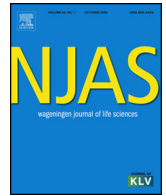




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Research paper

## Understanding the development of organic agriculture in Flanders (Belgium): A discourse analytical approach

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### ABSTRACT

Despite a fast-growing national consumer market for organic products and active governmental support for organic agriculture, organic production in Flanders has shown little growth since the late 1990s. Our discourse analytical approach offers important insights into the causes of the limited organic production capacity in Flanders complementary to more common political-institutional or actor-oriented perspectives. Our analysis reveals that for decades, a competition between two mutually exclusive organic farming discourses has hindered a collaborative effort to contribute to a growth of the organic agricultural sector by conventional and organic agricultural communities, agricultural policy makers, and food market actors. Such collaboration however, proves to be necessary to stimulate a substantial growth in organic production in a region like Flanders (Belgium). Our results suggest that facilitating the acceptance of non-competitive discourses across agricultural, political and food market stakeholders is vital to support the development of organic agriculture. By revealing the added value of discourse analysis in clarifying agro-food developments, the paper supports an adoption of multiple research approaches when studying dynamics of change in the multi-dimensional fields of agriculture and food provision.

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### 1. Introduction

Since the 1992 reform of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the EU formally recognizes that organic agriculture can substantially contribute to agricultural sustainability. To set a course for the continued development of organic agriculture, the EU Commission has progressively introduced legislation on the production, trade, monitoring and labelling of organic products in the last 25 years. EU member states have a high degree of flexibility in interpreting and applying these European regulations [1]. Most EU member states implement organic action plans [2], [3] and [4], but national institutional conditions and policies for organic agriculture vary widely. Furthermore, the size of the organic agricultural sector differs considerably among the Member States [5].

In Flanders (the northern region of Belgium), 0.6% of the cultivated agricultural land was under organic production in 2010, which remains far behind the European average of 4.7% [5]. At the same time, the government of Flanders offers one of the higher organic direct payments to farmers in Europe [3] and the Flemish

national consumer market for organic products has been growing steadily for years [6]. Currently nearly 40% of organic consumer products are being imported. This raises the question, "Why is the organic production capacity in Flanders so small compared to other EU countries?"

National differences in the size of the organic agricultural sector have been studied extensively. Many of these studies start from a political-institutional point of view and explain differences in light of national institutional conditions and policies. For instance, Daugbjerg et al. [7] found that direct supply side instruments for organic farmers have a significant impact on the number of organic producers and the area of land devoted to organic practices in the UK. Lynggaard [8], Lesjak [1] and Daugbjerg and Sonderskov [9] assert that a significant growth in a country's organic production capacity is most likely when policies simultaneously address the supply side and the demand side of the market. Other studies, however, found no significant direct links between political decisions on organic support and growth in organic agriculture [10,11]. The situation in Flanders suggests that a focus on governmental policies alone cannot explain its limited organic production capacity. Hence, national differences in policy measures alone appear insufficient to explain differences in growth rates [12,5].

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Another cluster of studies, relevant to our understanding of developments in organic agriculture, uses actor-oriented analyses, such as behavioural or rational choice analyses, to explain individual decisions regarding a conversion to organic agricultural practices. Personal attributes (including attitudes, use of information sources, risk aversion), farm specific factors (including farm size and farm type, resource availability) and social factors (including opinions of family members and colleagues) are found to influence farmers' individual decisions to convert to an important degree (e.g. [13–17]). With their focus on individual decision making processes, however, these studies provide few tools to analyse national differences in the size of organic production.

In view of the analytical limitations of the above two approaches, in this paper we adopt an alternative, discourse analytical approach to study the evolution of organic farming in Flanders. Discourse analysis is increasingly being applied to bridge the gap between institutional and actor centred analyses [18–20]. We argue that this discourse analytical approach offers important insights into the causes of the limited organic production capacity in Flanders that are complementary to political-institutional or actor-oriented perspectives. The first two sections present our conceptual framework and methodology. Subsequently, we distinguish different discourses on organic farming that have been advocated in Flanders over the last 20 years and discuss how these discourses and developments in their relative dominance interrelate to evolutions in organic agricultural policies and practices. Finally, the paper reflects on the implications of our findings for understanding of national developments in organic agriculture.

