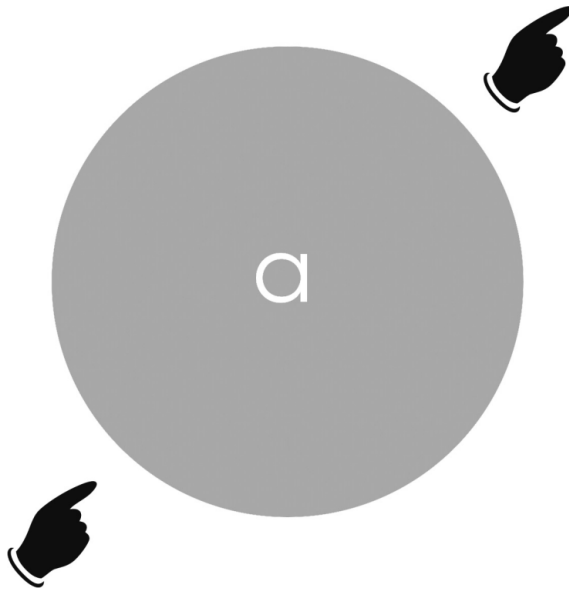


Extended abstract

*Valencian Organic Farming. Diagnosis of the
Sector and Evaluation of Regional Policies
through Participatory Action-research*



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Highlights:

1. The articulation of the SPI has allowed the creation of a space that is functioning as a forum and observatory.
2. The research has identified a wide range of weaknesses that hinder the progression of a sector still expanding.
3. The SPI has made a critical assessment of the public policies, not so much for its possible shortcomings, but for a need to increase the support it provides.
4. The weakness of domestic demand has been identified as the main factor strangling the growth of Valencian agroecology.
5. It is necessary a greater transversality of policies to stimulate demand and greater coordination of institutions.

Abstract: Organic farming has advanced significantly in various Spanish regions, with contrasting characteristics and dynamics, and facing different obstacles. This is a key sector in terms of its capacity to dynamize Spanish agriculture and reinforce the implementation of European policies of ecological transition. This work is a participatory research action that aims, on the one hand, to develop a general diagnosis of organic agriculture in the Valencian Community, in order to identify problems, interconnections between factors and agents, possible solutions and barriers to its implementation. On the other hand, the work performs an analysis of the efficiency of public policies to support the sector developed in the last decade. These objectives were addressed through the creation of mental model maps, based on semi-structured interviews and two workshops with the participation of a wide group of agents representing all the groups involved in the evolution of the sector. The results allow us to outline a complete diagnosis of the sector that highlights some structural deficiencies of Valencian agriculture, identifies specific problems of the agroecological sector and analyzes the contrast between the dynamics of rainfed and irrigated areas. It also shows the level of performance of public policies, identifying strengths and weaknesses, among which the problems in growing domestic demand stand out.

Keywords: agroecology, agricultural policy, agrifood systems, ecological transition, science-policy interface.

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Extended abstract

1. Introduction

Organic farming has made significant progress in various regions of Spain, with distinct characteristics and dynamics, while facing different challenges. In the Valencian Community, the advancement of organic farming in the last decade has been more significant than in the rest of the country. Much of this progress can be attributed to public support through the First Valencian Plan for Organic Production (2016-2020) and the Second Valencian Plan for Agroecological Transition (2021-2026). Between 2016 and 2019, the certified area grew by nearly 60 %; however, since 2019, this progress has slowed. Initially, one might think that the factors driving the sector have weakened, that the sector is facing new challenges, or that growth opportunities have been exhausted. This study seeks to address these and other questions.

2. Methodology

To do this, a participatory action-research approach was adopted. On the one hand, a general diagnosis of organic farming in the Valencian Community was developed to identify problems, interconnections between factors and agents, potential solutions, and barriers to implementation. On the other hand, the study evaluates the effectiveness of public policies supporting the sector over the last decade.

The research was conceived as a participatory action-research project, structured as a collective reflection with sector agents to facilitate the development of strategies that would advance and consolidate organic farming in the region. This participatory action research was carried out within the framework of a Science-Policy Interface (SPI), launched in early 2023. The term SPI refers to points of intersection between scientists and other political actors that allow for exchange, co-evolution, and the joint construction of knowledge to enhance decision-making. Around thirty representatives from various groups involved in the sector participated in the SPI, including government bodies, professional organizations, producers, consumers, cooperatives, agroecology NGOs, technicians, researchers, retailers, restaurateurs, and irrigation communities.

