Consumption and Consumer Behaviour of Organic AGRI-FOOD Products

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Abstract

The trend for a healthy life obtained as a result of a balanced diet is found in the list of main trends that will affect consumer behaviour and their choices about consumption. Information and the increase in purchasing power especially among millennials allows a significant increase in demand for organic products, obtained as a result of sustainable production processes. The primary aim of the present research is to investigate the consumption and consumer behaviour of organic agri-food products based on literature review and reports analysis. The main findings show that consumers are much more flexible, willing to make purchases on different platforms, and merchants must respond to this trend through investments to ensure their online presence. The expectations of the modern consumer involve establishing a post-purchase connection with the organic agri-food manufacturer. Purchasing local agri-food products is gaining ground, as it supports local entrepreneurship, assimilates the principles of environmental protection, avoiding as much as possible imported products, that involve transport and default pollution. There is a significant increase in the interest that both large companies and niche entrepreneurs show about the environment. In this sense, agri-food producers develop authentic environmental strategies, thus creating profitable business models from innovative green businesses.

Keywords: *agri-food production, consumer behaviour, ethical consumer, organic products.*

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1. Introduction

The evolution of consumer demands in the field of food and environmental protection has acquired, through the amplitude of manifestation and the depth of their consequences, a global and permanent dimension (Tonner, 2000; Trienekens & Zuurbier, 2008; Fung, Wang & Menon, 2018). The obvious impact of agricultural activities on the quality of the environment has determined an increasingly rigorous concern for compatibility between the two terms of the equation, in the sense of mitigating the negative consequences of agriculture while developing its ecological functions (Urra, Alkorta & Garbisu, 2019; van der Werf, Knudsen & Cederberg, 2020). It is increasingly stated that the "industrial society" is moving towards a "risk

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society", characterized by a recognition of the destructive potential and negative effects of scientific and technological development. In recent decades, the implementation of monitoring and quality assurance systems for agri-food products has become a common practice. These approaches emphasize that the identification and monitoring of critical control points in food production can make important contributions to improving consumer food safety (Panghal et al., 2018).

The current consumer is evolving in terms of individual needs and demands on the quality of products on the market (Van Nguyen et al., 2020), is an informed, educated consumer (Singh & Verma, 2017) and, in most cases, a consumer aware of his rights about economic agents promoting their products (Minor, 2012), so marketers and advertisers have had to find new strategies in promoting their products and improve their advertising to be credible (Egan, 2014). Against the background of consumer evolution, the advertising market has also evolved qualitatively, in the sense that the advertising message can no longer have strictly informative content, but must motivate the consumer, including emotionally, to purchase the promoted product. From a legislative perspective, it is important for the individual consumer to feel permanently protected by the regulations in the field of food promotion, to have confidence in the advertising message (Tandon et al., 2020). Multiple elements influence the business environment's performance, one of which is governmental institutions, which can regulate enterprises' operations through the adoption of regulations, standards, and taxes, among other things (Trifu, Gîrneață & Potcovaru, 2015). The need to strengthen the consumer's sense of security in the legislative framework on the advertising of products in general, food in particular, is felt in the context in which, on the one hand, the consumer subjected to a large volume of promotional messages in his daily work becomes saturated, consciously rejecting it, and on the other hand, the consumer, having access to information on technological processes and innovations in the food industry, such as food enhancers, artificial substitutes, genetically modified organisms, synthetic products, etc., does no longer trust the food on the market or the advertising activity.

2. Theoretical background

Research on the consumption of organic agri-food products is a relatively new topic and the number of studies is increasing significantly in the context of high market demand and rapid economic and social transformations in Central and Eastern Europe (Saitone & Sexton, 2017; Barrett et al., 2020; Borsellino, Schimmenti & El Bilali, 2020). Research on consumers and organic products (Oroian et al., 2017), product demand (Wojciechowska-Solis & Soroka, 2017), dietary changes (Strassner et al., 2015; Lusk & McCluskey, 2018), consumer perception and attitude (Oroian et al., 2017), consumer concern about the ethical principles of production and marketing (Singh & Verma, 2017), environment (Sazvar, Rahmani & Govindan, 2018), welfare, public health, etc. are reported. The interest for this kind of study is explicable because the ecological production, in contrast to other segments of the agricultural activity, is in full development.

