



## How to raise political awareness of the need for support to organic agriculture

### *Tips for organic advocates*

#### **Assessing the political landscape**

As for any advocacy activity, it is important to know the local administration and political landscape, the political alliances that are in place, and the attitudes of different parties and different administration units towards environmental issues in general. What is the current attitude of various ministries towards the issue of GMOs, for example? It is also important to understand, as much as possible, the general culture of government/public intervention, especially when it comes to the agricultural sector: for example, are interventionist policies regarded as a tool for achieving the public good, or are they rather regarded as a market distortion? What are the main policy instruments (taxes, subsidies, grants, funded projects, etc.) that the government uses in various sectors? This will help give advocates (or people in charge of designing policies) an idea of what is a feasible outcome of advocacy activities in the area of agriculture support, and which environmental (or other) NGOs or sectors they can partner with, to achieve the desired policy advocacy outcomes.

Most politicians dealing with agricultural issues will have some idea of what organic agriculture is, although their idea might be biased or inaccurate. The first step in lobbying for policy support to organic agriculture is to create awareness and a good understanding of what organic agriculture is, and its current status in the country, as well as globally.

#### **Positioning organic agriculture**

A strategic question is how to position organic agriculture in the political debate. Political receptivity will depend on whether this positioning is acceptable by the political majority or not. For example, in a country where environmental/health issues are very low on the agenda of the political majority, organic agriculture can be positioned as a promising high value market. In a country/region/municipality where the majority opinion, or the political party in power prioritizes sustainability issues, it is possible to emphasize the superiority of organic agriculture in delivering environmental and social benefits. Linking organic agriculture to economic benefits for the local communities (i.e. poverty alleviation, employment rate and/or increasing income) can also be an appealing argument to politicians. An example of such an effort is the one undertaken by the US Organic Trade Association with its “organic hotspots” research and report<sup>1</sup>. Hence, even in the awareness raising

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://ota.com/hotspots> for the OTA research report.



part of the advocacy process, the explanation of organic agriculture can be linked to the receptivity potential of the political target.

Because of the strong philosophical basis of organic agriculture and the perceived “radicalness” of its approach (as compared to other agricultural systems), many policy makers, even when provided with knowledge, may view organic agriculture as an idealistic, unprofessional movement and as a non-competitive sector, or a very niche sector. In order to gain broad policy support for organic agriculture, advocates need to change this perception and create a different “emotional” attitude towards organic agriculture. Theoretical arguments in favor of organic agriculture such as those in Section II of the *Guidelines for public support to organic agriculture* may be presented to policy makers, but often, “physical” impressions will have a stronger and more long-lasting impact than theoretical arguments.

Two particular experiences usually have a strong positive impact on politicians’ attitude towards organic: visiting successful commercial organic farms and visiting international organic trade fairs, particularly the world’s largest, BioFach (Nuremberg). When visiting organic farmers, politicians can see first-hand, that crops are not devastated by pests, and that the farmer is not crawling into poverty but instead has a good life and a good business. By talking with the farmer they can better understand the organic philosophy and perceive the quality of life it brings to the farmer, his family and farm employees. When visiting BioFach, most policy makers who are not familiar with the organic sector are startled to discover the size of the global organic market, the range and modernity of organic products available, as well as the strong innovation capacity of the sector. One visit can convince them that it is a sector worth investing in.

Attendance at local organic events, whereby (local) policy makers have the opportunity to feel the public’s enthusiasm for organic agriculture and also to make themselves visible (e.g. by being invited to make a speech in support of organic agriculture) will also be useful to progressively build their interest and commitment to supporting the organic sector. Advocates can also involve organic farmers and companies (those who create economic value for the country/region), brief them and then create an opportunity for them to tell their policy concerns directly to policy makers. This has often more impact than if policy makers only hear NGOs taking on behalf of the producers and companies.

After policy makers have become aware of organic agriculture, understand it, and acquire a positive attitude towards the potential of the sector, comes the real political lobbying process, whereby advocates try to achieve concrete policy decisions that will favor the organic sector. There are several general resources with tips for effective advocacy, which advocates are encouraged to consult. One example is the simple brief of the Ohio Environmental Council’s on [\*Tips for Effective Lobbying\*](#), which describes how to prepare and handle a meeting with a policy maker. One important point is not to come empty-handed to the meeting: advocates need to have their arguments and requests summarized in a short



policy brief.

