

Exit from organic farming: extent of deregistration in France and processes in play on farms

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Abstract

In European countries, the much-vaunted success of organic farming hides more complex dynamics in which there is a growing turnover of organic farmers. We are far from the targets for organic production set by many European governments, and the incentives do not seem sufficient to secure the organic sector in the long run. Both research and policy measures to help the development of organic farming have mostly focused until recently on conversions to organic farming rather than on its maintenance. Yet the maintenance of organic farming seems essential to promoting organic production. The present study investigates withdrawal from organic farming in France: (i) its extent, as numerical data are lacking in the national statistics, and (ii) the processes that cause farmers to leave the organic sector, and their subsequent paths. From data provided by Agence Bio on the number of farmers who withdrew from organic certification between 2005 and 2010, we give an overview of movements out of organic farming throughout France. From a case study in Rhône-Alpes, we show the processes in play and the different places and meanings that exits from organic farming have in the paths of individuals and farms as regards organic farming. Our findings show that withdrawal is still of limited extent in France, but raises questions about future outcomes, and reveals a diversity of exit processes that question different aspects of the “organic farming system”: mode of certification, dilution of standards, what being an organic farmer entails, system securing, and the transmission of organic farming values and practices.

1- Introduction

The total organic farming (OF) area as a percentage of the total utilized agricultural area (UAA) in the European Union has risen. However, OF area still does not nearly meet the objective set by governments. In France, the land area devoted to OF in 2010 was 3% of the UAA, i.e. only half the target set by environmental agreements, which was 6% by 2012. In addition, these incentives do not seem sufficient to secure the organic sector in the long run, as suggested by Llorens Abando and Rohner-Thielen (2007). The balance between new units and withdrawals seem to be very different from one country to another. The much-vaunted success of OF hides more complex dynamics (Harris et al. 2008). The design of effective policies to promote OF requires an understanding not only of the factors that lead to the adoption of OF, but also of the factors that induce its subsequent abandonment (Läpple 2010). Both research and policy measures to help the development of OF have been narrowly focused until recently on conversions to OF (for a review, see Lamine and Bellon 2009). In France a subsidy program for the two years of conversion has been implemented since 1992. It was replaced from 1999 to 2002 by the Territorial Farming System Contract (CTE) program which granted large subsidies for conversion with a 5-years commitment. From 2004 to 2007, an appreciably less attractive 5-years aid program (sustainable agriculture contract) took place. Besides the reduction of the budget, the allocated funds arrived

two years after the end of the CTE. Lots of farmers had to convert without public aid, which deterred many candidates from converting.

The maintenance of OF production is an emerging theme that is receiving interest now that there are signs of a slowing of OF in some countries (Gambelli and Bruschi 2010). In this way, in France, an aid to maintaining OF in farms has been introduced since 2008, with a 5-year commitment, besides the subsidy for conversion which still exists. To help maintain farms in OF, we need to know why some farmers have ceased to uphold their certification.

A literature on withdrawal from OF is emerging but remains rather sparse. It reveals two types of approach. The first type aims to examine, statistically or qualitatively, the characteristics of and reasons for farmers' ceasing certified organic production, and the outcomes for the farms and farmers (Alexopoulos et al. 2010; Darnhofer et al. 2005; Ferjani et al. 2010; Flaten et al. 2010; Harris et al. 2008; Kaltoft and Risgaard 2006; Kirner et al. 2006; Koesling et al. 2008; Rigby et al. 2001; Sierra et al. 2008; Strohlic and Sierra 2007). The main motives attested are: regulatory, production, or market issues, and economics (prices and cost issues). As regards the subsequent paths of the withdrawing farmers, authors indicate that some of them would never consider going back into organic production, no matter what the economic or persuading factors might be. Others say that they would have preferred to continue, or plan to go on farming on organic principles without certification. These studies provide valuable insight into farmers' decisions and behavior, but they are based on a static framework.

The second type of approach seeks to model the exit from OF over time (Gambelli and Bruschi 2010; Klonsky and Smith 2002; L pple 2010; Zanolli et al. 2010). It tests different factors with dynamic models to identify the factors that most influence the abandonment of OF. The use of duration analysis gives important insight into the timing of abandonment decisions and its possible links to changes in the economic environment, subsidy-driven policies or learning from others. However, these studies, which use mathematical models, do not offer a sharpened understanding of farmers' thinking on withdrawal, or a better understanding of the deeper reasons behind their decision over time (Flaten et al. 2010), and the events leading to decisions to leave organic certification (Harris et al. 2008).