Organic production as global farm management and food production system combines best environmental practices, a high level of biodiversity, the conservation of natural resources and the application of high animal welfare standards (Dinis et al., 2015). The main purpose of organic farming is the production of agri-food products with a high content of biologically active substances, free of synthetic chemicals, which can seriously harm human health, in the circumstances of a sustainable, healthy ecosystem with high productivity potential (Gullón et al., 2020; Fraga-Corral et al., 2021).

The key principles of organic farming are (Vogt, 2007; Ch, 2010):

- Prohibition of the use of chemical and synthetic fertilizers, as well as pesticides, herbicides;
- Severe restriction of antibiotics and growth hormones and absence of GMOs;
- Ensuring crop rotation. The agricultural producer must draw up a calendar plan on this fact, to fit the previous crops well so that their pests do not escape and the crops that will succeed.
- Preservation of crop rotations. Compliance with crop rotations can be a problem when organic farming is limited. Farmers are also allowed to produce conventional in addition to organic goods, but they must clearly separate their agricultural activities. A simple rule is that at least the crops from the same family/species should not be placed next to each other so that the pests do not pass from one culture to another;
- Raising animals outdoors, feeding them organic feed;
- Suppression of animal life by methods that would minimize suffering.

The difficulties experienced by the marketing of agricultural and especially organic products are related to the characteristics of production, of the products themselves, of demand, as well as to the nature of the rural world where these products are produced (Jouzi et al., 2017; Pan et al., 2018), as follows:

- Agricultural production is essentially food in nature, located irregularly in space and time and very dispersed.
- The products are perishable and to a large extent seasonal.
- The consumption demand of the population is uneven.
- Product collection is difficult and expensive.
- The preservation of perishable products requires large investments, both in transport, storage and technical equipment.

Regarding the link between the evolution of the consumer market in general and that of agri-food products, it should be noted that, in general, the growth rates recorded by them are not similar (Hobbs & Kerr, 2006). This is determined by the nature of the needs to which agricultural and food products are mainly addressed. Addressing in particular physiological needs, the demand for agri-food products is inelastic about the income of the population. In the expansion periods, when there is an increase in household income and, implicitly, an upward evolution of the consumer market, the share of agri-food products in total consumer spending is generally declining. The increase in consumer spending is valid in these periods especially for those categories of goods that address higher needs and to a lesser extent for agri-food products. In times of crisis, organizations in the agricultural and food industry are not subject to the same risks as enterprises that offer goods and services to higher needs on the market, the population directing its diminished incomes primarily to meet primary needs, to the detriment of products that meet higher needs.

Moreover, in the case of the low-income population that ensures a decent standard of living, the decrease in income (periods of crisis) may be accompanied by reorientations from more expensive processed food products to cheaper unprocessed agricultural products. The increase of revenues in periods of expansion may be accompanied by changes in consumption in the opposite direction to that presented.

Price appreciation is one of the elements that can influence behavioral patterns (Deac et al., 2016). The motivational structures that should lead to a well-defined business behaviour for this market segment are in turn diffuse and unorganized. The range of negative reasons specific to the sale of organic products is extremely wide (Lockie et al., 2004), but there are, in the assessment of the investigated subjects, several that are repeated with increasing frequency:

- there is no organized market for the sale of organic products;
- there is insufficient publicity for these products;
- organic products are too expensive;
- sellers do not show a special interest in capitalizing on organic products;
- the state does not provide sufficient support for the promotion of organic products.

Pro-ecological commercial behaviours are influenced not only by the degree of knowledge and information but also by their values or perceptions. There are various structures of how the prices of organic products are perceived and of the causality of the inefficient marketing of this type of product.

Evaluating the existing situation, it can be stated that aggressive promotion of organic products and an effective marketing policy at the store level is required. Promotion and marketing strategies should focus differently on the following target groups: people with high school education, undergraduate and postgraduate studies. In general, the middle class should be targeted, which has an incipient pro-ecological commercial behaviour, has commercial curiosities and has a strong consumerist behaviour.

