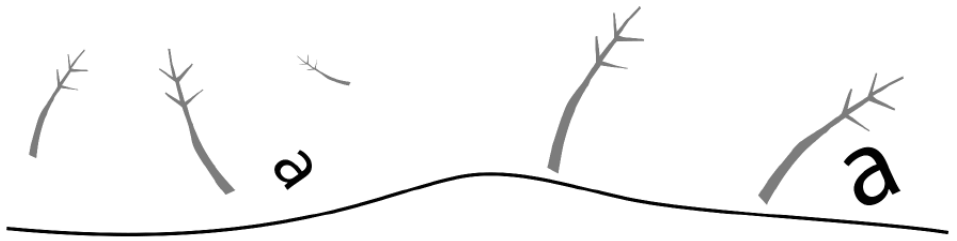
What does "organic" mean for farmers? A qualitative study on their perceptions and motivations about organic farming



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Hightlights:

1. Ecological motivations are key to understand farmers' conversion to organic production.
2. Organic production redefines farming activity, giving new views, expectations and values to it.
3. There is a symbolic breach with the old conceptions of conventional agriculture.
4. Differentiation and uniqueness are central elements for organic farmers in their production.
5. Self-perceived quality of life seems bigger for organic farmers in contrast with their previous experiences.

Abstract: Organic production involves multiple techniques and it is interpreted in different ways by the agents involved. They would act according to their preferences, values and expectations but also determined by the current system of food production, distribution and commercialization. At the same time, farmers experience a change in their perception regarding their business, themselves, and the relation with nature. For these reasons, it is relevant to study how this change contribute to the development of rural spaces and sustainable agrifood systems. The overall objective of this research is to find out producers' views about organic agriculture and farm labour. In order to do so, I have analysed the discourses and experiences from thirteen deep-interviews to different agents related to organic production whose activity takes place in the region of Aragon (Spain). The study gives evidences about the change in the meaning of "farming" in organic production and their implications in the development of this sector, based in the ideal of sustainability. It shows how organic farming is not only driven by economic motivations but also farmers' ecological commitment to sustainability.

Keywords: Organic agriculture, sustainability, food systems, farmers, rural society.

¿Qué significa "ecológico" para los agricultores?
Un estudio cualitativo de sus percepciones y motivaciones sobre la producción en ecológico

Ideas clave:

1. Las motivaciones ecológicas son claves para entender la conversión a la producción en ecológico.
2. La producción ecológica redefine el trabajo agrícola a través de nuevas visiones, expectativas y valores.
3. Se produce una ruptura simbólica entre la vieja concepción de agricultura convencional.
4. La diferenciación y especialización de los productos son elementos centrales para los productores.

5. Los productores ecológicos perciben una mayor calidad de vida ahora que en sus experiencias previas.

Resumen: La producción en ecológico envuelve técnicas múltiples y es interpretada de diferentes maneras por los actores implicados. Ellos actuarán de acuerdo a sus preferencias, valores y expectativas, pero también determinados por el sistema actual de producción, distribución y comercialización. Al mismo tiempo, los agricultores experimentan un cambio en su percepción sobre su negocio, ellos mismo y la relación con la naturaleza. Por ello, es relevante estudiar este cambio y de qué forma contribuye al desarrollo de las zonas rurales y de sistemas agrarios sostenibles. El objetivo principal de la investigación es averiguar la visión de los productores sobre la agricultura ecológica y el trabajo agrícola. Para ello, se han analizado los discursos y las experiencias de trece entrevistas en profundidad hechas a diferentes agentes relacionados con la producción ecológica que tienen la actividad en Aragón (España). El estudio evidencia los cambios en el significado de "agricultura" en la producción orgánica y sus implicaciones en el desarrollo del sector, basado en el ideal de sostenibilidad. Muestra como agricultura ecológica no es solo está guiada por motivaciones económicas sino también por el compromiso de los agricultores con la sostenibilidad.

Palabras clave: Agricultura ecológica, sostenibilidad, sistemas alimentarios, agricultores, sociedad rural.

