



What are the prospects of ecological agriculture in Romania?

Ioan Sebastian BRUMA
*Romanian Academy, "Gh. Zane" Institute of Economic and Social
Research, Iași, Romania*



It is an accepted fact that we live in a world of contradictions, particularly related to food and agriculture: we struggle between poverty and affluence, between famine and over-consumption. These aspects impact on our manner of thinking and acting. This is the reason why extremely diverse strategies, directions and trends emerge, which operate within opposing limits, ranging from destruction to planetary survival, from quantity to quality, from artificial to natural.

To solve these topical dilemmas, ecological agriculture, referred to variously as biological or organic agriculture, might prove to be a solution, a partial one at the very least.

Ecological agriculture aims to elevate agriculture and nutrition from being an economy field that is in charge of and exploits nature, to a higher level of conscious integration with the environment. In other words, ecological agriculture should be regarded as a body whose paradigm and model is nature itself.

Recent scientific discoveries and the deeper understanding of natural biological and chemical processes have facilitated the emergence of ecological agriculture as a response to the industrial, ultra-specialised, chemical-based and excessively energy consuming agriculture.

In formulating the concept of ecological agriculture, one has to acknowledge the dual role of this kind of agriculture.

By practising this type of agriculture, ecological agricultural and alimentary products are obtained which leads to the emergence of a dedicated market. In this respect, ecological agriculture is funded by the consumers that benefit from it, meaning that those ecological aliments which are demanded by buyers are going to be produced. From this perspective, the evolution of this kind of agriculture seems to be dictated by free market rules. Yet ecological agriculture also provides public goods and is beneficial to the natural environment, to public health, and to social and rural development.

The public goods which are thus obtained may be financed by public means. Seen from this perspective, the development of ecological agriculture is a political option, carried out within the framework of environment policies (Dobay, Krisztina Melinda, 2005).

Worldwide, ecological agriculture is applied in over 120 countries. According to the latest research, more than 26 million hectares are administered in keeping with ecological agriculture regulations, on approximately 560.000 farms worldwide. The ecological products market is constantly on the rise in Europe, North America and also in many developing countries.

In Europe, ecological agriculture has developed rapidly after 1990. Statistical data show spectacular differences between the situation in 1997 and the one in 2003 (table 1).

Around 170.000 European farmers run ecological farms on 6,3 million hectares. European Union states make up the largest portion with approximately 5,7 million hectares ecologically administered by 170.000 farmers.

This amounts to 3,4% of the agricultural surface and 2% of the number of farms in the EU. There are significant differences between each country's visions on this type of agriculture. More than 12% of Austria's farming land is ecologically administered, while in Switzerland this segment represents 10%. Italy has the highest proportion of ecologically cultivated land.

Table 1. Evolution of ecologically cultivated farming land in Europe.

Country	Surface (ha) 1997 ¹	Surface (ha) 2003 ²
Austria	299.920	328.803
Belgium	6.418	24.163
Czech Republic	4.166	254.995
Denmark	63.120	165.148
Estonia	3.000	40.890
Finland	84.552	159.987
France	100.000	550.000
Germany	327.329	734.027
Great Britain	17.240	695.619
Greece	5.000	244.455
Holland	14.000	41.865
Hungary	12.500	113.816
Ireland	12.000	28.514
Italy	33.854	1.052.002
Luxembourg	650	3.002
Norway	7.897	38.176
Poland	7.000	49.928
Portugal	11.000	120.729
Romania	1.000	75.500
Slovenia	2.446	23.280
Spain	30.000	725.254
Sweden	276.000	207.488
Switzerland	75.000	110.000
Ukraine	-	240.000

Source: 1 Vlăduț, M., N., Popescu, Adelina (2001), *Agricultura țărănească eco – biologică*, Editura Universul, București.

2 Miller, Helga, Yussefi, Minou (2005), *The World of Organic Agriculture. Statistics and Emerging Trends*, IFOAM, SOL, FiBL, BioFach.

Beginning with 2000, Romanian authorities have also shown interest in ecological agriculture. Thus, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development has adopted a series of laws to regulate this field. In 2003, the process of harmonising the national and EU legislation was completed. The technical and organisational framework for the production, manufacture, importing/ exporting and/or retail of ecological produce in Romania is legally regulated mainly by the following legal documents:

