



# Different discourses associated with organic milk in Denmark

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## **ABSTRACT:**

Organic milk is the biggest individual product category among organic products on the Danish domestic market. Thus, in 2004, approximately twenty per cent of the milk sold in Denmark was organic. Since 1990, milk and other organic products have been labelled by the Ø-label governed by the Danish authorities. The introduction of the common EU organic label in 2000, which includes less stringent requirements in some areas than the Ø-label, has resulted in a long debate among producers on the quality of organic products. This situation might breed distrust in organic labels in general. Thus, the situation is very dependent on the signals which the producers send to the consumers. On this background, the focus of this paper is the Danish organic dairies and their view on organic milk. The purpose is to discuss possible implications for consumers' trust in organic labels. Drawing on discourse approaches and building on qualitative interviews with seven Danish organic dairies, we identify two different understandings of organic milk among the dairies. I.e. one discourse carried by an economic rationality and the other discourse by sustainability.

## **Introduction**

Contrary to its neighbouring countries, Denmark has had its own domestic ecological label since 1990, the Ø-label. Fundamentally, the red Ø-label signifies that the Danish authorities have carried out a control of the farms and companies that produce, process, package or label the organic goods in Denmark (Norfelt, 2003). At the European level, Denmark has the highest share of organic products (5%) in total turnover of food products (European Commission, 2005). The big market share of organic food is linked to the Ø-label; thus more than 90 per cent of the Danish consumers know the label (Norfelt, 2003; Wier & Andersen, 2003, Wier, 2004). At the same time, approximately 85 per cent of the consumers express mistrust in foreign organic products without the Ø-label (Norfelt, 2003; Wier, 2004). Thus, today the Danish organic food market is, to a great extent high degree, based on the Ø-label. In this light, the government's decision to, over time, convert to the common EU label might represent a challenge, as the consumers at present seem to mistrust foreign labels.

This paper takes its point of departure in the upcoming challenge to convert to the EU label. We focus on the organic dairies' possible reactions towards this change. Therefore, the next section describes the Danish dairy sector focussing on milk, which is the single organic product with the highest market share in Denmark; 27% of all consumers buy organic milk (Wier, 2004). The discussion of the dairies' reactions is based on a discourse analysis. The theoretical framework is described in the next section and then followed by a section on methodological issues. The actual analysis is carried out in the three following sections, ending up with the conclusion.

## **The Organic Dairy Sector**

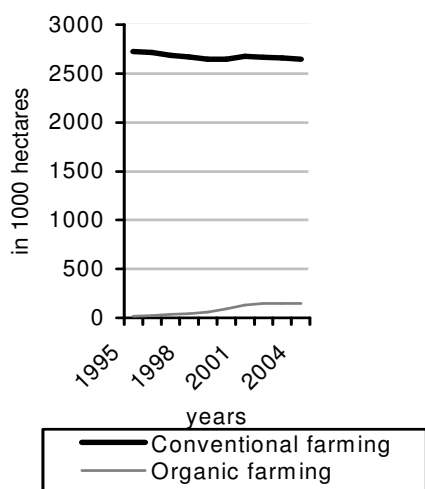
In 1987, the Danish Parliament passed an act on organic farming and, among other steps, introduced a label for organic food products in 1990. The red Ø-label is a guarantee that the production is organic and is monitored by state inspectors. This label has contributed to an increase in the production and sale of organic food products. Thus, in 2003, 93 per cent of the consumers knew the meaning of the Ø-label and only ten per cent of the Danish consumers



stated that they had never bought any organic products (Wier & Andersen, 2003). The criteria for the Ø-label are especially focused on the impact from the primary production, whereas the regulation only vaguely addresses other phases in the product's lifecycle. E.g. the Ø-label does not cover environmental impacts from the production at the dairies or the amount of transportation used in delivering the product down the production chain (Bekendtgørelse om økologiske fødevarer m.v., 2006).