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1. Introduction

Organic production is increasingly extended in European agricultural production systems due to the growing awareness about the environmental and health impacts deriving from our eating habits, but related to the new paradigm of rural development where, as Van der Ploeg *et al.* (2000) said: "*the rural is no longer the monopoly of the farmers*". Producing organic food is one of the innovative strategies used by farmers to overcome vulnerability and rural crisis (Moyano, 2000, Collantes, 2018). Therefore, considering the social representations that these new agri-food system agents hold may allow a better understanding of the dynamic of this growing industry and the effects on rural planning and sector development (Lozano, 2013). Organic farming leads to processes of resignification of farmers' identity and the agrarian product, in a general context of the meaning of farming labour from traditional small-scale farms to rural industrialisation (Requena *et al.*, 2018; Nyström, 2019).

The organic process in farmers has tended to be understood as a rational choice that individuals make according to their system of preferences (Blazy *et al.*, 2011; Feola & Binder, 2010; Saylor *et al.*, 2017; Arunrat *et al.*, 2017). Thereby, the analysis of current organic certification and labelling processes has namely considered the economic dimensions, paying little attention to farmers' valuation and expectations about it (Seufert *et al.*, 2017). Few studies assess from a qualitative perspective how organic production leads to a change in the meaning of farming in relation with

sustainability and environmental concerns. Disentangling the definitions of new types of farming from the producers' perspective is a key element to develop public policies aimed to enhance this sector.

This research aims to cover this gap and to contribute to the discussion around the meaning of "organic" addressing the view of the farmers from qualitative perspective, which gives a broader understanding of the farming sector. Results will also contribute to understand producers' opinion about farming style that may be a viable option to enhance people's livelihoods in rural areas as well as sustainability practices. This study was conducted in Aragon region (Spain), a marginalized inland region accounting only for roughly 5 % of the Spanish organic area, most of it devoted cereal, legumes, pastures, meadows and fodder crops (CAAE, 2018). Studying the organic sector in that region becomes relevant for further revitalization of marginalized rural areas based on innovative strategies.

Specifically, the objectives of this study are: 1) to examine the meaning of the concept "organic" for the sampled farmers –and to assess to what extent it this modifies the views about farm labour and sustainability–, 2) to explore the similarities among organic producers' in motivations and values, 3) to see which are their opinions about certified organic products and how producers' values are reflected in them. The study was undertaken through thirteen qualitative interviews to different social agents related to organic production, mainly farmers but also marketers and technical advisors and it is structured in three main blocks: the concept of "organic" for farmers, the "organic" producer and the characteristics of the certified organic product.

2. Theoretical framework: research on agriculture and organic farmers

Having adopted conventional agricultural system, and, overall, a view of food as a commodity that flows in global marketing networks, has affected the configuration of rural spaces. With the loss of economic and social importance of agriculture, new problems appear, such as the depopulation, aging or masculinization (Consejo Económico y Social España, 2018). Starting in the 1990s, a set of new policies for the rural development emerged (Van der Ploeg *et al.*, 2000), which were focused not only on agrarian aspects but also on diversification of activities, reforestation and

agro-environmental activities that entailed changes in the socio-economic, cultural and political structure (Moyano, 2000). These changes carry an identity crisis for farmers, but also a structure of opportunities for new strategies in European countries (Moyano, 2000). At an individual level, farmers will face the change in agriculture and the social position of the farmer in society in different ways, opting for innovation and entrepreneurship in agricultural production based on differentiation and diversification of production (Moyano, 2000; Loconto *et al.*, 2018). Milone and Ventura (2019) have pointed out this as a characteristic of new young farmers as, through innovation, they achieve autonomy and success.

Organic producers are part of that group, guided not only by pragmatism and economic opportunities but also by environmental rationality and a sense of responsibility and solidarity towards their communities (Padel, 2001; Garrido-Fernández, 2006; Milone & Ventura, 2019). In fact, pioneer organic producers defend the positive effects of the organic model over health and environment, trying to discredit conventional farmers as a way to empower themselves and to neutralize the negative stigma associated with their activity (Lähdesmäki *et al.*, 2019).

For a farmer, initiating the transition is a decision not only conditioned by structural conditions, but the perception that these factors are decisive is what will influence the agents to make one or the other decision (Darnhofer *et al.*, 2005). Garrido-Fernández (2006) proposes a multidimensional approach that considers three dimensions: economic, social and ecological. The first would explain the tendency towards agrarian intensification, technology or the orientation to constant growth that characterize the agricultural sector. The social dimension focuses on the change of the traditional image farmers have had over the years and how the devaluation of agriculture has pushed this sector to look for new forms of legitimacy, dignity and recognition of their work in a rural livelihood that is constantly being symbolically reformed and rebuilt. Finally, the environmental dimension explains how farmers, moved by the reaction to environmental degradation, would opt for respectful and sustainable production methods. Although that study indicated that the dominant principle was the economic dimension, other studies advocate the importance of ecological factors in the decision-making process (Leslie, 2000; Lockie *et al.*, 2000).

