

Organic farming policy in Portugal: analysis of the policy network

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Introduction

Evolved from a concern of a social movement representing an alternative to mainstream agriculture (Michelsen et al., 2001), organic farming developed independently of the established agricultural institutions (Moschitz et al., 2004).

In Portugal, the roots of the organic movement can be traced back to the 1950s, but it only became formalized with the foundation of AGRO-BIO (Portuguese Organic Farming Association) in 1985. Since then, the organic sector developed considerably. In 2010, there were 2,434 organic farms cultivating 210,981 hectares, corresponding to 6% of the total agricultural land. As in many other EU countries (Michelsen et al., 2001; Greer, 2002; Hrabalova et al., 2005), growth has been triggered by the introduction and direct application of EU policies regulating and financially supporting this production system. These new policy instruments, by increasing the number of organic producers and consumers, reshaped the national organic movement (Truninger, 2010). During the last two decades, the number of regional organic farmers associations and of private companies offering certification and specialized technical services also rose. In 2005, INTERBIO (Inter-professional Organic Farming Association) was established, aiming to be the organic sector's umbrella organisation.

As organic farming became an instrument of agricultural policy, the influence of state authorities in the sector increased and the emerging organic policy, even if established as a sub-domain of general agricultural policy and strongly determined by the EU policy framework, promoted the development of a distinctive policy network in Portugal. This network was analysed in a research work carried out in spring 2011 with the aim of understanding the political structure of organic farming and the main factors determin-

Abstract

Public policies have been the main driving force behind organic farming development in Portugal. Social network analysis (SNA) was used to examine the network responsible for organic farming policy making. Results show (i) a relatively loose and not particularly interested network; (ii) a marked influence of state institutions; (iii) a divided and not sufficiently influential organic movement. By considering the main factors that influence the structure of the current policy network, this study identifies the challenges that key stakeholders face regarding further policy development.

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ing its current status. This allows to anticipate with some accuracy the probable policy outputs and the potential of the network actors to influence decisions (Sciarini, 1996). In particular, it supports policy actors' self-assessment and insight into the framework conditions for

their political work (Moschitz and Stolze, 2007). The main findings and conclusions of the study are summarised in the present paper and, as a corollary, key stakeholders' strategies for further policy development are drawn.

Material and Methods

A formal social network analysis (SNA) approach is adopted and results interpreted in light of a comprehensive knowledge of the organic farming institutional setting in the country. SNA is used to measure and map the relationships established between the various actors currently involved in organic farming policy making in Portugal. A sociometric survey was conducted with 20 representatives of public and private institutions selected by using a combination of the decisional, positional and reputational approaches (Sciarini, 1996). The quantitative measures required to characterize the structural configuration of the policy network (density, cliques, degree centrality and betweenness centrality) were computed with UCINET, Version 6.320 (Borgatti et al., 2002). The reputational power for organic farming policy was processed by using simple relative frequency tables. Finally, a graphical representation of the policy network was generated using Visone, Version 2.6.3 (Brandes and Wagner, 2011).

Since no recent studies that could serve for a meaningful interpretation of the network analysis results were available, a complementary qualitative research was carried out, mainly relying on content analysis, to examine information gathered from official documents, academic and grey literature and key informants which allowed to better explore the content and quality of relations between the network actors.

Results

“With whom do you work together or stay in regular contact in order to exchange your views on organic farming

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policy more closely and/or frequently?” was the sociometric question used in the survey that enabled to represent the network of close contacts and collaboration relationships among the actors influencing organic farming policy. Figure 1 shows the network visualization displayed by Visone.

Size and composition of the policy network: The national organic farming policy network is made up of 20 actors, comprising 4 state bodies of the agricultural ministry, 10 private organisations both from the mainstream and organic farming sectors and the 6 political parties with parliament seat. Only a minority (6) is predominantly oriented towards organic farming.

Cohesion within the policy network: In SNA, cohesion is the extent to which the actors are connected to each other (Hanneman and Riddle, 2005). It is measured at the network level by the density of the network; at the subgroup level, it is explored through the existence of cliques.

Density is defined as the ratio of actual ties to the number of possible ties in a network. Values range from 0 (no ties present) to 1 (all actors are interconnected). The network density is 0.1368, meaning that only 13.7% of all the possible ties are present. This value could be considered low and suggests that the policy in question – at the time of the study – is of little interest for most of the network actors.

