

Social sustainability, farm labor, and organic agriculture: Findings from an exploratory analysis

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Abstract. Much of the attention by social scientists to the rapidly growing organic agriculture sector focuses on the benefits it provides to consumers (in the form of pesticide-free foods) and to farmers (in the form of price premiums). By contrast, there has been little discussion or research about the implications of the boom in organic agriculture for farmworkers on organic farms. In this paper, we ask the question: From the perspective of organic farmers, does “certified organic” agriculture encompass a commitment to “sustainability” that prioritizes social goals? Specifically, we aim to broaden our understanding of the relationship between social sustainability and organic agriculture by drawing attention to issues affecting farmworkers, whose labor and contribution tends to elude most discussions of organic agriculture. We present findings from a survey of organic farmers in California about the possible incorporation of social standards into organic certification criteria. Our findings suggest that, at best, lukewarm support for social certification within organic agriculture exists among certified organic farmers in California. They also question expectations that organic agriculture necessarily fosters social or even economic sustainability for most of the farmers and farmworkers involved. However, we also find exceptions to the patterns evidenced in our survey. In-depth interviews with select organic farmers demonstrate that there are individuals whose practices are atypical and demonstrate that, under some circumstances, an organic production system can be at once environmentally, economically, and **socially** sustainable.

Key words: California, Certification, Farmworkers, Labor, Organic agriculture, Social justice, Social sustainability, Sustainable agriculture

Abbreviations: ALRA – Agricultural Labor Relations Act; CCOF – California Certified Organic Farmers; IFOAM – International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements; USDA – United States Department of Agriculture; WIC – Women, Infants, and Children Program

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Introduction

Organic agriculture is frequently associated with or subsumed under the rubric of “sustainable agriculture,” with many using the terms interchangeably. In theory, sustainable agriculture refers to a system that integrates environmental health, economic profitability, and social and economic equity (Feenstra, 1997). The National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture (2004) describes a sustainable food and agricultural system as one that is simultaneously “economically viable, environmentally sound, socially just, and humane.” Similarly, some definitions of organic agriculture, including that of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), incorporate a commitment to social justice. However, organic agriculture, as operationalized by USDA’s certification standards (USDA, 2000), privileges ecological goals and is much vaguer on social and economic objectives. Likewise, in practice, as Allen and Sachs argue, dominant perspectives of agricultural sustainability “do not [always] question the inequities many people experience in current structures of family farms, rural communities, or agricultural labor” (1993: 143). Their review of sustainable agriculture literatures suggests that labor issues are not addressed adequately, if at all, by the sustainable agriculture movement.

This lack of consensus over what both organic agriculture and sustainable agriculture are or should be has contributed to a similar division among academics and practitioners as to whether or not “organic” should be equated with “sustainable” agriculture (see Gips, 1988; Gershuny and Forster, 1992; Kirschenmann, 1993). Recent empirical data showing the wide diversity of production practices, cropping schemes, and ideological bents within the organic “community” in California suggest that, in practice, using organic and sustainable interchangeably is problematic at best (Guthman, 2004a).

The historical origins of organic agriculture in the US are connected to a countercultural movement that embraced an alternative, utopian model of society and the food system.¹ As Belasco points out, the movement’s “radical vision extended the organic farmer’s cooperation with nature to a cooperative model in human relations” (1989: 76). The ultimate goal was an “ecologically balanced, radically decentralized, humanely pastoral society” (p. 73). This agrarian populist vision was just one of a number of historical origins of the organic movement (Conford, 2001; Guthman, 2004a); yet it is one that is still extremely salient today. Guthman notes that the agrarian ideal encompasses a vision of

owner-operated farms in which family members provide all the necessary labor and in which farm income can pay for all necessary expenses (2004a). She further suggests that, as the organic movement today espouses notions of a “new agrarianism,” it equates both ecological sustainability and social justice with small-scale family farming. Left out of this historical and current tendency to equate social justice with small family farms is the reality of hired farm labor, which is increasingly prevalent in the organic sector today. As such, we feel that it is both fair and important to ask of the organic agriculture sector: Does “certified organic” agriculture incorporate a conception or practice of “sustainability” that prioritizes social goals beyond those associated with the agrarian ideal and specifically addresses farm labor?

