



Erfahrungsbericht / *Travel Report*

über mein / *of my*: *Traineeship*

Studium an einer Partnerinstitution

Institution: International Federation of the Organic Agricultural Movement, Europe (IFOAM Organics Europe)

Land / *country*: Belgium

Studienfach an der UBT: MSc. FOOD QUALITY & SAFETY
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Unterrichtssprache: Englisch
language of instruction

Aufenthaltszeitraum von: 20.02.2023
stay duration from

bis: 23.12.2023
to

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I am available for questions. I, (Ohemaa Mensah) can be reached, at the following email address:

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Erfahrungsbericht / *Travel Report*

FACULTY OF LIFE SCIENCES: FOOD, NUTRITION AND HEALTH

TRAINEESHIP IN BRUSSELS

Presented by:

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Appreciation

This internship was only possible due to the financial support received from the University of Bayreuth Erasmus grant. Access to this funding meant I could afford to live in Brussels and also fully focus on the internship without having any financial challenges.



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List of abbreviations

European Union (EU)

The European environment state and outlook reports (SOER)

International Federation of the Organic Agricultural Movement, Europe (IFOAM Organics Europe).

Organic Agriculture (OA)

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Chapter 1

This report outlines the activities undertaken and experiences gained during an internship at IFOAM Organics Europe, the principal European umbrella organization dedicated to organic food and farming, located in Brussels. The internship centred on developing advocacy strategies to champion and advance the cause of organic agriculture within the European Union (EU). The report comprehensively addresses the organization's structure, the path leading to the adoption of EU proposals, work done on the proposal as well as lessons learnt.

This particular internship deviated from the conventional format followed by typical food quality students, focusing instead on advocacy and European policies. Throughout the duration of the internship, numerous proposals were adopted by the European Commission although the report will not touch on all of them. This report will however focus on one specific proposal which is the “Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on Soil Monitoring and Resilience”. This law is also referred to as the Soil Monitoring Law.

Introduction

In accordance with the 2008 definition established by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM International) at their General Assembly, Organic Agriculture (OA) constitutes a production system dedicated to nurturing the health of soils, ecosystems, and individuals (IFOAM International, 2008).

Organic agriculture places a paramount emphasis on employing ecological processes, biodiversity, consciously avoiding the use of inputs that could yield negative consequences and the use of locally tailored cycles and processes in production. Through the amalgamation of tradition, innovation, and scientific principles, OA seeks to establish a harmonious association with the environment, concurrently promoting fairness and elevating the overall quality of life for all involved parties (ibid). In the move to promote sustainable agricultural practices and especially organic farming IFOAM International as a body, has other regional bodies who work to promote organic practices in various continents. One such entity is the International Federation of the Organic Agricultural Movement, Europe (IFOAM Organics Europe).

According to its website, IFOAM Organics Europe is a member-based association based in Europe with the mandate to promote organic practices in the region. Presently, IFOAM Organics Europe stands as the preeminent European umbrella organization dedicated to the advancement of organic food and farming in Europe (IFOAM Organics Europe, n.d). In the last two decades, the organization has played a pivotal role in representing the interests of the organic sector within the realm of European



polycymaking. This has been achieved through continuous advocacy. The activities of the association are guided by the core principles of organic agriculture, namely health, ecology, fairness, and care (IFOAM International, n.d). Currently, IFOAM Organics Europe represents about 200 members across 34 European countries (IFOAM Organics Europe, n.d).

It is in this regard that IFOAM Organics Europe functions as one of the non-governmental organisations in Brussels advocating for a total transformation of the current food system towards a sustainable one. With over twenty years of advocating for a shift to organic farming systems, IFOAM Organics Europe achieved a significant milestone when organic farming gained recognition in the EU Farm-to-fork strategy.

The internship in Brussels was for a period of approximately 11 months commencing in February 2023 and concluding in December 2023.

Main tasks carried out

The main tasks carried out during the internship are summarised below.

