

## **Sector cooperation on biodiversity and organic agriculture in Sweden - can the experiences be used in East Africa?**

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### **Summary**

Between 1997 and 2003 a number of representatives from different stakeholders in the area of biodiversity and organic agriculture took part in a project to promote biodiversity in organic agriculture. Initially, the project was used to build up an overview of the knowledge in the area of biodiversity and organic agriculture. It was also seen as important to understand the other group member's views and positions, especially the differences between representatives for nature conservation and the practical farmers. The outcomes of the project included the building of a strong network of stakeholders interested in organic agriculture and biological conservation, an overview of the knowledge in the area, a series of seminars, a change in the KRAV standards (the Swedish organic standard) with the introduction of a "Management plan for biodiversity and cultural heritage". Other outcomes were a "Good example competition" with farmers that had promoted biodiversity on their organic farms, information material to farmers and identification of areas for further research.

This type of cooperation can be used in other parts of the world to keep and develop biodiversity in organic agriculture. This broad support network is probably needed to get well based standards for biodiversity in organic production. The Swedish sector group was clear that standards in this area had to be developed with all stakeholders active participation.

To identify how biodiversity can be kept and promoted in East African organic agriculture there is a need for dedicated persons, especially practical farmers with an interest in biodiversity issues, to work with organic organisations on these issues as the farmers, and especially the female farmers, are the ones that will do the practical work on the farm.

### **Biodiversity – an issue of cooperation**

From 1997 to 2003 a number of representatives for different stakeholders in the area of biodiversity and organic agriculture met on a regular basis in Sweden.

Participants were organic farmers, advisers both for organic agriculture and biodiversity, researchers in biodiversity and nature conservation, certifiers, representatives from nature conservation movements and the conventional farmers association. Limited funding was available through the Ekhaga Foundation and WWF, and was used mainly for a part time project leader, printing of information material and travel reimbursement for participants in the group.

The project had the goal of promoting biodiversity in organic agriculture through:

- Increased knowledge about biodiversity in organic agriculture both in the organic agriculture sector and in society.
- Increased dialogue and cooperation between the organic agriculture sector, research, decision makers and NGOs.
- Initiation of discussions and researchs about the relation between biodiversity and the production methods in agriculture.

Initially the group focussed on sharing information on what was already done and what was going on in the sector to give the participants a better knowledge and overview of the area of biodiversity in organic farming. It took some time to cover all these issues and to start to understand the conditions for the different stakeholders.

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The representatives from the nature conservation sector had not had much contact with farmers. The exchange of knowledge and discussions about life as a farmer, and especially an organic farmer, and the reasons for being organic gave rise to many interesting discussions and statements. For example, there was a discussion about non-cultivated “islands” on farms. The nature conservation representatives saw them as well needed refuges for insects, plants and birds, whilst the farmers described the problems when farm machinery like harrows were too wide to drive in between these “islands” and the problems which arise from this.

Another area for discussion was to try to define what biodiversity in organic agriculture was, a discussion which was interesting but did not lead to any direct conclusions or decisions. Questions were also discussed whether the focus for conservation should be biodiversity in soil bacteria, the presence of red listed species or biodiversity which is useful for the farmer.

One of the most important outcomes of the sector cooperation was a change in the KRAV (organic) standards. The concept of a “Management plan for biodiversity and cultural heritage” as a requirement for all organic farmers was introduced. The plan is a tool to help the farmer to learn about the biodiversity on their own farm, to identify possibilities to develop the biodiversity and how to do it. The plan is part of a bigger governmental programme to conserve and develop biodiversity and the development of the plan is state funded.

There was clear agreement in the group that it was not possible to conserve and develop biodiversity on the farm with standards proposed from “above”. The inspiration and the work has to be done by the individual farmer who should be the driving force developing biodiversity in organic farming and solutions have to be adapted to the individual farm.