Product promotion actions, carried out through marketing campaigns and promotions, as well as special offers or advertising, stimulate the demand for products at the level of the respective states. An important role in increasing sales is also played by large supermarket chains, hypermarkets and discount stores. In countries such as Switzerland and Denmark, large retailers have their brands under which they record the largest increases in sales of different categories of organic products (Janssen & Hamm, 2012). Gradually, organic products began to be used in the production process in the food and catering industries, as a result of a growing demand from consumers, determined by the awareness of the impact that healthy food, produced without additives, has in ensuring food safety, health and thus well-being.

3. Research Methodology

The present research aims to investigate consumption and consumer behaviour of organic agri-food products from a theoretical perspective. Therefore, the appropriate methodology identified and applied was qualitative research. A literature review was performed based on the analysis of various reports, research articles and up-to-date books that address the issue of organic agri-food production. The results of the analysis undertaken target the following objectives:

- analysing the evolution of key indicators on organic agriculture at World and European level and presenting some conclusions regarding the registered results;
- identifying and analysing the trends in the evolution of consumption behaviour in agri-food products;
- establishing the main megatrends regarding the behaviour of European consumers regarding agri-food products.

The main results obtained from the analyses are presented in the following sections of the article, together with personal considerations regarding the identified problems.

4. Evolution of key indicators on organic agriculture

Demand for organic products has grown steadily over the last decade, driving production growth and sales growth in this market segment. According to information provided by the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL), the main indicators that characterize organic agriculture have seen steady growth in recent years, both globally and in Europe. Worldwide, according to the latest data available on the institute's website, in 2019 there were 72,285,658 ha of organic area. The values of this indicator increased constantly, by approximately 1,000,000 ha annually, except in 2013, when the growth was spectacular, respectively being cultivated over 7,000,000 ha of organic crops in addition to 2012. Organic retail sales also encountered steady growth every and in 2019, organic products recorded retail sales worth 106.404 million euros (Table 1.)

Table 1: Evolution of key indicators on organic agriculture- worldwide

Year	Organic area (farmland) [ha]	Organic producers	Organic retail sales [Million €]
2019	72,285,658	3,135,436	106,404
2018	71,172,783	2,781,011	97,747
2017	69,411,457	2,925,492	92,73

Year	Organic area (farmland) [ha]	Organic producers	Organic retail sales [Million €]
2016	58,090,567	2,539,671	84,663
2015	50,365,075	2,233,825	75,549
2014	48,694,674	2,063,935	61,277
2013	43,067,952	1,954,034	54,807
2012	36,832,974	1,906,916	49,528
2011	36,670,679	1,766,789	43,861
2010	35,713,927	1,564,348	41,227

Source: FIBL statistics, https://statistics.fibl.org

According to the data provided by FiBL, the increase is a constant among organic producers, which in 2019 registered a value of 3,135,436 (Figure 1). However, it is found that organic agriculture is not carried out on large areas of land, each producer being distributed, on average, 23 ha.

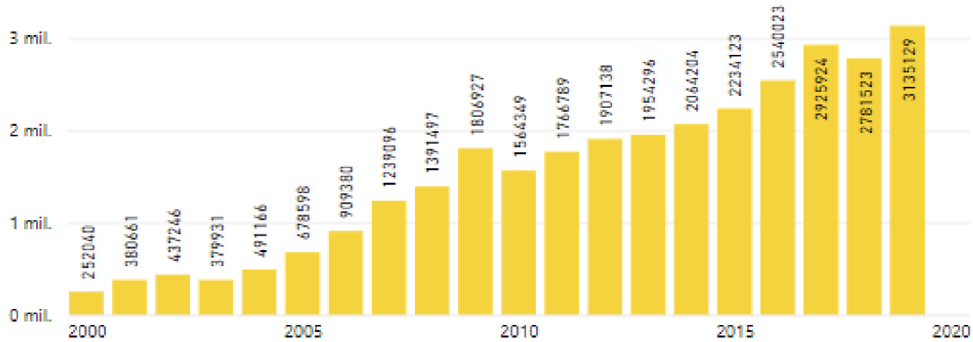

Figure 1. Evolution of the number of organic producers – worldwide

Source: FIBL statistics, https://statistics.fibl.org

The development of national markets within the European single market is different, with fluctuations and trends that are worth analysing. In 2019, 16,528,677 ha were cultivated with organic crops, but this value represents only 2% of the total available farmland (FiBL, 2021). At the European level, 430,742 organic producers were registered, and retail sales of organic products amounted to over 45,000 million euros (Table 2).

