

Towards a science-society dialogue about contentious issues in organic agriculture: results from focus group research

About the focus groups:

- 6 focus groups held in Norway, the UK and Italy in 2018/19
- one regular and one 'mixed' group in each country, all consisted of 8-15 participants
- used a range of elicitation methods including free association, product engagement and a presentation
- themes addressed: shopping and eating habits, understandings of organic, impressions of different organic foods and an evaluation of the importance of the various contentious inputs within organic agriculture

Associations with organic food among dedicated and mixed (regular and non-regular) consumers

Despite the exploratory nature of these results, some interesting trends can be observed (see fig.1). The focus groups consisting of dedicated consumers of organic food tended to think of 'organic' in terms of environmental impacts and product attributes, such as quality and taste. In contrast, the focus groups consisting of a mixture of regular and non-regular consumers associated organic food more strongly with low inputs (especially pesticides and fertilisers) and with a more ethical supply chain, including better animal welfare and more local, small scale production.

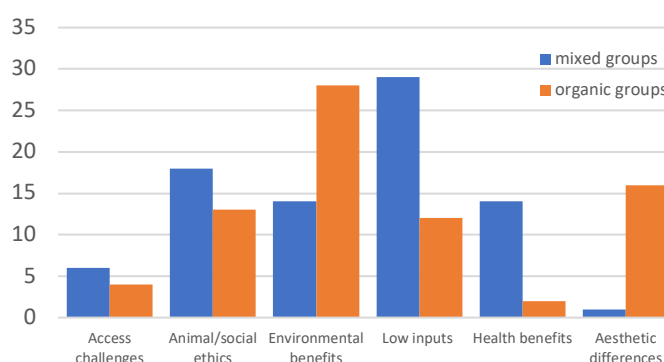


Fig. 1: results from post-it note exercises showing spontaneous associations with organic food by category as a percentage of all responses from mixed / organic groups

| | UK | | Norway | | Italy | |
|----------------------|---------|-------|---------|-------|---------|-------|
| | Organic | Mixed | Organic | Mixed | Organic | Mixed |
| Copper | 20 | 20 | 13 | 73 | 38 | 57 |
| Mineral oils | 20 | 20 | 25 | 55 | 88 | 71 |
| Synthetic vitamins | 0 | 30 | 63 | 18 | 13 | 43 |
| Antibiotics | 80 | 80 | 50 | 55 | 88 | 86 |
| Conventional bedding | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Conventional manure | 60 | 20 | 38 | 0 | 25 | 0 |
| Peat | 60 | 40 | 25 | 27 | 0 | 14 |
| Plastic mulch | 60 | 80 | 88 | 64 | 50 | 29 |

Fig. 2: percentage of participants who chose a given input as one of their three most contentious

How focus group participants responded to the contentious inputs identified by Organic-PLUS

After listening to a detailed presentation explaining each contentious input, participants were asked to choose which three they thought were the most important to focus on. The results (see fig.2) show wide variations between groups but *antibiotics* and *plastic mulch* stand out as highly contentious for over half the participants in all but one group. Participant discussions also highlighted:

1. Surprise that these inputs were used in organic agriculture and concern over the transparency of organic certifiers
2. The ability of participants to raise poignant, insightful and pragmatic questions with minimal prior knowledge demonstrating the value of such dialogues
3. The potential for an input-based agenda to focus on "marginal things within organic production... [we must] not drown in such trifles."
4. That public concerns about organic farming covered a broader range of issues, including local production, over-commercialisation and animal welfare.

This research implies that for organic to remain a trusted label at the forefront of ethical food consumption it must address not just the concerns of natural scientists but also those of a range of other stakeholders. It also implies that members of the public are more than capable of engaging in and making a valuable contribution to debates about the future of organic agriculture, even if those debates appear to be quite technical in nature.