As one of the fastest growing segments of the food system, organic agriculture is increasingly identified as an opportunity for struggling small-scale farmers, in particular, and for California’s agricultural sector, in general (Dmitri and Greene, 2002). In California, gross sales of organically grown commodities tripled between 1992 and 2002 while organic acreage quadrupled (Klonsky, 2003). These patterns have prompted social scientists to try to understand theoretically and empirically the implications of organic agriculture. Research published thus far has focused primarily on the structure and implications of the organic market (Buck et al., 1997; Coombes and Campbell, 1998; Allen and Kovach, 2000; Dimitri and Greene, 2002; Guthman, 2004b), the meaning of “organic” agriculture (Guthman, 1998; Campbell and Liepins, 2001), or the significance of an organic “movement” (DuPuis, 2000; Reynolds, 2000).

With the exceptions of Guthman (2004a), who has collected and analyzed data on labor practices by organic growers in California, and Inouye and Warner (2001), who have documented some arenas where the organic and sustainable agriculture movements are explicitly embracing labor as an important issue, very little research has focused on the implications of organic agriculture for farmworkers. Similarly, in practice, the extent to which organic certification intends to address the “social” dimension of sustainability is unclear. One notable example in this regard is an international movement to incorporate a set of criteria concerning worker rights into the requirements for organic certification. Consistent with this effort, IFOAM voted in 2003 to adopt a new chapter on “Social Justice” for its Basic Standards to which IFOAM accredited certifiers are expected to comply.

Through our research, however, we find little consensus in the organic community in California about this

new direction for organic certification. This study was designed to broaden our understanding of the relationship between social sustainability and organic agriculture by drawing attention to issues affecting farmworkers, whose labor and contribution tends to elude most discussions of organic agriculture. The research we present here centers around the perspectives of organic farmers on the “social” component of organic and sustainable agriculture. Specifically, we discuss findings from a survey of and in-depth interviews with organic farmers in California about the possible incorporation of social standards into organic certification criteria.

The intersection of farm labor and organic agriculture

I think that organic farming is more socially responsible just by being organic.

Mark Lipson, California Certified Organic Farmers²

If in some way you're exploiting the workers, it's no different from exploiting land – taking care of people and taking care of land are part of the same thing.

Juanita Valdez-Cox, Farmworkers Co-op³

The titles of recent reports – *Like Machines in the Fields: Workers without Rights in American Agriculture* (Oxfam America, 2004), *Suffering in Silence* (Villarejo et al., 2000), *Modern Day Slavery* (Palm Beach Post, 2003) – highlight the many challenges facing farmworkers in the United States today. There are an estimated 2.5 million farmworkers hired to work in the United States, the majority of whom work seasonally on crop farms and are classified as migrant workers because they travel over 75 miles to find work. These workers are young (half are under the age of 29), overwhelmingly male (80%) and predominantly foreign-born (US Commission on Agricultural Workers, 1992). In 1997–1998, more than three-quarters were born in Mexico (Mehta et al., 2000). The experiences of the 700,000–1,000,000 farmworkers who live and work in California at any given time mirror these national patterns (Rosenberg et al., 1993). The California Agricultural Worker Health Survey conducted in 1999 found similar demographic, income, benefits, and workplace injury patterns and rates as the national averages from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (Mehta et al., 2000; Villarejo et al., 2000).

The economic challenges facing these farmworkers are many. For the past two decades, their real wages have been declining, with wages paid to workers on crop farms declining 10% (from \$6.89 to \$6.18) between 1989 and 1998. Today, the typical [median] farmworker can expect to earn between \$7500 and \$10,000 per year (Carroll et al., 2005). Exacerbating low wages are two other economic realities facing farmworkers: lack of

overtime pay and seasonal underemployment. Because of exclusions and exemptions from federal and state labor legislation, farmworkers in some states may still work 80 h in a week without receiving any overtime pay. In other states, such as Maryland and California, overtime pay for farmworkers does not apply until after a worker has worked 60 h during a week, even though workers in other sectors are eligible for overtime after 40 h (Schell, 2002). And though during peak harvest seasons they may indeed work long hours, during the off-season, underemployment prevails. The majority of farmworkers in the US spend less than half the year employed on farms (Oxfam America, 2004).