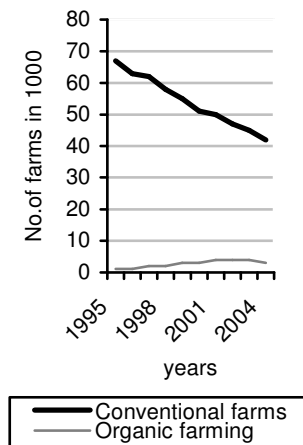
The organic milk production has to fulfil the following criteria to obtain the Ø-label: the stable area must be of reasonable size with soft bedding and light, the cows must be pasture-fed at least five months a year, and they must have exercise everyday. The fodder must be organic; no genetically modified fodder is allowed; and minimum 60 per cent of the fodder must be coarse fodder. The newborn calf must be with its mother cow at least a night and a day; the calf must be fed by milk in minimum three months and its need for sucking must be fulfilled. Preventive sickness treatment is not allowed, neither is hormonal treatment or egg implantation (Superbrugsen, 2006). Furthermore, the Danish organic milk is not homogenised, so the product remains as "natural" as possible (Økologisk landscenter, 1998). After manufacturing, the organic milk is distributed to the retailers, although a small amount of the milk is sold directly from the farms or the dairies (Ingemann, Abrahamsen & Holgaard, 2000).

Conventional and organic farming area in Denmark, 1995-2004



**Figure 1:**Development in conventional and organic farming area in Denmark, 1995-2004. Source Danmarks statistik, 2006b

No. of conventional and organic farms in Denmark, 1995-2004



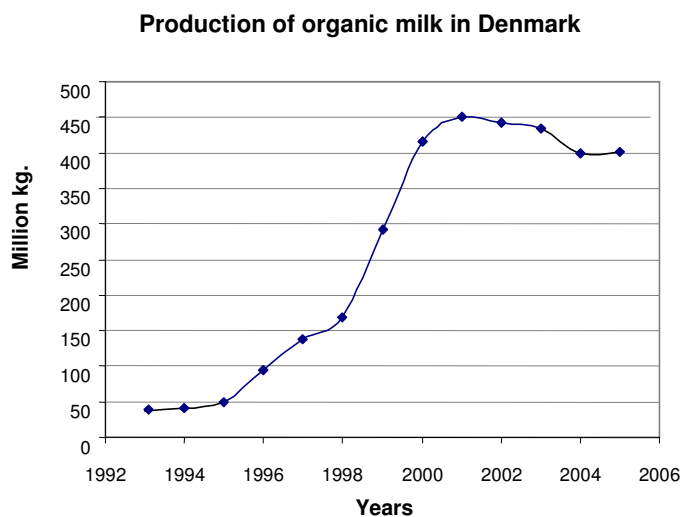
**Figure 2:**Development in number of conventional and organic farms in Denmark, 1995-2004. Source Danmarks statistik, 2006c.

The Danish market for dairy products is characterised by a low export/import rate and one large dominating dairy. Besides its size, the large dairy has its own distribution system, a high degree of power in the business association, and the resources to implement an intensive marketing of its products. Cases of exclusive agreements between the large dairy and retailers occur. Besides the large dairy, a handful of small primarily organic dairies compete especially on organic products. On this background, the co-operation and exchange of knowledge in the sector is limited, and some of the small dairies are not connected to any trade organisation.



Furthermore, the relation to research institutions is quite limited for the small dairies; however, some of them occasionally use consultancy.

The regulatory network of the Ø-label has been important in promoting the organic food market by quarantining the quality of the label. The organic food experienced an additional boom from 1993 when the large supermarket chain FDB/COOP changed their pricing policy in order to reduce price differences between traditional and organic milk. Consequently, the organic farming grew although it remains a minor part of the farming sector, see figure one and two above. In the decade from 1995 to 2004, the number of organic farms tripled beginning with 1.5 per cent of the total number of farms in 1995 and ending with approximately 6.9 per cent in 2004. In the same period, the total number of Danish farms was reduced with approximately one third. Looking at the farming area, the picture is more impressive. In the period from 1995 to 2004, the organic farming area increased sevenfold, while the total farming area in Denmark fell by five per cent. From the mid-1990s, the market for organic products experienced a considerable increase, which indicates a change in consumer preferences. For example, the number of organic farms in Denmark increased by a factor eight, the square metres of organically cultivated land increased by a factor 150 and the organic milk production increased by a factor 20. This was due to initiatives of the state, the organic farmers, and the retailers. Furthermore, conventional farmers and food industries have integrated organic methods into part of their production, and this tendency has been most prominent in the dairy sector (Ministeriet for Fødevarer, Landbrug og Fiskeri, 1999). At a certain point in the mid-1990s, which was said to be the first time in the history of Danish agriculture, the organic farmers and dairies were not able to meet the consumer demand of organic products. To some extent this has increased the focus on product innovation and the need “to have an ear on the market” in the food industries. The organic consumerism stagnated by the end of the 1990s, and therefore, the production of organic milk has suffered a slight decrease from 2000, see figure three below.



