Sustainable and Resilient Social Structures for Change: The organic movement

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The organic food and farming movement has evolved over the past three decades from an alternative movement for social change at the farm and food industry level to one that is professionally formalised in its production standards and in its relationships with governments and its associated industry across the world. Such an evolution has not been without challenges including a fundamental one of maintaining a focus on its originating social movement tenets of sustainable natural farming, animal welfare and fair trade. This article explores some of the risks that such movements face as they mature. Corporate or organisational structures that encourage ownership and involvement of stakeholders (in standards and agenda setting) are a key point of success for the organic movement and its associated industry. Balancing this with professionalism and financial and resourcing independence from governments and other interests not fully aligned with the organic ideals has also been a key element in delivering longer term resilient and lasting change.

Introduction

The organic farming movement can trace its roots from mid last century with the reaction to the rising use of synthetic pesticides and a more corporate or agribusiness trend in farming. Consumers were becoming disenfranchised from being able to make active and informed choices about their food, where it came from, who produced it, and under what methods. From the 1970s there were farmers and consumers who came together to establish standards by which their farming and food production systems would be predicated: banning synthetic pesticides, shunning productivity pressures in favour of sustainability and ecological priorities, and re-orienting the status of farm animals from production units back into integrated parts of the whole 'organism' of the farm.

From quite radical beginnings in the 1970s, organic farming now has well-entrenched international standards, with both government and industry or movement-driven regulatory and verification arrangements. The organic farming movement became a successful industry and market niche through the 1990s in particular via the uptake of organic food products in the major supermarkets of Europe and the US. While dominating some food market sectors (baby foods, dairy products) in some countries, it averages between 2 and 3% of total food and beverage retail value across much of the western industrial world, while being a recognised value-added marketing claim into many emerging markets by the larger food industry players. Its impact has been both within the marketplace itself, albeit as a niche offering, and as a broader movement impacting on or questioning food labelling claims and promoting greater transparency in production standards at farm level.

The processes of standards setting, independent assessment and verification, and market monitoring, remain to this day both 'organic' and true to the core of the original tenets of the movement of the 1970s. It is arguably this success, of remaining focused on processes of standards setting and maintaining broad stakeholder input into these processes (rather than being beholden to singular commercial interests or interest groups) that maintains organic as a distinct and sought after food category in the markets of the developed economies.

While, like the food industry generally, not without its contradictions and ethical challenges, this movement and its associated industry offer lessons (from both its successes and mistakes) for those looking at wanting to see greater social change in the food and farming sector. The upside has been that a percentage of farmers from developed economies have converted their farmlands to organic production practices, and in turn given access to consumers wanting food products that are pesticide-free and, more recently, produced without the use of GMOs (genetically modified organisms). In an environment where consumers are getting more confused rather

than informed about food labels, food origins, and food ethics, and where more farmers continue to leave the land due to lowered returns and competition from anonymous producers in other countries, the ongoing growth of the organic market and its networks of farmers to consumers stands out as a case of successful social change engineering. Its challenge remains the balancing of the competing agendas and interests of government, big business and commercial retailing maximising financial returns and protecting market share, with that of consumers and the ideals embodied in the standards for organic production.

Organic processes of standards setting themselves at their best remain 'organic' and changing rather than ossified, and the movement and associated industry have worked hard to ensure ongoing ownership and buy-in of key stakeholders. The organic industry remains a case study of consumer-producer-driven food production regulation in action. At the centre of this success are resilient, sustainable and professional industry associations and social structures that provide the glue to manage the conflicts as well as opportunities for further social change in the food and farming community. These successful aspects of the movement could effectively be applied across a range of social change theatres.

Setting and maintaining standards

The fundamental strength of the organic movement has not been its stance against synthetic pesticides or less than ideal animal welfare standards, but how it goes about reviewing its stances on food and farm technologies, and establishes and maintains standards and systems to deal with these. The case of GMOs and their progressive integration into the food and farming system through the 1990s is a classic example of technologies being utilised against the wishes of a significant proportion of consumers, but consumers otherwise unable to make discerning choices about the use of such technologies in their own food purchases.

The organic industry has been able to establish a choice for consumers amidst this sea of confusing and sometimes opaque labelling requirements (or lack thereof) and in turn create a channel to market for farmers and value adders wishing to supply to that demand. But how has it managed to do this?