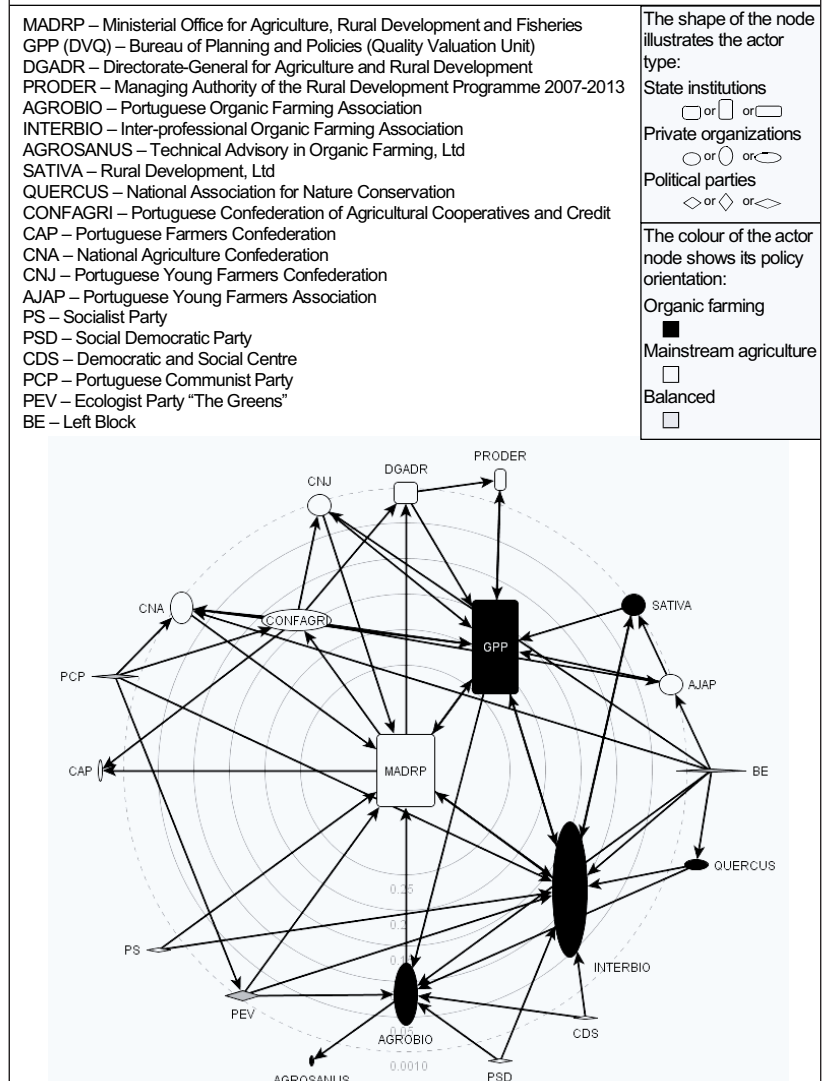
UCINET indicates the existence of only one clique (a subgroup of actors mutually interacting), made up of the Agricultural Ministerial Office (MADRP), the state department for organic farming (GPP), and INTERBIO, one of the main organic sector organisations. This demonstrates the existence of well established contacts between INTERBIO and the two main state institutions with a stake in organic farming. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, given the lack of cohesion within the national organic movement, AGROBIO, the other key organisation, is not included in the clique.

Distribution of power in the policy network: The study focuses on two different concepts of power, assessed through centrality and reputation measures. Degree centrality measures the number of ties that an actor is involved in. The more ties an actor has, the more choices it has and the less it depends on any specific other actor, hence more powerful it is (Hanneman and Riddle, 2005). In Figure 1, node size is mapped to the degree centrality, whereby the vertical extent refers to the number of ties received (in-degree) and the horizontal extent to the number of ties sent (out-degree). If an actor receives many ties, it is often said to have high prestige, whereas actors who have high out-degree might be regarded as influential (Hanneman and Riddle, 2005). Betweenness centrality views an actor being in a structurally advantageous position to the extent to which it lies

between many pairs of actors on their shortest or geodesic paths (Hanneman and Riddle, 2005). In other words, betweenness centrality is a global network measure, describing the potential of a network actor to act as an information broker (Moschitz and Stolze, 2007). The normalized values of betweenness centrality are used to position the actors in the network (Figure 1), so that the actor with the highest betweenness centrality is in its centre. The network analysis shows that only few actors have a relatively good range of direct ties and present simultaneously the highest betweenness centrality (nodes closer to the centre) and the highest degree centrality (larger nodes), while all the remaining actors are represented by small size peripheral nodes. This limited group includes MADRP, GPP, CONFAGRI (one of the main general agricultural organisations), INTERBIO and AGROBIO.

A reputational approach is also used to identify the distribution of power within the network. The more other actors believe that an actor is of particular importance in a policy

Figure 1 - Portuguese organic farming policy network.



field, the more this actor can make its point heard and thus has the power to influence the policy outcome (Moschitz and Stolze, 2007). This method does not constitute an exploration of the real power of an actor but a sort of opinion poll on its power (Sciarini, 1996). In this study was assessed by asking the interviewees to name the three most important institutions for organic farming policy. The two main state bodies (MADRP and GPP) and the two major organic farming organisations (INTERBIO and AGROBIO) present the highest scores for reputational power, confirming the most powerful position in the network given by centrality measures.

