

Organic and other regulations

Organic, not such good compliance...

Illusionists, con artists and dupes

We live in a world of illusions, and therefore of illusionists. Illusion is about the ease of hoodwinking people without them noticing. It is about appearance devoid of reality, where everything is just smoke and mirrors. There are two types of illusionist: those who believe what they say, i.e. the self-delusional, and con artists. Let's take two examples from the agricultural and agribusiness sector: the very French idea of a loss selling threshold (EGalim Law), and the marvellous world of organic agriculture.





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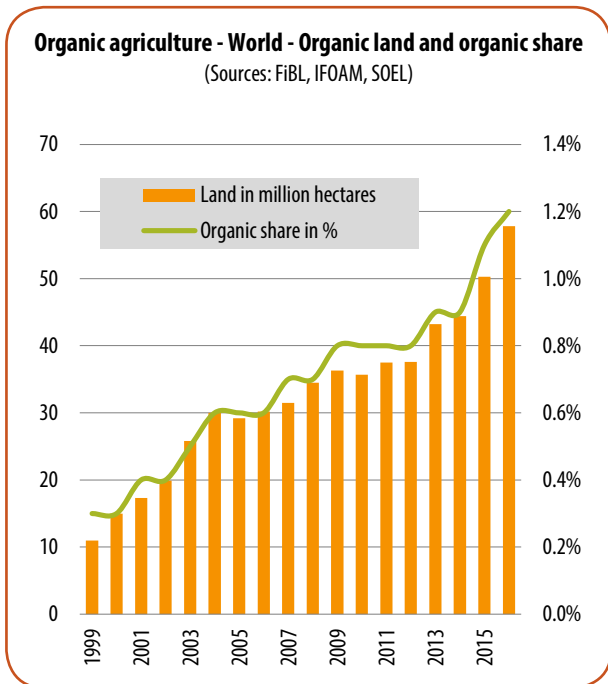
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The regulatory authorities of all countries make up a large part of the illusionists. In a kind of doxa attributing quasi-magic powers to the law and public standards, in the case of the EGalim Law (France), they decided to administer part of the commercial relationships between agricultural suppliers and the distributors, no less! To do so, this law limits loss selling by setting the distributors a minimum margin threshold (10 %). Therefore this will restore margins which can be ploughed back into the purchase price for fresh and processed agricultural products, thereby improving producer revenue. A great and bold idea on paper... yet unfortunately (for the moment) completely on the wrong track! Recent examples show that the distributors are pressuring suppliers to lower their purchase prices by 10 %, all so that the price tags remain acceptable for consumers. Others are giving back to their customers, via loyalty programmes, all or part of the 10 % that they have gained. Ultimately, an excellent intention is at best bypassed, and at worse produces the opposite effect to that expected. Not to worry, the administrative machine is already working on a new law monitoring the outcome of the first. We can also expect that the pressure groups, whistle-blowers, agricultural trade unions, etc., will speak up, and with a little luck things will end up on an even keel.

Who cares about organic as long as you have the label?

The organic sector is a more serious case. A new world standard bearer for an agricultural sector claiming to be completely breaking away from the old chemical-intensive-productionist model, organic is seeing strong growth in sales across the board. Nothing can withstand the promise of "zero" to which organic lays claim... well, for "zero" maybe we should read "nothing": no synthetic phyto products, no synthetic fertilisers. "Conventional" agriculture has thereby come to be regarded as old hat, and even open to ridicule.

And that is where illusion enters the scene. Since for some players in the organic sector, the sole aim is to produce a calorie for the same cost as a conventional calorie. They do not accept the constraints or even the philosophy of organic. They are not inclined either to rethink their production system in any depth, or in many cases accept a reduction in their yields, or more generally a deterioration in productivity. Since the whole world is clamouring for organic, let's give them organic! Who cares about how it actually gets done? Or, as the Roman Emperors put it "Panem et circenses".

While there is a shortage of proof due to a near-omerta on the subject, and a lack of simple analytical means to separate the wheat from the chaff, this does not stop us from querying at least three points.