The literature points to the importance of time in gaining a better understanding of exit from OF, together with a certain number of ingredients that motivate, influence, or trigger decisions, so playing a part in the background to an exit from OF. Alexopoulos et al. (2010) suggest that studying exit from OF through the identification of farmers' biographical and farm trajectories as other authors did for conversion may be fruitful. The present study investigates withdrawal in France, with an emphasis on time: (i) its extent, as numerical data are lacking in the national statistics, through a quantitative study of the dynamics of exit from OF, and (ii) the processes that cause farmers to leave the organic sector, and their subsequent paths, through a qualitative study from detailed interviews with farmers who have left OF.

2- Materials and methods

We focused our analysis on farmers who had opted out but were still farming, termed "deregistrants" in what follows. These are the cases that interested us the most in this research as they pointed to a farmer's decision to leave OF certification, but to carry on farming.

2.1- Quantitative analysis of exit from OF in France

The quantitative analysis is based on anonymous data supplied free by Agence Bio. The list supplied gives farms that left certifying bodies between 2005 and 2010. For each exit instance, we had the years of exit and entry, and a more or less well-attested reason classified by Agence Bio: cessation of activity, change (site, certifying body, business name), return to conventional farming, breach of contract, reason not given (NG). These were the only data available on exit from OF in France, and although they did not finely detail the reasons for giving up OF, they revealed certain trends. We selected the reasons corresponding to deregistration (return to conventional farming and breach of contract) to determine its weight and analyze the variation according to year and duration of certification to identify time elements that might have influenced the decision to opt out. The results of this analysis, compared to literature data, prompted hypotheses concerning the possible circumstances of deregistration, and what remained of the OF experience.

2.2 Qualitative analysis of deregistration processes in farms

To test these hypotheses, we conducted interviews with 18 farmers, as part of the project "Organic farming, an agricultural prototype for sustainable development" in the Rhône-Alpes region, coordinated by Isara-Lyon. The choice of farmers was made to cover different durations of certification (early opting-out, at 5–6 years and after a longer time), and the diversity of systems and small regions so as not to have a too-marked sectoral or territorial effect on these exits, and to increase the number of possible sources of variations and processes in play. From comprehensive interviews with deregistrants, of the life narrative type (Bertaux 1997), we sought to identify the processes, i.e. prior experiences, triggering events or circumstances of entry, reasons for choosing OF, factors favoring this choice, the processes of shifting or switching between modes of production and implications of the conversion, and then likewise for exit (Pettigrew, 1990; Lamine and Bellon 2009; Madelrieux and Alavoine-Mornas 2011), always taking care to distinguish between farmers and farms (Padel 2001). We then went on to examine:

-the farmers' path in relation to the founding principles of OF (health, ecology, fairness and care) in reference to the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), their vision of OF (regulatory, societal -ethical, local, autonomy-, neutrality), and how the farm management changed (to evaluate compliance with OF specifications and IFOAM principles, in particular regarding chemical inputs, and also feed and fertilizer autonomy and crop rotation).

-the place of the exit from OF (when, how and why it occurred), especially the circumstances of the exit and what is retained by the farmers about the vision of their activity and the farm management (production rationale and practices), so as to understand the meaning of this temporary OF phase.

3- Results

3.1 – Dynamics of deregistration in France

An effect with limited extent

When we seek to estimate the number of deregistration (Table 1), we find that the database contains "reason not given" (NG) cases that make up from 6% to 86% of exits from OF between 2005 and 2010. Some of these cases may include deregistrants. We can thus consider that the actual number of deregistrants lies between two extreme values, stated deregistration only (low value) and stated deregistration plus NG (high value), that is to say for 2005–2010 between 277 and 437 deregistration per year. We can thus estimate the total number of deregistration as the average of low value and high value, which allows to smooth the database information. For each NG instance, the database gives the years of exit and entry, thus for each entry year, for each exit year

and for each duration of certification, we have the total deregistration and the total NG, and we can also estimate the number of deregistration as the average of low and high values.