Another important aspect is to decide whether media presence is useful at the event where advocates will interact with policy makers. This will depend on who the advocacy target is. If the purpose is to influence elected politicians, then media presence is usually positive, to give them visibility and also to document the commitments they might make in the context of the event. If the advocacy target is the staff of public administration, they will not like media presence and this would harm the effectiveness of the meeting. In general advocates should maintain good contacts to the media in general and a strong relationship with a selected handful of them who are ready to place an article in a paper when the time is needed. Timing is often crucial, particularly in election or policy-making periods.

### **Advocating direct support for the organic sector**

Most strong (local) government commitments to support the organic sector are linked to a situation where a political party with environmental sensitivity is in power or is in a strong position in a broader coalition. It is also often people's personal opinions that count, and advocates should, whenever possible, take advantage of situations when environmentalists are in policy-making positions. Sometimes pro-organic policies will be undone once the power shifts to the other side of the political spectrum, but sometimes they will remain, or largely remain. Hence it is worth focusing the advocacy efforts on such windows of opportunity.

When advocating for a defined level or concrete measures of support to organic, it is valuable to point at examples from other countries (especially countries who do more for the organic sector). This can inspire policy makers and also show them that certain measures have already been "tested" by other governments (most governments are cautious about political innovation). This, in fact, is the main purpose of the *Guidelines for public support to organic agriculture* (and related policy briefs) produced by IFOAM-Organics International as part of the Global Policy Toolkit on Public Support to Organic Agriculture.

Policy-making and policy adoption also does not require convincing an entire political party or legislative body of the benefits of organic agriculture. It is often enough to have a champion (either in the government staff, or in the elected politicians) who will propose policies and push them through the political process. It works best when this champion is eager to work in partnership with the private organic sector representatives, but is also well connected and respected within the political sphere (and this is also valid at the very local level, such as at the municipality level).

The story of the organic policy development process in Kerala, written by Sapna Elizabeth Thottathil in her book "[India's Organic Farming Revolution: What It Means for Our Global Food System](#)" is a detailed account of how a whole state came to embrace political support for organic agriculture.



## **Advocating for policies that indirectly support the organic sector**

Depending on the political context, it may be more strategic not to lobby for organic agriculture per se, but for broader policies in favor of “sustainable agriculture”, of “food quality schemes”, of “rural development”, or of “family farming”. There are many examples of countries in which it has been much easier to get policy support for such issues than for organic agriculture. Once policies are in place to define policy objectives on these issues, it becomes relatively easy to demonstrate the potential contribution of organic agriculture to fulfill them and to incorporate policy measures related to organic agriculture. For example, in the EU, “rural development” concerns have provided the overall context for support to organic farming. Also, in the EU, most policy measures that allocated a certain budget to “food quality schemes” ended up disproportionately benefiting organic agriculture. Indeed, it is the dominant food quality certification scheme (and the only one that is regulated by governments). In Brazil, support to “family farming” was a strong political agenda during the Lula government and support to organic farming grew alongside those concerns during this period (for example in public procurement policies).

When such broader advocacy efforts are envisioned, the organic sector should consider partnering with like-minded movements in lobbying for the desired policies. However, in doing so, caution should be taken. At the level of detailed policy measures, (such as when it comes to eligibility criteria for public support that target various “sustainability” schemes or practices), each movement partner will want to promote their own interests. Resulting measures that include broad agri-environmental support may divert farmers to other (easier) schemes than organic agriculture (see Section VI of the *Guidelines for public support to organic agriculture* for more information on such competing environmental schemes).

Therefore, the organic sector should consider carefully what it lobbies for, what strategic alliances to establish, and the risks associated with various advocacy strategies. Generally speaking, consumer associations, environmental NGOs and development organizations will be the classical advocacy allies of the organic sector. Consumer associations are often neglected, because they might not necessarily fall on the organic-side, but in some instances, if an alliance with them can be created for a particular topic (e.g. pesticide use reduction), they might have more influence on politicians (and access to the media) than the organic sector.

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