## 2. Conceptual framework

According to Fairclough [21] and Hajer and Versteeg [22], a discourse can be defined as a socially-shared frame of meaning that structures understandings of the social and natural world and that is produced, re-produced and transformed through distinct complexes of social practices [21,22]. As evidenced by this definition, discourses relate dialectically to practices and institutions [18,23,24]. Discourses are both constitutive of social practices and institutions by informing and legitimating their enactments, and at the same time constituted (i.e. re-produced or transformed) in the enactments of these practices and institutions [22,25].

By adopting a discourse analytical perspective in our study, we move away from assumptions that political-institutional frameworks determine national developments in the organic agricultural sector, or that such developments are contingent upon individual actors' decision making processes alone. Rather, we contend that organic farming discourses co-inform developments in the organic sector by structuring (collective understandings of) organic farming practices and institutions and, that developments in such practices and institutions in turn inform and are reflected in organic farming discourses. In other words, we consider discourses both medium and outcome of developments in organic agricultural institutions and practices [19,23,24,26,27]. Hence, we see the discourse analytical perspective not as an exclusive explanatory approach but as complementary to other approaches in interpreting and explaining phenomena such as the development of organic agriculture.

Hajer [26] showed that discourses are dynamic and tend to be advocated by "discourse coalitions". These coalitions consist of sets of actors that share a particular discourse after coalescing on similar understandings of (economic, social, environmental aspects of) a phenomenon like organic farming, and on ways to position themselves towards and act in relation to this phenomenon. By forming coalitions around particular discourses, (key actors in) coalitions may thus work to legitimate specific practices and policies over others. The level of dominance of discourses and their coalitions

may manifest itself formally, when a discourse informs policies and institutional arrangements [26], or informally, when actors start to internalize a specific discourse and begin to structure their thoughts and acts on the basis of it. Accordingly, a discourse analytical approach allows for an examination of how organic farming policies and practices have been shaped and transformed by ideas, concepts and understandings about organic agriculture that have been advocated and adopted by actors and their coalitions.

## 3. Context and methods

### 3.1. Context

In Flanders, the first conversions from conventional to organic farming took place during the 1960s. At this time, the term "organic" signified a range of alternative production methods that were adopted by farmers in protest against the modernization and globalization of agriculture [28]. Different labels owned by different private organizations represented their principles. In 1991, the term "organic farming" became officially defined in the European legislation EC 2092/9. This placed the issue of organic agriculture onto the national political agenda in Belgium and instigated a harmonization of national and European production rules and organic labelling. Taking 1991 as our starting point, in this paper we analyse developments in organic agriculture in Flanders over 20 years, until 2011.

Until 2003, most of the powers in the field relating to agriculture (including organic agriculture) were under federal governance but regional governments could make extra policies for their region. Through further state reforms, agriculture became under the authority of the Government of Flanders in 2003 and organic farming became exclusively administered by the Flemish administrative structures. Accordingly, we consider in our pre 2003 period the Belgian as well as the Flemish agricultural political domain. In our post 2003 period, we only focus on changes in the Flemish agricultural political domain.

### 3.2. Methods

Methodologically, our research is situated within the tradition of interpretive case study research [29–31]. This means that the ultimate aim of our research is not to produce causal explanations but to articulate well-founded interpretations of phenomena. Interpretive research focusses on revealing context specific meanings rather than generalized meaning abstracted from specific contexts [32].

We explored organic farming discourses and practices in Flanders using four distinct data collection methods. First, we drew on insights that the first author has gained as a civil servant of the Belgian/Flemish Department of Agriculture. In this position, she has been involved in monitoring the development of organic agriculture in Belgium/Flanders from 2000 to 2005, and has acted as the coordinator of the Flemish network for research and knowledge for organic food and farming from 2007 onwards. In fulfilling these tasks, she has actively participated in different Belgian/Flemish organic food and farming networks and projects, which enabled her to gain contextual knowledge of discursive dynamics centring on organic agricultural development in Flanders.

Second, these insights were complemented and refined with the use of eight semi-structured interviews with representatives of key stakeholders from four societal domains that together determine organic farming growth to an important degree [12]: the organic agricultural community, the conventional agricultural community, the Flemish agricultural policy domain, and the food trade and retail sector. The interviewees were selected based on their long-

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