

# The ORPESA project: a participative approach combining different knowledge types for organic rice production in the Camargue

Mathieu Bayot, Jean-Claude Mouret, Brigitte Nougaredes, Roy Hammond

INRA, SAD, UMR Innovation et développement, Montpellier, France - [mouret@supagro.inra.fr](mailto:mouret@supagro.inra.fr)

**Abstract:** The aim of the ORPESA (Organic Rice Production in Environmentally Sensitive Areas) project was to develop organic rice production in environmentally sensitive areas. We developed a participative training method which helps ricegrowers and stakeholders to convert to organic farming and to improve their organic rice production. Different training sessions were organised. The participants shared their thoughts about technical problems encountered and identified possible solutions. At the end of these sessions, a motivated workgroup was constituted. Some of its members even proposed to evaluate in fields on their farms the efficiency of some techniques which were discussed during the work sessions. Currently, scientists and members of the group wish to continue to work together beyond the end of the ORPESA project. In order to satisfy this demand, we are now planning to initiate new research and development actions using the same approach.

**Keywords:** participative training, organic rice growing, research action, Camargue.

## Introduction

In the south of Europe, rice is cultivated principally in protected geographical regions, which is paradoxical considering the particularly important impact that conventional rice has on the environment (Ghosh *et al.*, 1998). An alternative option, attractive environmentally but also from an economic and a social viewpoint is conversion to organic production (Bayot *et al.*, 2007). However, the rate of conversion to organic production is much lower than could be expected, since organic growing of rice presents particular technical problems. Conversion depends on multiple determinants (markets, government policy, etc..) but technical problems remain central. The availability of expert support is critical to successful conversion and no structured training is currently available.

In this context, within the ORPESA (Organic Rice Production in Environmentally Sensitive Areas) project we developed a structured vocational educational training programme to support organic rice conversion and production in environmentally sensitive areas. Our method is based on the sharing of technical, practical and theoretical knowledge within a group constituted of rice growers (organic or not) and stakeholders. Each work session was based on discussions of farmers' own practices with input from experts chosen in relation to the subject being dealt with. After two years' experience, satisfying first results encouraged our team to continue this work using the same approach beyond the initial project. This paper describes the methodology developed during the project and underlines the first results we obtained.

## Training method

### Session structure

Vocational training sessions were developed according to a participative method (Rodwell, 1994; Izarn, 2007). This choice was due to the training objectives and the trainees targeted. The aim of the method is to list technical questions raised by the practitioners and to envisage a panel of solutions which can be applied by them. Thus the objective of this very pragmatic method is not to produce scientific knowledge about organic farming but rather to elaborate, as a priority, technical solutions. Furthermore, farmers' practical knowledge and scientists (agronomists, breeders,...) theoretical knowledge influence their respective ways of approaching a given technical problem (Darré *et al.*, 2004). This is the reason why we start from practitioners' questions in order to elaborate a plan which

helps to find solutions. Once this position is adopted, we think that it is by combining the complementarity of each individual's knowledge, that we can elaborate the structure of the sessions.

## Deontology

A climate of trust, conviviality and free exchange is established. At the beginning of each session, facilitators remind participants of rules concerning the respect of each person's point of view and the confidentiality of each opinion expressed. All the trainees are informed of the session's structure. Topics treated are selected by the trainees a month before the start of the training sessions. The training team and the trainees need to have the same information regarding the content and organization of the sessions. So, each session is introduced by a detailed presentation of the session's schedule. Furthermore, participants are given a book containing the schedule and which is structured so as to facilitate the taking of notes.

## Training techniques

Themes treated are developed using different approaches in order to organize debates around a central question. Different training techniques (brainstorming, case studies, hum group,...) (Wannop *et al.*, 2006) are used in order to facilitate the participants' intervention and to balance each person's speaking time.

## Results

Many participants showed great interest in these types of exchanges. They were also satisfied that a workgroup had been constituted. However, they said that rather than being a training programme as such, this method was more a way of creating an inventory of current knowledge concerning organic farming. Subsequently they think that we must continue in this way using different approaches. First of all, they wanted to test on-field some techniques envisaged during the sessions. They will be experimented in some farmers' fields during the next growing season. Furthermore, they listed some topics which could be developed during further training sessions. Besides agronomical questions, the economic evaluation of some techniques and the legislation regulating organic production need to be considered in the future. Members of the workgroup also emphasized their interest in exchanging experiences with foreign ricegrowers. Finally, some of them proposed to enlarge the function of the workgroup. For example, the creation of an organic rice growers' syndicate has been mentioned. At the end of the project, a written document summarising the method used and reviewing the different sessions, was produced and sent to people involved in rice production in the Camargue. The interest to continue with our approach and the definition of a project that we could eventually initiate as a result of this experience (objectives, means, methods), will be evaluated during the next meeting with the workgroup.

## Conclusion

Beyond the elaboration of a training method based on the sharing of experiences, the participative approach of ORPESA initiated the setting up of a group of organic rice growers. Furthermore, the research workers involved were able to broaden their knowledge about practices used in organic rice growing. Even if this approach does not permit the elaboration of scientific technical references in organic rice growing, it creates the possibility of proposing a panel of techniques approved and mobilizable by farmers. Furthermore, this method helps research workers to work with rice growers in elaborating original experimental plans.

In a context where environmental stakes occupy the political and scientific scenes, inducing rapid evolution of agricultural practices, and where at the same time farmers and researchers are confronted with a lack of technical references concerning organic rice growing, we estimate that this work method constructed in partnership with the rice growers themselves could enable a quick improvement in production techniques. In addition it could contribute to the reflection concerning experimental designs and improve agronomists' knowledge of the observation and decision indicators of organic rice growers.

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