These economic challenges cannot be separated from the challenges posed by immigration policy in the United States. Farmworker advocates and others have argued that the vulnerable immigration status of most farmworkers puts them in a weak bargaining position with respect to wages and working conditions (see Levine, 2004). Indeed, the majority of farmworkers working on US farms are “unauthorized,” meaning that they are not able to work legally on US farms. The National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) indicates that in 2001–2002, 53% of the hired crop labor force lacked work authorization, down from 55% in 1999–2000 (Carroll et al., 2005). However, unofficial estimates suggest that the percentage of the workforce that is undocumented may be even higher than the NAWS data estimates. Compounding farmworkers' vulnerability related to immigration status is the increased prevalence of often-exploitative farm labor contractors in agriculture, who many in the agricultural labor movement consider to be the single most daunting challenge facing the movement today.

One consequence of their economic and political vulnerability is that hired farmworkers tend to lack the access to contribution-based and need-based services that might help to supplement low income-levels. In 1997–1998, only 20% of farmworkers surveyed in a national study reported that they or someone in their family had received unemployment benefits within the last 2 years, and only 1% reported having access to social security pensions or disability insurance. Roughly one in 10 farmworkers reported receiving Medicaid, Food Stamps, or WIC benefits. Equally alarming is the dearth of employer-provided benefits, with only 5% reporting that they had health insurance coverage (Mehta et al., 2000; Oxfam America, 2004).

Compounding the impact of low wages and lack of benefits on farmworkers' well being are the high risks associated with farm work. Because of “the strain of labor, accidents, exposure to toxic substances and to the elements,” it is considered one of the most dangerous occupations (Oxfam America, 2004: 16). According to the Environmental Protection Agency, between 10,000 and 20,000 acute pesticide-related illnesses are reported

by US farmworkers each year (Reeves et al., 2002). Agrochemical exposure and related impacts are widely recognized dangers; however, they represent only one type of occupational hazards that farmworkers confront. Moreover, the agricultural inputs used by organic farmers are not necessarily benign to humans either. Sulfur (an accepted input for organic systems), for instance, was the second most frequently implicated pesticide in reported poisoning cases in California between 1998 and 2000 (Reeves et al., 2002).

Many serious occupational injuries suffered by farmworkers also stem from the continuous stoop labor, climbing, lifting, and reaching they perform for long hours. These common characteristics of agricultural field work are well documented risk factors for musculoskeletal disorders. And, indeed, back and musculoskeletal pain are among the primary health problems reported by farmworkers (Villarejo and Baron, 1999). Even less known are the high rates of mental health disorders affecting farmworkers. High levels of stress, anxiety, and particularly depression within farmworker communities are associated with the social isolation and insecure living and working conditions common in this population (Mines, 2003).

Are these challenges for farmworkers similarly problematic on both organic and conventional farms or do organic farms provide better working conditions than do conventional farms? The USDA's National Organic Program defines organic agriculture as "a production system that is managed ... to respond to site-specific conditions by integrating cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity" (USDA, 2000: 80550).⁴ IFOAM describes organic agriculture more holistically as a system that "promotes environmentally, socially, and economically sound production of food, fiber, timber, etc." (IFOAM, 2004). Though neither makes explicit reference in their definitions to the relevance of organic practices for hired farmworkers, there are, nonetheless, reasons to believe that organic production can have positive implications for these workers. Importantly, the reduction of toxic pesticides in organic systems lowers the risk of exposure and associated dangers for workers on these farms. There are also theoretical reasons to expect that organic production will provide more favorable working conditions than does conventional agriculture. For instance, higher wages and benefits might be offered to encourage workers to commit to working on organic farms for longer periods of time; multi-cropping patterns more common in organic agriculture demand more year-round, permanent labor; and ideologically committed farmers might extend their critique of conventional agriculture to include labor issues (Guthman, 2004a). While there is anecdotal evidence that organic farmers

are likely to provide healthy working conditions for farmworkers, there is little social science research to confirm or deny these expectations. Moreover, a representative of a farmworker advocacy organization that works closely on sustainable agriculture issues described such assumptions as "presumptuous" (interview 6/10/04). Given this context, this study aims to further our understanding of whether and how organic agriculture holds advantages over conventional agriculture for farmworkers.