Well established standards setting processes, via consultation with industry members, consumer groups, food technologies and others through the 1990s, determined that GMOs did not have a place in organic production principles and therefore would not be actively used in organic farming. This has been determined again and again in a variety of international settings. The most extreme example of social involvement in organic standards setting was the 1990s processes in the US which saw one of the largest public responses via submissions to a draft USDA organic standard which suggested the inclusion of GMOs in organic standards. Over 250,000 submissions were received on this draft, with a resounding 'no' vote being registered.

The level of social engagement within the organic community on such issues, and the regular commentary that the organic movement has on food and farming practices more broadly, continues to provide the social jell that ensures a continued focus on the issues, and an ongoing resourcing (both financial and social) such that submissions are made, the public is informed via the media and other social forums, and governments are pressured to deliver on policy that aligns with the interests of the movement.

Such success has translated into premium prices for organic foods being maintained at retail level, such that farmers can continue to maintain what are very exacting agricultural and food standards for the consumers that demand them. An industry-driven and maintained system of auditing or inspection and certification to the standards then ensures that commercial pressures and self-interest do not outweigh and take over the principles upon which the standards are based in the first place.

One key message has been that the attention and resources placed in ensuring widespread consultation and broad stakeholder input, as well as independence of the regulating of those standards, are quite critical elements in building legitimacy for standards setting, particularly when such standards are related to issues of significant controversy.

Organisational structures and financing

On the one hand the organic industry's success via market share growth and ongoing uptake by consumers and farmers alike (albeit still at niche levels of low single digit percentages of total market) continues to enable it to have influence on food standards and some production methods. From a 'network theory' point of view this may be a good thing, suggesting that the ideals and ideas are being cemented in mainstream social structures and practices. On the other hand, such success risks the organic industry becoming beholden to the very masters and market pressures that stimulated the birth of the movement in the first place.

The world's largest food companies now own organic processing facilities and organic brands (for example, Danone, General Mills, Proctor and Gamble internationally; in Australia, Heinz, Sanitarium, National Foods and the major retailers Woolworths and Coles). Similarly in some countries there has been a significant take-over of

standards setting arrangements by government (the most significant one being the US via the US Department of Agriculture). This has both benefits while also generating tensions as commercial interests at times clash with organic ideals of production. Publications such as Organic Inc. have chronicled how these tensions and pressures continue to play out in the US, with implications for other countries including Australia in the decades ahead.

Between market (retail and producer) pressures and increasing government involvement are industry associations: the buffering agents enabling ongoing negotiation between market needs and movement principles. Of course not all associations are either born, or are maintained, equal or 'organic' and hence some become co-opted by the very pressures they are set up to manage. Others fail to substantially generate a legacy or impact due to unsustainable structures in the form of social, corporate governance or financial arrangements.

Industry associations, owned by industry members and structured in ways which ensure equal voting of members, while also having some structure which limits overall commercial pressure or clout from either a single individual, group or sector, are arguably one of the most resilient means of ensuring that these competing pressures do not negate organic ideals.

The Biological Farmers of Australia Ltd (BFA), now in its third decade of operation, is a very large and successful organic industry representative, advocacy and services association, harbouring over half of the members of the Australian organic industry via voluntary membership, while having subsidiary operations that conduct independent auditing and certification to standards set by its members and stakeholders. BFA has a structure which caps financial levy contributions to a level that any one commercial interest or individual contributes less than 1% of overall turnover of the group (while harbouring the majority of all major food and retail sector companies in Australia within its client ranks). It has both conventional corporate structures that enable voting of a board of directors on a rotating biennial basis, as well as advisory groups and stakeholder groups that ensure that broad consultation is conducted to enable transparent and effective decision making, whether of a technical or policy nature. It invests significantly in regional and metropolitan 'roadshows' and other networking events that ensure that members of industry have the opportunity for input and involvement throughout the year on a variety of initiatives and activities.

In short, structures such as the BFA are organised around the interests of members, with constant feedback processes occurring (literally monthly) back to strategic Board level about the needs and interests of its broad membership base. Both informal (gatherings, forums and roadshows) as well as more formal (annual general meetings, advisory group meetings) consultation mechanisms ensure that the broad and varying views of the membership are heard and engaged with.

