



Quality-Certified Training of Farmers on Organic Agriculture

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www.cerorganic.eu

Challenges, Opportunities & Recommendations

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Version

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List of Definitions, Acronyms and Abbreviations:

Term/Acronym/Abbreviation	Description
E	Excellency criterion
EC	European Commission
EFQM	European Foundation for Quality Management
EQARF	European Quality Assurance Reference Framework
ICT	Information and communications technology
M	Minimum criterion
OA	Organic Agriculture
Open ECBcheck	Accreditation and quality improvement scheme for <u>E</u> - Learning programmes and institutions in international <u>C</u> apacity <u>B</u> uilding
QA	Quality Assurance
ToT	Training of Trainers
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VS	Validation Seminar

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1. Executive Summary

The CerOrganic White Paper presents the main developments and outputs of the project to stakeholders and interested organisations, including universities, schools, VET providers, as well as private and governmental organizations and individuals of all kinds. These groups represent diverse interests and resources that address Organic Agriculture and Agroecology issues in the field of agricultural training and education, OA-advisory, vocational educational training, organic agriculture and innovative pedagogy. This paper outlines the main outcomes and benefits of the project and presents recommendations for the further application, improvement and integration of the project results in training policies and practices.

2. Introduction

In 2004 the European Commission launched the European Action Plan for Organic Food and Farming¹ in order to stress the need for actions supporting the training and education of all stakeholders related to OA. CerOrganic - Quality-Certified Training of Farmers on Organic Agriculture (<http://www.cerorganic.eu>) was a Leonardo da Vinci Multilateral project for the Development of innovation (Agreement Number: 504387-LLP-1-2009-1-GR-LEONARDO-LMP) that aimed to develop and validate a modular, competence-based, innovative blended-learning training for future OA-advisers and to test new pedagogical approaches in OA-advisory practice. The key innovation of the project was the development of an international training curriculum for OA-advisers in alignment with the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF) for e-Learning trainings in Europe, against which other OA-trainings can be measured. By incorporating existing OA initiatives for agricultural experts and OA-advisers into an innovative quality-certified training programme and developing a flexible quality assurance and certification system, CerOrganic aimed to enhance the quality and attractiveness of all VET systems for OA.

The second major objective of CerOrganic was to develop an international training curriculum for OA-advisers, following an innovative blended-learning design, which enables the development of collaborative training strategies facilitated by the appropriate ICT tools, like the CerOrganic Course Management Platform (<http://cerorganic.moleportal.eu>) and the CerOrganic Portal (<http://portal.cerorganic.eu>).

Thirdly, CerOrganic aimed to provide agricultural experts with a trade specialization, making these individuals more employable, as they would be experts in the production and marketing of OA. It created opportunities for their mobility, since the trainings were built upon EQARF. The CerOrganic ToT was designed to empower trainees to become trainers of trainers creating opportunities for further trainings and entrepreneurialism.

2.1 Scope

This document aims to present the CerOrganic project, its implementation and its main outcomes/results, and discusses the benefits and recommendations for the further application, improvement and integration of the project results into training policy.

2.2 Audience

This deliverable is addressed to the CerOrganic Consortium, to any other parties involved in VET and/or training in organic agriculture or agricultural extension, including potential participants (as trainers or as trainees) in future CerOrganic Training events.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/organic/eu-policy/action-plan_en

3. Training needs

Organic Agriculture (OA) as a rural development strategy addresses the need for sustainable growth while meeting consumer demand for increased food quality and safety. For this reason the European Action Plan for Organic Food and Farming² has identified the need for actions supporting the training and education of all stakeholders related to OA. A great variety of international and national organizations, non-profit associations, and universities promote OA methods and practices and have integrated OA-related courses into their educational programmes, aiming to prepare agricultural professionals to appropriately support and guide farmers through the selection and adoption of OA methods. The European Council of Young Farmers found training to be a ‘very important instrument’ to adopting the European Model of agriculture. These initiatives, while focusing on the training of agricultural advisors and farmers on theory, methods and practices of OA do not follow a common quality-certified training process and vary remarkably in terms of their quality and effectiveness. The results of the CerOrganic training needs analysis in the partner countries revealed a very heterogeneous situation; while the OA-advisory service is well established and organized in Austria and to some extent in Hungary and in the Czech Republic, the training opportunities in Greece and Cyprus are scarce. The main feedback from OA-stakeholders, OA-experts and advisors in the partner countries indicated that despite the fact that the current level, focus and organization of OA-extension training differs remarkably among the surveyed countries, the need for a quality-certified training enabling blended-learning and collaborative learning approaches was common to all.