- a. Advocate for developments within agricultural, food and/or environmental legislation.
- b. Coordinate internal structures such as the IFOAM Organics Europe Interest Groups, Expert groups and Task Forces
- c. Develop content material for advocacy –for publication, briefings, public speaking
- d. Organise and moderate events- plan event including content of event, identify speakers and reach out to them, moderate event including panel discussion (IFOAM OE Lets Discuss Organic Event which was targeted at the youth)
- e. Network with policy makers, external partners and IFOAM Organics Europe members.
- f. Support the internal coordination of meetings and organising the participation of IFOAM Organics Europe members to the DG AGRI CDGs (Civil-society Dialogue Group of DG AGRI)

Chapter 2

The European Green Deal: Paving the Way for Sustainable Organic Farming

The [European Green Deal](#) published towards the end of 2019 is the European Union's (EU) most significant action at present to reach a climate neutral Europe (European Commission, 2019). It is also characterized by its transformative [Farm to Fork strategy](#) which aspires to orchestrate a comprehensive restructuring of the European Union's food system (European Commission, 2020). Central to this endeavour is the establishment of a new sustainable food system designed not only to



address climate change but also to combat biodiversity loss and provide Europeans with a health-conscious food supply.

The strategic framework outlined by the European Green Deal incorporates stringent measures, including marked reductions in fertilizer usage and a substantial expansion of organically farmed areas (European Commission, 2020). These measures are integral components of the EU's strategy to align agricultural practices with sustainability objectives. Moreover, the EU aims to leverage its influence as a key player in the agrifood market to enforce high sustainability standards among its trading partners.

This comprehensive approach has garnered enthusiastic support from civil society including climate and environment activists who appreciate the progressive and forward-looking nature of the European Green Deal. A major part of European policy making involves engagement with civil society. In the context of the European Union (EU) and Brussels, civil society encompasses all other interests beyond the EU political institutions. Organized civil society, therefore, refers to entities representing diverse interests, ranging from producers, processors, associations unions, citizens etc. According to Greenwood (2017), EU institutions actively engage with organized civil society due to their capacity and ability to effectively convey political messages. Furthermore, Dür et al. (2015), argue that the transition in policy orientation from market-making to market regulation, necessitated the collaboration of EU institutions with civil society advocates to realize the EU's regulatory objectives.

The strategies embedded within this initiative signify a significant step towards fostering a resilient and sustainable food system that aligns with broader environmental and climatic imperatives. The 2030 objectives for sustainable food production can be succinctly categorized into four major groups (European Commission, 2020):

- a. A reduction by 50% in the use and risk of chemical pesticides as well as a reduction by 50% in the use of more hazardous pesticides.
- b. A reduction in nutrient losses by at least 50% which will further translate in a reduction in fertilizer use by at least 20%.
- c. A reduction by 50% in the sales of antimicrobials used in farmed animals and aquaculture.
- d. Improve the development of organic farming in the EU by having at least 25% of total farmland under organic farming.

Proposals at play

To facilitate the European Commission, in reaching its ambitious targets, several proposals have been released. Prior to the tenure at IFOAM Organics Europe, the Commission had released some proposals and some were still yet to be released. In this regard, reference is being made to some proposals that



have an impact on agriculture, nature and biodiversity as this is the focus of IFOAM Organics Europe. Given the 10-month duration of the internship, there was ample opportunity to engage with and monitor several proposals. Moreover, each proposal triggered its own public outcry, discussions, and necessitated meetings with various stakeholders. To gain comprehensive knowledge in the realm of advocacy, it became imperative to track more than one proposal concurrently. This approach afforded the opportunity for hands-on learning, enabling a deeper understanding of the intricacies involved. The specific proposals I had the privilege to follow were:

- a) Soil Monitoring Directive
- b) Nature restoration law
- c) Sustainable Use of pesticide regulation
- d) New Genomic techniques
- e) Sustainable Food Systems

Nonetheless, I was assigned to the Soil Monitoring Law and was responsible for policy activities related to this specific proposal. Since the nature of tasks carried out at IFOAM Organics Europe was rather broad, this report will be limited to the work done on the Soil Monitoring Directive.