A risk for some social or related movements can be a tendency early on to run with the original intent or desires of the founding membership, without the capacity for regular feedback and review of agendas and direction setting, let alone review of performance against outlined strategic plans. A similar risk is to become beholden to, or bedazzled by, government agendas, particularly where financial benefit may arise, rather than remaining focused on the original tenets and core aims of the movement. An organisational ability to get this balance right, and ensure it is enmeshed within the genetics of the organisation and membership, enables the potential for more professional as well as more resilient organisational structures.

Managing interests and agendas

BFA's financial resilience means that it is not beholden to government interests. The competing and sometimes conflicting interests and agendas of governments can mean that more conventional or 'non-organic' interests (for example, the introduction of GMOs, synthetic chemical control of pest plagues and food labelling laws) can otherwise overpower organic interests and practices, or at best continue to position them as fringe or radical ideas (for example, in relation to debates about sustainable farming and carbon emissions reduction, current favourite topics of governments around the world).

In contrast to this there have been a number of attempts by governments in Australia in setting and then propping up a 'single voice' to government from the organic movement, either federally or at state level. In and of itself this is a desirable and admirable thing. The problem has been however that such moves have often been instigated by government, rather than the movement, and have been attached to a series of public funds being made available that fostered a culture of dependency within the structures and functions of the group. Although some social movements cannot exist without some form of public good funds or philanthropy from external sources, there are often unwanted costs associated with such 'gifts', particularly in instances where the movement in question may otherwise be able to organise to fund themselves in the absence of this.

In the most overt of cases, the Victorian government nominated funds for an organic industry representative group following a review of a GMO-crop moratorium. The logic of support for organic (as well as GMO crops in the final report) was that organic offered consumers a choice of non-GMO foods in the marketplace. The logic on the

surface appears reasonable, however the implications can be that such groups then become co-opted into government agendas and policies, and distracted by meeting those, rather than being driven from and by the roots of the movement itself.

The contrast of these two types of groups (one movement or industry-driven, the other funded and driven by government interests) is a classic case study in 'what to do' and 'what not to do' in establishing lasting, effective, and independent associations and structures that are aligned with the founding movement ideals. The important challenge for such movements, where there is the potential to raise funds via its membership and stakeholders in one manner or another, is to create financial and resourcing structures that are renewable and sustainable in a manner to meet the needs and expectations of the members that are supporting such funding and related organisational activities. What can become a 'virtuous loop' of support can then in turn translate into a very effective and powerful tool for further social change. A lack of a focus on achieving this, in contrast, can deliver a movement both dependent on external (and sometimes finite) resources and captivated by interests and agendas well beyond its own control.

Conclusion

The recipe for success for the organic industry in Australia is to balance competing agendas and stakeholder interests with a pragmatism for using existing social and financial structures - retail markets and government rules - to engage and impact on farmer and retailer behaviour alike. By educating consumers and mobilising stakeholders to influence policies, such outcomes in turn can encourage further purchase of organic products, which in turn make it more evident as a viable option for farmers and consumers. This in turn may influence governments and the media to cover stories and issues close to the heart of the organic movement such as animal welfare practices, food labelling transparency and the use of synthetic chemicals or GMOs in foods.

Most importantly such moves generate a vortex of social change in the food and farming communities, questioning food production methods and labelling claims and their alignment with practice in the field, which is exactly an aim and ideal of the organic movement.

The very success of the organic movement to date, and the litmus test of its future performance, will be measured on how well it maintains these social networks of consultation with stakeholders, the balancing of competing and sometimes conflicting interests, the tempering of overt commercial and government interests and agendas, and its pragmatism in remaining relevant to and for the general public. All of these cannot all be achieved simultaneously all the time. Like democracy itself, the organic movement's strength and its effectiveness can never be taken for granted and require continual renewal and engagement by affected stakeholders.

Ultimately a smaller group of individuals and select groups that are best placed and able to continue to engage and look after the wider stakeholder environment will define the success of this social change movement and others like it. The role of well structured, pragmatic and well resourced associations and social groups are key in this process and cannot be under estimated. Investing significantly in getting these structures right early on, but also maintaining them with the ownership, buy-in and support of the pivotal stakeholders is the key to lasting success.

This case study leads to several recommendations for organisers promoting social change.

- The setting and maintaining of production standards should have meaning and integrity, based on processes of broad participation and buy-in of stakeholders.
- Organisational structures and financing should be sound and sustainable to ensure resilience.
- Special interests should be tempered by effective structures and processes.
- Issues that stimulate greater government interest and recognition and in turn co-option of agendas and directions should be managed very carefully.

Further Reading

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