Methodology

The following analysis is based primarily on responses to an anonymous mail questionnaire that was sent to a random sample of 500 organic farmers in California. The questionnaire was mailed with a pre-addressed, postage-paid reply envelope in March 2004. A post card reminder was mailed to the same group 1 month later. One hundred eighty-eight organic farmers returned completed questionnaires between March and May. Fourteen questionnaires were returned as undeliverable (from processors, or from individuals who were no longer farming), resulting in a return rate of 39%. The sample was selected from a list of 1762 organic farmers provided by the California Department of Food and Agriculture with whom organic farmers are required to register. The sample includes farmers who practice **only** organic as well as those who **combine** organic and conventional practices on their farms.

The three-page questionnaire focused primarily on farmers' thoughts about social sustainability in organic agriculture. Respondents were asked to answer 27 questions about their farming activities, their hiring and employment practices (when applicable), their beliefs regarding sustainability, and their basic demographic characteristics. To find out about respondents' beliefs about social aspects of sustainability and organic agriculture, they were asked (in a series of Likert items) to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with various claims about organic agriculture and with a proposal to incorporate criteria regarding working conditions into organic certification standards. In particular, respondents were instructed to indicate, on a scale of 1–5 (with 1 meaning "strongly disagree" and 5 meaning "strongly agree"), whether they agreed with a series of statements. Two examples include: "To be certified, organic farmers should be required to pay farmworkers a living wage" and "To be certified, organic farmers should be required to provide farmworkers with health insurance."

In this paper we limit our analysis to the perspective of organic farmers. The data presented here, however, are part of a broader project investigating the intersection

of labor and organic agriculture from the multiple perspectives of farmworkers and labor and organic movement organizations as well as farmers. As such, our analysis is also informed and complemented by qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews with organic farmers during the spring of 2004.

Results

Similar to the profile of the population of organic farmers in California (CA), most of the farmers responding to our survey operate at a small-scale in terms of both area farmed and annual sales. Almost three-quarters (73.8%) of respondents farm 50 acres or less, and 64% of the farms reported less than \$50,000 in annual sales. Figure 1 compares our sample with data for all organic farmers in California and indicates that our sample includes a higher proportion of larger farmers. A majority (58%) have all of their cultivated land certified organic. Three-quarters (74.6%) of the farmers market 10 or fewer crops, with just over 30% growing only one crop for marketing purposes. Two-thirds (66.1%) of the sample sell at least some their product on the wholesale market (e.g., sell to distributor, broker, cooperative, export) and about a third (34.8%) sell only wholesale. In addition, a third (33.9%) of the farmers who responded rely on farmers markets for at least some of their sales. The mean amount of time practicing organic

agriculture was 10.7 years and 71.5% of the respondents were male.

Two-thirds (67%) of the farmers responding report hiring workers (besides themselves and their families) at least part of the year. Of these employers, half hire just six or fewer farmworkers at the peak of their season and most (68.3%) hire the workers directly (11.1% rely on farm labor contractors and 17.5% use a combination of both recruitment methods). When the farmers who hire farmworkers were asked if they believe workers seek work on their farm because it is an organic farm, just 16% replied “yes.” At the same time, none believe workers decline or avoid work on their farms because they are organic.

Since organic agriculture is so frequently associated with the principles of sustainable agriculture, respondents were asked if they believed organic agriculture was more environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable than conventional agriculture (see Table 1). While a fairly large majority of farmers said organic was more environmentally sustainable (with 78% replying agree or strongly agree), less than half think organic is more economically sustainable (41% agree or strongly agree). Organic is generally seen to be more socially sustainable than conventional as only 12% disagree or strongly disagree.

There is relatively little support from organic farmers, however, for adding social certification standards to the current organic certification requirements. As Table 2

