

Testimonial video and associated training material

7. Conversion to Organic Farming



This training set looks into the principles of organic farming and the legal requirements of certified organic farming. It is linked to the testimonies of farmers Cane Vella and Josef Farrugia who are both organic vegetable growers in Malta. In their testimonies they explain about their motivation for having converted to organic farming. Organic farming, by its nature, implies their use of typically several of the agro-ecological practices being promoted by Mara-Mediterra, such as for example, cover cropping, green manuring and mulching. Whereas Josef formally applied for organic certification of his produce, Cane maintains that by running his farm with an all-year-round open-door policy and a weekly online marketing campaign.

Organic farming

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)¹, "Organic agriculture is a holistic production management system which promotes and enhances agro-ecosystem health, including biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil biological activity. It emphasises the use of management practices in preference to the use of off farm inputs, taking into account that regional conditions require locally adapted systems. This is accomplished by using, where possible, agronomic, biological, and mechanical methods, as opposed to using synthetic materials, to fulfil any specific function within the system".

A sustainable food system is at the heart of the EU Green Deal. Under the Farm to Fork strategy, the European Commission has set a target of at least 25% of the EU's agricultural land under organic farming by 2030.

In Europe, the area under organic farming has increased by almost 66% in the last 10 years from 8.3 million hectares in 2010 to 147 million hectares in 2020. It currently accounts for more than 8.5% of the EU's total 'utilised agricultural area'. By producing high quality food with low environmental impact, organic farming is expected to play an essential role in developing a sustainable food system for the EU in the years to come.

¹ FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission. Guidelines for the Production, Processing, Labelling and Marketing of Organically Produced Foods, 1999.

The four principles of organic farming

The roots from which organic agriculture originates and its potential contribution to the world can be reflected in four principles².



∅ **The Principle of Health:** The role of organic agriculture, whether in farming, processing, distribution, or consumption, is to sustain and enhance the health of ecosystems and organisms from the smallest in the soil to human beings. In particular, organic agriculture is intended to produce high quality, nutritious food that contributes to preventive health care and wellbeing. In view of this, it should avoid the use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, animal drugs and food additives that may have adverse health effects.

∅ **The Principle of Ecology:** This principle roots organic agriculture within living ecological systems. Organic agriculture should attain ecological balance through the design of farming systems which fit the cycles and ecological balances in nature, establishment of habitats and maintenance of genetic and agricultural diversity.



∅ **The Principle of Fairness:** Organic agriculture should provide everyone involved with a good quality of life, and contribute to food sovereignty and reduction of poverty. It aims to produce a sufficient supply of good quality food and other products.

∅ **The Principle of Care:** Practitioners of organic agriculture can enhance efficiency and increase productivity, but this should not be at the risk of jeopardizing health and well-being. Science is necessary to ensure that organic agriculture is healthy, safe and ecologically sound. However, scientific knowledge alone is not sufficient. Practical experience, accumulated wisdom and traditional and indigenous knowledge offer valid solutions, tested by time.



Conventional vs organic farming



Conventional farming prioritizes efficiency and profit through intensive cultivations and monocultures. Heralded as the Green Revolution back in the 1970s, it has been extensively documented since its inception that it reduces soil fertility, utilises more harmful chemicals, pollutes more, brings adverse effects on the ecosystem, results in soil degradation and erosion, and often requires more irrigation and fuel.

Organic farming requires a systemic and complex approach, the farmer must have a clear and complete knowledge of environmental, agricultural and commercial challenges. The farmer must also navigate through more formal obligations required by international, community and national legislations. Ultimately organic farming is about quality, producing a yield with high nutrition value.



² International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM). Principles of Organic Agriculture, 2020

Conversion to organic farming

The conversion from conventional to organic farming entails two parallel processes:

- **Legal process:** An 'in conversion' period of 3 years that starts with the official application to the respective authorities, and a
- **Field process:** A gradual transition that can start before official request from conventional agriculture to organic agriculture on the farm.

EU Regulations in organic farming

In force since 1st January 2022, Regulation (EU) 2018/848 on organic production and labelling of organic products, lays down the rules concerning organic production, related certification and the use of indications referring to organic production in labelling and advertising, as well as rules on controls. It requires Member States to set up a system of controls and designate one or more **competent authorities** responsible for controls in respect of the obligations established by this Regulation.



'Competent authorities' means the central authorities of a Member State, and where relevant the corresponding authorities of a third country, responsible for the organisation of official controls.

'Control authority' means an organic control authority recognised by the Commission for the purposes of carrying out controls in third countries for the import of organic and in-conversion products into the Union. This role can be delegated to a 'Control body', i.e., a private control body.

As an example, in Malta, the Agricultural Directorate is the designated Competent Authority. It has designated the Malta Competition and Consumer Affairs Authority (MCCAA) as the sole recognized Control Authority to date.



In contrast, in Italy, a fairly large number of Control bodies have been accredited, as depicted by their logos on the right.

While in Malta, the controls carried out by the MCCAA are in turn subject to controls by the Agricultural Directorate, the control bodies in Italy are subject to controls by the competent authority in Italy.



Organic Certification



The Organic certification process goes further than the primary producer, in fact the categories of Organic operations, include: Organic Producer, Organic Retailer, Organic Wholesaler, Organic Processor, Organic Importer and Organic Traders.

In order for any of these operators to produce, process, prepare, sell, import or market any product labelled as organic, they must be certified as organic operators by the Control Authority or Control Body recognised by the Competent Authority. It should be noted also that any person or operator who is found guilty of an offence against the provisions of the EU Regulation shall, on conviction, be liable to a fine.