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OPINION PIECE by Lone Andersen

What would it mean to triple our organic production by 2030 from the view point of an organic farmer

The European Commission has now published strategies for the future of agriculture in the EU and it has very ambitious objectives for the organic sector. The European Commission has set a target of 25% of agricultural land in the EU to be organic by 2030. It is an extremely ambitious objective and it will require a lot of effort to reach this goal. As organic farmers we will do our best.

Currently, the area under organic covers 7,7% of the EU's agricultural land, which means that in 10 years, the area of organic farming would have to triple. The challenge will be even more significant in some member states as the share covered by organic productions vary greatly in the EU from 2% in Romania to 24% in Austria !

More than a top-down target, I believe that the success of the Commission will depend mainly on the willingness and the capacity of end consumers to initiate a never-seen-before market push. I am convinced that a sustainable organic growth can only rely on a market-driven development. As farmers, we are dependent on consumers wanting to buy our goods and, as organic farmers, we are totally dependent on consumers also paying a higher price associated with the organic farming practices.

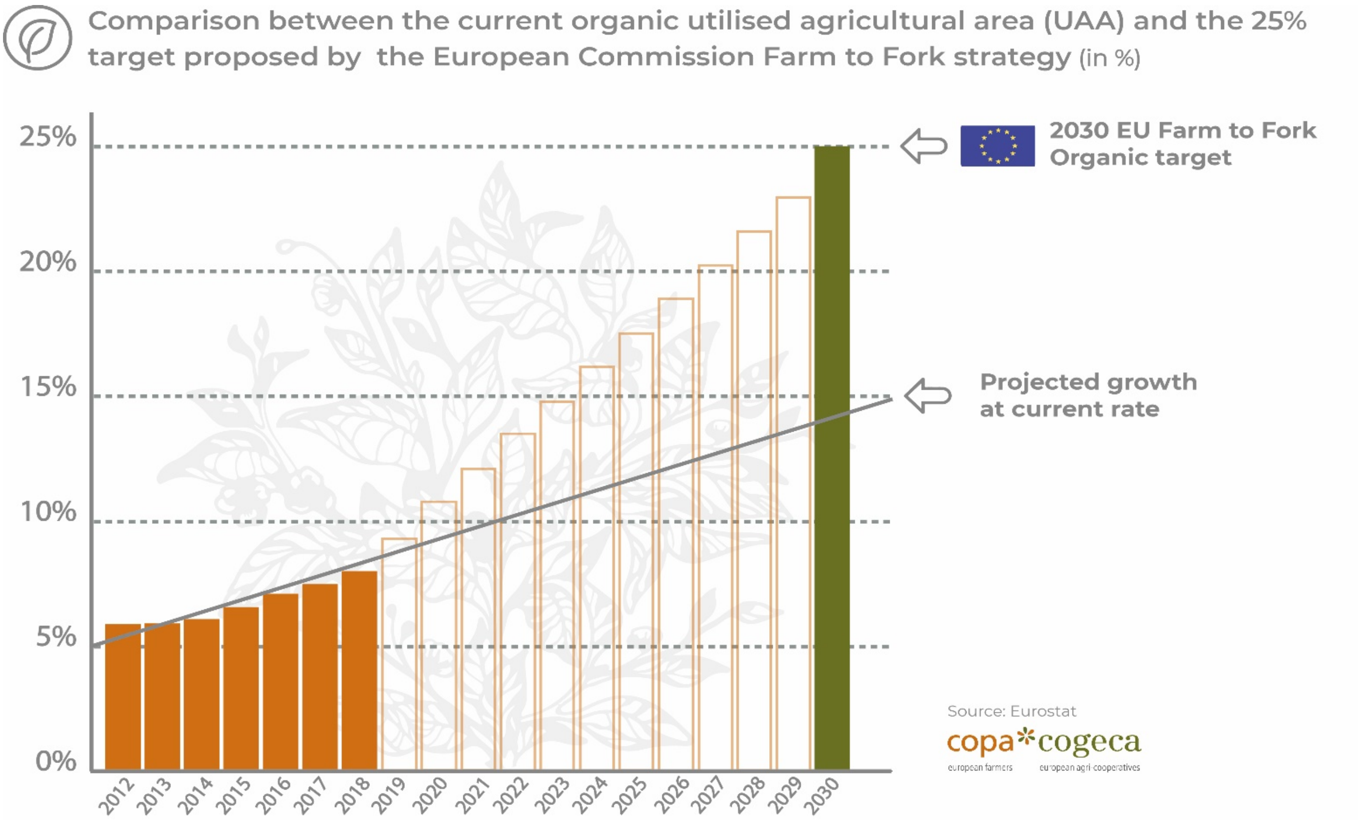
The market needs to be stimulated

In my opinion, as a dairy organic farmer, organic production could be doubled, and driven by the market, so that by 2030 the organic area in the EU will be at least 15%. Indeed, there is a general growth in organic consumption in most of the world, but with a target of 25% organic area in the EU within the next ten years, it will be necessary to make some unprecedented efforts to influence the market.

In the last 20 years, there has been an increasing demand for organic products in the EU. In 2018, the organic area and market continued to grow, however the growth rate of the European organic food market is now slower than in the past[1]. This underlines the need for a strong effort to stimulate the market to match the increasing organic production. Information and promotion campaigns are relevant to better inform European consumers about organic production and to boost its development. Consumers need to know about the characteristics and benefits of this type of production, if we want them to pay a higher price. It is also essential that the increasing demand is linked with EU organic products and not with imported organic products[2].

[1] The World of Organic Agriculture 2020 Statistics and Emerging Trends 2020, FIBL

[2] The EU imported 504,000 tonnes of cereals from third countries in 2019. Source : EU imports of organic agri-food products – Key developments 2019, European Commission



On the other hand, we also need to improve production, and that requires more research and development. We must, among other things, raise yields in the field and strengthen our own protein supply for feed. We must also ensure a balanced growth of both supply and demand to achieve the goals. This is essential to protect existing farming investment in the sector by not reducing farm-gate prices and maintaining the economic viability of organic farmers. In addition, it must be understood that farmers would only engage in the complex process of conversion to organic farming provided that they can rely on a sustainable and long-term demand. We must also strengthen the functioning of the entire food chain. This is important to ensure that European organic products reach the market and consumers, without having to be declassified and sold as conventional products. What's more, it is essential to ensure that there are no unfair trading practices at large-scale retail sector.

Generational renewal, as well as the transmission of organic farms to the next generation and the maintenance of these in organic farming needs to also be ensured. Over the last five years, a minimum of 2 % of organic producers were quitting organic production annually[3] due to production constraints, related costs, the lack of local demand and the bureaucracy and cost of certification. We need additional data at an EU level to be able to monitor such a phenomenon.

More globally, if we want to be able to properly monitor the development of the sector, it is essential to have up-to-date, regular and reliable data on production volumes and value, as well as on demand (volume and value), to ensure production according to the demand. Statistics on how many raw or processed products are available locally or for export are also needed.

3 Partial data reports on average 4 500 agricultural producers quitting organic production annually over the 2013-2017 period, compared to an average of 5 400 newly registered producers. Source: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/food-farming-fisheries/farming/documents/market-brief-organic-farming-in-the-eu_mar2019_en.pdf

Consumer confidence in organic products is the key to its development. Therefore, consumers would not understand a relaxation in production rules that would weaken the difference between conventional and organic production. Organic production standards and production methods should continue to evolve to meet organic consumers' expectations and attract new farmers. Would that be still possible when having 25% of the European agricultural land under organic production? Targets are not solutions in this regards, they will have to come from farmers.

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