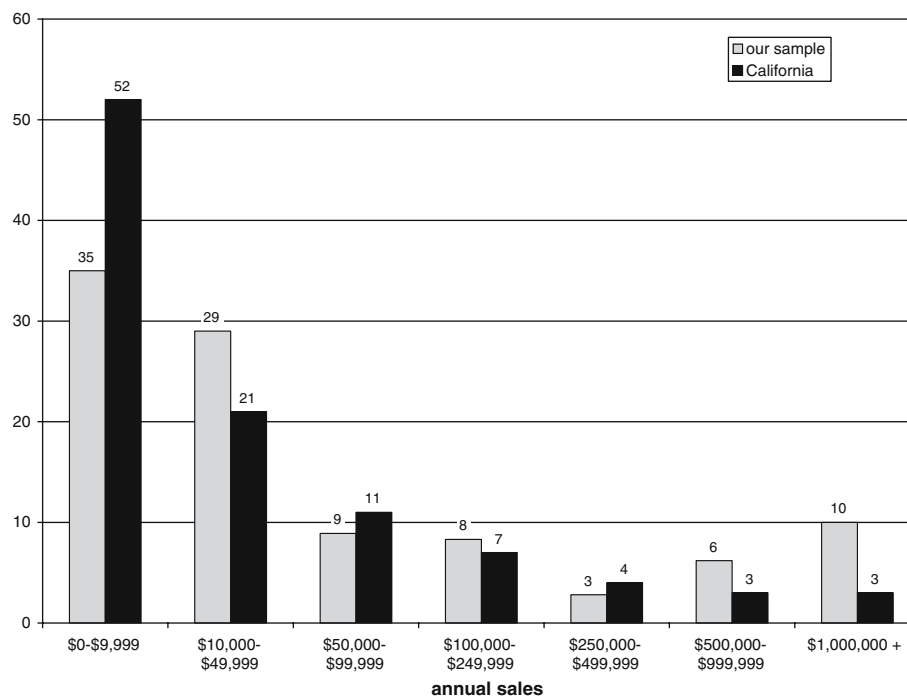


Figure 1. Distribution by sales class of study sample and all organic growers in California.

Table 1. Perceptions of organic as sustainable agriculture.

	Organic is more environmentally sustainable than conventional agriculture		Organic is more economically sustainable than conventional agriculture		Organic is more socially sustainable than conventional agriculture	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly disagree	11	5.9	21	11.4	8	4.3
Disagree	6	3.2	32	17.4	14	7.6
Neither agree/disagree	24	12.8	55	29.9	46	25.0
Agree	31	16.6	34	8.5	34	18.5
Strongly agree	115	61.5	42	22.8	82	44.6
Total	187	100.0	184	100.0	184	100.0

indicates, more than half of the respondents are opposed to this proposal, even as the international organic community plans to move forward with social justice standards. A cross-tabulation (Table 3) comparing responses to whether organic certification should include social standards by whether the farmer employs farmworkers on his/her farm indicates, as expected, an association between employer status and opinion about additional cer-

tification requirements. Specifically, farmers who employ farmworkers are more likely to disagree with additional criteria than are those who do not hire workers.

There is at least anecdotal evidence to suggest that, at the core of the organic agriculture community, small-scale farmers are philosophically committed to farming in a way such that both the land and workers fare better than they would in a conventional agricultural system. Guthman (2004a) found, in her extensive analysis of California's organic agriculture sector, that the farms with higher than average wages and benefits tend to be all-organic (as compared to farms with both organic and non-organic acreage), **larger** farms that are highly diversified and oriented toward direct marketing. In our study, as well, large farmers (in terms of annual sales) are more likely to provide their farmworkers with some fringe benefits (e.g., either health, dental, life, or vision insurance; paid vacation, pension, or sick leave) than smaller farmers (Figure 2). For instance, as shown in Table 4, farms with sales of over 1 million dollars are 31% more likely to provide health insurance to workers than those with sales of \$150,000–\$999,999 and 49% more likely than the smallest farms (sales up to \$49,000).

In terms of specific, potential social certification criteria – such as requirements to provide health insurance or pay living wages – most respondents felt that such measures were inappropriate for organic certification. Table 5 shows the percentages of respondents who indicated strong agreement or disagreement with a series of proposed requirements. In practice, more than a third (35.3%) of the employers in the sample provides at least one fringe benefit to hired farmworkers. For instance, 26.2% provide paid vacation while 19.0% provide health insurance; 9.5% provide dental insurance, and 19.0% provide paid sick leave.

Importantly, as a number of farmers reiterated through comments they included on their questionnaires, even if they **believe** that organic agriculture should ensure fair

Table 2. Should organic certification include criteria on working conditions?

	<i>n</i>	Percent (%)
Strongly disagree	74	42.3
Disagree	25	14.3
Neither agree nor disagree	33	18.9
Agree	16	9.1
Strongly agree	27	15.4
Total	175	100.0

Table 3. Cross-tabulation: Certification criteria by employer status.