Soil Monitoring Law

The importance of soil is not only emphasized in its definition but more so in its social, environmental, economic and cultural functions to the very survival of humans. The European Soil Charter defines soil as the interface between the earth, the air, and the water. The definition is essential in emphasizing the transnational nature of “soil” as opposed to the territorial character of “land”. For as long as humans have existed, soil has formed the basis of our food system. And today, not only are agricultural food systems dependent on it, but soil is also the basis of our fight against climate change, being the second largest carbon sink after the oceans (EEA. 2019).

The recognition of the role of the comity of nations in the protection of soil, has, unfortunately been lacking, evidenced by the lack of overarching and transnational framework for its protection. Indeed, the European Soil Charter of 1972, is largely held to be the first international document relating to soil, predating the World Soil Charter and the World Soils Policy regulated by UNEP and FAO respectively. The 2020 EU (European Union) Environmental State and Outlook report (SOER, 2020) provides a glimpse of the effect of this seemingly lack of collectiveness in actions to address the increasing degradation of soil across the European Economic Area. The SOER report minced no words in describing the current pressures put on European soils and, ominously predicted that unless urgent



actions are taken, Europeans soils risks being incapable of providing the services expected of a properly functioning, healthy soils.

The SOER report amongst other factors, determined that the lack of a comprehensive and coherent policy framework for protecting Europe's land and soil resources is a key gap that reduces the effectiveness of any existing incentives to protect soil health.

Soils support plant growth, animal life and human life and its importance cannot be overlooked. At present, about 70 % of farmable agricultural land in the EU is degraded (Soil Strategy for 2030) but the problem of land degradation in the EU does not stem from agricultural production alone. The degradation of EU soils is occurring through erosion, desertification, land sealing and the increased use of synthetic chemicals in production. Degraded soils take years to recuperate and therefore there is a strong need for clear legislation that protect soils and prevent the further degradation of soils.

At present there exist no common binding legislation on soils in the EU. The Soil Directive of 2006 would have set the ball rolling in this regard, but it faced opposition from some minority in Parliament and was later withdrawn. In November 2021 the European Commission launched the [EU Soil Strategy for 2030](#) which aims to address the sustainable use of EU soils and sets a vision and objectives to achieve healthy soils by 2050. Following this the Commission adopted a proposal for a Soil Monitoring Law. The proposed law will be the legal framework to attain optimal soil health by the year 2050.

On the 5th of July 2023, the European Commission finally released its first ever proposal on soils that will provide it the same legal status as air and water in the European Union. See Figure 1.

