EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Abstract:
Research in organic food and farming is a fairly new, but rapidly expanding discipline on the European research scene. One of the problems faced by the authorities seeking to initiate research programmes in organic food and farming is that the present research effort in Europe is characterised by small research communities, which are often scattered and fragmented both geographically and institutionally. Therefore a gathering of the dispersed expertise to a critical mass in order to increase the competitive quality and relevance of the research as well as the dissemination and use of the research is needed.

CORE Organic is a 3-year EU FP6 Coordination Action with the aim of improving the coordination of transnational research in organic food and farming. The project was carried out by 13 public funding bodies representing the 11 countries, Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK.

The overall objective of CORE Organic was to gather a critical mass and enhance the quality, relevance and utilisation of resources in research in organic food and farming in the partner countries, and to establish a joint pool of at least 3 million € per year by the end of the project for funding of selected transnational research projects. This should be accomplished by implementation of the following four objectives:

1. Increased exchange of information and establishment of a common open web based archive
2. Coordination of existing research and integration of knowledge
3. Sharing and developing best practice for evaluating organic research
4. Identification and coordination of future research

Objective one and two were reached by means of various tools:

- Issuing of 8 electronic Newsletters
- Building and running of a common Internet portal on research in organic food and farming, www.coreportal.org with information on history, organisation, research programmes, financing, research facilities, initiation of research, selection and evaluation, utilisation of research and scientific education plus research schools in the 11 partner countries lining to further information.
- Extending the open access electronic archive for research publications related to organic production, www.orgprints.org, which was established by DARCOF in 2002, to include research publications etc. from all the partner countries. The archive is maintained by the three partners, BLE (DE), DARCOF (DK) and FiBL (CH), and each partner has nominated a national editor being responsible for depositing publications and other relevant information from their country. In 2007 Organic Eprints contained more than 200 descriptions of research organisations, programmes and facilities, 500 descriptions of research projects and more than 10.000 research papers, and it had 200.000 – 300.000 visits per month (autumn 2007).
Conducting of a workshop in May 2006 at the Joint Organic Congress in Odense, Denmark to identify and discuss the most important research topics of common interest for the joint transnational CORE Organic call. Hereby topics for increased future cooperation as well as new research areas suitable for transnational cooperation and development of training schemes for research personnel and experts were identified.

The 11 partner countries organise the funding in different ways. Some countries mainly fund organic research through universities or public/private research centres (CH, DE and FR), while others fund organic research through general research funding schemes or specific organic funding schemes with irregular or irregular calls every 1 to 5 years or up to several times a year (NO). All the partner countries except IT and NO had organic research farms (76 in total), which, however had a large number of experimental fields. Long term experiments were established in all countries except for NL. Fields for nutrient leaching experiments were only established in the Nordic countries (DK, FI, NO and SE). Eight countries (AT, CH, DE, DK, FI, NO, SE and UK) had organic animal research facilities, of which 3 for beef production, 14 for dairy production, 7 for pig production, 7 for poultry production and 5 for sheep production. The most important research topics identified among the partners for a 5 year period within 2000 – 2007 were within the categories, “crop husbandry”, “animal husbandry”, “farming systems” and “food systems”, while less important research topics were “environmental aspects”, “values, standards and certification”, “knowledge management” and “soil science.

Objective three focused on the joint development of best practices for evaluation and quality assurance at project and programme level to ensure high quality research in organic food and farming. To reach this objective a questionnaire investigation involving various stakeholders in the 11 partner countries was carried out, revealing that the evaluation criteria used for organic research are quite similar in the partner countries and close to the ones used for evaluation of general research programmes. In 8 countries the research proposal evaluation is carried out anonymously (i.e. the evaluation experts are not known to the applicants), while the evaluation experts are known in 3 countries, CH, IT and SE. Reporting and monitoring of projects is very similar in all countries, requesting annual reporting and a final report, except for FI and NO, which request semi-annual reporting. Based on these findings a concept for the evaluation of the proposals for the 1st CORE Organic call was developed and a list of excellent European experts for peer reviewing of transnational CORE Organic pilot project proposals.

Objective four concerned identification and coordination of future research. This objective was reached by means of identifying research topics of common high priority and developing plans for future coordination and agreeing on a range of procedures for transnational funding. Out of 7 high priority research topics the following 3 topics were selected for a joint transnational pilot call:

- Animal disease and parasite management, including preventive and health improvement therapies to reduce reliance on antibiotics.
- Quality of organic food – health and safety
Innovative marketing strategies. Identification of successful marketing methods. Local markets.

In 2007 the CORE Organic partners launched a pilot call for joint transnational research projects within these 3 common research topics. Out of 37 project proposals 8 were selected for transnational funding by means of a virtual common pot approach, and all partner countries participated in the transnational funding. The overall funding budget for the 8 3-year projects was about 8.3 million EUR – close to the aim of 3 million EUR/year. The 8 CORE Pilot Projects, which are running in the period 2007 - 2010 are:

AGTEC-Org: Methods to improve quality in organic wheat
ANIPLAN: Planning for better animal health and welfare
COREPIG: A tool to prevent diseases and parasites in organic pig herds.
FCP: How to communicate ethical values.
iPOPY: Innovative public organic food procurement for youth.
PHYTOMILK: What makes organic milk healthy?
QACCP: How to assure safety, health and sensory qualities of organic products.

(See also www.coreorganic.org/research/index.html)

After the selection procedure an evaluation of the evaluation criteria and the procedure used for the CORE Organic pilot call was made by means of a questionnaire investigation involving among others, the applicants and evaluation experts, and by means of a literature review. This study showed that the 19 evaluation criteria clustered within six main categories fulfilled the expectations of most target groups, but interdisciplinarity and innovative aspects should be addressed in a more appropriate way. Besides the gap between the initial scientific evaluation and the final selection of the CORE Pilot projects should be improved and made more transparent and the way national priorities are integrated in the decision-making process should also be considered in more detail.

At a kick-off meeting for the 8 CORE Organic projects in September 2007 it was decided by the partners to continue the cooperation in a CORE Organic Funding Body Network after the end of the project in order to monitor and evaluate the 8 research pilot projects and to broaden and deepen the cooperation between European organic research funding bodies in the future.

Project logo and web page:

www.coreorganic.org