching the scale and standards (in terms of homogeneity, packaging, sustained production over the year, etc) required by international markets. Therefore, in the current context, these peasants do not necessarily need to become certified organic farmers.

Table 2. Cost of individual-farm organic certification in Argentina.

Certification body	Annual fee ($)	Farm inspection ($/day-visit)	Sales fee on gross sales (%)	Extra fees
A	104	156	1	Yes
B	104	173	1	Yes
C	104	121	1	Yes
D	70	70	1	Yes
E	104	121	0.5–1	Yes
F	104	156	1	Yes
G	121	156	1	Yes
Average cost	102	136	1	Yes
Average annual cost	102 + 408 (3 farm inspections) + 11 + extra fees (50–200?)			

Notes: Certification bodies A and B are IFOAM members. All the fees are expressed in US dollars (US$1 = ArgS3.50).

What is the socio-productive impact of non-certified organic farming?

In general, the conversion to non-certified organic farming has had substantial and positive impacts on the productive, economic and social aspects of the life of peasants and the urban dwellers with whom they interact.

(a) Production. Conversion to organic farming has had a profound impact in the farming systems of Misiones peasants. This has resulted in the design of highly diversified systems that are not only more environmentally friendly and resilient, but also improve the safety of food for their families. On average, farmers who have converted to organic agriculture grow or raise c 29 species in order to fulfil their own food needs. In contrast, farmers involved in industrial agriculture, such as tobacco growing, produce only about nine species (Cáceres, 2003b).

(b) Economy. Information showing the economic impact of organic farming on these systems is not yet available. Some limited evidence shows that the average annual income of non-certified organic farmers is slightly lower than that of tobacco growers (Cáceres, 2002). However, this is somewhat counterbalanced by organic farmers producing much more food, and therefore needing less cash to buy goods from the market. A common behaviour observed in the street fairs reinforces the food security of organic farmers. At the end of the day, peasants barter the products not sold to customers among themselves. This strategy behaves as a sort of 'off-farm productive diversification', allowing them to obtain some of the goods not produced within their own farms, and thus strengthening their food security and lowering their need for cash.

(c) Society. The spread of agroecological practices has raised important gender issues and increased the social recognition of women as producers. Their involvement and commitment to organic farming has been high, and they have proved to be crucial social actors in the process (Fernández, 1999; Carballo *et al*, 2001). Also, peasants' participation in street fairs has fostered integration among rural and urban sectors. This is encouraging solid relationships between the two groups and is developing some consumers' awareness about the need to protect the environment and develop more ethical consumption patterns. This closer relationship between the two groups has boosted peasants' self-esteem. They can now see that their urban counterparts socially acknowledge their work. Finally, a major achievement has been the strengthening of peasant organization. This has resulted from the networking of pre-existing and new groups in order to discuss general strategies for addressing the most crucial problems affecting the livelihoods of this social sector.

Concluding remarks

The obstacles faced by non-certified organic peasants in Misiones who might wish to become organic-certified farmers are mainly economic. Unless new certification schemes emerge, resource-poor farmers not affiliated to agroindustry or export markets are unlikely to become certified farmers. This seems to be especially clear in contexts where small and economically depressed markets prevail, and where consumers are unwilling to pay price premiums.

Nevertheless, the conversion to non-certified organic agriculture has proved to be a very successful strategy for resource-poor farmers. It allows them to produce, consume and sell organic products, to improve their food safety, and to develop a more environmentally friendly approach to farming. This suggests that even if they had the chance to become certified organic producers, they would not take it because the change to certified organic farming does not appear to be essential under the current conditions.

The relative success of this strategy draws on four main concepts: (i) the technical assistance of NGOs and some governmental programmes; (ii) the development of local markets where peasants are able to offer non-certified organic products directly to consumers; (iii) the construction of an informal social contract between producers and consumers, based on solidarity and the promotion of a more ethical style of consumption; and (iv) the emergence, strengthening and increased networking of some autonomous and representative peasant organizations, which have managed to cover the problems of organic agriculture within a more inclusive empowerment strategy.

Even though non-certified organic agriculture seems an appropriate strategy for resource-poor farmers, its prospects and long-term potential still remain unclear. One of the main challenges they are likely to face is related to the ability of peasant organizations to continue developing and to implement monitoring schemes capable of guaranteeing the quality of their products. Another will be their ability to deal with possible conflicts arising both within peasants' organizations and between them and other social actors playing in the same socio-economic field (eg shop retailers, local municipalities and certified organic farmers). The evolution of organic domestic markets and the behaviour of more general macroeconomic variables will also play an important role in the development and consolidation of this livelihood strategy.

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Note

[1] All these figures have been adjusted by the retail price index and are expressed in US dollars (US$1 = Argentine pesos 3.50).

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