

QLIF subproject 1:

Consumer expectations and attitudes



Photo: Organic Denmark

Determining consumer expectations and attitudes towards organic / low-input food quality and safety

The objective of QLIF subproject 1 was to deliver in-depth analyses of consumer expectations, attitudes and buying behaviours, with respect to quality and safety of foods from organic and low-input production systems.

Results of the research showed that consumer attitudes towards quality and safety are not consistent - they are changeable, and linked to a whole bundle of assorted issues such as personal health, the natural environment, and ethics. Organic consumers appear to fall into two main types: regular and occasional purchasers. Regular consumers are committed insofar as the products satisfy their quality and safety requirements, but they are suspicious of over-processed organic foods sold in supermarkets. Occasional consumers of organic and low-input foods are more price and convenience sensitive. A key finding is that consumer behaviour has co-evolved with market development. Availability has constituted the main barrier to increasing demand, and limited assortment as well as the perceived relationship between quality and price account for much of the fluctuation in demand among occasional users.

Regular and occasional consumers of organic food differ in attitudes and should be reached by different marketing strategies

Attitudes towards quality and safety

Results of the QLIF subproject 1 showed that consumer attitudes towards quality and safety of low-input and organic food are not consistent - they are changeable, and linked to a whole bundle of assorted issues such as personal health, the natural environment, ethics and self-image. These findings were based on analysis of existing studies and qualitative data from Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and UK. Although geographical differences were not significant, the place of production, particularly when local, did play an important role in developing trust. It was not clear from this analysis, however, what influenced fluctuations in household demand over time.

Regular and occasional consumers

Organic consumers appear to fall into two main types: regular and occasional purchasers. Regular consumers are committed insofar as the products satisfy their quality and safety requirements, but they are suspicious of over-processed organic foods sold in supermarkets. Occasional consumers of organic and low-input foods are more price and convenience sensitive. One dilemma, which needs to be addressed by the industry, is whether the concerns of both existing and potential consumers of low-input products can be satisfied at the same time, when their requirements differ quite markedly.

Perceptions of quality and safety

In another stage of the research we focussed on consumers who were not regular buyers of organic foods to determine what they understood by quality and safety and how this related to organic and low-input foods. The research was carried out by focus groups in France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy and the UK, concentrating on four products: bread, yoghurt, tomatoes, and eggs. For these consumers 'organic' was associated with freshness and a minimal level of processing. Organic is thus linked to short distribution channels and on-farm production. However, consumers' knowledge of agriculture, food technology and processing seems weak and for some there might be confusion between 'organic' and any product purchased through short distribution channels.



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Organic can also be considered an assurance of food safety for processed foods when farming or processing techniques are suspected. Thus, provision of information may not necessarily address the lack of knowledge. Some consumers seek more information while others feel overwhelmed by the quantity of information they need to make their food choices. Both attitudes can lead to support for organic consumption. The latter group wishes to have a label that provides an assurance of food safety and quality, without personal investment.

Quality indicators

Through a questionnaire survey across six countries we were able to collect information from almost 6000 consumers on their attitudes and perceptions of the quality and safety of organic, low-input and conventional foods. Again, we focussed on eggs, bread, tomatoes and yoghurt. There was evidence across the products and countries that low-input characteristics are important to consumers as quality indicators. For example, together with freshness and taste, the absence of chemical residues and artificial ingredients are regarded as very important quality indicators across all products and countries. At the other end of the spectrum, brand name and price were not regarded as particularly important indicators of quality for bread, tomatoes and eggs and brand name and packaging was regarded as the least important for yoghurt.

Low-input products are regarded as being safer, although a comparison of organic and non-organic consumers shows differences in the level of concern that they express. Comparisons of organic and non-organic consumers have implications for the marketing of low-input products. Table 1 shows the degree to which UK non-organic consumers regard organic products as better or not. The table indicates those aspects of product quality that provide most scope for increasing sales to previously non-organic consumers.