The average number of withdrawals from 2005 to 2010 was about 700 per year, half of which were deregistration. These made up 1.3% to 5.1% of all the OF-certified farms, according to the year.

Table 1 Number of deregistration compared with all withdrawals from OF and number of OF-certified farms from 2005 to 2010 in France

Total withdrawals by category	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Total	/year
Cessation of activity	43	303	23	292	328	251	1240	207
Change	5	3	0	129	60	69	266	44
Reason not given	542	49	40	62	94	178	965	161
Deregistration	38	360	590	304	161	209	1662	277
All withdrawals	628	715	653	787	643	707	4133	689
Total certified	11402	11640	11978	13298	16446	20604		
Deregistration								
Low value L	38	360	590	304	161	209	1662	277
High value H = L + NG	580	409	630	366	255	387	2627	437
Average A = (L + H)/2	309	385	610	335	208	298	2145	357

An effect that depends on the year of entry into OF and the duration of OF-certification

If we look at deregistration rates according to entry year (Figure 1), entries between 1995 and 1998 make up 21% of deregistration, corresponding to year of slow development of OF. An exit peak corresponds to entry years 1999 to 2002 (47% of deregistration), concerned by the Territorial Farming System Contract program, which granted large subsidies for conversion with a 5-year commitment. For these entry years, when the important development of OF was supported by subsidies, we note some exits at 5–6 years, but also longer certification durations, showing that some farmers went on operating beyond the subsidy period. Deregistration is less frequent for the following entry years (32% of deregistration), possibly linked to a stagnation in OF development, and an appreciably less attractive aid program.

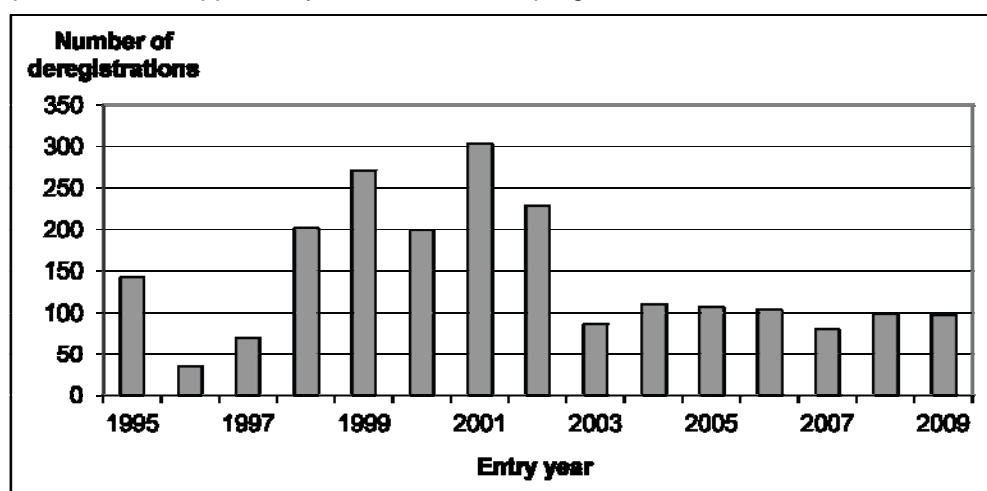


Fig. 1 Average value of deregistration in France between 2005 and 2010 according to the year of entry registration

As to the certification duration (Figure 2), we find an average duration of 5,8 years. Graphically, we can discern three periods: 33% of farms deregistered before the end of the fifth year of certification (mostly before the end of the conversion period); 39% of the deregistration took place between the fifth and the seventh years of certification; and 28% left after the seventh year.