² European Action Plan for Organic Food and Farming, 2004 http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/organic/eu-policy/action-plan_en (January 2010)

4. Approach

In order to meet the constantly increasing demand for quality-certified training in the area of organic agriculture VET, as well as a more user-focused training curriculum, CerOrganic:

- Analysed the current-status of OA-training opportunities in Europe.
- Defined a competence-based OA-training profile.
- Developed the international CerOrganic training curriculum according to the EQARF requirements.
- Designed the CerOrganic Training of Trainers (ToT) as an exemplary programme providing quality-certified training.
- Pilot evaluated and adapted the CerOrganic ToT using a blended-learning approach combining theory and supporting activities (e.g. farm practice, case-study visits) with online training resources organized in the CerOrganic Course Management Platform.
- Localized the CerOrganic ToT to national training needs and validated it in five pilot trainings in the user countries.
- Validated the CerOrganic quality certification procedure through trials conducted by CerOrganic ToT trainers in their home countries (national validation seminars that took place in Austria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Greece & Hungary).
- Promoted CerOrganic results and policy recommendations through European networks.

5. CerOrganic Products and Services

The basis for the development of the CerOrganic Training was the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF), which ensured the high quality of this blended-learning, certified training. The modular nature of the CerOrganic ToT will permit it to be readily tailored to meet local/regional needs in vocational OA-training throughout Europe in the future.

The CerOrganic Web Portal aims to support the development of innovative ICT-based content, services, pedagogies, and practices for lifelong learning. It will list, collect, describe and categorize vocational training content that will contribute to the overall focus of the project - the development and testing of a quality assurance procedure for the vocational education/training of agricultural advisors / trainers, based on the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF). In the following paragraphs the main outcomes of the CerOrganic Project are explained.

5.1 CerOrganic Training Curriculum

Based on the findings of the user requirements analysis and on stakeholder and expert opinions, the consortium developed a training curriculum, reflecting the fact that an organic farmer consultant is much more than a transmitter of good technical practices. In addition to a broad range of OA-topic- and site-specific knowledge, they should also possess as well as pedagogical and communication competencies and be able to identify the specific needs of each OA farmer. Consequently the targeted CerOrganic learning objectives and competencies cover agricultural topics, resource management and the skills required to implement suitable blended-learning models in a training design, where communication and pedagogy are of paramount importance. The advisor needs to be able to provide an interesting and engaging mix of different learning methodologies and strategies, have a rich portfolio of methods for course and learning design and the ability to utilise ICT (Information and communication technologies) for OA content adaptation, for problem analysis, consultation and decision making. The training content covers the following five core modules:

- Blended & e-learning Design
- ICT Technologies for OA Content Adaptation
- Farmer Communication & Consultation Approaches
- OA Topics, Issues & Problems – Decision Making
- Quality Assurance in Learning

In total, 25 training units of the CerOrganic training curriculum were developed and were uploaded, organized and stored in the CerOrganic Course Management Platform (<http://cerorganic.moleportal.eu>). Additional courses were created in order to meet the specific needs of the end users in each user country, along with a number of units from the CerOrganic training curriculum that were adapted for the same reason. These were further

supported by additional related material, freely available from previous relevant projects, initiatives or learning portals and adapted in order to meet the specific needs of the specific audiences. The metadata of each CerOrganic document on the course platform are available in five languages (Czech, English, German, Greek and Hungarian).

5.2 The pedagogical training design

The international CerOrganic training curriculum was developed in as a blended-learning course and facilitated through an open online learning environment. The pilot implementation of the ToT was held over five weeks in May-June 2011, and consisted of three phases:

- Phase I: An initial 2-week preparatory period supported through the CerOrganic Course Management Platform (<http://cerorganic.moleportal.eu>), in which trainees created their own profile, received information concerning the training programme for self-study, and initiated a virtual interaction with the ToT tutors and other trainees.
- Phase II: The on-site training in the Pilot ToT this took the form of a week-long summer school, hosted at the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Chania (MAICh). The programme comprised an intense programme of lectures, workshops, hands-on-sessions, and site visits to local organic agriculture farms and enterprises.
- Phase III: 2-week reflection and assignment period, in which the students visited in their home area local organic cultivation sites, consulted with the OA farmers, identified problems and proposed specific strategies and blended-learning activities to address these problems, supported by the tutors on-line.