**Figure 3:** Production of organic milk in Denmark from 1993 to 2005 in Million Kg. *Source:* Danmarks Statistik, 2006a.

The present picture shows a stagnated market, where approximately one fourth of the Danish consumers buy organic milk (Wier, 2004). The previous trend among the consumers indicates that especially the occasional organic consumer can get attracted to organic milk, and they



form a much bigger group than the exclusive organic consumers (Wier & Andersen, 2003). The question is then how to encourage this group to buy organic foods. In an international perspective, the share of organic food on the Danish market is relatively high, and researchers relate this to the dominating Danish organic label (Wier, 2004). In this way, the introduction of a common EU label is a challenge. In the remaining part of this paper, we investigate the dairies' present understandings of especially organic milk in order to present a picture of the challenges in the new situation, and its possible implications for the consumers' trust in the label.

### **Applying a Discourse Approach**

The theoretical perspective of this paper is inspired by a discourse approach. The purpose of this approach is to create a framework for a good empirical story rather than add to theoretical developments in the discourse field. This section outlines the theoretical framework of the paper.

A discourse approach implies a social constructivist point of departure (Burr, 1995; Jørgensen & Philips, 1999). In this perspective, phenomena, including both physical and cognitive items, are made understandable through processes of social construction. This implies a critical stance towards taken-for-granted understandings of the world. Pictures of the world are not reflections of the reality "out there" but products of our way of categorising the world. More fundamentally, it is *only* possible to assess reality through categories. Therefore, our knowledge of the world is not considered as an obvious truth, but as a historical and culture-specific reality (Burr, 1995: 3).

The social constructivist approach is often criticized for its so-called "problem of relativism" (see e.g. Elam, 1998; Collin, 1998; and Bertilsson, 1998). This refers to a discussion about whether nature is real or only existing through social construction. In our approach, social constructivism is a methodological tool, and as such we do not take a stance in the conflict. Yet, because something is socially constructed, this does not mean that it is unreal. Organic milk does have a market among environmentally deliberate consumers. The market share for organic products is growing etc. But people can make very different things of these phenomena and especially their interconnections (Dryzek, 1997: 10).

In stead of *a priori* giving scientific knowledge or economic relations the decisive parameter in an analysis, the social constructivists claim that all knowledge in the starting point should be treated equally, whereas the subsequent analysis will reveal the dominant knowledge in the specific context. This implies an empirical approach with openness towards the variation of interpretations presented from different actors considering a given phenomena.

In this study, a discourse presents a specific way to talk about and understand the world or parts of the world (Jørgensen & Philips, 1999:9). In other words, a discourse is an active constructed horizon of meaning and actions, making up the mechanisms which define, delimit, and determine meaning in relation to a specific field of society (Thomsen and Andersen, 1996: 175). Discourses are interlinked with our identity and thereby, although not in a one-dimensional way, our behaviour. Identity is constructed on the basis of the discourses culturally available to us, which we draw upon in communicative interactions with other people. An identity is then a subtitle interweaving of many different "treads" of discourses woven into a unique fabric of a person's identity (Burr, 1995:51). Taken this broad definition of discourses into consideration, the obstacle is how to identify the different discourses.