2.1. Typology of organic farmers

Several studies have shown the differences among organic farmers according to their motivations and attitudes towards organic production. Some growers have opted

for a pragmatic view of production motivated by economic reasons, tending to follow the minimum certification requirements (Lawrence *et al.*, 1999; Lockie *et al.*, 2000; Darnhofer *et al.*, 2005; Flaten *et al.*, 2006). On the contrary, committed farmers are guided by ideological considerations and a firm belief in the philosophy of organic farming, which is associated to nature, balance, diversity, creativity, spirituality and localism (Lawrence *et al.*, 1999; Lockie *et al.*, 2000; Darnhofer *et al.*, 2005; Flaten *et al.*, 2006). In the Spanish context, the study carried out by Lozano (2013) on organic farming in Andalusia also establishes a difference between organic producers according to their views on organic farming. On the one hand, there are those characterized for having replaced the chemical products with authorized ecological supplies; on the other hand, those who have preferred to implement a set of agroecological practices that, although more demanding, generate greater environmental.

As it is highlighted, the researches carried out show the existence of two main profiles of organic farmers: the pragmatists who move by economic criteria and will carry out their businesses by adjusting to the requirements of the organic agriculture certificate that will allow them to commercialize. In contrast, those farmers, that moved by agroecological principles, seek the environmental sustainability of their farms. Both profiles will perform farm labour based on different values about "human-nature" relationship. However, the types of motivations are not drastically opposed, since the committed producers must adopt pragmatic measures to survive in the market and the pragmatists end up swayed by the ideas and idealistic motivations of the first group as the symbolic idealization of organic (Zagata, 2010).

2.2. The organic certification as a control mechanism

This change may be driven by public institutions through the elaboration of mechanisms that give stability to the producers and ensure the control of the products for the final consumer. While a farmer may be producing ecologically without certification, this stamp is a way to verify production methods and to access a more valuable market with more competitive prices (Plants, 2016). In this way, the organic certification[1] that regulates organic farming in Europe understands it as the

1• Although this research focuses only on institutional public certification, it should be noted that there is a movement around the creation of Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) that serve as quality assurance systems at the local level that certify that a product is ecological through the active participation of producers and consumers (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement (IFOAM), 2007).

"*agricultural system that seeks to provide the consumer with fresh, tasty and authentic food while respecting the life cycle of the systems*" (European Commission, 2018). It is a production technique that does not necessarily question distribution structures (Seyfang, 2006). The requirements are regulated at the community level since 1991[2] in the Law 9/2006 on Food Quality in Aragon, which establishes the controls to obtain the specific label. This regulation sets the standards for farmers, importers from third countries and processors who want to commercialize organic farming products, ensuring they respect production standards and do not use incompatible techniques.

The reductionist view of these certificates has often been questioned for focusing on the prohibition of a series of inputs, which is not a sufficient condition to ensure the sustainability. It may be the case of farms that are certified as organic because they work without any chemical inputs but they do not meet other sustainability criteria (Seufert *et al.*, 2017).

The organic certificates are different depending on the territory although, generally, they all define activities and substances that are not allowed (genetic engineering, chemical fungicides, etc.) and a series of required activities such as crop rotation. Compliance is followed through public or private certifiers that monitor that producers comply with the regulations and keep track of any change that is established in the farm, through the elaboration of reports (Seufert *et al.*, 2017).

3. Methods and techniques

This study is based on the analysis of thirteen of in-depth interviews on a one-on-one basis with organic producers in Aragon (Spain), although the view of the controlling institution of organic farming in Aragon (the Aragonese Committee of Organic Agriculture, hereinafter CAAE[3]) and two interviews to two agricultural

2• Currently the regulation on production and labelling of organic products is No. 834/2007 (European Commission, 2018).