The Pilot ToT was developed according to the CerOrganic QA Process and following implementation of the training it was independently peer reviewed and granted quality certification, granting licence to the CerOrganic consortium to provide this training until December 2014.

5.3 CerOrganic Quality Assurance Process

The CerOrganic QA Process provides the methods, procedures, and benchmarking criteria that were applied for the quality certification of the CerOrganic Training of Trainers (ToT), and that are now available for application to other OA VET programmes. CerOrganic has worked with OA certification bodies and ministries in order to introduce the quality standards widely in the community. The CerOrganic QA Process was built upon international quality standards³ and combines them with the European Quality Assurance Reference

³Ehlers, Ulf, 2010, Open ECBcheck Manuel: Low cost, community based certification for E-learning in Capacity Building, http://www.efquel.org/openecbcheck/images/stories/docs/OpenECB-Check_manual.pdf (December 2011).

Framework⁴ (EQARF) in order to permit application of the quality standards during all the phases of the EQARF.

5.4 CerOrganic ICT-tools and Online Platforms

A number of ICT tools were used by the CerOrganic project in order to support its aims and objectives, including the following:

- CerOrganic Course Management Platform (<http://cerorganic.moleportal.eu>): MOLE (Multimedia Open Learning Environment), a platform initially developed by the Laboratory of Distributed Multimedia Information Systems and Applications of the Technical University of Crete (TUC/MUSIC - <http://www.ced.tuc.gr>) was adapted in order to meet the needs of the CerOrganic project. The platform was used to upload, store and index the training curriculum of the project, along with the additional training resources, and further supported the training by providing access to a wealth of communication, evaluation and multimedia options.
- CerOrganic Portal (<http://portal.cerorganic.eu>): The CerOrganic Web portal is designed to list, collect, describe and categorize vocational training content (such as competencies, training opportunities and certificates) that will help the overall focus of the project to move towards the direction of development and testing a quality assurance procedure for the vocational education/training of agricultural advisors / trainers, based on the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF).
- CerOrganic wiki page (<http://wiki.agroknow.gr/cerorganic>): The CerOrganic wiki page provides basic information about the main outcomes of the CerOrganic project; Quality Assurance Process, Training Curriculum and ICT tools used. It aims to provide an overall image on these outcomes and act as an additional dissemination tool, ensuring the sustainability of the contained information even after the project is over.
- CerOrganic Platform Austria (<http://www.edumoodle.at/vis/cerorganic>): This national course platform was set up to supplement to the CerOrganic Course Management Platform for the validation training in Austria. It facilitated the developed, certified training approach and will be used for future deployment of local and national OA-training initiatives in Austria.

All aforementioned tools will remain available after the end of the project, in order to maximize the dissemination and exploitation of the project results and outcomes and to ensure their availability to all stakeholders in the future.

⁴http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11108_en.htm

5.5 Training Guidelines and Handbooks

- CerOrganic Course Management Platform Handbooks for Trainers, providing information to trainers on how to use the platform for uploading their courses, additional material and set up a number of supporting services.
- CerOrganic Course Management Platform Handbooks for Trainees, providing information to trainees on how to attend the courses, participate, use the various communication tools of the platform and exploit its various functions.
- Implementation of Training Scenario - Vocational Training Handbook, which provides basic information about the blended-learning approach followed in the CerOrganic training curriculum as well as detailed information about the concept of training scenarios, the methodology and examples.
- Guidelines on how to design a blended-learning training for OA-farmers with e-tools and collaboration strategies.

All aforementioned resources are freely available through the CerOrganic Course Management Platform (<http://cerorganic.moleportal.eu>).

5.6 Five localised training schemes

The partners from Austria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Greece and Hungary developed, based on the findings of their requirements analysis and on their local needs national CerOrganic validation trainings.

The Austrian local ToT horizontal training "*CerOrganic: The use of Blended-learning Tools in Organic Agriculture Advisory Services*". (OA-advisers train OA-advisers) highlighted the development of competencies concerning pedagogy, e-teaching and e-learning. This training was developed according to the CerOrganic QA Process and received quality certification as an independent national training, having found to be compliant with all essential quality criteria and many excellence criteria.