	Does the grower employ farmworkers?	
	No (%)	Yes (%)
Should organic certification include criteria about working conditions?		
Strongly disagree	29.6	47.5
Disagree	7.4	17.5
Neither agree nor disagree	13.0	21.7
Agree	16.7	5.8
Strongly agree	33.3	7.5
Total	100.0	100.0

$n = 174$; Pearson χ^2 27.73, $p < 0.001$.

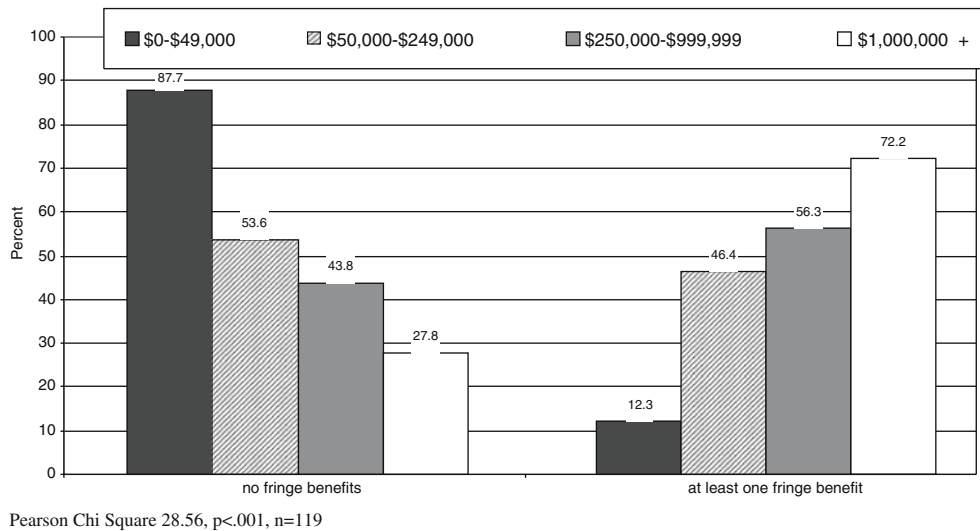


Figure 2. Employers' provision of fringe benefits by sales class Pearson χ^2 28.56, $p < 0.001$, $n = 119$.

and healthy working conditions for farmworkers, they explain that it is simply not economically viable given the realities of the market.

After being asked about the inclusion of the five potential requirements regarding working conditions, respondents were asked if the requirements would create

an **unacceptable** financial burden. Their responses confirm the above concerns: 56% strongly agreed and 11.4% agreed. Only 10.2% strongly disagreed that the requirements would be too financially burdensome.

In addition, a number of respondents questioned why organic farmers should be "singled out" and held to higher standards than other farmers, with some suggesting they would support additional criteria "only if conventional has the same requirements." Similarly, it was argued that the conditions "should be required by state law or federal law for **all** farms, both organic and conventional. It would be unfair to require it of the organic farms only."

Finally, some farmers mentioned specific obstacles such as extremely high workers compensation costs, international competition, and falling and unfavorable prices from "big brokers like Whole Foods" as preventing many farmers themselves from enjoying the benefits of health insurance or vacation pay. One

Table 4. Provision of health insurance by sales class of employer.

	Annual sales			
	\$0-\$49K	\$50-\$249K	\$250-\$999K	\$1 million +
Does employer provide health insurance?				
No	93%	82%	75%	44%
Yes	7%	18%	25%	56%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

$n = 119$; Pearson Chi Square 21.06, $p < .001$

Table 5. Perceptions of responsibilities of growers to meet additional certification criteria

	Certified growers should be required to provide ...									
	Collective bargaining rights		A living wage		Health insurance		Paid sick leave		Paid vacation	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly disagree	69	40	42	24	83	49	83	49	83	49
Disagree	11	6	10	6	16	10	20	12	22	13
Neither agree nor disagree	37	21	40	23	26	16	26	16	24	14
Agree	23	13	32	18	14	8	14	8	16	10
Strongly agree	33	19	51	29	29	17	25	15	23	14

*Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

respondent's comment summarized concisely the remarks of many: "We can't afford to hire help, much less pay benefits." Another wondered, "How can you think of insurance and paid leaves [for workers] – as a **farmer** I have neither." Some responses challenged the status quo while at the same time expressing doubt about social certification requirements. For instance, one respondent explained, "I don't have health insurance myself. I don't [think] it should be the employers responsibility: universal health coverage." And another reasoned, "get rid of imports, allow prices to reflect actual costs and I believe most family farms would absolutely support benefits such as you mention."