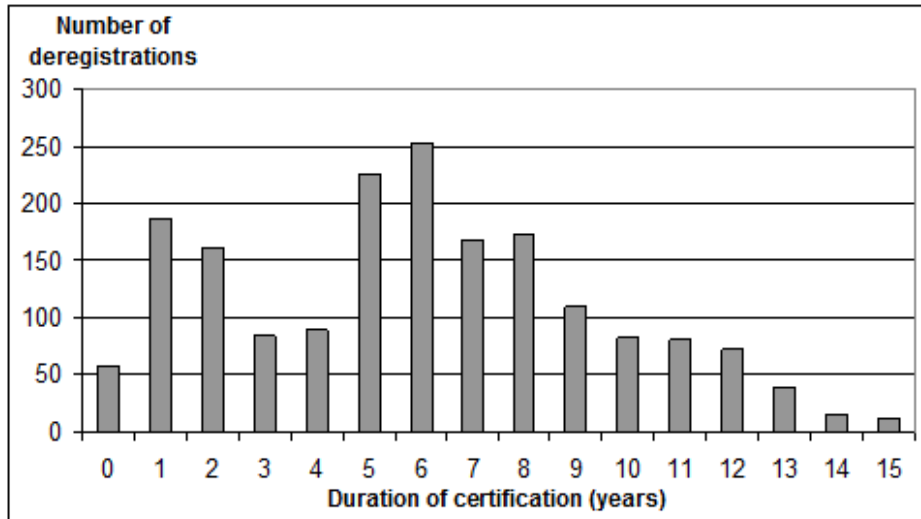


Fig. 2 Average value of deregistration in France between 2005 and 2010 according to the duration of certification

If we take a closer look at these variations in duration, for each of the years 2005 to 2010 with Figure 3, the exit peak at 5–7 years fall away from 2009. We find an increasing proportion of early exits before 3 years, climbing from 12% of deregistration in 2005 to 43% in 2010 for an average of 21% of deregistration over the six years. Will the strong development of OF and in particular the recent conversions lead to a similarly high rate of early exits? Such an effect would suggest that certifications are encouraged by sectoral incentives or subsidies, but are not sufficiently thought out at the farm level leading to early deregistration once the farmers have fully realized what their commitment entails.