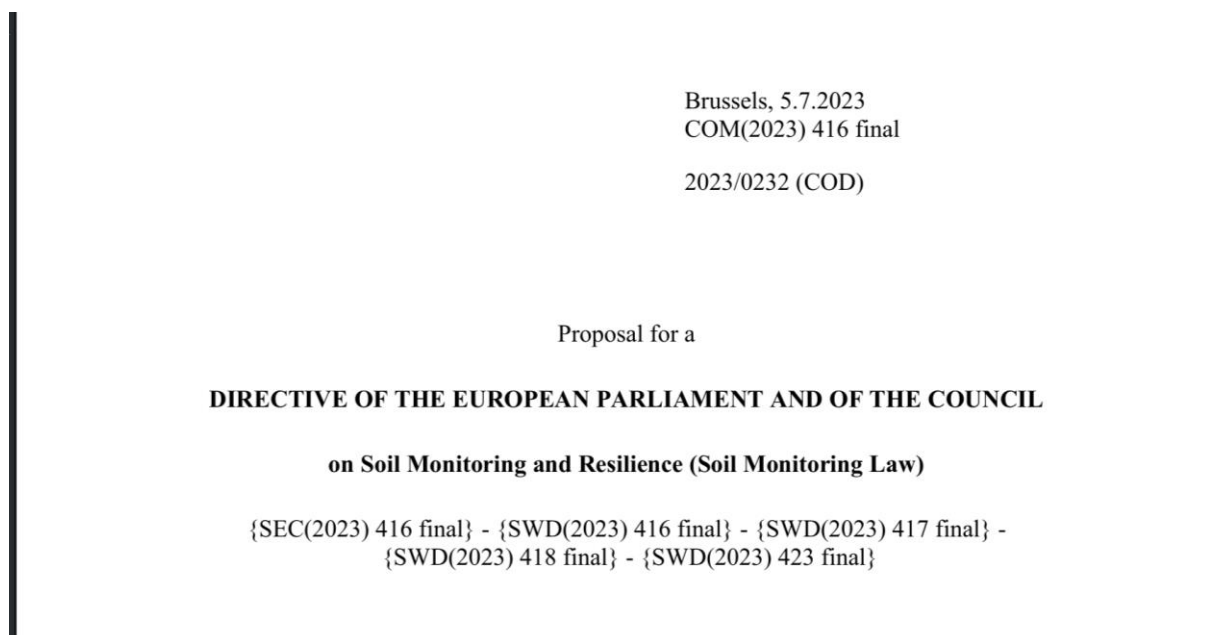


Figure 1: Proposal on a Soil Monitoring law released



Organic agriculture and healthy soils

Organic farming relies on the use of environmentally friendly methods which have a positive impact on ecosystems during production. Organic excludes the use of synthetic chemicals and unnatural products as organic systems simulate the natural functioning of ecosystems. In relation to soils, organic agriculture has always been applauded for its contribution to the protection and restoration of degraded soils. At present 60-70 % of EU soils have been degraded or are unhealthy but soil is an important natural element that needs to be protected and sustainably managed to support life (SOER. 2020, European Commission, 2021).

Chapter 3

Methodology used and Results

In order to make a decision on how to proceed after the release of the proposal, there was the need to conduct a thorough analysis of the proposal. Preceding this was a policy analysis to understand the rationale behind the proposal. This involved a systematic investigation and understanding into the existing policies concerning soils as well as an overview into all meetings that had been organised towards the creation of the soil monitoring law. Weimer and Vining (1999), European Commission (2004; 2014), emphasize that policy analysis is a systematic investigation. It encompasses a thorough examination of the implementation and outcomes of existing policies as well as exploring potential options for new policies. Thus, the proposal together with all annexes and impact assessments were read and all relevant information to the organic sector extracted.

Producing documents for publication as well as crosschecking scientific literature with the proposal is often based on secondary data analysis. Secondary data analysis has become an increasingly prominent and valuable research method in recent years, allowing researchers to analyse and interpret already existing data (Smith et al., 2011; Smith, 2008). Secondary data analysis entails the examination and interpretation of data originally collected by individuals or entities for purposes other than the primary research inquiry at hand (Szabo and Strang, 1997). This methodology serves as a pragmatic alternative for researchers facing constraints in terms of time and resources. The process involves the systematic review and analysis of pre-existing data within the specified domain of interest, enabling researchers to extract valuable insights without the necessity of conducting primary data collection. At the IFOAM the main source of secondary data was previous publications in the form of position papers.



Subsequently, meetings were organized with the IFOAM Soil Task Force to ascertain their opinion on the proposal. Once sufficient data and evidence had been collected to support the position of IFOAM Organics Europe regarding the proposal, communication began. Also, meetings with other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Members of the European Parliament/assistants were had as well as events attended to gather diverse opinions on the proposal. The opinion and specific demands of IFOAM Organics Europe were later communicated to the Rapporteur on the Soil Monitoring Law. Subsequently, a response to the EU public consultation was also submitted and policy recommendations made. See Figure 2.

Soil health – protecting, sustainably managing and restoring EU soils

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03 November 2023 | Non-governmental organisation (NGO)

IFOAM Organics Europe (Belgium)

“IFOAM Organics Europe, the European umbrella organisation for...mitigation and adaptation, water quality and public health. IFOAM Organics Europe acknowledges that the law is a step in the”

IFOAM Organics Europe, the European umbrella organisation for organic food and farming, welcomes the Commission's proposal for a Directive on Soil Monitoring and Resilience to monitor the state of soils in the European Union. Indeed, healthy soils are fundamental to produce nutritious and sustainable food and deliver a wide range of ecosystem services such as water purification and carbon sequestration. The organic movement believes that...