3• The Aragonese Committee of Ecological Agriculture (CAAE) works both as a registry of operators that carry out this type of business in Aragon and as a Product Certification Entity. Although all

advisors who work with organic producers have also been incorporated. The purpose of the study was not to be demographically representative of the organic sector but rather to have a deeper understanding of the diversity of discourses, so that, in-depth interviews were suitable for the study.

In total, thirteen interviews were conducted in summer 2018 in farmers' towns[4], ten of which are producers who are in the process of obtaining the certificate or already have it. Out of these ten producers, there has been an attempt to have a wide variety of types of production and agricultural exploitation, as well as equal representation of women and men. All of them were chosen because they were pioneers in their sector in Aragon. The individuals interviewed were selected through the technique of chain sampling or "snowball", an intentional and non-statistical technique used to arise small or geographically dispersed population (Heckathorn & Cameron, 2017). In addition, an interview was conducted with an expert on soil analysis and with an agroecological adviser, both of whom were working with the interviewed farmers. Apart from that, it was considered relevant to incorporate the institutional point of view about organic production and certification through an interview with a worker in the administrative area of the CAAE. All contestants were informed about the purpose of the study and approved to participate in it. In order to preserve their anonymity, the responses are presented with a code: E + number of interview.

the operators of Organic Agriculture in Aragon must be registered in the CAAE, the certification can be granted by this or by a private entity, which will be in charge of the periodic audits and controls.

4• See Table 1 for detailed information about participant's sample.

Table 1.
Information about participants. Town, sector and description

ID	Town	Industry	Description of the case
1	Binéfar	Sheep	Focused on not only organic production but also regenerative techniques.
2	Binéfar	Technical soil analysis	Expert on biodynamic agriculture.
3	Fraga	Fruit	He was working on conventional fruit production until three years go, when he decided to convert.
4	Pomar de Cinca	Cereal	Her father started the conversion process 11 years ago, being one of the first farmers in the region. In addition, she represents the new generations of yough farmers.
5	Sariñena	Horticultural	The cooperative is part of the Alternative and Solidarity Network en Aragon (see https://www.economiasolidaria.org/reas-aragon)
6	Zaragoza	Comité Aragonés de Agricultura Ecológica	Official register and control institution.
7	Huesca	Aromatic and medicinal plants	The cooperative is part of the Alternative and Solidarity Network in Aragon (see https://www.economiasolidaria.org/reas-aragon)
8	Binéfar	Cereal	He inherented the family farm and decided to innovate with a different cereal seed (tritordeum) made by the Superior Council of Scientific Investigations in Spain (CSIC)
9	Lleida	Agroecological Advice	Expert on agroecological advice and soil regeneration.
10	Leciñena	Marketing: bakery and mill.	Family company set up in 2006 in a small village in one of the most depopulated areas of Europe (Monegros desert). They recovered a local cereal seed: Aragon Wheat 03
11	Cofita	Fruit	It is an example of middle-size company, with two production lines (conventional and organic).
12	Binéfar	Poultry	The company is one of the few farms dedicated to organic eggs production in Aragon.
13	Barbastro	Oil	It was one of the first companies in making organic olive oil in Aragon. Converting the family farm from 1931 to organic production in 1999.

Source: Own preparation based on the information provided by the participants.

The interviews are structured in four thematic blocks: a descriptive one and three other ones based on the spheres of sustainability (social, economic and ecological) (Brundtland, 1987). The first block addresses the descriptive aspects of the farm: type of certificate, their opinion on it and a whole set of questions about live

experiences and the initiation process in organic production. Secondly, a block regarding aspects related to the economic viability of the project, such as issues related to the management, financing and commercialization of the products. The following one focuses on ecological aspects and the techniques carried out in the farm. Finally, social sphere refers to the personal changes that this has meant for producers and, at the same time, the views about the future and their suggestions to improve the industry.

Once the information has been compiled, the analysis has been carried out identifying the main topics that arose in their speeches through a process of codification and later categorization based on seeking similar patterns among speeches (Saldaña, 2013). On this basis, the dissertation is structured into three blocks: the first one is about the concept of organic: what is organic farming for them and how farm labour in organic production is understood. Secondly, the characteristics of organic producer and the diversity of their motivations. Lastly, a section on the description of the certified organic product, where the opinions on the certificate and the way in which they reflect their ideas of organic in the final product are analysed.