The first is the differential in the specifications, especially for phytosanitary products authorised there and banned here. The fit of anger of an iconic French industry at the International Agriculture Show in 2017 ("better than organic" campaign) shone a bright light on the famous prin-



ciple of equivalence, whereby the EU labels organic products from third countries under a set of specifications that may be different to that applied to European producers.

The second question is more conventional, and also more alarming. It relates to the rigour of the inspections. Many lament the lightness of the certification processes, the extreme rarity of unannounced inspections and the absence of verifiable indicators (soil, water and leaf analyses). Without reliable and unannounced inspections, organic systems which are not the real deal are legitimised. While the worst operators are engaging in skulduggery both in terms of synthetic phytosanitary products and chemical fertilisation, some merely forget that use of organic fertiliser is not an optional aspect of the specifications. Since in the majority of cases, the Gordian knot of the organic cropping system is to find, preferably locally, substitutes for chemical fertilisers: guano, manure, residue from other crops, distillery waste, etc. In this way, to suppress the problem, certain organic farms have been found to be using urea, DAP, organic fertilisers cut with nitrogen, etc. They also sometimes employ ferti-irrigation, a very handy spreading system, as well as smokescreen. Finally, while composting units – the spearhead of organic agriculture – are in use, they are ridiculously sized, just to pull the wool over our eyes. The three-card trick of organic is in full swing, without any coercive measures troubling business-as-usual.

The third source of unease springs from the very principles of organic cropping and distribution of organic products. How is it possible to promote a resilient system, reducing the environmental impacts, if, for certain industries and certain regions, organic material (bearing the organic label) is imported over thousands of kilometres? The most militant consumers are also questioning the distribution of organic fruits and vegetables in non-specialist supermarkets, which most often requires specific outer packaging (separation of organic and conventional flows).

On top of swindling and fraud, there is also the dupe's market. And the first victim is the consumer, who does not end up purchasing the result of the organic promise made to them, but rather an ersatz more or less removed from the Holy Grail they seek, and for which they spend more, or even much more!

The regulation and inspection authorities too are showing signs of blindness, continuing to brandish the scriptures as Moses did with the Tablets of Stone. Who will tell them one day that the world is not only inhabited by cutesy folk who contribute willingly and collectively to the pursuit of a common good?

The triumph of night-watchmanism

The demand for organic is so strong that above all consumers must not be deceived, or put off by the price. In the short term, there will be organic for all, at least in terms of the labels. Which is a shame, since it would suffice to explain that it is not possible to produce organic without seeing in most cases big falls in yields (20 to 40 %) and costs increases.

That organic is only a market segment, and will remain so, probably for a very long time. That an "all organic" agricultural strategy must, to be credible, be part of a comprehensive reform of our diets: reallocation of land use, reduction in animal protein production, cutting waste, etc.

Unless we prefer to all keep living in a collective illusion, this is also the opportunity to make the consumer smarter. Explaining to them how agro-ecology is a smart approach to promote, which would help round off the organic approach and solve the immense problem of phytopharmaceutical products. Since while eventually zero phyto for all is conceivable via principles of agro-ecology, organic is not.

Yet ultimately, the worst thing is not opting to live in a pretence. The worst thing is that many producers and entire industries are getting organised to deliver the promise of genuine organic. And this makes them the laughing stocks, since they suffer a threefold punishment. They have soaring production costs. They have competition from the fake organic sector, which as it develops, drives market prices down. They are also subject to orders from the national, European, US authorities, etc., which believe that legislation and legislation alone that can change practices.

Finally, we seem unable to see in the absence of inspections, rigorous or otherwise, a blatant example of abdication by States of their sovereign prerogatives (e.g. inspection) to private players. The champions of unbridled liberalism (political theory of night-watchmanism) and of the unfailingly greater efficiency of the private sector compared to the useless public sector, have a few questions to ask themselves, unless this is another perfect crime. Regardless, there is a grave threat weighing on the organic sector, that of the day when all the inconsistencies and trickery will burst into plain view ■

Denis Lœillet, CIRAD
denis.loeillet@cirad.fr