Figure 2: Submitted response to EU public consultation.

Can be accessed at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13350-Bodengesundheit-Schutz-nachhaltige-Bewirtschaftung-und-Wiederherstellung-von-Boden-in-der-EU/F2927687_de

In the final days of working on the proposal, suggestions for amendments to the proposal were drawn up and submitted. Also, as part of my tasks, a factsheet was published to communicate the importance of organic farming to the health of soils. See figure 3.



Figure 3: Factsheet published on behalf of IFOAM Organics Europe.

Can be accessed at:

https://www.organicseurope.bio/content/uploads/2023/07/ifoameu_policy_soils_soil-health-leaflet_20230704.pdf

Since some of the findings from the proposal as well as the submission to the rapporteur are confidential for the advocacy work of IFOAM Organics Europe, the present discussion will be limited to scientific data on the importance of organic farming to soil health. As part of the evidence gathered on the relationship between organic farming and healthy soils it was found that:

- a. Contribution to Farm to Fork Targets - The European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork strategy encompass specific soil-related targets, necessitating policy coherence across diverse initiatives.
- b. Organically managed soils exhibit notably elevated rates of soil carbon sequestration and higher stocks of soil organic carbon in comparison to conventionally managed soils, thereby contributing significantly to soil protection and climate mitigation (Beste, 2016; Gattinger et al., 2012).
- c. Soils cultivated through organic farming methods manifest substantially heightened levels of microbial biomass, microbial activity, and diversity relative to soils from conventional farming (Lori et al., 2017). Specifically, soils under organic management demonstrate a 41% increase in microbial biomass carbon and a 51% increase in microbial biomass nitrogen (Ghabbour et al., 2017).



- d. d. Measures implemented in organic farming play a pivotal role in reducing, and to a large extent, even preventing soil erosion (Sanders and Heß, 2019; Seitz et al., 2019; Libohova et al., 2018).
- e. e. The augmented organic matter content in the soil contributes to reduced soil density and enhanced soil porosity (Perie and Ouimet, 2008). Additionally, organic matter in the soil functions akin to a sponge, facilitating water retention and gradual release. This characteristic improves the soil's water-holding capacity, mitigating the risk of drought stress for plants.

Relationship between the MSc Food Quality and Safety and the Internship at IFOAM Organics Europe

In preparation for my work in Brussels, acquiring a foundational comprehension of the operations of European Union (EU) institutions was imperative. This prerequisite was fulfilled during my enrolment in the Food Quality and Safety Master program, wherein a comprehensive introduction to the EU and the operational dynamics of its diverse institutions was provided.

The knowledge gained through this academic experience has proven to be particularly beneficial during my internship. Specifically, the insights garnered from the courses below facilitated a nuanced understanding of the intricacies and functioning of EU institutions, thereby enhancing my capacity to contribute effectively to the objectives of the internship. These courses were

- a. Introduction to Law and Food Law
- b. Food Safety and Risk Management
- c. Food Quality & Food Authenticity Law
- d. Food Trade Law.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The internship at IFOAM Organics Europe was a transformative experience, providing a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances involved in advocacy in general and specifically for the organic sector in Europe. This experience has offered a better understanding of EU policy making. From the experience, it is safe to say that I gained first-hand experience into EU policy making and what happens in Brussels. I also gained adequate knowledge in policy analysis and in preparing policy recommendations. Also, the upcoming soil monitoring proposal if passed will serve as the first legally binding document protecting EU soils.

Moving on, the internship has further enhanced my interest in food quality and safety and especially organic food. I am not sure of what the future holds but I do see a possibility of returning to Brussels to work in the area of EU policy.

Achievements from the internship

The key achievements from this internship in Brussels can be summarised as

- a. An interest in European policies
- b. Expansion my private network
- c. A better understanding of EU policy making
- d. Improved French speaking skills
- e. Improved confidence
- f. Improved communication and public speaking skills

Images from the time in Brussels

The images below are just a few of the wonderful time spent Brussels attending meetings, events, conferences and networking.



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