The demand for organic products is unbalanced, being concentrated especially in the states of Western Europe. However, in recent years there has been a growing trend in demand for organic products in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, mainly Romania, Poland and Hungary, traditionally recognized for organic crops intended mainly for export. Therefore, the European market for organic products is performing globally, is in full development, with significant potential for growth in the coming years.

Table 2: Evolution of key indicators on organic agriculture- Europe

Year	Organic area (farmland) [ha]	Organic area share of total farmland [%]	Organic producers	Organic retail sales [Million €]
2019	16,528,677	3	430,742	45,048
2018	15,607,635	3	419,019	41,701
2017	14,382,479	2	391,673	37,687
2016	13,535,234	2	373,251	33,681
2015	12,663,904	2	348,986	30,062
2014	11,757,323	2	337,466	26,220
2013	11,397,344	2	331,075	24,230
2012	11,154,985	2	320,483	22,736
2011	10,548,522	2	289,628	21,298
2010	10,028,781	2	273,375	19,447

Source: FIBL statistics, https://statistics.fibl.org

The increase in consumption of organic products at the European level has also been due to the increased consumer confidence in organic agri-food products, and this is due to the rigorous implementation of control and certification systems, which ensure compliance with relevant standards imposed by European legislation in force. Both ensuring an optimal competitive environment and optimizing the free movement of environmentally friendly goods within the single market are priority objectives for the EU, to protect the interests of European consumers. Thus, the role of control bodies and certification authorities for organic products is crucial in implementing one of the fundamental principles for the development of the organic sector. Control bodies are either independent private entities or public authorities responsible for certification and inspections in the organic sector, at the level of production, processing and distribution, including the category of organic agri-food products imported. Given that organic products marketed on the European market are not fully produced in the single market, so as not to affect consumer confidence and stimulate their consumption, imported organic products are subject to the same set of rules, being verified and certified under certain conditions. similar to the local ones. In this respect, an equivalent role is played by equivalent control bodies, which operate in the countries from which organic products are imported by the EU because they implement production and control rules equivalent to European ones.

Rigorous and uniform regulation of the import of organic products from third countries is one of the objectives underlying the increase in consumption of organic agri-food products, by increasing consumer confidence in the quality and safety of imported organic products. In this way, the share of currently imported organic products, which is currently quite low, will be able to increase in the coming years, with the European final consumer having the certainty that similar production criteria are met as within the EU. To this end, it is necessary to increase the monitoring and evaluation measures carried out by the European Commission, including by increasing the number and complexity of audits carried out at the level of equivalent control bodies operating at the level of the largest exporters of organic products to the EU, for example, the Dominican Republic. All these corroborated invoices led to a positive evolution of the consumption of certified organic products, reflected in the market share of organic products in the total value of sales of agri-food products. In turn, the supply of organic products has adapted to increasing demand, through a significant increase in production reflected by the increase of relevant indicators such as the total agricultural area used organically, the number of farms dedicated to organic farming and the total number of operators, whether we are talking about organic producers, processors or traders of organic agri-food products (importers and exporters).

5. Behaviour of European consumers

Awareness of obesity as one of the major problems facing the global population attracts significant changes in consumer behaviour, in the expectations they have from agri-food products. The establishment of new product evaluation criteria, by introducing those related to complete and correct information on the composition and traceability of products, leads to changes in consumer choices and thus sales hierarchies and the market structure as a whole. In this sense, through transparency and traceability, the "ethical gap" between the desire of consumers of ethical products, implicitly ecological, and their willingness to pay more for them can be reduced (Wei, Ang & Jancenelle, 2018). Consumer access to valuable information on product traceability allows manufacturers to create communication bridges that significantly contribute to increasing consumer confidence in those products and thus to their loyalty.

The trend for a healthy life obtained as a result of a balanced diet is found in the list of main trends that will affect consumer behaviour and their choices about consumption. The megatrend is defined in the research conducted by Euromonitor as a change in consumer behaviour and attitudes, a change that has a global impact and crosses industries. Thus, the impact it generates is not short-term, the megatrend being a long-term trend, which reflects a fundamental change in the behaviour that defines consumer markets. Changes in the distribution of economic power and global incomes, the rapid pace of technological innovation, the aging of the global population, the growing constraints on the depletion of natural resources and climate change on economic production and the change in the system values, due to the influence of ideological factors, including political movements, determine the main megatrends, the estimate being made by 2030. Starting with the simple consumer and including institutional and governmental actors, needs and perceptions of the world are constantly evolving. Generational changes, as well as cultural factors or political changes, simultaneously contribute to shaping consumers, the way they think, perceive and react on the market.