5.7 The partner affiliation programme

The aim of the CerOrganic affiliation programme is to create a European-wide network of interested organizations/individuals who will use the products developed by the CerOrganic project, e.g. curricula, quality assurance process, learning platform, etc and form a network to be regularly informed about developments, project results and exploitation within and beyond the project. Since the project information, its objectives and outcomes will be made available to this network, it represents the basis for a wide-spread practical use of the project results and a further sustainable presence in the European Union. The partner affiliation programme presents not only the CerOrganic products but also the benefits of

affiliated partners and the terms for joining the network. The partner affiliation programme describes the mutual benefits of the affiliation process with CerOrganic and encourages organizations and individuals to follow the project developments, and contribute to the outcome and the sustainability of the project.

6. Impact

CerOrganic ToT incorporated the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF) in order to increase the quality of OA trainings by creating an innovative example training programme in OA and developed the CerOrganic Quality Assurance (QA) process against which other OA trainings can measure their quality. The ToT was developed in a cooperative, international form, taking into consideration the diverse European situations, and aiming to share best practices.

Interest in the CerOrganic Pilot ToT exceeded all expectations and capacities and was restricted to the final number of 35 trainees and 17 tutors, from eight European countries. Feedback from the trainees indicated that more than 40% of the trainees had a university degree in an agriculture-related discipline. The most popular motives for attending the ToT were to acquire *expertise in organic farming (64%)*, *the blended-learning training approach (24%)* and *to gain a certificate in organic agriculture (20%)*. Most of the trainees had prior experience in organic agriculture training or a related domain (legal issues, OA-marketing or management activities in the field of OA). Three trainees indicated that they have had previously participated in educational programmes in organic agriculture as a trainee or student⁵. Overall, the evaluation of the Pilot ToT was very positive and the majority of the participants expressed a desire to attend subsequent trainings.

In Austria the national validation course stimulated the development of various future training activities with OA-farmers and OA-school teachers and students and comprises the start of an online collaboration platform for young OA-advisers in Austria, the establishment of a blended-learning pilot course for organic soil cultivation, and the development of a CerOrganic learning scenario on grassland plants for OA-secondary schools.

CerOrganic aimed to increase the number of internationally qualified OA trainers and to provide quality trainings and training certification systems that will ease farmer transition to OA. Secondly, it aimed to enrich existing OA-trainings and OA-advisory systems with new pedagogical training strategies and blended-learning tools to improve their quality.

Both objectives were achieved during the two years of the project; however, a larger-scale effect is expected to take place in the next years through cooperation with related initiatives/EU projects.

⁵D4.3_Evaluation Report Pilot ToT

7. Recommendations for further developments

The CerOrganic project aimed to design and test a quality assurance procedure for the vocational education/training of agricultural advisers, based on the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF). Its major challenge was to find a viable way of combine the best-practices from different OA-training approaches and standards operating in Europe. For this purpose, the five partner countries (Austria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Greece and Hungary) identified through national research of OA training opportunities and competencies for OA advisers and through stakeholder meetings and interviews specific national OA-training needs. This enabled the CerOrganic consortium to construct a certified, training curriculum utilising the strengths of existing courses and addressing areas that need further development and attention.

The following recommendations should be taken under consideration for the development of future OA-training programmes:

7.1 Pedagogy and participatory training techniques

The main findings of the requirements analysis were that whilst the current level, focus and organisation of OA-extension training differs remarkably among the partner countries, the community based training approaches facilitated by blended-learning tools and strategies provide a major common innovation benefit to OA-education across all countries. This approach is in particular valuable in organic agriculture as the farmers' needs are highly site specific and require the close and equal knowledge exchange between advisor and farmer (Ozkaya⁶). In the course of the validation trainings it became obvious that organic farming requires a holistic approach, involving cooperation between the OA-farmers with their on-site expertise, and the OA-advisors with their technical knowledge and can be effectively achieved by the application of enhanced blended-learning and participatory training techniques

7.2 Focus on blended-learning training designs

The feedback from OA-stakeholders and OA-experts received during the course of the requirements analysis and the results of the Pilot ToT evaluation clearly identified the blended-learning training design which offered an interesting mix of e-learning tools, pedagogical strategies, learning outcome assessments, and on-site visits as the major benefit of the training approach. Whilst the presentation of different European case studies demonstrated that different local and national characteristics require the treatment of specific OA-topics, and the current level, focus, and organisation of OA-extension training varies remarkably among the partner countries, the community based training approaches facilitated by blended-learning tools and strategies provide a major common innovation

⁶ Cahiers Options Mediterranees 61, XXp

benefit to OA-education across all countries. A general advantage of a blended-learning design is that it allows for a quick information exchange and problem tackling independent of place and time. This is especially relevant to organic farmers, who are often geographically isolated and unable to commit to a rigid schedule for consultation.