Here, we combine the discourse approach with the concept of carriers within institutionalism, as it is a very accessible method for detecting discourses. Institutionalism



includes many different approaches with very different and sometimes incompatible understandings of institutions. However, the approaches all share the conviction that institutions guide and frame actor performance (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). In this broad understanding, discourses could be considered equal to an institution. Scott (1995) maps the different institutionalist approaches. According to his wide definition:

*“Institutions consist of cognitive, normative and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behaviour. Institutions are transported by various carriers – cultures, structures and routines – and they operate at multiple levels of jurisdiction.”*

*(Scott, 1995:33)*

Discourse approaches build on a social constructivist foundation, which is highlighted in the cognitive structures in the definition above. Thus, this is the part of institutionalism which we focus on in this case. The institutional carriers transfer the institution (discourse) between different contexts. Scott (1995) proposes three types of carriers, i.e. cultures, social structures, and routines.

The *culture carriers* primarily rely on codified patterns of meanings and rule systems (Scott, 1995: 53). Concepts have different meanings depending on who states them. In a specific social setting, more or less stable conceptual understandings evolve. Such stable understandings and their relations to other conceptual understandings represent a discourse. E.g. the conceptual understanding of sustainable development in a UN setting will imply the balance of economic, environmental and social resources; while in an economist setting; sustainable development might refer to a sustainable economic growth. In our analysis, the central issue is to investigate the way in which the respondents attach meaning to organic milk and other organic products, and how they interlink the concept of organic milk/organic dairy products to other concepts as market, consumers, sustainability, etc.

The *social structural carriers* rely on social patterned expectations connected to networks of social positions: role systems (Scott, 1995: 53). The role systems include behavioural expectations which, at the same time, constrain and empower the constitution of specific roles. E.g. the food safety authority is expected to control the hygiene at food-producing companies. Often food-producing companies will have divisions dealing with food safety to match the demands of the authorities. The agenda is relatively fixed to the expectation of the two partners. If the food safety authority began to discuss or propose increased production of low-fat food, this would be considered inappropriate. In this way, the two partners hold each other on the agenda and the form of communication expected, and thus, they maintain the discourse of what food safety is all about. In this study, we focus on two relationships, i.e. the dairy and its owners and the dairy and its costumers.

The final carrier *routines* are forms of habituated behaviour which embody institutions. E.g. the food safety test done in a food-producing company links to a specific understanding of what food safety is. Routines are carriers which rely on patterned actions. These actions reflect the tacit knowledge of actors – deeply ingrained habits and procedures based on non-articulated knowledge and beliefs (Scott, 1995: 54). Over time, routines become so internalised that we even tend to forget the reasons behind them. The tacit knowledge and redundant process of internalisation make it hard to reframe the routines if the reasoning changes. In this study, we will shortly elaborate on how production of organic milk has changed the routines at the dairies. Figure four below summarises the carriers employed in this study.



Carriers	Issues for investigation
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The meaning of a concept within a given context</li> <li>• Relation between the concept and other related concepts used in a given culture</li> </ul>
Role systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The social structures and roles, divisions, organisations etc., established to maintain and develop the conceptual understandings</li> </ul>
Routines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The routines involved which maintain and develop the conceptual understanding.</li> <li>• The routines involved, which are inherited from a previous or alternative conceptual understanding.</li> </ul>

**Figure 4:** The three carriers in focus and issues to investigate in relation to these.

### Methodological Considerations

This section briefly discusses methodology regarding the employment of the empirical data. The study builds on the empirical findings from the project: Product innovation, Organic foods, Environment and Technology (POET), especially the part dealing with innovation in organic dairies, see Ingemann, Abrahamsen & Holgaard (2000). The focus of the POET project was the dairies' manufacture of organic products. Two factors showed considerable importance to this manufacture, i.e. environmental understanding and network relations. The aim of the POET project differs from the objective of this paper. However, the factors of the POET projects cover especially the two first carriers, i.e. culture and role systems. On this background, we estimate the data of the POET project as valuable data for this study. In the conclusion, we will return to this issue and discuss the degree of success.

The empirical material is based on qualitative interviews with seven organic dairies, of which three, apart from the organic production, also have a considerable conventional production. One company differs from the others by its size with approximately 14.000 employees; while the rest of the dairies are small companies with 10-50 employees. Two of the companies do not produce organic milk, but have a considerable production of organic cheese. Thereby organic milk forms the basis of their production. Interviews were conducted with managers at five of the organic dairies, and with one group managing director of environment and one sales director from the two remaining dairies. The interview persons have reviewed the data used in the POET project.