Discussion

Since there has been limited explicit attention paid by social scientists or others to the intersection of organic agriculture, social sustainability, and labor practices, our research was designed to explore these issues directly. In making labor more visible, we aim to deepen our knowledge about the potential for organic agriculture to foster a sustainable agrofood system that is environmentally sound, economically viable, **and** socially responsible. As part of a larger research project, this study helps to increase our very limited understanding about the perceptions of farmers regarding social certification, organic agriculture, and worker rights and about employment practices of organic farmers in California.

Findings from this organic farmer questionnaire provide insight into the implications of organic agriculture for farmworkers on California's farms. From the data we analyze here and the interviews we conducted with leaders in the organic community, it is clear that there is no consensus about whether organic agriculture, as it is currently practiced, is necessarily more socially sustainable for farmworkers than conventional agriculture. From studying the perspective of organic farmers, we suggest three phenomena that help explain this finding.

First, and significantly, it appears that the social dimension of sustainability is widely interpreted (one respondent indicated he did not know how to interpret the concept of "social sustainability"). While there is a general perception that organic agriculture **is** more socially sustainable than conventional agriculture, few farmers responding to our questionnaire felt that criteria regarding working conditions should be codified to ensure that this was the case in practice. Remarkably, about 40% of respondents "strongly disagree" with one of the proposed requirements – to "respect farmworkers right to bargain collectively." Thus, while there is widespread, international consensus about this being a foundation of fair working conditions in **any** setting, and it is

already required by California law (under the ALRA of 1975), only a third (32%) of the farmers in our study believe organic farmers should be accountable for this right.

Second, the full costs of making organic agriculture socially sustainable are being externalized to a certain degree. This is suggested by the reality that most employers of farmworkers do not provide, and perceive that they cannot afford to provide, things like living wages and health insurance. Indeed, many small-scale farmers like those who participated in this study do not provide insurance for themselves either. This finding is not surprising, as many of these same costs are externalized in the conventional agricultural system as well. However, it is worth noting that the organic farming system, touted for the higher prices its products capture, is generally perceived as sustainable even as many costs go unpaid.

Finally, our in-depth interviews with organic farmers and others in the organic community confirm that there are certainly exceptions to the patterns found in this short questionnaire. There are individuals whose practices are atypical, yet demonstrate that under some circumstances an organic production system can be at once environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable.

We believe it is important to further examine these "positive examples" by identifying the farmers' motivations, challenges, and strategies. One of the key ways to address the needs of farmworkers is to increase the wages they can earn. One farmer responding to the questionnaire mentioned that he pays workers overtime after 40 h (as opposed to the legal requirement after 60 h) per week and noted "and I encourage overtime." One farmer whom we interviewed has "slowly tried to keep increasing the hourly wage" and now provides health insurance, year-end bonuses, and some paid holidays. On his farm, a worker who works year round can earn \$25,000–\$30,000 in a year, but he worries "that's still not very much...it's not really enough...for as hard as they work, as valuable a job they are doing." Several farmers described how they decided to plant additional crops in order to provide year round work opportunities for workers who wanted it. This not only helps farmers retain good workers but also provides steady jobs in a sector where the average farmworker is employed for only 24.4 weeks per year (Martin and Mason, 2003). One farmer explains that he started increasing the diversity of his crops,

to fill in gap areas or to keep continuous work, year round work available for the people working on the farm. So we grew cabbage in the winter ... which gave us jobs in the winter to do and then we grew zucchini in June. June was always kind of the slower month... essentially to keep continuous work.

Another strategy that these farmers describe is having a diversity of tasks that workers can do in a given day. On one organic strawberry farm on the Central Coast, workers will typically work on several different operations in a single day, even though, the farmer notes, this makes supervision more complicated. Another strawberry farmer explained,

I never have the same employee do the same thing for more than six hours ... They may pick for six hours and then go weed for a couple ... put out persimilis [a beneficial insect] ... work in the vegetables ... but it keeps it so they're not bored.