4. Analysis: what does organic production mean?

4.1. Organic farming: meaning and labour

Organic production involves the acquisition of a new view for farmers regarding farm labour and the relation with the land, which encompasses much more than not using chemical synthesis products. All interviewees attach importance to the ecological value of their farms and the firm belief that they are doing something good for society. Therefore, they associate the agriculture they are promoting with a "*real*" agriculture, "*without surnames*" (E12, poultry industry), which implies an integration with the environment and a reconnection with nature, which at the same time counters the view of the conventional agriculture that produces without taking into account the needs of the environment. They maintain the idea that conventional agriculture is obsolete and only organic farming can ensure the sustainability of the future:

> Actually organic farming should not be called that, it would have to be called agriculture and the other one should be chemical agriculture. One is labelled and the other is not. – (E8, cereal industry).

The concept of organic for producers is associated with the processes of prevention, conservation and repair. It is the understanding about the environment in which they are producing and the respect towards it that allows them to carry out their work. In fact, they associate the success of the farm with the ability of the farmer to know how the crops and soil work to prevent pests and ensure a good product. Organic farming needs a shift in thinking towards a new conception of the relationship between soil and plant in which the process of prevention is crucial. One of the most differentiating aspects pointed out is the change in the type of work that organic farming entails. The extra workload is not valued negatively by the producers; on the contrary, they indicate it is a more satisfactory type of work that brings them greater well-being and happiness than the previous one (E5, E7, E8, E9, E10, and E12). Often, the decision of producing organic is part of a change project in the producers' lives, thus, many of them see the conversion as an opportunity to build a business model, such as cooperatives, that may give them a better quality of life and a work-life balance (E5, E7 and E9).

> When we started, we used to work a lot, but since I became pregnant, my daughter has taught me that we are here to live. You have to enjoy every morning and you have to enjoy the present. That and educating ourselves, made us change our mind-set. From now on, we want to work less and live longer. Here you do not work at night; you do not work on a Saturday afternoon or on Sundays. We try to make everyone know how to do everything so that there is total flexibility. – (E10, bakery and mill).

Although not all producers share these transformative views about organic farming, all admit that dedicating themselves to organic farming is a process of personal change that may produce social changes. In fact, part of the producers aspire to a complete paradigm shift in which organic farming is only one phase (E1, E2, E3, E5, E7, E10, and E12). For this group, the final objective is to create a society that respects both the environment and the people. Sustainability involves the social cohesion in the territory. On the contrary, there is a more reductionist view such as the one given by the CAAE that understands it as another type of production based on the non-use of chemicals and, therefore, other aspects should not matter, such as the producer-consumer proximity, the ecological footprint or the production conditions:

> If you start with the topic of agroecology there are many studies and many other things of this kind. However, it does not have to do with organic production, this has to do with producing in a certain way based on a regulation, the other has to do with looking for this product as well as being totally ecological. (...) You have to make a difference. It cannot be mixed with other things: fair trade, natural products ... and sometimes things are organized together.

It is through organic farming that the agricultural sector is currently innovating and this commitment to modernization is not at odds with the ecological character of the farms (E1, E4, E5, E8, E11, and E13). In addition, some point out the negative image that the organic producer has as opposed to the conventional one (E2, E3, E8, and E13). They are seen as the exception that has decided to produce in a way that goes against the logic of conventional production, which creates scepticism among other farmers, although they recognize that the trend is towards the standardization of this practice:

> I'm not going to say that it's not going to get better, at least you're not a weirdo anymore: who doesn't throw anything on the weeds, who seems to have everything half abandoned. – (E13, olive industry).

4.2. The characteristics of the organic producer: perceptions and motivations

Organic farming is not a productive industry separated from traditional agricultural production but works and coexists alongside it, since in many farms there are parallel production lines. The organic producer is primarily a farmer, so they share the traditional problems of the sector, which are identified in their speeches as impediments to grow and improve their situation. In many of them the strong crisis of the countryside is present: the lack of generational change (E2, E12), the devaluation of agricultural work (E2), indebtedness (E2, E8, E12), speculation with food (E3, E5, E8, and E12), or unequal access to land and financing (E1, E3, E9, and E12).