Against the background of a significant increase in the number of people affected by obesity, food intolerance to various foods (such as lactose or gluten), but also other medical conditions caused by an unhealthy diet and lifestyle, the concern for adopting a balanced diet becoming more common. Healthy food, implicitly organic agri-food products, is one of the eight megatrends that will significantly influence the consumption habits of Europeans and beyond. Inside the megatrend regarding the balanced diet, we find the intention of consumers to consume foods that contain as few amounts of pesticides, phosphates, as well as fewer amounts of salt, sugar or gluten. A distinctive element that is worth mentioning is that, in the Euromonitor study, there was no statistically significant reluctance on the part of consumers to show products containing animal or vegetable fats.

The aging population at the European level is a business opportunity for companies that understand the needs of this segment of consumers. Thus, the current generations have a slower pace of aging, and unlike previous generations, now the age gap is blurring and even disappearing, which contributes to the emergence of a new category of consumers with very specific needs, namely ageless people. who, despite their mature age, have concerns that, in past generations, would have been rather associated with a younger age group. The share of the elderly about the total population increases every year. The age characteristics of the population, corroborated with the major trend regarding maintaining health through a balanced lifestyle, will significantly contribute to shaping consumption characteristics. Given the importance that the mature consumer plays in shaping consumption trends at the European level, it must be borne in mind that this category is the most financially stable, with a standard of living and purchasing power superior to all other segments. of age.

The concern for a healthy lifestyle derives precisely from this main trend, and here we find as sub-trends organic food, ethical and sustainable consumption, sports activity, active participation in various social and civic activities. To meet these consumers' needs to optimize their healthy years, manufacturers need to provide intuitive products and, at the same time, use the right marketing tools so that they can appeal to both young and mature audiences, the new typology of the ageless public.

6. The ethical consumer

Another megatrend that is gaining ground in the market is the lifeline governed by ethical principles. Both final consumers and economic agents base their consumption decisions, more and more often, depending on the degree to which the products respect certain ethical and moral values. Among the most significant ethical arguments are the desire to protect the environment, sustainability, animal protection, whether referring to testing animals or killing them for meat or fur, the use of sustainable production techniques, or the desire to make a positive impact on a community, as a result of the consumption of a certain product. In the latter case, the conduct of social responsibility campaigns can be a comparative advantage and an element that counts positively within the megatrend regarding the lifestyle governed by ethical principles. Equally, the economic development of some rural communities, as a result of the development of organic farming, may be an additional argument of an urban consumer in choosing local products from the rural area of the region.

The Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) industry, namely the frequently purchased consumer goods, is undoubtedly affected by trade trends dictated by consumer needs and principles and in 2019 the main concerns of consumers were sustainability and environmental protection. The megatrend of a lifestyle governed by ethical principles is decisively influenced by three main factors: awareness, availability and accessibility.

Information as well as the increase in purchasing power especially among millennials allows a significant increase in demand for sustainable, environmentally friendly products, obtained as a result of sustainable production processes. The response of companies to the change that the trend of ethical consumption imprints in the structure of demand did not take long to appear, they increasingly resorted to the principles of the circular economy. Thus, we find in companies' elements of circularity such as simplifying the design of packaging and products, using recycled materials, encouraging reuse by using a modular structure and facilitating consumer access to spare parts, providing instructions and repair platforms, and the transition of from products to services (Lüdeke-Freund, Gold & Bocken, 2019).

As regards the degree of reuse and recycling of a package, it becomes an increasingly relevant criterion in the ethical consumer's purchasing decision. Although the concept of clean label is not a scientific one, it was taken from consumers and now has a generally accepted use, is associated with products that contain ingredients easily recognizable by end consumers, without additives or chemicals. A clean label is a symbol of trust, an additional certification of the quality of the product (Asioli et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2019).