1. *Government Emergency Order no. 34/2000*, concerning ecological agricultural and alimentary products;
2. *Law no. 38/7 March 2001*, for the sanctioning of the Government Emergency Order no. 34/2000, concerning ecological agricultural and alimentary products;
3. *Government Decree no. 677/19 July 2001*, establishing the Institute of Food Bio-resources;
4. *Law 166/2002* on agricultural exploitations. By this law, family owned agricultural exploitations are encouraged to implement ecological farming.
5. *Government Decree no. 917/13 September 2001*, for the approval of the Methodological norms for the application of the provisions of the Government Emergency Order no. 34/2000, concerning ecological agricultural and alimentary products;
6. *Order of the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Alimentation no. 70/2002*, establishing the Commission for the development of ecological agriculture in Romania;
7. *Minister's Order no. 186/2002*, for the approval of the inspection requirements and safety measures within the inspection and registration programme for operators on the ecological agricultural and alimentary products market;
8. *Minister's Order no. 721/2003*, for the approval of the Regulations on the import and export of the ecological agricultural and alimentary products;
9. *Minister's Order no. 527/2003*, for the approval of the Regulations on the inspection and certification system and the accreditation requirements of inspection and accreditation bodies in ecological agriculture.

Following the adoption of these legislative documents one can notice a significant increase in Romanian farmers' interest in implementing this type of agriculture. Data from the

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Romanian Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development (www.maap.ro), show constant expanding of ecologically cultivated land. Thus there were 17.550 ha in 2000; in 2001 – 18.690 ha; in 2002 – 43.000 ha; in 2003 – 57.200 ha; in 2004 – 75.000 ha.

These farmlands have been cultivated especially with cereals, oil crops and protein plants, vegetables, and medicinal plants. The production of certified ecological cereals has increased from 30.400 tonnes in 2003 to 55.590 tonnes in 2004. The quantity of ecological oil crops and protein products reached 19.800 tonnes in 2004. Regarding the production of vegetables, it increased significantly from the year 2000 (600 tonnes) to 2002 (7.000 tonnes), but it fell sharply in 2003 (2.000 tonnes). In recent years, in Romania ecological orchards have been created, too. The amount of ecological fruit is still low: 200 tonnes in 2002; 300 tonnes in 2003; 800 tonnes in 2004. Yet, ecological agriculture is not represented exclusively by the cultivation of plants. Animal husbandry practised according to ecological standards has grown over the past few years. Livestock numbers have been on the increase for all species. Thus, there were 2.500 dairy cows in 2000 and 10.000 in the year 2004; there were 7.600 dairy sheep in 2000 and 70.000 in 2004. The raising of laying hens in an ecological system emerged in 2002, when there 2.000 poultry were recorded, while in 2004 the total increased to 6.000. Ecological apiculture has greatly developed over the last few years, going from 400 certified ecological bee families in 2000 to 8.000 in 2004.

Below is a list of ecological production which Romanian specialists consider to be niche ecological products:

- sheep and goat milk, and dairy products obtained in exploitations and family farms in mountainous and sub-mountainous areas;
- cow milk obtained in mountainous, rift (depression) and sub-mountainous areas;
- meat of young fattened oxen;
- veal;
- lamb;
- pork;
- meat of mixed, traditional chicken breeds;
- duck;
- production of eggs in family farms, farms or small farms using mixed breeds and natural food supplies;
- medicinal and aromatic plants;
- ecological honey and apicultural produce such as pollen, propolis, bee bread, royal jelly etc.

Agriculturalists are faced with a series of economic problems that obstruct the development of this sector, such as:

- the low purchasing power of the potential customers;
- the specific market segment has not sufficiently developed to allow the producers to adopt niche strategies on the internal market;
- the absence of product distribution lines;
- the inability of the agricultural producers to rally in order to ensure a substantial uniform and constant offer to attract the interest of retailers;
- the insufficient information on the products' inspection and certification.

The association of small producers with a view to practise ecological agriculture is a solution because the problems related to certification and retail can thus be solved more easily and with reduced costs.

The transition from the conventional agriculture to the ecological one involves certain costs. SAPARD encourages the development of ecological agriculture in Romania. By accessing Measure 3.3, sub-measure C, of the SAPARD Project, certain obstacles to the ecological agriculture development may be eliminated as follows:

- decreased production during the conversion period;
- decreased production related to technological changes;
- modification of crop rotation;
- increased cost of labour and of mechanical processes used in weed control;
- supplementary costs required for produce certification.

In order to expand the ecological agricultural and alimentary production it is vital to identify the areas favourable to this type of agriculture.

The optimal use of berries, mushrooms, medicinal plants, venison, and fish can enable Romania to become a household name on the ecological products market.

Lately ever more consumers are looking for ecological agricultural and alimentary products, which mean that there exist the premises of a retail market. Considering the higher interest in these products, prices may rise considerably.

In view of the fact that, worldwide, the demand for ecological products is constantly on the rise and that Romania is not subject to contingency for these products, we consider that this activity holds good prospects for Romanian farmers.

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