Discussion

The analysis showed that in Portugal, the organic policy arena is characterised by a relatively broad and diversified policy network where the level of interaction is generally low and a small sub-group of actors, closely interconnected between each other, is in a central dominating position. Actors included in this circle of power also interact to some extent with the many other secondary actors (small and peripheral nodes) of the network for which, however, organic policy does not represent an exclusive field of interest and action and a priority in their agenda. Additionally, resource scarcity affects many network players and no specific policy process currently in place appears to be able to catalyse the national debate and foster more intense interaction between the network actors.

The dominating sub-group playing a key role in shaping national organic policy consists of two state actors (MADRP and GPP) and only one of the two main organisations of the national organic movement (INTERBIO). The centralization in organic policy making, predominantly focused on the direct application of EU regulatory and policy measures, the high level of integration of organic farming policy inside the state structure and a clear governmental interest in organic policy manifest in the political recognition of organic farming, are all important elements that contribute to explain the reason why Portuguese organic policy network mainly revolves around the institutional role, the routine activities and the consultative needs and initiatives of the governmental institutions. And even though the centralized decision-making style does not leave much room for negotiation with interest groups, the state appears to have found an interlocutor in the would-be national umbrella organisation, INTERBIO.

INTERBIO has overt political activity as its main objective and the limitations in terms of finances, constituency and legal status do not seem to hamper the organisation's engagement in organic policy making. Coincidentally, just a few months before the interviews, this organisation set up meetings with the Minister of Agriculture, political parties and organic farming organisations to present a proposal for an organic action plan that in Portugal is lacking. The recentness of this event, made INTERBIO a well known player amidst the organic farming policy network, explain-

ing the highest prestige and reputation attributed to this organisation. Therefore, INTERBIO is on one hand closer to the core organic policy actors and processes but, on the other hand, it is struggling to fully assert its representative claims within a fragmented movement made of many regional organisations and other actors and where the two main organisations, INTERBIO and AGROBIO, alternatively (rather than jointly) represent the sector, do not cooperate and tend to have parallel initiatives. Though not part of the core circle, the pioneer organisation AGROBIO, is the fourth most central and powerful actor, included in policy consultations and technical committees but significantly more involved in field activities rather than in the national policy arena and actively representing Portugal in various international projects and events.

The fragmentation and internal divisions of the national organic movement contribute to the unbalanced and weak representation of the sector not only in the relation with governmental institutions but also in the necessary dialogue with mainstream agricultural organisations which has been so far virtually non-existent. These, too, are part of the network but do not show any direct specific interaction with organic interest groups since mainstream-organic relation is essentially mediated by state actors. Clearly, the organic sector being still very small, there is no basis for the emergence of that *creative conflict* (Michelsen et al., 2001) which could promote an enduring growth of organic farming.

Finally, it cannot remain unnoticed the absence in the network of some other important players, like for instance market actors and research institutions, which can play an important role in the development of the national organic sector but that appear not to be directly involved in the policy arena.

Conclusion

SNA enabled to identify the main traits of the Portuguese organic farming policy network: the institutions influencing the national organic policy, their power relations and the main factors affecting the network. On the basis of the research findings some conclusions and recommendations for the key network players could be drawn.

It was made clear that, in Portugal, organic farming policy is predominantly driven by EU policies and, consistently, the agricultural ministry plays the central role in the national organic farming policy network. Policy initiatives do not go beyond the need to comply with developments at the EU level and the national debate on organic policy issues is generally scarce. The network's performance appears to be highly dependent on the initiatives of the dominating sub-group and lacks cohesion. Even if, in the current moment of economic and financial crisis, organic farming may not be a political priority for Portugal, the agricultural ministry could adopt some of the following measures to improve the quality of organic farming policy making: (i) create formal forums for discussion on issues of organic farming policy, ensuring a broad participation and involvement of the sec-

tor in strategic decisions; and (ii) create the position of network manager, with no powers to direct but much scope to seek cooperation between main policy actors.

It was also found that the influential power of the two major organic farming organisations is still relevant, particularly when compared to that of the secondary network actors. Nevertheless, the lack of a strongly unified organic farming community and of a healthy dialogue with mainstream agricultural organisations is weakening the political influence of organic interest groups. Therefore it would be important for the sector's organisations to: (i) promote a higher level of cooperation within the organic farming community and thereby strengthen the identity of the sector as a whole; (ii) establish contacts and exchange views with the general agricultural community laying the basis for developing *creative conflict*; (iii) create meaningful ties with the most central actor in the organic farming policy network, i.e. the agricultural ministry; (iv) diffuse knowledge and information about organic farming to create a favorable environment for debate; and (v) bring organic farming onto the political agenda capturing the interest and mobilizing the resources of the network secondary actors.

From the methodological point of view it is worth mentioning that the combination of SNA with a qualitative analysis has proven to be effective in capturing the complexity of the examined policy network: the static picture provided by SNA was complemented by a dynamic perspective explored through qualitative methods.

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