7.3 Facilitate localisation of the CerOrganic Training curriculum

In most cases, a generic training curriculum is available and delivered to different audiences from different countries with significant differences in their needs. After the implementation of the CerOrganic Training of Trainers and the national validation seminars, the need of a flexible and easily adaptable curriculum became obvious. Not only do the organic agriculture topics vary for each country (or region), but also the methodology and tools used may have to be adapted in order to meet specific needs, and to address cultural differences.

7.4 Develop two training schemes (one for OA-advisers, one for OA-farmers)

The requirements analysis showed that the majority of the OA-experts and future OA-advisers possess a university degree or a similar level of education. This is usually not the case for the OA-farmers and the training material of the CerOrganic Training Curriculum was found to be too academic and lacking in practical sessions and experience exchange for use by the farmers. In order to address the needs for a collaborative learning design and to increase the acceptance of the training among the actual (OA-) farmers, future curriculum developments should consider the needs of the final target group, the farmer.

7.5 Involve national OA-training accreditation bodies

The localization of the CerOrganic training needs to consider different national OA-regulation and accreditation procedures. It is therefore recommended that representatives from accreditation bodies and ministries of agriculture be consulted, to promote maximal national adoption of the developed training.

7.6 Use the CerOrganic Affiliation Network to promote Quality Certification

A number of EU projects that develop/have developed training programmes focused in organic agriculture provide/have provided training opportunities for various stakeholders (trainers, advisors, extension officers, farmers etc.). However, these programmes do not follow a pre-defined set of quality criteria, making their evaluation and comparison with other related efforts hard. In addition, the certificates provided to the trainees of such training programmes may not be accredited by an official standard/body.

7.7 Adapt the CerOrganic QA-Process to the ISO Quality standard

Future full alignment of the CerOrganic QA Process with the international ISO quality standard ISO/IEC 197961-1 and its reference process model RFDQ. The Greek inspection and

certification organization DIO, stated that a more widely-recognized Quality label would be useful and facilitate the dissemination of the certified training within and beyond the European Union.

7.8 Extend the international training component

Many tutors and trainees mentioned positively in their qualitative feedback to the CerOrganic Pilot ToT the European context and setting of the training that enabled a stimulating interaction and experience exchange among the participants at a cultural and at a professional level. Secondly, it is recommended to use the collaboration potential to enable cross-country trainings in regions with similar OA-characteristics.

7.9 Reach additional target groups

The awareness for organic agriculture and a sustainable life-style is constantly growing in Europe⁷. It is therefore recommended to connect with future OA-farmer generations and with informal learners, interested in ecology, organic agriculture and a more sustainable way of living in order to implement organic agriculture in every-day life.

7.10 Motivate and empower OA-experts and OA-farmers to use ICT-tools

CerOrganic developed a blended-learning based training curriculum which is available online, on a platform which supports e-learning (e.g. by delivering courses real-time using the platform). In addition, the CerOrganic ToT implementation included a pre- and post-school distant phase, during which there was online communication between the trainers and the trainees. The majority of the project products, such as the CerOrganic Portal & the Wiki page are also online, therefore they require the use of a computer and an internet connection. However, during the various training events became obvious that not all trainees were familiar with the use of computer and related tasks (e.g. creation of accounts on online services/platforms, use of online communication tools). This reveals the need for specific courses on the use of computers and basic, common software, that could be attended by those who are in need of additional training, to allow them to cope with the tasks that a modern training programme includes.

⁷Organic World, Global organic farming statistics and news, <http://www.organic-world.net/>(March 2011).

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Deliverable 1.2. User Requirements Report.

Deliverable 1.4. Report on OA Competencies for CerOrganic Trainers.

Deliverable 2.2. ToT-Curriculum.

Deliverable 5.1. EQARF Requirements for the CerOrganic QA Process.

Deliverable 5.2. Draft CerOrganic QA Process.

Deliverable CerOrganic_D4.3_Evaluation Report.

Deliverable 7.2. CerOrganic Affiliation Programme.

Project Information

CerOrganic is a two year Leonardo da Vinci Multilateral Project financed by the European Commission that aims to develop and test a quality assurance procedure for the vocational education/training of agricultural advisors/trainers in Organic Agriculture, based on the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF).

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