

CORE organic pilot project Farmer Consumer Partnerships

Annual abstract

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Globalisation and growing anonymity of trade with organic products causes farmers in Europe to see themselves forced to lower their production standards in order to stand up to world-wide competition. On the other hand consumers criticise food products which were produced under unsatisfactory social and environmental conditions. Thus, this project investigates marketing and communication strategies by which organic farmers try to include higher ethical values in their production than the legal ones. The aim is to know which communication arguments for ethical aspects are the most promising from the consumers' point of view in different countries.

Research progress

Within the first 6 months of the research project tasks with respect to WP1 and WP2 were fulfilled.

The subject of WP 1 is to provide a transdisciplinary framework integrating the different research and CSR approaches and stakeholder perspectives. Thus, the work consisted mainly in a literature review with respect to CSR approaches in the organic sector and the screening of existing organic farmers' initiatives and their arguments on ethical values in all partner countries. This screening was done by consultancy of stakeholders, internet search and telephone interviews.

Studying emerging CSR marketing concepts in organic farming is the aim of WP 2. In each country three to four successful initiatives were selected for in-depth analysis of the communication arguments with respect to higher ethical values. By means of oral interviews (personal or by telephone) farmers, managers or directors were asked for ethical values in their production (mission statement), their marketing concept and for an evaluation of their communication concept.

Two project meetings took place. The first project meeting was the kick-off meeting, dedicated to create a common understanding of the research objective and to understand the different perception of the research partners on ethical values (WP 1). The second project meeting took place after having completed the case studies in all partner countries. Main aim of this meeting was the discussion on the communication arguments to be tested within WP 3.

Results

WP 1: The literature review on existing ethical concepts in the organic food sector turned out that particularly CSR (corporate social responsibility) concepts are rare among SMEs (small and medium sized enterprises). However, ethical concepts like ethical consumerism, fair trade (trust in food, food chains) matter at various levels in companies (mission statement, activities, communication, monitoring). The written versus spoken conceptualisation of company mission/ethics may be related to size, that means larger companies tend to have more often written concepts than smaller firms.

At the consumer side it showed up that decision making is rather complex, and that the ethical issue cannot be treated separately. Building of consumer trust (verification/guarantee) is needed and going along with this the necessity of clarification of ethical standards.

The categorisation of concerns showed up to be not as easy. There are various ways of categorisation documented in literature, however for this research the most promising way might be an extended triple bottom line approach with social, economic, environmental, animal welfare and cross cutting arguments. The categorisation of arguments is still under discussion. Summarised in main statements, each statement reflects a range of values.

The decision on the final most helpful categorisation for the purpose of this study needs to remain an open issue for the time being, as there were intensive discussions on the most sensible way of categorisation.

WP 2: About 20 organic companies in each country were mapped concerning their organic plus concept and showed that social concerns (care farms) and environmental concerns are predominant within the mapped companies. Further concerns are economic concerns like fair prices and animal welfare. It was noted that this selection is in no way representative since it also reflects particular emphasis of the involved researchers. In total 19 case studies were done in all partner countries by oral interviews (personally or by telephone) with the owners/managers of the organic plus companies. A large number of arguments was collected. However, it turned out that communication of ethical values often is rather weak. This holds true particularly for care farms, but also for other approaches of realising ethical concerns. As stated by the interview partners production of high quality products almost always is the predominant aim and is what the market asks for.

The next steps consist in the final decision on the arguments to be tested with the Information-Display-Matrix. The software will to be adapted to the research question and the survey will be completed until June 2008.