Within the framework of the SPI, three activities structured this participatory research action. First, 10 mental model maps were created based on semi-structured interviews. Second, two participatory workshops were held in which SPI members collectively worked on the sector diagnosis (first workshop, June 2023) and the evaluation of public policies (second workshop, February 2025).

3. Results and discussion

This research has identified a broad range of weaknesses that hinder the progression of a still-expanding sector, many of which are also affecting the majority of small and medium-sized farms in the region. Much of the diagnosis identifies deficiencies in agricultural structures, human capital, and markets, which are also present in conventional agriculture, as highlighted in previous studies on Valencian agriculture. These obstacles and weaknesses constitute a significant sociopolitical challenge due to their complexity, multifactorial nature, and various interconnections.

Additionally, the effects of the gradual conventionalization of organic farming have been highlighted. For some authors, this could move the agroecological sector away from environmental, social, and economic sustainability. However, based on the Valencian case, it is evident that this process is negatively affecting the competitiveness of small and medium-sized agroecological farms.

The diagnosis has also served to identify and characterize some of the factors explaining the delay of irrigated agriculture compared to dryland farming. As has been noted in other Spanish regions, traditionally extensive farms find it easier to convert to organic practices. However, this study has uncovered other reasons related to water quality and the lack of involvement from the cooperative sector in irrigated areas, highlighting the need for specific support measures.

How have regional policies influenced the recent evolution of the sector? The average rating given by SPI participants regarding the effects of public support provided during the implementation of the IIPVTA was just under the passing grade. The plan was critically assessed, not due to possible mistakes but due to deficiencies. The sector demands more support and calls for the completion and expansion of the plan's execution. The evaluation of the plan's performance also showed significant contrasts, particularly between areas related to territory and knowledge and those related to demand.

The latter has been identified as the main bottleneck for the growth of agroecology in the Valencian Community.

It is evident that growing internal demand is a challenge of such a temporal and socioeconomic dimension that it exceeds the capacities of the Plan. It requires a cultural shift in consumption, a reassessment of the role of food in health, and a greater environmental awareness within Valencian society. The scale of this change cannot be addressed solely by a regional sectoral plan. It is also a challenge that is relevant across the entire Spanish state, or even the broader Southern European context, as in some Northern European countries, the opposite occurs, where policies seem to lag behind changes in consumption patterns.

Public procurement has been a key factor in increasing demand in other European regions. It has short-term effects on production and consumption, with long-term consequences for public awareness. Therefore, it seems advisable to reinforce public procurement efforts from administrations. However, in this study, the public procurement line of the IIPVTA was the least positively rated, despite the existence of some local programs, such as the Horta-Cuina project, which has been referred to as exemplary in connecting local agroecological production with consumption.

Autonomic policies will require support from higher state institutions to overcome the internal demand bottleneck. However, more than just administrative scaling, this study highlights the need for greater transversal integration of these policies and better coordination between institutions. It is well established that there is a close link between agroecological consumption and environmental and health awareness, and this connection forms the basis of European policies. However, at the regional level, these policies seem to be rooted primarily within agriculture departments. Agroecological sector agents lament the lack of involvement from other areas of the administration. They primarily call for ambitious work in the education sector, but also in tourism, commerce, and public health.

Beyond the limited influence of administrations, the time required for these profound sociocultural changes is slow, leading to the expectation that this bottleneck will persist at least in the short term. Moreover, this coordination deficit is also vertical. It affects the subsidiarity of policies supporting the agroecological sector, particularly concerning the inaction of many municipal administrations. Much of the potential for public influence on the advancement of organic production and consumption lies with

local governments. However, their policies are highly varied and subject to electoral cycles. The involvement of local administrations has been highly valued, and it would be advisable to stimulate their involvement and coordination from regional or provincial administrations.

4. Conclusions

The future of the sector depends mainly on strengthening the cross-cutting nature of agroecological policies, both vertically, along the value chain, and horizontally, integrating education, health, trade and tourism. For its governance, in addition to the consolidation of the SPI, effective mechanisms for inter-administrative coordination are required, from the state to the local level, and between different departments.