

BOOK REVIEW

Organic Agriculture – A Global Perspective

Edited by Paul Kristiansen, Acram Taji and John Reganold. CSIRO Publishing. Collingwood, VIC. Australia. < www.publish.csiro.au > June 2006. 480 pages, illustrated. AU\$ 150.00. ISBN 0 643 09090 8.

“The organic movement has grown beyond its roots of farmers, growers groups and loyal consumers to a global niche industry” (p 436).

These days there is growing international interest in conference proceedings and new publications about organic agriculture, particularly those that provide credible documentation of its growing global significance. Once it would have been thought quite unlikely that such interest was possible from merely reading earlier books and publications about organic agriculture that usually gave an account of organic (i.e. unconventional.) farming activities of the day and reporting them to an otherwise conventionally farmed Western world. Nowadays, the contemporary writings and conference proceedings about organic agriculture systems are beginning to beat a clear path into mainstream consciousness about the future sustainability of land use ... any land use! The appearance of this CSIRO publication has occurred, interestingly, at a time when organic agriculture appears to be experiencing growing international recognition as a global production, marketing, and healthy-food system.

In contrast to many common understandings of the organic genre, this 18-chapter book with its distinctly international flavour is broadly explorative and leaves few aspects of organic farming systems unexamined. Given that many individual facets of organic agriculture are beginning to be recognised for their relevance to societies and their cultural components, along with environmental policies, public health issues and international trade, the arrival of this book is almost perfectly timed. Its editors are to be commended for their serious attempt to construct a global perspective of organic agriculture.

Organic Agriculture is organised in five sections. Section one: *“Production”* (eight chapters and about half the book) overviews and updates the things that we think we know well, such as soil fertility; crops and crop protection; plant breeding and seed production; animal husbandry, health and nutrition; animal welfare and ethics. The authors competently review and update the significantly expanded data-base of technical information about the practicalities of organic farming. Particularly notable is the recognition of the growing paradox between selection and use of improved genetic stock and the ways in which their use contradict the ecological strategies of achieving sustainability. Also notable is the special topic chapter that examines biodynamic farming and its anthroposophic foundations.

Section two: *“Regulatory and management issues”* (three chapters) deals with historical as well as paradoxical aspects of this section’s subtitle. Chapter 9 and its companion special-topic chapter are particularly mindful of the influence of certification standards on the current regulatory landscape including apparent discord with the principles of sustainability. The last two chapters give an overview of the economics of organic management. Here they propose a useful framework for understanding the nature of global markets for organic food. Somewhat surprisingly, there is no mention of marketing risks that might conceivably arise from transgenic contamination of produce destined for international markets.

Section three: *“Beyond the farm gate”* (three chapters). At first sight this section has the potential to be the most provocative in the book. Though it explores some interesting aspects of the environmental consequences of organic versus conventional agriculture, effects of tillage in cropping, and quality of organically grown food, it nevertheless turns out to be disappointingly bland in context. Chapter 14 (Social responsibility in organic agriculture), however, is the exception. It pointedly outlines comprehensive and coherent steps to achieve fair trade as well as advocating the need for new codes to address baseline issues of social justice in organic agriculture.

Section four: *“Knowledge and capacity building”* (three chapters), addresses wide-ranging research and development issues in organic agriculture. Most readers will spot an emerging theme: the need to rethink and redesign organic systems research. This includes reforming the design and delivery of agricultural education and training programmes at even the most advanced levels. This section presents some particularly cogent observations of the relevance of institutionalised research in providing the sort on knowledge-integration considered to be necessary for effective education programmes in organic agriculture.

“Research on organic farming is often, correctly, focussed on the development of systems that present problems such as pests, diseases, or nutrient shortages. Contrastingly, much conventional research has focussed on finding short-term interventionist solutions to such problems. The commodity based thinking prevalent in agriculture has also contributed to this paradigm” (p 375).

In addition to the book's multi-chapter sections, there are also five special-topic chapters that provide greater in-depth examinations of such topics as organic agriculture in Africa. The book's editors have done well to achieve coherency across the book's major themes while drawing on and coordinating the substantial experiences and expertise of over 50 participating authors/co-authors from 14 countries.

Organic Agriculture will be invaluable to both those teaching about organic farming systems in universities and colleges, and to the increasing numbers of students and others doing research in this area. All chapters are well referenced and most figures, tables and boxes are effective 'collators' of diagrammatic and annotated information, though these not excessively used. And because of its integrative scope, More importantly, however, **Organic Agriculture** should become compulsory reading for all planners and policy-makers currently involved in formulating the future architecture of sustainable agricultural development throughout the world.

Neil Macgregor.