The consolidation process of this new sector, which in areas such as Aragon continues to be a minority, is in tension with the interests of the previous model. As the sector grows, it becomes more institutionalised and needs to create its own organizations: new farmers associations, financing channels and a solid network of

distribution and marketing of its products. Organic farmers must compete with conventional farmers in order to strengthen their position in the organic sector and impose their view on the agriculture of the future and with the aim of guaranteeing that this materializes on a legislative level. Their speeches include three key claims: marketing structures, counselling and training, and access to financing.

In the first place, the lack of specialized network of marketing and distribution is an element pointed out by the producers as an item of improvement for the situation of the organic sector (E1, E2, E6, E7, E10, and E13). Although in Zaragoza or Huesca there are indeed organic markets every now and then, moving there is already a sacrifice that some producers might not be able to afford. At the same time, when higher production levels are reached, distribution channels are needed to ensure the output of the product (E4, E5, E7, and E12).

There is not only the absence of distribution channels but also of associations or own agrarian unions with which to establish common strategies for growth and consolidation of the sector in the area (E1, E2, E6, E7, E8, and E12).

> Nobody wants to lose a pinch of power. That is why I believe this has to come out of the citizen movement. Farmers who come together. When you have successful cases that are examples, life changes that work out, that encourages farmers. – (E2, technical soil analysis).

Secondly, the lack of specialized counselling and training, since it is still difficult to find technicians who advise on ecological production, partly because the practices are very dependent on the territory and there are no exact production patterns as in the conventional system (E2, E3, E8, E11, E12, and E13).

Thirdly, the access to financing or the lack of support during the years of conversion (E1, E3, E5). Many producers claim a new polices that enhances sustainable systems with measures not only aimed at organic production but also at linking the aid with indicators of environmental impact (E1, E3, E13).

They are not common farmers but for some reason they have decided to undertake a different path. This motivation may be due to a greater awareness of the negative consequences of conventional practices: the commitment with the environment and soil which is the main support of their business. Production techniques differ according to the characteristics of each farmer, its needs and the views of the producer. On the one hand, some consider that it is necessary to introduce other agroecological practices of soil regeneration, and conservation or even to move towards biodynamic agriculture (E1, E2, E3, E5, and E9). Carrying out

this type of measures often involves extra work that is not recognized in the final product, so the motivation for doing so is the ecological principles of the producers. There is also a concern about the health effects deriving from the use of chemical products: from a consumer perspective because of the increase of diseases related to diet, and from a farmers' perspective because of the prolonged exposure during production. There may be a process of "disappointment" with the agrochemical industry that had supplied them with inputs and, as a result, they seek new alternatives outside the channels of the agribusiness:

> I was sure I was doing things wrong, I was hearing that glyphosate was bad and I was throwing it every day. In 1990 they were telling me that the fruit could have X level of X product residue and ten years later they were taking it away because it was carcinogenic. So I thought: if now I'm throwing this, I'm sure that in a few years I will be told that some of these products are carcinogenic. We are better off not applying any product. – (E3, fruit industry).

Furthermore, there may be an economic motivation due to the greater profitability that the organic products market generates. The conversion becomes a viable alternative to adapt to current instable contexts since the conventional system no longer grants them the same opportunities as previous generations; so there is a sense of disenchantment that also motivates the shift towards new production models.

Most of them have opted for completing the commercialization cycle, avoiding intermediaries and giving value-added through the emphasis on the quality of the product as differentiating factor. However, although there may be a greater weight on one type of motivation than another, both are present in all types of farmers. Even those strongly concerned about the negative consequences of conventional practices needed to ensure the economic viability of organic production to make the change:

> I started by awareness. I worked in conventional, with pesticides. With the whole range. I've always liked the subject, but you separate your conscience from work. What costed me the most to make the decision to take the step was the economic part, I needed to make sure I could live from that. – (E5, horticultural industry).

In fact, the economic motivations are always behind the ecological ones, since in all the discourses a criticism appears to those producers who are only converting for the economic gains and focus on obtaining the certificate, thus establishing a line between those that would be real organic farmers and those who would no:

> There are producers who do everything well and others who do not, who simply go for the certification. I will not tell you how they do it, but the one who does it right must know that it is not obtained in the blink of an eye. You have to change the way you work and this is not done overnight. – (E11, fruit industry).