### Meaning attached to organic milk

This section is an analysis of the culture carrier, see figure four. In particular, we investigate the understanding of the concept of organic products, the understanding of doing business, and the importance of innovation for the dairies regarding both product and production process. Among the seven dairies treating organic milk, three different discourses emerge; i.e. an economic discourse, a mix of economic and ecological discourse, and a discourse with strong ecological attitude towards organic production.

The first discourse is primarily driven by an economic rationality, according to which, the organic dimension tends to be a mean more than a goal in itself. The discourse represents two dairies, both exclusively cheese producers. For these two dairies, the change from conventional to organic cheese production has only involved a limited number of product and process innovations. "Organic" is considered a fashionable concept to add to the cheese. In the following, we call this discourse *Organic as Fashion*. The product quality is not considered dependent on whether the milk is organic or not. These dairies related *organic products* to the processes at the organic farms. The concept of *sustainability* is related to the free market and making quality products at competitive prices. The two dairies both have a history of cheese production based on conventional milk and the incentive to start production



of organic cheese was described as an opportunity to earn some easy money. If the consumer is willing to pay a higher price for a certain kind of product – then this is what the dairy will produce. Thus, the dairies see themselves as demand-driven.

The second discourse was motivated by an economic rationality along with an ecological understanding. This discourse represents four dairies; some had a previous production of conventional milk and some started out as organic dairies. In relation to the conversion or the start of the organic production process, product innovations were highly prioritised in order to differentiate the dairies on the market for organic products. To these dairies, the understanding of *organic products* is related to natural products, which implies a gentle treatment of the milk in the production processes at the dairy. The organic product is also connected to new values related to higher standards of living. One of the dairies mentioned that feelings are highly attached to organic production:

*“Everything we have done is, to a high extent, affected by the fact that feelings are governing the picture...and I have not in all my earlier professional carrier, and I have worked in several different sectors, met those kinds of attitudes I have experienced here, and that is just how I want it to be”*

*(Own translation)*

The same dairy pictures the challenge of organic production as a balance between romanticism and realism. The meaning attached to organic milk is a product which besides being a way of making a living is a considered as “the right thing to do” in a more holistic perspective. Related terms are romanticism, natural, feelings, and differentiation on the market, gentle production processes. In the following, we denominate this discourse: *Organic – Business doing the Right Things*.

The third discourse is driven by a strong ecological attitude closely related to the managers’ private “way of living”. This discourse is represented by one dairy. In the production, product and process innovations are prioritised, but also social concerns have a high priority in the dairy’s way of “doing business”, e.g. taking initiatives in engaging people in urban areas to buy organic products. Organic production is seen as common sense and is grounded in a “hippie culture” of organic production:

*“In those days (in the 1980s), there were fifteen hippies in Copenhagen who drank organic milk; in 1991 there were 25 hippies and in 1992 there were 35.”*

*(Own translation)*

The dairy explains the increase in the organic milk market by the common concern about human health initiated by stories in the press, e.g. of pesticides in the drinking water, salmonella infections etc. However, the dairy still sees a direct conflict between an economically rational behaviour and what they call an ethically correct behaviour:

*“I have had all these ambitions of behaving ethically correct, environmentally responsible and all that but I just never have had the money...I have used all my energy to keep things running, and occupying people to run this place, and keeping up a job outside this place to make up the deficit.”*

*(Own translation)*



To this dairy, the meaning of organic milk is a “way of life” and filling out an ambition of being ethically responsible. The related terms to organic milk is ethics, health, common sense, hippie culture, and economically inefficient. In the following, we call this discourse *Organic – a Way of Life*. Figure five below illustrates some of the essential elements of these discourses.

