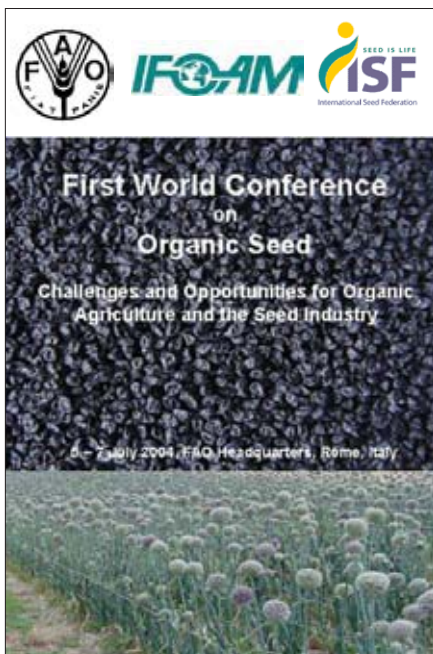


# 'Challenges and Opportunities for Organic Agriculture and the Seed Industry'

A note on the First World Conference on Organic Seeds held at FAO Headquarters in Rome, Italy  
July 5 - 7, 2004

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Last July we were guests at the FAO building in Rome, attending the First World conference on organic seeds. The conference was jointly organised by the International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements (IFOAM), the International Seed Federation (ISF) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO). The meeting was very well organised and had attracted around 270 participants from 57 countries, showing the world-wide interest in organic agriculture and the importance of seeds. This diversity in participants was also presented in the mixture of farmers, seed company staff, small scale seed producers, policymakers and

scientists. The theme of the meeting was 'Challenges and Opportunities for organic Agriculture and the Seed Industry'. I was privileged to present ISTA on this meeting and talk on the issues of seed quality and the role of seed scientists in working on solutions.

The meeting discussed many technical, economical, social and political aspects of organic seed supply. In his opening speech Swedish organic farmer and IFOAM president Gunnar Rundgren stressed the challenges for the organic movement regarding seeds, the need for harmonisation in the organic sector, seed regulation in general and the importance of respecting farmers rights. Representatives from seed companies and public researchers demonstrated several examples of the efforts and challenges for organic seed production, aiming at the production of high quality organic seeds. A special session was devoted to the co-existence of genetically modified (GM) crops and the risks of GM contamination during organic seed production.

## Use of organic seeds?

"Should organic farmers use organic produced seeds as crop starting material?" was one of the main questions at the conference. Unintentionally, Mr. Rundgren induced confusion about the opinion of IFOAM whether organic produced seeds should be used and if certification for that organic production is required. Mr. Rundgren stated that the use of certified organic seeds should be a voluntary option, not a mandatory demand, "The use of certified organic seeds or not comes longer down on the list of my priorities, and also on



the priorities of the consumers buying my food". Questioned by several participants, he stated the next day that he preferred that organic seeds are used, whenever available. These confusing statements reflect the situation within the organic agricultural sector. Organic farmers worldwide prefer to use organic seeds, but they encounter several problems in that. Not always are organic produced seeds available, and if available they may not be certified as produced organic. The latter is frequently the case in developing countries where farmers use seeds from own production or from exchanges within the community. Moreover, for several crops it is still difficult to reach the same quality standards as for conventional seeds.

## Organic seed supply

In Europe, North America, Israel and New Zealand certified organic seeds become more and more available, but the higher costs may make it economically difficult to use them for certain crops. Ronald Peerenboom, chairman ISF Working Group Organic Seeds, showed how the seed companies have invested in organic seed production: "They have a vision, supported by the ideological and political will of the last decade that organic seeds might become an interesting 'niche' seed-business to be involved in. They learn from it and use the new experience also in breeding and production of conventional seeds. They understand the ambivalent attitude from the organic farmer, especially when the prices of organic produced seeds are high". Representatives from seed companies Hild, Enza and Bejo asked for clarity from the organic sector and if decided to go for the use



tion, the seed crop may be grown in a region where the crop is not grown widely and cultivation methods can aid in restricting spread of diseases. Genetic or variety aspects can influence seed production. Varieties that are chosen on good performance in organic vegetable production do not always perform well during organic seed production. This can provide serious problems with some biennial crops or F1 hybrids.

Whereas the larger seed companies have well trained staff for production of high quality seeds, it is a problem with the small scale seed productions and farm saved seeds in third world countries. Moreover, certification of seed quality hardly exists for these seeds. There were several strong questions towards ISTA for support on this aspect. The pamphlet that ISTA presented, on its role in organic seed production was highly appreciated. As I understand the pamphlet has also frequently been downloaded from the ISTA web site in the weeks after the conference.

of organic seeds to get clear deadlines for derogations. Seed companies need to plan their seed production two or three years ahead and large costs are involved. As Dick van Zeijden from Bejo stated, "The organic seed programmes will only have a future if the organic chain is closed by law and self regulation. Commitment of all parties is needed. If there will be no self regulation it will be difficult to maintain an expensive organic seed programme. We can fully accept if organic farmers want to use conventional produced seeds, in that case we will provide conventional non-chemical treated seeds, but it should be clear".

Unfortunately, there are still differences between countries in regulations regarding organic crop production. This not only hampers the export of organic products, but also the world-wide supply of organic farmers with high quality seeds and plant material.

#### **Production of high quality organic seeds and support by ISTA.**

Professional organic growers, just like their conventional colleagues, are demanding high quality seeds. The seed industry has taken up the challenges and opportunities for organic seed production by several means, as demonstrated by Jan Velema (Vitalis Biological Seeds). Since no chemicals can be used to control diseases or pests, it is important to find an optimal climate for favourable development of the seed crop. To prevent infec-

**The pamphlet, 'The International Seed Testing Association (ISTA) and Organic Seed Production' can be downloaded from the ISTA Website at [www.seedtest.org](http://www.seedtest.org) or ordered directly from the ISTA Secretariat**

#### **Improving organic seed production and processing**

The conference allowed also the exchange of experience in improving organic seed production and processing, through lectures and posters. Dr. Ruud van den Bulk (PRI, Netherlands) presented how epidemiological studies can be used for setting up a model of critical control points to avoid contamination with *Alternaria radicina* during carrot seed production. Dr. Annegret Schmitt (BBA, Germany) presented a European project on treatments of organic vegetable seeds, giving examples of physical and biological seed

sanitation treatments. The effects of thyme oil for seed sanitation, which I presented myself, received a positive response for being both a component of natural origin and from a crop that can be produced by the farmers. Several examples were provided of dressing seeds with micro-organisms, e.g. the Cerall® treatment of wheat seeds by the Swedish company BioAgri. Interestingly these treatments presented for organic seeds, receive also large attention from the conventional seed sector. Also conventional farmers are interested in reducing the amount of chemicals and seed companies can sell surplus treated seeds still as cattle feed when treated in an environmentally safe way. In this way the challenges for the organic seed sector will provide also possibilities for a more sustainable conventional agricultural production.

#### **More information**

For those that lacked the opportunity to join the conference, there is good news. The very intense and lively discussions and exchange of information, made the organisers promising to continue with the organisation of this conference and we can look forward to a Second World Conference on Organic Seeds.



In the meantime you might read the proceedings (188 pages) that were distributed at the conference and can be ordered through IFOAM for only 24 Euro. ■

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