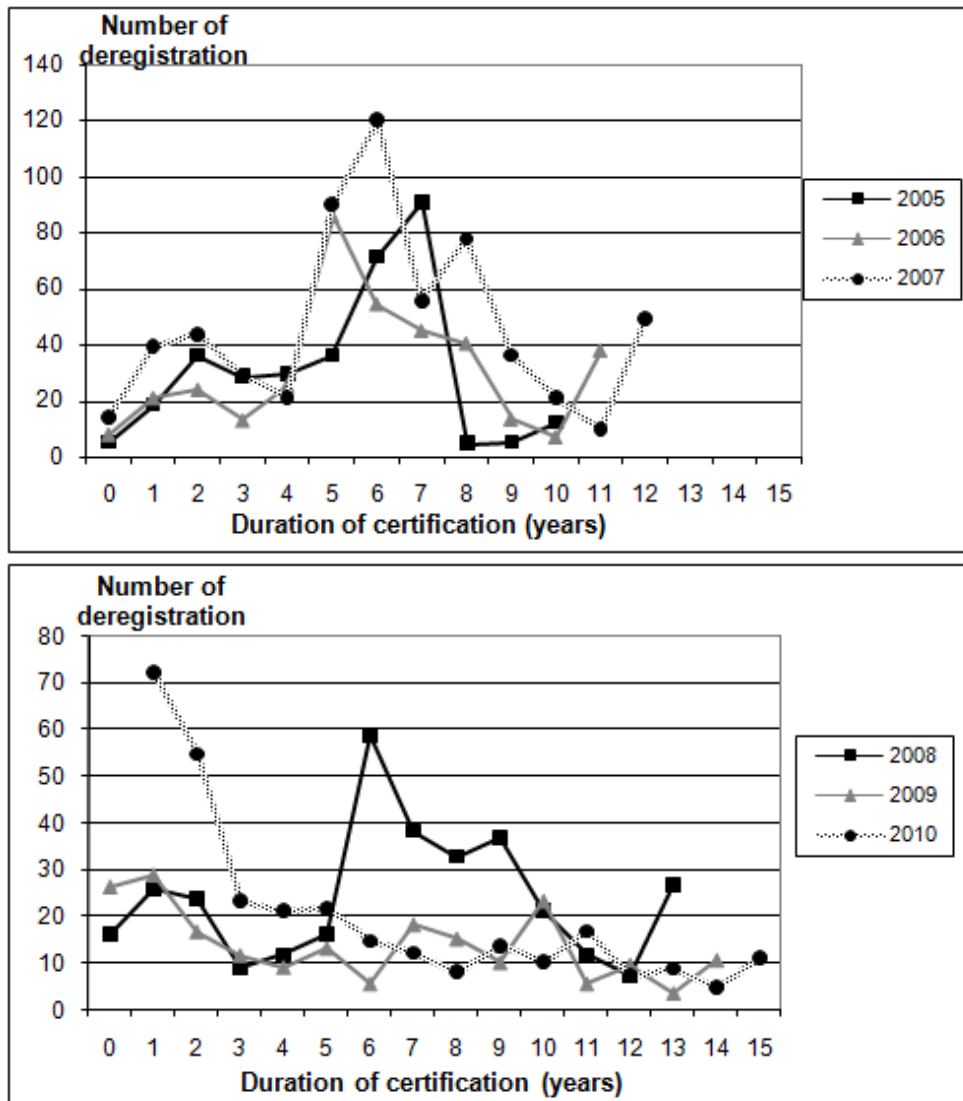


Fig. 3 Average value of deregistration in France according to duration of certification, for each of years 2005 to 2010

Hypotheses to account for deregistration

These quantitative analyses, despite probable bias due to the imprecision of the database we used, bring out three groups of deregistrants according to duration of certification. We made the hypothesis that the different groups did not opt out in the same circumstances and that what remained of the OF experience is various.

For the early exit group, especially for deregistration before three years into certification, we made the hypothesis that such withdrawal was due to an under-estimation of the changes that had to be made on the farm, and an overestimation of market opportunities (Harris et al., 2008). We could thus advance that this OF experience was too brief for farmers to retain much of it.

For exits after 5–7 years of certification, we hypothesized that these farmers either came to OF with as their main motivation conversion aid for five years, and left OF as soon as this period was over, or had underestimated the difficulties they might meet, but still carried on to the end of their 5-year commitment before withdrawing (Kaltoft and Risgaard 2006). When this OF experience was purely opportunistic, we hypothesized that the farmers returned to their previous practices. By contrast, if they had truly tried this other mode of production with the intention of adopting it permanently, then we could suppose that they retained something of their OF experience in their production system or in how they viewed their activity.

For the later exit group, which seem the most puzzling, and are not given much attention in the literature, we hypothesized that in this case deregistration was linked to changes in the farmer's situation or to unplanned events, but that the OF approach and practices persisted after exit.

The following qualitative analysis tests these different hypotheses and defines the processes in play on opting out of OF.

3.2 – Deregistration from OF: processes in play on farms

The sample of 18 farms surveyed displayed a broad diversity of combination of production: cropping, arboriculture, market gardening, grape growing, livestock farming (dairy and meat cattle, sheep and goats) and beekeeping, in short or long circuits. Farming areas ranged from 2 ha to 118 ha, with a workforce ranging from a single person, up to five associates. Durations of certification encountered ranges from 1 year to over 15 years. We situate the place occupied by deregistration at the intersection of two dimensions: the circumstances causing the farmer to leave OF and what the farmer retained of their OF experience.

Circumstances of exit from OF

The case analysis shows four types of circumstance. In the first type, deregistration was the result of a path followed by organic farmers trapped in identity-based tensions (as defined by Van Dam 2005) expressed against the “OF system”. While these farmers had all long been committed to an organic lifestyle, and no changes had occurred in their farming linked to OF certification, their exit was due to a worsening of relations between farmers and the CB (inspections, increased cost of certification) and their view of certification (evolution of specifications, contractual agreements...). OF certification no longer matched their OF commitment and the values they espoused.

In the second type, deregistration was the result of a path followed by farmers who had come to OF for income, but who found themselves beset by tensions linked in this case to the setting-up of OF in the farm and expressed within the family or work group, where the farmer was unable effectively to defend OF within family or work group who were hostile to OF (difficulties of production, commercialization, the conveyed image...). Collective identity was challenged in these cases, and the OF mode of production, which was considered to present a greater risk, failed to withstand tensions in the family or among associates, a marked fall in production.

In the third type, deregistration was the direct consequence of lack of income from OF (due to the agrofood production chain or linked to economic or commercialization difficulties), causing farmers to refuse the additional constraints imposed by certification (inspections, paperwork, specifications), and to prefer withdrawal from OF. This could happen at the end of the subsidy period, in the light of the first year's results, after a marked loss of production or a series of inspection that went badly.

