

**2017 ACORN Conference & Trade Show  
Best Western Glengarry - Truro, NS**

**Workshop Title:** Striking a Balance: Opening Remarks and Plenary Session - Philosophy, Principles and Outcomes of Organic vs. Market Development and Profitability

**Presenters:** Allison Grant, Shannon Jones, Dr. Andrew Hammermeister, Av Singh

**Executive Summary:** What are the drivers of the organic sector today? We must look at the organic principles, and not only markets, to assess the success and the future of the industry. Critical thinking and engagement at the local level is critical to meaningful and progressive development of the organic sector.

**The Principles of Organic Agriculture:**

- Health - soil, plant, animal, human and planet as one and indivisible.
- Ecology - sustain living ecological systems.
- Fairness - equity, respect and justice for all living things.
- Care - for the generations to come.

**Dr. Andrew Hammermeister:**

A New vision for Organic Agriculture has been adopted by IFOAM Organics International in 2016 “Org 3.0”

- What is driving the Organic sector - Principles or Markets?
- Andrew started in organic agriculture with an interest in farming, and an ecological perspective; farming background - the importance of farmer health, not market demand.
- Organic agriculture advanced tremendously - organic farms are now viable for decades (both economically and ecologically).
- Consumer acceptance - value added proposition; willingness to pay a premium:
  - Demand for organic products is driving sector growth.
  - Prices are being set at a premium.
  - Retailers are adopting willingness to pay - profit margins.
- Beyond profit margins, there are also benefit margins, which include consideration of environment, livestock, and farmer wellbeing, etc.
- A concern - some organic farmers are discouraging transition programs to protect their market demand:
  - Organic agriculture still only represents 1% of global ag land base - not growing fast enough; change needs to be made quickly.

- o Org 3.0 is designed to enable widespread uptake of organics based on *principles*.
- o There is a disparity to be recognized between north and south (most product is being produced in the south, while research and development is widely supported in the north).
- As a consumer, sector representative, grower, processor, or advocate, VOTE IN SUPPORT OF PRINCIPLES OF ORGANIC PRACTICES, not only the market.

### **Allison Grant:**

The new round of organic movement concerns itself with harmony with the environment.

Long before public uptake:

- Despite adversity, the movement continued.
- Then came the need to standardize, and with it - concern.
- With the regulation; pioneers became concerned with about where the movement was going:
  - o Certification began as a volunteer initiative.
  - o Now done by 3<sup>rd</sup> party groups.
- The organic movement cannot be progressed without understanding current system:
  - o Keep principles strong while advancing the marketplace.
- Challenge to uphold excellence of standard; look inward before participating with next level of organics.
- Pioneers of the sector have complaints and concerns about the “watered down system” ie Aquaponics - in the approval stage for organic certification.

### **Shannon Jones:**

Shannon has thought on the topic on her farm all season; how the organic principles apply to the farm, to life, to her community, worldwide, and the system as a whole - inspired by principles in daily life.

The current economic model doesn't align with organic principles - continuous growth on finite planet.

Gross Domestic Product - increases when \$ changes hands, regardless of the reason (ie cancer treatments, crime, etc.) - perhaps not a quality reflection of the state of a country.

NAFTA: gains power through a mechanism that is not shared with most citizens. It works against the promotion of local food and environment.

Investor State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) is a burden to Canadian taxpayers, being sued over environmental policies is a major disincentive putting more policies in place.

From the Census data presented earlier this year, Gross Farm Sales figures increase doesn't show full picture - farm debt surpasses farm revenues and net sales last have barely changed in the last 60 years. They have decreased with inflation taken into account (which is not to be congratulated) - input sales, banks capturing most of wealth; financial stress leading to mental and physical stress and breakdown.

Organic principles; can be in line with common alternatives with the consideration of:

- Gross Domestic Happiness (vs GDP).
- Capital expressed in more than monetary forms.
- Indigenous Solidarity - consider a world view of a bowl with one spoon; take what we need before passing the spoon to your neighbour to ensure enough for everyone.
- The current economic model; a square hole - with the Organic principles being the round peg.

The farm is the primary place where a sense of change is felt:

- It can be hard to see alternatives.
- Through Shannon's whole life (born in the 80's), the common messaging has been to fit your life and values within the model of growth.
- Consider instead an 'Economy of Enough' - value principles and live within your means, not in excess.
- These thoughts have impacted Shannon and Bryan's farm vision and their personal indicators of success.

### **Av Singh:**

Organic pioneers intended to teach principles to peasants abroad, but found that they had nothing to teach; peasants were the teachers in China and India.

Organics is a dynamic field and we are a species with interesting technologies that will be adopted if they are deemed to be appropriate in scale and use.

Av pointed out that he is not the only person of colour at ACORN conference, perhaps for the first time, and that shows an advancement in the farming movement (applause!).

Many of the original pioneers of the organic movement are no longer certified, though they are still farming according to the principles...why?

- Standardization has taken meaning away from the principles of organics; this is perhaps industrialized capitalism's "fault"? Regional and local differences get lost and ignored in a standardized system.
- The peer-review system is respected in social and natural sciences - but perhaps is not stringent enough for the greater public. Our current system has led to greater focus of market development and less around principles (the "Genie can't be put back in the bottle" now that we have progressed to the current system).
- Work to get peer-review back!

Q - What ideas does the organic sector have to do to bridge gaps?

A (Dr. AH) - If we want to have impact globally, we are not growing or acting fast enough. Visionaries are asking how to make change - looking toward more sustainable practices; work with others and don't put up barriers. Organic niche has barriers around us - either organic or not; there is a reluctance to engage. Impact IS possible without certification. Support market development and move forward with the model while working with others.

Q - Discussion of getting past dichotomy of visionaries and market - how do we advance the conversation?

A (SJ) - Barter systems in place in the south; fitting into current economic model while trying to maintain "economy of enough". As an example, on-farm honey harvest has proven controversial. Honey bees (*apis mellifera*) not native here, and harvest more than is needed. Native bees harvest/produce only what they need, and as such surplus is not seen by humans.

A (AS) - Questions and solutions are typically asked of and put on farmers; we can ask consumers to step up. There are opportunities for consumers to better access organic and sustainable food, etc.

Q - On PEI, some financially successful farms focus on 5-10 crops; less fragile than 1-crop systems, and less intricate than 40-crop systems, which can be inefficient and spread thin. Though this is not a healthy CSA model, partnership model with other farms with other crops is possible. Are there developments like that? Is there a way to move forward without big growers and large share buyers?

A (SJ) - Each farm is unique and there is no room for prescriptions; larger farms may be growing crops that are attractive to CSA farms that are less attractive for smaller farmers to grow (ie rasp (fragile), dried beans (scale)). A higher population density may be required to support this kind of system.