Analyzing these kinds of cases can help us better understand how and why some farmers internalize the social costs of production and, in turn, realize the possibilities that could be incorporated into organic agriculture systems. For instance, the farmers interviewed insist that exceptional working conditions on their farms are dependent on delivering a top quality product. A farmer who pays workers between \$8.00 and \$15.00 per hour explained that the only way she can do this is by getting a premium price for the berries she grows. More explicitly, another berry farmer (who has a contract with the United Farm Workers union) insists that providing excellent working conditions is possible. Yet, he cautions,

it's just that you have to get absolute top dollar for your product. You have to have top quality product and you must get top dollar. It's not going to work if you're going to be kicked around in the marketplace.

Since these cases may be more the exception than the norm, understanding the motivations of farmers is helpful as well. Our exploratory findings suggest that these farmers are philosophically as well as economically motivated. For instance, one farmer explained how treating her workers with respect and paying above average wages saves her a lot of money since almost all of her seasonal crew returns each year. Her savings on training (which takes about 2 weeks or around a \$1000) totals 20–30,000 dollars each year. Providing year-round work for a core crew of workers is another way to save money on training. Another farmer noted that “keeping those same people employed is pretty important to the quality that we pack and the production that we do.” But beyond these economic calculations, he also believes that “the core people who have bought [organic produce] for a number of years ... probably want to see that the people who work on the farm have good conditions to work in and are compensated.”

We include these perhaps atypical cases in order to complement the patterns found in our analysis of the

questionnaire data. Recognizing these examples – the strategies and what makes them viable – is important because they defy the perception of the inevitability of current, dominant practices and working conditions experienced by the majority of farmworkers on conventional or organic farms.

Conclusion

Organic agriculture, which has a holistic approach that includes taking care of human beings' needs and rights, is supposed to be beneficial for all people involved at all levels. This is, indeed, an ambitious goal. Cierpka, 2002: 20

The organic community in California has discussed the inclusion of social standards regarding working conditions in organic agriculture sporadically for many years. Though there have always been those who advocated for addressing the needs of farmworkers through the certification process, certification groups never formally adopted specific criteria. The now-official definition of organic agriculture under the USDA's National Organic Program also excludes any certification criteria concerning farmworkers' rights or working conditions. Nonetheless, the broader international organic community is moving ever closer to formally addressing the needs and rights of farmworkers and attempting to ensure that organic agriculture meets the “ambitious goal” of being socially as well as environmentally and economically sustainable.

This study suggests that, at best, lukewarm support exists for social certification within organic agriculture among certified organic farmers in California. Our findings question expectations that organic agriculture necessarily fosters social or even economic sustainability for most farmers and farmworkers involved. Indeed, a majority of the organic farmers who participated in our study, and likewise in California more generally, have annual sales of less than \$50,000. Many are also unable to provide for themselves the kinds of employment benefits available to workers in most other sectors. A representative of the California Certified Organic Farmers Foundation summed up the situation as follows: “You go organic and get there and you're still in a system set up for failure. It's failing the farms, and it's failing the farmworkers, and it's failing the farm communities.”

Our findings are very much in line with this viewpoint, also espoused in the literature (see Allen et al., 1991). Thus, we argue that to empower farmworkers and to create **production** conditions that are favorable to a broader conception of social justice, change is needed in the agro-food system as a whole, not just at the point of production.

Indeed, our findings suggest that it is imperative to move beyond the deafening silences within the sustainable agriculture and organic communities in regard to the distinctly different structural positions and power asymmetries in certified organic food chains. The structural positions and interests **both** between actors at the point of production (of farmers and farmworkers) on organic farms **and** between the point of production and other nodes in the commodity chain (processing, distribution, and consumption) must be clearly delineated and addressed if we hope to envision, much less create, an agriculture that is characterized by a truly comprehensive definition of sustainability – an agriculture that is ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible.

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Notes

1. For an in-depth review of the origins of the organic movement see Conford (2001).
2. In Gershuny and Forster (1992: 8).
3. In Gershuny and Forster (1992: 11).
4. Environmental and social justice criteria were dropped in the course of formulating the National Organic Program (NOP) standards (see Fetter and Caswell 2002).

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