The project arranged a series of seminars which tried to cover a broad view on the area of biodiversity and organic agriculture. One example was a seminar on meat production and conservation of the pastoral landscape. This is an area with conflicting interests between nature conservationists, farmers and the organic standards. The nature conservationist wants hard grazing of meadows to promote the flora but that can lead to a lower growth rate of the animals and an increased risk for internal parasites. The farmer wants to have good grazing for the animals and little risk for internal parasites which gives a good growth rate leading to a good financial outcome from the meat production. The organic certification body does not allow preventive use of chemical treatments against internal parasites. At the seminar expertise from all groups was gathered and all views could be presented and thoroughly discussed. An outcome was the identification of the absolute need to have a plan for grazing and a rotation of the grazed areas which took into consideration internal parasites, meat production and nature conservation. Also farms where part of the grazing could be on farmland with a crop rotation were identified as the best way to solve these problems.

Another topic for a seminar (and also other activities) was to identify the contribution from biodiversity in the practical production on the farm. Very often biodiversity is discussed from its ethical, esthetical and cultural importance but is there a practical importance in plant and animal production? Two practical examples are degrading of cow droppings making nitrogen available for the plants and keeping aphid levels of low by promoting natural enemies such as carabids.

To get good practical examples of biodiversity conservation working on organic farms a “Good example competition” was arranged. The idea behind it was that farmers were the most likely people to be developing smart and trustworthy ways of promoting biodiversity on organic farms. Five farmers/farms were selected as winners and their practices have been published in the media and in information materials.

One more outcome of the discussions both in the group and in the seminars was the identification of areas which needed further investigation, it became an idea bank for the researchers. One research project going on is the investigation of the impact on farmland birds and wild field animals of the time and intensity of weed-harrowing and cutting of green manure leys.

## **Lessons learned**

The project was thoroughly evaluated by an external evaluator. The conclusion was that the project had resulted in a strong network and good communication between the actors, the level of knowledge in the area had increased considerably and there were good examples how to work on farms with biodiversity. Another conclusion was that the goals were very wide and that working methods could have been more effective and more directed to the goals and wished outcome. It might have been better to put more efforts in a continuation of the project, external marketing and more external courses. Instead resources were used for networking and gathering of more knowledge.

Today there is no active work in the sector group mainly due to lack of funding. The knowledge gathered during the project is used and new research is on-going. The network is also still working but as individuals change jobs it will be weakened. The government funding for making management plans for natural and cultural values is very low at the moment as there has been a decision to first focus on plans for the most valuable meadows and grazing areas. Therefore there are almost no new plans being made for organic farmers and not all organic farmers have a plan. Hopefully this situation will change in the coming year otherwise there will have to be a change in the KRAV standards to a more effective and workable standard.

In the future this cooperation will have to be developed again. Organic agriculture will change and develop. Organic agriculture promotes biodiversity in many ways but organic agriculture can also be developed further in the biodiversity area.

## **Sharing experiences with other regions**

The lessons learned from the sector cooperation in Sweden can very well be used in other parts of the world. My experience both from work in Sweden with standards setting and certification in organic production as well as from the development of standards for organic production in Tanzania and Uganda is that biodiversity issues are quite difficult to handle, especially in the development of standards. Discussion and cooperation between different stakeholders and experts is needed to develop these issues. Biodiversity needs different knowledge to find actions and measures which are good both for biodiversity and possible for the farmer.

Maybe the best way to promote biodiversity in East Africa is the use of wood saving stoves so that less wood and shrubs are cut down and that the women have more time for farming at home. In some areas, best practices for biodiversity maybe having a dedicated part of the forest for gathering fire wood, as was proposed by an Ugandan standards hearing, or to not clean weed so efficiently to reduce the risk for erosion or it might be to replace some of the matoke bananas used as shade for coffee with a wider variety of trees. Perhaps, sector cooperation like the one developed in Sweden could investigate these issues and come up with proposals for how to keep and develop biodiversity in organic agriculture.

I am sure of two things, there is a need for funding to get the work started and there is a need for dedicated persons, especially practical farmers with an interest in biodiversity issues, to be involved from the start.

## **References**

Mattsson, E. and Kvarnäck, O. (2000) A Swedish project for co-operation between nature conservation and organic agriculture organisations. In Stolton, S., Geier, B., & J.A. Mc Neely (eds). The relationship between nature conservation, biodiversity and organic agriculture 197-200.

See <http://www.cul.slu.se/biodiv/> for documents from the project (in Swedish)