One of the outstanding characteristics is the family nature of the farms. Organic production becomes a valid option for the future of the farm. New generations who had left the countryside to study at the university decided to restructure the family farm into an organic production and continue with it (E4, E8, E10, and E13). It is not only a business option but there is also a symbolic and sentimental component towards family exploitation:

> When my uncle died, we asked ourselves if we finish or continue with his work (...). But of course, making a mill without knowing where to sell and whatnot is a long process for two +50-year-old people. So, I asked my sister: What if we do it? And since people do not eat wheat but instead eat bread, we learned to make bread. My sister was an agricultural engineer, she was studying food science and technology, I am a classical philologist, and I was working in an orchestra. Well, we did not know how to do anything. But now we are learning. – (E10, bakery and mill).

In this regard, the interviewees point out the change in the motivations of new young farmers, which follow the current dynamics of prevalence of postmaterialist values as a greater concern for environmental conservation. Thus a break with previous generations occurs, who trusted in the principles of the Green Revolution in agriculture.

We observe how producers are seeking to consolidate their organic model on the agricultural sector and create a new structure that responds to the new reality of rural society and agriculture sector. A new model that is legitimized through speeches about the defence of social values different from the prevailing conventional norms. While the farm work of the Green Revolution was led by the search for maximum productivity that would bring progress and economic development to rural areas, organic workers are driven by the respect towards the environment, defining themselves as environmental managers who offer a non-harmful, unique and different product.

Moreover, there is a symbolic breach between the new and traditional conceptions of agriculture and the meaning of being a good farmer. This rupture

evidences the transformation of farmers' position in rural societies and the emergence of new models of farming.

4.3. The certified organic product

Following the European regulations on organic farming, the certificate ensures that products labelled are produced without chemical treatments. For producers, the certificate is only a necessary step to market their product, it is the most pragmatic side of organic farming. They consider it beneficial for organic production since it allows access to new markets, especially to exportation. At the same time, it gives assurance and trust to the consumer about what they are buying and differentiates them from other products that are sold under similar labels ("Bio", "natural", etc.).

Obtaining the certificate can be a hard job for producers. At this point, a difference is observed between those that come from conventional agriculture (E1, E3, E4, E5, E8, and E11) and those that have decided to start directly in organic (E7, E10, E12, and E13). For the former, changing to organic forces them to change the previous conceptions they had about agriculture and farm management. As many of them point out, organic farming means changing their ways of thinking and understanding in a different way how crops work:

> In conventional agriculture, if you get weeds, you treat them and do not worry. In organic production you have to know the proper date, rotation of crops... the conventional one is a recipe agriculture (...), the organic one is agriculture in the sense of its word, to know about the land and how to manage it. – (E8, cereal industry).

Although all interviewed see the certificate as something positive, many of them believe that the current certification system has deficiencies that prevent it from solving the problems of current agriculture. In the first place, the excess of bureaucratic procedures supposes an overload of work what can be a dissuasive element to those who are thinking about converting their farm. Secondly, the fact that organic agriculture, seen as the beneficial agriculture, is the exception that needs distinction; it is interpreted as a penalty and they consider that it should be the conventional one that had to pass the controls and be identified as such. Finally, part of them consider that the certificate is limited and it should take into account other aspects (E2, E3, E9, E10, and E11). This group usually applies other complementary agroecological practices and seeks the real sustainability of their farms.

One of the most controversial aspects is the organic certification of products imported from third countries. There is a certain scepticism since it is not considered that one can call something that has been produced at a long distance "organic":

> Many times it is also important that not every organic product makes sense. Organic kiwis from New Zealand are not worth it just because of the ecological footprint. Take them from Murcia. It makes you aware that not everything is worth it and this is something that we are going to pay for, for sure, maybe not us but those who come after us. – (E13, olive industry).

The organic product is characterized by a higher quality, a link to the territory and the respect for the environment. Although at first these products were associated with groups with specific population sectors and specialized stores, in recent years, large distributors have been incorporating them into their offer. This change in the products supply is valued as positive in most cases by producers, who see an opportunity for the growth of demand in the incorporation of large distributors. However, they agree that the reasons that will guide large companies to invest in organic production will be purely economic, so they will end up reproducing the same dynamics of the conventional system. In general, organic producers are very critical with the business model of large distributors as it would go against the non-productivity view that organic farming has for them. Even if it is because of different reasons, the search for differentiation and uniqueness of the product is a constant in their discourses.