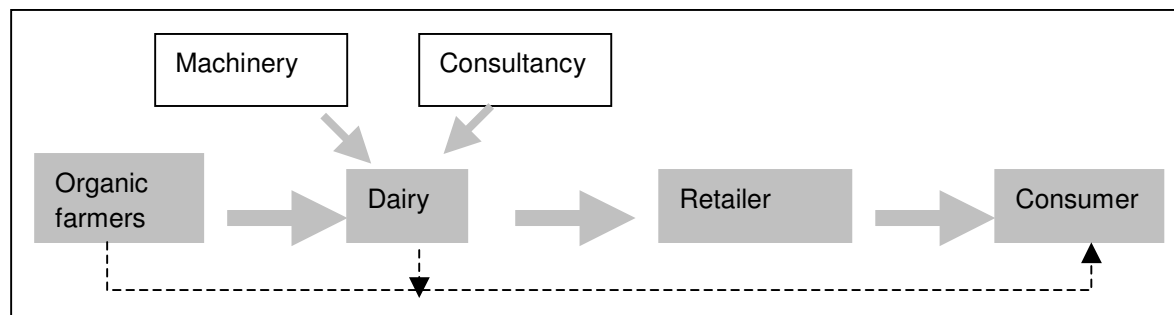
	<b>Understanding organic products</b>	<b>Doing business</b>	<b>Innovations</b>
<b>Organic as Fashion</b>	Fashion relating to organic farming	Customers get what they want	Low importance
<b>Organic – Business doing the Right Things</b>	Natural products	Balancing romanticism and realism	High importance
<b>Organic – a Way of Life</b>	A way of life	Incompatible with the ethical ambitions	Importance

**Figure 5:** Main issues of the three recognised discourses among the seven dairies.

Even though all the dairies fulfil the requirement of the Ø-label, the three discourses illustrate three different ways of thinking about organic products and thereby also three different ways of comprehending the label. For the two dairies characterised by the *Organic as Fashion* discourse, organic production is entirely a business question; thus stagnation of the market might make them look for other ways to earn easy money. The two other discourses *Organic – Business doing the Right Things* and *Organic – a Way of Life* will fight to a higher degree to keep the position of organic products on the market. It might be possible to differentiate between the discourse of *Organic as Fashion* and the two other discourses in shades of green, where the *Organic as Fashion* discourse is lighter green than the two other discourses. The *Organic – Business doing the Right Things* and *Organic – a Way of Life* discourses act differently towards the business of selling organic products. The *Organic – Business doing the Right Things* discourse is more professional in business, e.g. aware of avoiding negative numbers on the bottom line and developing products and processes; while the *Organic – a Way of Life* discourse is more idealistic.

### Role systems

In this section, we analyse the carrier, i.e. role system, see figure four. The focus is on communication in the production chain. Figure six below illustrates a typical production chain of Danish organic milk.



**Figure 6:** The typical production chain for organic milk.

For historical reasons, almost all the dairies are co-operatives. They have a strong tradition for partnership and very close communication and collaboration practices with the farmers.



Especially, in the case of the smaller dairies this collaboration is still an important link, while the large dairy has not been able to preserve the close connection due to the large number of farmers involved. The managers of the minor dairies describe the relation to the farmers as positive regarding knowledge exchange and periodic meetings in the board. The dairies and farmers also work closely together on monitoring and controlling the milk quality. Surprisingly, the co-operation among the smaller dairies in the trade is rather weak. Even though many minor dairies complain about the conditions on a market dominated by one large company, no initiatives have been taken in strengthening the collaboration between the minor dairies. One reason is the fact that these dairies are afraid of being caught in the middle – being either too big to have proximity to their suppliers and consumers or too small to compete with the large company dominating the market.

Down the chain, the retailers have played an important role in increasing the market share of organic food. In 1993, the market for organic food products experienced great changes in a relatively short period of time, due to an intensive marketing campaign and a different price policy among the retailers. In the beginning, these initiatives mainly came from the Danish retailer chain FDB (Forenede Danske Brugsforeninger – the COOP), which invested 1 million DKK in an information campaign stimulating sales of organic food. Later, the same pricing policy spread to other retailers due to the interest of the consumers.

The consumer-producer relation is relatively weak. Only the large dairy has implemented an intensive marketing of organic products, trying to affect the attitudes of the consumers via advertisements in television and newspapers. Direct farm gate selling of milk does almost not exist. However, annual events are arranged to strengthen the consumer-producer relation, e.g. the harvest market where organic farms are open to the public. The dairies stress that close contact to the consumers is an important source of information, e.g. market investigations and feedback from the consumers by e-mail or by demonstrations of the product in the stores.