In the fourth and last type, deregistration was an effect induced by the evolution of the combination of activities on the farm due to changes not linked to OF. These exits all took place after a long period of certification. In our sample, we encountered farmers who refocused on non-OF activities because of the withdrawal of an associate who supported the OF activity and who was not replaced, or because of problems of work or health; others who wished to develop a profitable activity at the expense of an OF activity to meet competition for land and labor; and farmers who changed their activity due to various constraints (access to markets or land) making OF irrelevant.

What remains of the OF experience

Concerning what remained of the OF experience, the cases reveal two types (covering five modes in all). The first type groups farmers who changed their ways of thinking and working through OF. This OF experience brought them a different view on their activity and their practices. Even when brief, their OF experience showed them that another way was possible, whether OF without certification, or more thoughtful conventional farming. These farmers include (i) those who were already engaged in an organic lifestyle, and who want to take OF practices further, with a radicalization in the positions of individuals in favor of the founding principles of IFOAM but against OF certification, (ii) those who did not revert to the system they had before OF, but who instead set up a hybrid system, combining practices from their previous conventional system and practices learnt during the OF period.

The second type concerns the farmers for whom the OF experience seems not to have influenced their views on their activity. These include (i) those who retained the same approach, which was already organic, (ii) those who reverted to or continued the conventional approach they had before OF, or continued in parallel with OF in cases of partial certification (partial conversion of a farm is possible in France) and extending it to the whole farm, and (iii) one noteworthy case where a new intensive conventional system was set up on a farm that had long been run under organic principles.

At the intersection

At the intersection of these two variables, the exit processes refer to the different types of situation presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Deregistration processes in cases encountered according to exit circumstances and what is retained of the OF experience

		What is retained of the OF experience				
		Take OF further	Set up a hybrid system of OF and conventional farming	Stay in the same OF approach	Resume conventional approach	Set up a conventional system non pre-existing
Exit circumstances	Identity-based tensions against "OF system"	<u>I</u> <u>J</u>		<u>B</u> <u>P</u> <u>X</u>		
	Tensions from setting up of OF on the farm		<u>C</u>		<u>Ja</u> <u>S</u>	
	Lack of income from OF		<u>A</u> <u>M</u>	<u>Si</u> <u>L</u>	<u>Ch</u>	
	Induced effect of changes in combinations of activities			<u>R</u>	<u>G</u> <u>F</u> <u>D</u>	<u>Ri</u>

Duration of certification of cases reported in the table:

X: early exit (< 3 years); X: exit at 5–7 years; X: late exit (more than 7 years)

Our hypothesis of a link between duration of certification and reasons for withdrawal was not supported by the qualitative analysis. The duration of certification was not associated with a single type of process. Early exits were not solely the direct consequence of difficulties linked to entry into OF, but could reveal identity tensions (cases T and J) that caused farmers to redefine their position, and even radicalize it against OF. Even a brief OF experience could lead to practices being retained (case C). Exits at 5–7 years were admittedly linked to the end of subsidies and results judged unfavorable at that time. However, lack of income (cases A and Ch) or criticism of certifying bodies and OF certification could support and trigger withdrawal (case B). Some farmers would have liked to carry on in OF if their activity had been more profitable. Simple economic opportunism is thus not a final explanation in these cases. Subsidies were more an opportunity that was seized to help overcome obstacles that the farmers could not have faced without help (Madelrieux and Alavoine-Mornas 2011). For the exits after a longer time, in some cases (P, X, M and L), there were difficulties that could not be solved even with time, or tensions that appeared in particular with the evolution of the OF system. Somewhat unexpectedly, OF did not leave its mark on these systems.

Finally, out of the 18 farms surveyed, eight are still engaged in an organic farming approach, of which two in a more radical mode after deregistration, three set up a hybrid system combining OF and conventional systems, six reverted to the conventional approach they had before entering OF certification, or pursued in parallel, and one set up a new conventional system that had not been present before OF. Thus 7 farms out of the 18 are “lost” for OF as regards farm management.

