

Danish small-scale organic food businesses and organic regulation: A qualitative study of challenges in a regulatory perspective

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Background

Organic food production has grown continuously over the past decades and as a result standards in organic food production have increased in order to ensure trust and fair competition due to a separation of production from consumption in a non-transparent food system. New alternative, sustainable and innovative small-scale organic food businesses (SSOBs) are emerging that are recognised for their ability to reconnect producers and consumers in new ways. As a consequence of increased standards SSOBs face more bureaucracy, increased costs and time consuming requirements.

Aim

To examine the challenges of Danish SSOBs when having to comply with the organic regulation as well as the challenges that the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration (DVFA) faces in relation to the organic regulation and the enforcement of this. In addition, the aim is to identify underlying causes that influence these challenges.

Methods

The study takes an explorative approach and draws on semi-structured interviews with five key actors representing different positions in the Danish organic food landscape:

- Birgitte Escherich - founder of MadMarked A/S, a small-scale 100% organic innovative food business.
- Dorthe Kloppenborg – works at Organic Denmark as project manager in the organic area of food service and advisory.
- Else Christensen - works at Organic Denmark with project development and project service.
- Tine Fallesen - consultant at Comida Fødevarerådgivning, and previous food inspector and team manager at the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration.
- Robert Lind* - employee at the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration working in the area of the organic sector.

The empirical findings are examined from a regulatory perspective through a theoretical contextual framework of food paradigms, regulatory regimes, governance and multi-level governance as well as the concept of street level bureaucrats.

**Robert Lind's statements in this study are personal opinions and are not an expression of the DVFA's official stance.*

Findings and conclusion

- The DVFA's regulatory instruction guide is insufficient and there is a need for more advisory to SSOBs.
- The DVFA is challenged in their inspection of SSOBs due to the different types of food businesses operating and complex regulations that inspectors are responsible for enforcing. This can result in strict enforcement of the organic regulation and too legislative communication, which can challenge SSOBs in their compliance with the organic regulation.
- Multi-level governance in terms of EU harmonisation of organic regulation is found to be an underlying cause posing challenges to the DVFA, to accommodate SSOBs, due to less power and flexibility on a national level.
- It can be a challenge for the DVFA to meet the needs of both the small-scale and the large-scale organic industries, as their needs are opposing.
- Due to fewer resources in SSOBs enforced self-regulation of balance sheets, required by the DVFA's organic control, are found to be administratively burdensome and resource consuming for SSOBs, especially those with mixed activities.
- Network approaches in regulatory changes are found to be important in food policy processes in Denmark, as the DVFA depends on non-state actors' resources and knowledge.
- In the light of increasing consumer demand for SSOBs as well as political visions to support growth in food businesses further examination of the potentials to accommodate SSOBs is needed.

Future recommendations

The study did not clarify whether the administrative burdens in SSOBs are caused by the DVFA's interpretation and implementation of the EU organic regulation in a national control system or whether it is caused by harmonisation of EU organic regulation leaving member states with no flexibility to regulate SSOBs differently. Based on these uncertainties, it is recommended to investigate how to implement organic control by examining control systems in other EU member states as well as the possibilities to gain more national flexibility through a national rule that can ease the burdensome administrative requirements in SSOBs.