With regard to the suppliers of machinery and cleaning, the managers of the dairies have had a positive collaboration and exchange of knowledge with them, but environmental issues have seldom been on the agenda. This also seems to be the case in the collaboration with the retailers, which is oriented towards the traditional flows in the business network. The knowledge exchange has mainly taken place in relation to unexpected problems, and often the concerns have been traditional quality features. The retailers do not have a tradition of serving as a link of information and knowledge exchange between the consumers and the producers.

Overall, the dairies to a high degree maintain the existing co-operation regarding organic milk. The consumer-producer relation and the internal co-operation within the trade are relatively weak.

### **Informal and inherited routines**

Finally, in this section, we analyse the third and last carrier of routines, see figure four. The focus is on the formal and informal environmental work at the dairies. The requirements to obtain the Ø-label for milk are primarily of the production sector. Thus, the only measures the dairies have to take are to make sure that the organic milk is not mixed with conventional milk and to avoid homogenising the organic milk. In this light, knowledge of organic milk is often concentrated in the primary production. In the cases where organic farmers have a position in the board of the dairies, their knowledge was also reflected in the secondary production. However, the focus on primary production seems to have an important role in defining quality, as these issues are reflected in the Ø-label. Other issues such as working conditions and environmental impact from the production and distribution are not a main concern.



In terms of innovation, organic dairy products primarily innovate with an incremental focus, transforming traditional products to organic and, at the same time, improving the quality of the products. In that way, conventional dairy products now have organic alternatives on the market. However, in general, the environmental understanding at the organic dairies relates to conditions in the primary production. For most of the smaller dairies, environmental work is informally integrated in the organisational culture. The routines of the organic dairies are inherited almost directly from the conventional production of milk. Although one dairy states that a company producing organic products is expected to have a higher degree of environmental awareness, few of the companies have the resources to make a systematic environmental effort.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The investigation of the organic dairies resulted in a distinction between three different discourses among these seven dairies:

- *Organic as fashion* is a discourse representing two dairies viewing organic products as coming from organic farms. Thus, it is not the dairies but the farming that is organic. Along these lines, routines and practices remain as earlier when the dairies were entirely treating conventional milk. The way of doing business is to follow the customers' preferences, although the dairies do not have direct contact with the costumers.
- *Organic – Business Doing the Right Things* is the discourse representing four dairies considering organic products as equal to natural products. The two dairies holding an environmental management system is connected to this discourse. The business strategy is to balance romanticism and realism, and it is also the discourse with the most active practice towards product and process innovations.
- *Organic – a Way of Life* is the most idealistic discourse of the three, represented by one dairy. This discourse views organic as a way of life emphasizing ethical and social issues. Innovations are seen as important, although not in same degree as expressed by the previous discourse.

Faced with the reorganization of the Ø-label into a shared EU label, the dairies in the three discourses will act in different ways. If the demand for organic dairy products decreases, the Organic as Fashion dairies will probably return to conventional products as part of their follow-the-customer strategy. The Organic – Business Doing the Right Things dairies would probably to some degree try to convince the consumers to trust the new label, while part of them might also go back to entirely conventional products. The Organic – a Way of Life dairy will continue to produce organic products no matter the market trends, as this will be the only way to go according to the ideals attached to this discourse.

The fact that the trade in general has a weak connection to the customers might appear as a barrier to persuading consumers to buy organic products and overcome their possible distrust in the new EU label. The weak co-operation practices among the dairies in the trade also form a barrier to creating a common strategy towards the challenge of the new label. At the same time, organic dairies are very much producing in the same way as the conventional dairies, thus the costs of converting to conventional dairy products are small.

As promised earlier, we briefly discuss the empirical data applied for this study below. Among the three carriers, the first one, the culture carrier, has been easy to cover from the empirical data collected for the POET project. The two other carriers, however, have been



more difficult to assess, as the issues are not directly touched upon in the interviews. Along these lines, the three identified discourses are well-supported conclusions of the paper.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the rest of the team from the POET project from which we have adopted the empirical material. Besides the co-author of this paper, the research team from the POET project consisted of Arne Remmen & Jan Holm Ingemann (Project Managers), Per Christensen, Jesper Lassen, Eskild Holm Nielsen, Mikkel Thrane, Bolette Abrahamsen, and Carla Smink.

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