The growing consumer appetite for products that reflect the ethical change of consumers towards more sustainable lifestyles has positioned sustainability as a priority for companies in shaping their product and service offerings, with the proliferation of voluntary commitments and the launch of sustainable products and innovative services in all industries. Understanding the major impact it generates among consumers, more and more frequently, companies incorporate ethics in their main business strategy as an element of market differentiation, respectively as a comparative advantage over competitors

7. Trends in the evolution of consumption behavior

Under the influence of the megatrend regarding the reinvention of the shopping process, the whole shopping experience is transformed. Thus, the ethical consumer no longer wants the simple purchase of a product or service, but carefully follows the entire experience associated with the purchase process (Harper & Makatouni, 2002). In other words, the purchase of a product or service is made following a careful evaluation, based on the evaluation of the degree to which the manufacturer complies with a series of qualitative criteria, as well as principles related to sustainability, transparency and direct relationship with the consumer. The expectations of the modern consumer involve establishing a post-purchase connection with the manufacturer. Therefore, the expectations of the ethical consumer refer to the permanent assistance from the seller, both before the purchase and during the use of the product, respectively after the purchase (Thøgersen et al., 2015). The ethical and modern consumer will opt for the purchase of products mainly from those producers who adopt the principles of the circular economy so that the life of the product is extended, producers involved in social responsibility activities or who assume responsibilities related to separate collection and recycling (Nedelcu, Dima & Dinulescu, 2018).

Another revolutionary element is the change in the hierarchy of product distribution channels to the final consumer. In the last decade, the way of purchasing is constantly evolving, dictated mainly by economic development and technological innovation. Under the rule of value changes, as well as a result of the increased accessibility to the internet, the modern consumer has changed his consumption behaviour also in terms of how he makes the purchase. Thus, consumers are much more flexible, willing to make purchases on different platforms, and merchants must respond to this trend through investments to ensure their online presence, both as a website and with dedicated pages on social networks, ready to respond to a purchase request regardless of the channel. The tendency to buy using channels considered until now to be nonconformist is more and more accentuated, especially as the buying habits extend from goods to services. In the category of online sales, a spectacular increase can be noticed in the segment of mobile internet sales. This category of sales registers the most significant increase, highlighting the importance of social networks and applications developed by large retailers to facilitate consumer access to the desired products or services. Sales through social media and messaging (s-commerce), subscriptions to mobile applications, pop-up facilities or other innovative methods allow the adaptation of the sales method both to the typology of the product or service and to the target audience.

Along with a healthy lifestyle and ethical consumption, in Euromonitor research, we find other global megatrends that will define our daily habits in the future, such as the consumption of local products, in response to the phenomenon of globalization. Thus, the purchase of local agri-food products is becoming an increasingly well-defined trend, from a combination of corroborated considerations: supporting local entrepreneurship, fresh food and assimilating the principles of environmental protection, avoiding as much as possible imported products, which involve transport and default pollution. At the same time, the consumption of niche products is gaining more and more ground, allowing the consumer to personalize their menu in a way that is as specific as possible to their own needs and aspirations.

As a general trend, there is a significant increase in the interest that both large companies and niche entrepreneurs show about the environment. In this sense, companies develop authentic environmental strategies, thus creating profitable business models from innovative green businesses (Dima, 2021). By taking these models as widely as possible, the overall results will be considerably improved. In this sense, there are already companies whose models can be successful examples.

8. Conclusions

A decade ago, the sale of organic products took place in small and specialized stores, cooperatives or local outlets. However, the market for organic products in supermarkets has grown steadily, and the increase in sales of organic products in supermarkets reflects a general trend (similar to that of conventional products), towards a more intensive and standardized market, the trend supported by the policy applied by national chains and international supermarkets. There is also evidence of increased interest in alternative distribution channels, such as online shops.

The great success of organic farming in Western states is due to at least the following three factors:

- allocation of subsidies for farmers, especially through agri-environmental schemes covered by European funds;
- consolidating a commercial chain with the sale of organic products in stores other than specialized ones (the latter, frequented primarily by eco-fans), demonstrating that organic products are not just a niche market;
- the existence of effective consumer advertising and information programs.

Although in developed countries the rules and principles of organic farming have become a constant of agricultural policies, this type of agriculture belongs to the future, because at present, the total replacement of inputs with resources and natural mechanisms to regulate agroecosystems has the great disadvantage of increasing production costs by approximately and reduces the level of yields.

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