> I am afraid of how large companies are positioned in the sector and for them it is relatively easy to adopt organic techniques but they do not share the view of regeneration of the social fabric of the territories, they carry out practices very similar to the practices in conventional agriculture. – (E1, sheep industry).

5. *Discussion*

Our results show that organic production represents both an innovation strategy for the crisis of the sector and the search for sustainability; this affects the configuration of rural spaces and redefines farmers' identities as signalled by previous studies (Moyano, 2000, Collantes, 2018). The analysis has shown that the shift to

organic production is linked to a change in the conception of farming and the representations associated with food production and its role in rural spaces. The economic factor is key to understand the conversion to this type of production (Zagata, 2010), although the ecological motivations are the first reason exposed and that legitimizes their business. Moreover, as it was explored by other authors (Padel 2001; Garrido-Fernández, 2006; Milone & Ventura, 2019) organic producers show a great commitment with public health and environment conservation. Organic farming is an opportunity to continuity with their family farm, in a context where the diversification of activities becomes one of the pillars of rural development policies. As Darnhofer *et al.* (2005) explained, it is the perception of structural changes that influences the decisions; in this case, the perception that there is no alternative (due to either climatic, economic or social issues) and the dissatisfaction with the conventional model explain the decisions made by the producers interviewed

However, two clearly different profiles values did not emerged according to whether they act by economic or ecological (Lawrence *et al.*, 1999; Lockie *et al.*, 2000; Darnhofer *et al.*, 2005; Flaten *et al.*, 2006). It seems to be due to the limited spread of the organic sector in the region compared to other more consolidated areas where the distinction is clearly found (Lozano, 2013). The main differences found relate to the marketing adopted strategies between these who seek a product of closeness, concerned about the actual sustainability of their product, and those who employ organic production as a growth strategy. Furthermore, as seen in the literature (Busck, 2002; Lozano, 2013; Plumecocq *et al.*, 2018), the change towards an organic model is associated with representations about agriculture linked to conservation of the environment, food security or revitalization of the territory that are different from the previous conventional views. Organic producers create a different ideal about being a good farmer, providing a new meaning to farm labour, a central element in the new farm sector. As pointed out by Garrido-Fernández (2006), these are changes in the social, economic and ecological dimensions of farming. Organic farming is not only the response to environmental deterioration, but it is an example of the new types of businesses that emerge in rural areas, associated with a new generation of farmers (Milone & Ventura, 2019) before the rupture of the social and economic structures that had traditionally existed and the social representations linked to them (Moyano, 2000).

The organic production is an innovative and differentiated strategy that is sold as a higher quality product, emphasising its local and environmentally sustainable nature in contrast to conventional mass-produced foods distributed in long value large chains (Loconto *et al.*, 2018). The interviewed farmers evaluated positively the possibility of accessing a market with higher monetary incentives, despite the broad

consensus about the limited nature of organic certification since it does not take into account the current sustainability of the farm.

6. Conclusions and next steps

Organic production is part of the current strategies that are being carried out in a changing rural society where farmers, traditionally the main axis, must redefine their identity and do so based on values that are not the same as those that led previous generations. Organic farming is seen as a changing process both in the modification of the working logic of conventional agriculture and in the representation of food, health and the relationship with nature and land. It is understood as an agriculture of respect for both the environment and future generations, and the idea of prevention, conservation and repair of the environment is present in all the speeches. It leads to a new conception about farming based on sustainability, a key sector to enhance the situation of rural areas and to understand the new emerging farmers' identities.

There is a predisposition towards sustainable systems by farmers. Therefore, specific policies focused on supporting organic farming should be implemented, mainly during the conversion process to ensure economic viability. Reshaping organic certification may be a proper pathway to respond to the farmers' claim of guarantying farm sustainability on its three dimensions (social, ecological and economic).

The study presents some limitations since the label "organic agriculture" covers very diverse industries and parts of the value chain, so it would be necessary to study in more detail the perceptions of each sector. Simultaneously, analysing how organic farming projects evolve and whether they end up reproducing the same dynamics as the conventional ones or incorporate values such as sustainability and community commitment would be a gap to fill in next researches. Moreover, the small size of the sample does not allow to generalize the results but to have some insights about the sector, so that, it would be interesting to realise a representative study considering the new information. All those questions set out future research lines in organic and sustainable perceptions. Finally, it will be relevant to assess heterogeneity in the discourses considering variables such as gender, class or place to see main differences.

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