Table 1: Comparison of organic products with non-organic by UK non-organic consumers

Much better	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Chemical residues - Artificial ingredients - Impact on environment
Better	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Naturalness - Not mass produced - Quality of animal feed - Use of veterinary medicines - Animal welfare - Nutritional content - Taste - Food safety - Made in your own country - Local or regional identity
A little better	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hygiene standards - Freshness - Reputation of seller - Distance transported - Quality assurance label
The same	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing fair price to producers - Appearance
Worse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shelf life/keeping quality - Value for money - Range of types available - Price

Consumers' actual buying behaviour

Consumers' actual buying behaviour was studied by choice experiments in Germany, France and Switzerland. It was found that consumers' attitudes towards higher prices for food quality and organic foods are highly significant determinants for the choice of the organic alternatives, while the attitudinal influences regarding choice of the low-input



Photo: Organic Denmark

alternatives are weaker. Interestingly, the relevance of particular attitudes depends on the processing level of the products. The low-input products compete with conventional rather than with organic products. The quality-oriented consumers are not very price-sensitive as long as a certain price limit is not exceeded. The findings suggest that a promising marketing strategy is to increase the perceived price-performance ratio of organic food. This could be achieved through better communication of the various quality criteria incorporated in organic food.

Development of household purchases

It is well-known that general demand for organic products has risen in recent years, but demand at household level fluctuates and is unstable over time, and almost nothing is currently known about factors that influence this instability.

During the most recent year for which data were available, more than 80 pct of organic products on the Danish and Italian markets (60 pct in the UK) were sold to households spending 10-25 pct of their food budget on organics. In all three countries, the purchasing pattern of these households had been more stable over a longer period of time than households that had spent smaller proportions of their food budgets (1 to 5 pct on average) on organic purchases.

A key finding is that consumer behaviour has co-evolved with market development. Availability has constituted the main barrier to increasing demand, and limited assortment as well as the perceived relationship between quality and price account for much of the fluctuation in demand among occasional users. Distribution, assortment and price are key elements of a marketing strategy aimed at the latter. However, the results also indicate the need for differentiating marketing strategies if the loyalty of regular users, who prize high quality, careful processing and local production, is to be maintained.

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Links

Find more information at www.qlif.org

Selected publications

Ritson C and Brennan M (2008). What does consumer science tell us about organic foods? In: *Health Benefits of Organic Food: Effects on the Environment* (Givens I, Baxter S, Minihand AM and Shaw E, eds). CAB International, pp 190-206

Zanolì R, Francois M, Midmore P, O'Doherty-Jensen K and Ritson C (2007). Determining consumer expectations, attitudes and buying behaviour towards 'low-input' and organic foods. In: *Improving Sustainability in Organic and Low Input Food Production Systems* (Niggli U, Leifert C, Alföldi T, Lück L and Willer H, eds). Proceedings of the 3rd International Congress of the European Integrated Project Quality Low Input Food (QLIF), March 20-23, 2007, Hohenheim, Germany, pp 25-33

About QLIF

The Integrated Project QualityLowInputFood aims to improve quality, ensure safety and reduce costs along the organic and low-input food supply chains through research, dissemination and training activities. The project focuses on increasing value to both consumers and producers using a fork-to-farm approach. The project is funded by the European Union and runs from March 2004 to March 2009. The research involves thirty-one research institutions, companies and universities throughout Europe and beyond.

QLIF comprises seven subprojects on:

- 1) Consumer expectations and attitudes
- 2) Effects of production methods
- 3) Crop production systems
- 4) Livestock production systems
- 5) Processing strategies
- 6) Transport, trading and retailing
- 7) Horizontal activities



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Information on partners and subprojects is found at the project website www.qlif.org. The website also holds the library for project newsletters and serves as entry to Organic Eprints, where more than 100 publications from the QLIF project are available: http://orgprints.org/view/projects/eu_qlif.html