

Circular economy

One of the main concepts of organic food and farming system is the circular economy. The circulation of substances and nutrients in the system of soil, plants and animals - based on water and air and driven by the sunlight is the basis for all lives on our planet.

From the beginning R. Steiner set up in its agricultural seminars the concept of the perfect agricultural system as much as possible closed circular system – as close as possible to the ecological systems – as a guarantee for high ecological efficiency. But this concept cannot be limited to the farm system it needs to be spread out to all other human activities our planet.

In a circular economy, economic activity builds and rebuilds overall system health. The concept recognizes the importance of the economy needing to work effectively at all scales – for large and small businesses, for organizations and individuals, globally and locally. Transitioning to a circular economy does not only amount to adjustments aimed at reducing the negative impacts of the linear economy. Rather, it represents a systemic shift that builds long-term resilience, generates business and economic opportunities, and provides environmental and societal benefits. The industry and especially the food industry have a task there.

Circular economy aims to redefine growth, focusing on positive society-wide benefits. It entails gradually decoupling economic activity from the consumption of finite resources, and designing waste out of the system. Underpinned by a transition to renewable energy sources, the circular model builds economic, natural, and social capital. It is based on three principles:

- Design out waste and pollution
- Keep products and materials in use
- Regenerate natural systems

The model distinguishes between technical and biological cycles. Consumption happens only in biological cycles, where food and biologically-based materials (such as cotton or wood) are designed to feed back into the system through processes like composting and anaerobic digestion. These cycles regenerate living systems, such as soil, which provide renewable resources for the economy.

With the concept of organic farming OPTA members have already chosen for the right direction. Never the less it is very clear that further progress and innovation toward a cycle economy in organic farming systems is needed. As we know today we are facing for example relevant problems in the circulation of main nutrients. The waste water from the cities is transporting a lot of nutrients theoretically very useful for organic agriculture and a main element for closing cycles. But in reality this waste water is massively contaminated by chemicals and other contaminants that it is in fact hazardous waste.

“Technical cycles” recover and restore products, components, and materials through strategies like reuse, repair, remanufacture or (in the last resort) recycling. All based on systems minimizing energy use and pollution of environment.

DG Environment of European Commission has started some years ago a very ambitious program for circular economy. <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/circular-economy/> A main topic in the DG Environment strategy is “plastic”.

For OPTA members already oriented toward organic raw material a number of other topics are relevant for circular economy. The two main ones are overall environmental balance of the company and the topic of packaging systems and materials. Progress is challenging.

OPTA members try to address this topic in their daily company practice. Beside the marketing needs often the legislative framework hinders the food companies to reduce packaging and improve packaging systems in a more environmental friendly way. There are legal requirements for hygiene in production, transportation, packaging of end products and sale in store, there are labeling requirements asking for more space on packaging material and asking for application of more printing material on packaging while in the meantime online information systems are all around. Further on there are requirements for the reuse of materials for packaging of food which are limiting the possibility of reuse of materials tremendously. We are facing the situation that well working recycling systems for example for paper which are a very good source for packaging material are systematically contaminated by the printing industry which is not willing to change for contaminant free printing material.

So we are asking for;

1. Checking all requirements for food production and handling for the possibility to reduce incentives for the reduction of packaging material
2. Modernize obligation for communication and identification for food to the latest technical development in digitalization. Check the possibility of reducing legal obligations for identification and labeling concepts based on packaging material to a max. (For example; In many cases organic fruits are extra packed and labeled in the shops because organic reg. is interpreted as asking individual identification of the organic product as such)
3. Set up legal requirement for example for printing industry which avoid contamination of recyclable raw materials to a max.

Organic Processind and Trade Association Europe

OPTA-Founding members are: Aboca S.p.a. Società Agricola (Italy), De Groene Weg/Vion (The Netherlands), DO-IT BV (The Netherlands), EOSTA (The Netherlands), Freiland Puten Fahrenzhausen (Germany), Green Organics (The Netherlands), Gruppo Fileni (Italy), Hipp (Germany), La Sanfermese Spa (Italy), L.D.C. (France), Ulrich Walter GmbH (Germany), SIA Aloja Starkelsen (Latvija), The Organic Factory (Italy), Toppas (The Netherlands), Tradin Organic Agriculture B.V. (The Netherlands).