

## The IFOAM principle of health – how do organic farmers apply it in practice?

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**Key words:** health, organic, network, system, farm health

### Abstract

*The project ‘Developing best practice networks of health in organic agricultural systems’ aimed to create an international network of farmers and scientists to jointly develop new and interdisciplinary approaches to health measurement and research in ecological agriculture. The project identified personal philosophies and statements of best practice that make organic farmers successful in running healthy farming systems. Building on farmers’ practical experience and findings from a former research project, we produced a working list of ten transferable strategies to increase the direct translation of organic principles into practice. The project further initiated the creation of a best practice network of health in organic agriculture, connecting farmers, advisors and scientists for future interdisciplinary research collaboration and a joint approach to increase health effects in organic agricultural food systems.*

### Acknowledgments

We are grateful for funding of this project by the Ekhaga Foundation, Sweden.

### Introduction

The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) has defined the following principle of health for organic agriculture:

*“Organic Agriculture should sustain and enhance the health of soil, plant, animal, human and planet as one and indivisible.”* And further: *“Health is the wholeness and integrity of living systems. It is not simply the absence of illness, but the maintenance of physical, mental, social and ecological well-being.”* (IFOAM 2005).

However, when asked, few farmers are familiar with the wording of these principles and the following questions arise for health research in agriculture: What do farmers understand under a ‘healthy farming system’, how do they individually interpret and implement this self-imposed ‘principle of health’ in practice, and have they developed their own principles and philosophies to manage healthy farming systems? This project has closely worked with an international group of farmers to answer some of these questions.

### Material and methods

To address these questions of health in a discourse between practice and science, the Organic Research Centre ([www.organicresearchcentre.com](http://www.organicresearchcentre.com)) initiated an international research project, which was conducted in England, Germany and Austria. The project included: 1) an online survey

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among farmers in each country; 2) three national farmer workshops; 3) one international farmer workshop; and 4) a final workshop with farmers, advisors and scientists.

To establish a common base for an international and interdisciplinary network, the first step of the project aimed to identify the personal strategies and philosophies of organic farmers to improve health on their farms, as well as the methods they use to implement the principle of health on their farms. An online survey (using the cloud-based software Survey Monkey) was conducted in the three countries, which was answered by a total of 79 farmers. In several open-ended questions, the participants were asked to describe how they understand, measure and improve health on their farms. From these qualitative survey answers, as well as further semi-structured interviews with consultants and other external experts familiar with the individual farmers, five farmers were identified in each country and invited to a national health workshop. Criteria for the selection of these farmers were developed by the project team; the farmers should:

- have a clear vision of the health concepts on their farm (a clear view of what makes the farm healthy, and what not).
- be particularly aware of the impact of their actions and practices on health (health effects on and of their system).
- be aware of where there are health deficiencies in the system, and be prepared to improve them continuously.
- be open to share their own philosophy with others and be interested in learning from other practitioners.

The selected female and male farmers (henceforth called ‘example farmers’) came from a large variety of agricultural systems (large and small scale, mixed farming, dairy or beef farms, arable and horticulture, organic and biodynamic, etc.) and as such, contributed to the project from a wide range and diversity of perspectives and experiences. With this interdisciplinary and international group of farmers as key actors, a series of national and international workshops followed, where participatory approaches were used for the next steps of the project work.

During two-day workshops with the farmers in Germany, Austria and the UK in autumn 2015, the presentation and comparison of individual health strategies of the farmers aimed to identify possible commonalities and differences in their personal visions or philosophies.

A second, international workshop was organised in February 2016, bringing all example farmers from Germany, Austria and the UK together. Here, the statements and philosophies, which had previously been developed in the national groups, were presented, discussed, and again checked for parallels and differences between the farmers, but also between countries.

And finally, in September 2016, a second international workshop was organised, this time linking the example farmers with several scientists and advisors from a wide variety of disciplines (e.g. soil science, veterinary science, cropping systems, phytopathology, social sciences etc.). The aim of this final two-day discourse was to jointly discuss the developed farmers’ own health strategies, and establish the consequences and possible next steps for new and interdisciplinary approaches for health research and implementation of the health principle in (organic) agriculture.

## Results

There was broad agreement among the survey participants and the finally identified example farmers that a healthy farming system does not necessarily result from the sum of individually ‘healthy domains’ such as animals, soil, plants or humans. As important features of a healthy farm, the survey participants mentioned for example the production of healthy food, the stability of the health of people working and living on the farm, an increase of soil fertility, an increase of

biodiversity, a low number of visits from veterinarians and generally low amounts of external inputs to the farm.

When asked in the survey about strategies or philosophies that the farmers have used to improve health on their farms over the years, most answers were related to two main topics. The majority of farmers see 1) soil health (soil fertility, soil life, etc.) as a central point of health on the farm; as well as the basis and prerequisite for healthy plants, animals and humans. And further, many farmers saw the promotion of 2) biodiversity and diversity in general on the farm as one of the most important strategies for promoting health in the agricultural system. They explained that this does not only cover the support and enhancement of wild animal and plant species, but also for example the choice of a large diversity of crop plants and varieties, a diversity of resilient livestock breeds, diversity of market channels, customers or people working on the farm.

Table 1 below summarises keywords of the ten statements for health in organic agricultural systems, which were developed and refined by the farmers during the project period, and finally discussed with advisors and scientists:

**Table 1: Keywords of the ten health statements developed by the international farmer group**

Statement 1	Intuition, self-observation, aware of strengths, weaknesses and resources
Statement 2	Soil health as base of health in all other areas
Statement 3	Recognising, observing changes in biodiversity, aiming to increase it
Statement 4	Awareness of working in and with nature’s systems
Statement 5	Closely observing key health-related processes and reacting appropriately
Statement 6	Responsible and optimal organisation of processes and capacities
Statement 7	Away from mass production towards quality production and multiple outcomes
Statement 8	Increasingly broad and long-term perspective of the system
Statement 9	Awareness of contributing to human health through products and public goods
Statement 10	Awareness of the first and most apparent indicators of health on the farm

During the first international workshop, the farmers also defined practical methods or tools they use for implementing their individual health philosophies on the farm. The focus here was on methods that could potentially be transferred and applied to other businesses, such as choosing rare and more resilient breeds of livestock, the use of homeopathy for diseases in dairy cows, the use of hay instead of silage, or manure instead of slurry, as well as the use of effective micro-organisms. These methods are now incorporated in a working guidance document, open for input and feedback from a wide range of farmers and other stakeholders. This has laid the foundations for a guide, which will include a whole series of practical measures for the direct implementation of health principles into practice and linking up farmers, advisors and scientists for interdisciplinary collaboration in health measurement and research.

## Discussion

Organic farmers have developed their own best practice strategies to improve health in their farming system. In their opinion, one of the main factors in achieving health in soils, plants, animals and humans is the awareness of strengths and weaknesses in the farming system, and particularly the knowledge and respect of available resources and system boundaries. The farmers stated that the

choice of suitable and resilient breeds and varieties for each individual farm, as well as the awareness and respect of the specific needs and nature of the animals, plants and soils, is crucial for healthy and successful farming systems. While several of these ten health statements of the farmers are relatively well known and already widely accepted and practiced strategies in organic agriculture, the farmer group also identified uncommon and rarely communicated philosophies to achieve health on the farm; such as for example the crucial importance of intuition, self-awareness and self-observation.

## **References**

IFOAM (2005) The Principles of Organic Agriculture. <http://www.ifoam.bio/en/organic-landmarks/principles-organic-agriculture> Accessed 9 August 2016