4- Discussion

Deregistration: a phenomenon of limited extent but which raises questions

The database used presents uncertainties and lack consistencies as regards recording, and so the data must be handled with caution. We tried therefore to be careful in our analyses and interpretations accordingly. We smoothed the data by estimating the number of deregistration as the average of stated deregistration only and the sum of deregistration and NG cases, keeping in our mind that for farmers who have withdrawn from certification after 12-15 years, for example, even if they have stated “reason not given”, it is more likely that they have withdrawn because of ‘cessation of activity’ or ‘change’ rather than ‘deregistration’...The figures 1 and 2 were designed using those averages but it seems to us that they show interesting trends of exit, which raise questions. Indeed, at the present time, deregistration in France is limited in extent, and the turnover does not exceed 5% of the certified population. However, comparisons with OF development dynamics in other countries prompt a number of questions. For example, in Norway, after an important development of OF, Flaten et al. (2010) indicate that since 2002, 150–400 farmers have established organic production each year and at the same time, about 150–200 farmers have ceased their certification every year. Between 2004 and 2006, the number of exits nearly equaled the entries, and one in four organic farmers indicated that they planned to cease certification within the next 5–10 years. France is currently experiencing a strong development of OF, and the question arises of how long these newcomers to OF will last, given the loss of momentum of OF dynamics in other European countries, and the trend towards more early exits in the last two years in France, as seen here.

Utility of a process-based approach to gain a better understanding of exits from OF and question the “OF system”

This process-based approach remains exploratory and the trends evidenced need to be further validated by more case studies. However, they help to understand the paths taken by farmers

and farms, how OF certification is sought and later abandoned, and gives an idea of what is retained. This last point could be usefully explored by a finer analysis of practices on farms during certification and after withdrawal. Lastly, the results obtained take us further than approaches based on motivations or outcomes, and fuel the debate on organic farming models.

The processes of withdrawal from OF that are evidenced here question certification in different ways. When identity-based tensions are expressed against the OF certification system and lead to opting-out, the certification and inspection procedures and the specifications are called into question. These farmers continue to adhere to the principles of IFOAM. How can we prevent them being statistically diluted in the population of conventional farmers, and continue to identify and encourage them in their chosen approach? Emerging alternatives to the prevailing third-party certification may help reduce regulatory barriers as Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS), built on a foundation of trust, social networks, and knowledge-exchange (Flaten et al. 2010). The PGS would be a condition for the re-appropriation by producers and consumers of the ecological transitions in agriculture (Stassart et al. 2011). Governments also need to be alert to the dilution of standards and dubious farming practices, as already mentioned by Guthman (2004) and Flaten et al. (2010). For example, some farmers deregister and undergo new conversion on the same land few years later and during the intervening period, can legally apply pesticides. The regulatory challenge is to design standards that maintain the integrity of organic ideals and consumer faith yet do not come across to farmers as unnecessarily bureaucratic.

The farmers for whom OF was not profitable or who experienced economic or commercial difficulties or suffered large production losses raise the more classical questions of securing production and sectors, but also those of the burdens of certification, or subsidies for OF practice. Will subsidies to maintain OF, recently put in place in France change the situation?

Those who have gone back to the production system that preceded OF question the way entry and maintenance in OF are accompanied. These cases, and also the greater numbers of early exits, suggest that the farmers had not always fully appreciated the commitment implied by OF certification. Opting out of certification induced by changes in combinations of activities questions whether organic and conventional farming can coexist on the same farm without some dilution of the founding principles of OF. There is a noteworthy trend towards conventional farming when difficulties are encountered with the OF part or when individuals supporting OF are no longer present on the farm. Partial certification can be a transitional step in a process of extension of OF to the whole of a farm (Madelrieux and Alavoine-Mornas 2011), but here we find situations where one part of the farm is certified, without any transmission of values and practices of OF to the other parts of the farm, to associates on the same farm or between generations.

5- Conclusion

Organic agriculture in France has grown rapidly in the last few years. This growth is characterized by many new entrants and exiting farms each year. As a result, the composition of OF has evolved. The currently strong entry dynamics may foreshadow strong exit dynamics at a more or less close time. Although the future size and picture of the organic system are still unknown, growth and continued change seem inevitable. What will happen if exits after at least five years give way to exits during the conversion period? Work on a broader scale should give us a more detailed picture of withdrawal from OF, and a better assessment of its time course and extent. Initiatives to help farmers cope better with the major tensions or difficulties behind their decision

to opt out seem essential to ensure that those who plan to continue farming stay on in organic production.

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