

## **Organic food: comparing experiences between Italy and the UK**

On the occasion of the bilateral meeting on “Research of strategies to support the competence of organic food companies: comparison of experiences and best practices between Italy and UK”, researchers and representatives of government agencies in both countries had the opportunity to exchange information and opinions on the most recent developments in this field. The seminar, held at the Italian Cultural Institute in London last 14<sup>th</sup> July has been organised by the Scientific Office of the Italian Embassy in London, in cooperation with CINSA (National Interuniversity Consortium for Environmental Sciences), the Italian Chamber of Commerce in the UK and DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs). The event was supported by the Italian Veneto Region, where one of CINSA’s main offices is located.

The interest in this topic is very strong in the UK, where the sector of organic agriculture has grown so much in 2006 that, in terms of employment, it has overtaken the conventional agriculture. Beyond that, due an increasing sensitivity of the British consumer to the quality of food, following a long-lasting information campaign on the benefits of natural products and their role in the prevention of cardio-vascular diseases, the British market proves to be particularly receptive to organically farmed products. Italy is the third country in the world for percentage of national surface destined to organic cultivations (7%), and the second by number of companies (almost 50.000). For this reason there is a keen interest establishing co-operation with the UK in the sector. The total commercial turnover of the agro-biological sector in 2005 exceeded 1 billion Euros in Italy, while it reached about £1.2 billion in the UK.

The conference discussed issues related to general policy aspects of the sector, techniques and strategies to improve the information received by the public and the information flow between economic operators, and finally the sensitive theme of product quality certification. The latter is a very important point not only for the Italian producers, but also for the British consumers, in view of the long processes necessary to import the organic products from abroad.

In his welcome address, the Minister Giovanni Brauzzi of the Italian Embassy has highlighted that the widening of contacts and co-operations in the sector could represent a precious occasion to improve the whole European approach to organic agriculture. The aim is for agriculture to become the forefront of a “green revolution” in the framework of sustainable development and environment protection.

Subsequent speeches have developed this theme underlying that agriculture as a whole, and not only organic agriculture, has a great impact not only on a

country's economy, but also on the preservation of its culture and traditions, environment and biodiversity. This theme is particularly noteworthy, and attracts great attention in Italy, e.g. within an international forum like the Green Diplomacy Network.

Organic agriculture therefore constitutes a paradigm for these themes, setting the quality of the product as first aim. It has been evidenced that, much more than in the past, the British consumer pays particular attention to quality and environmental preservation, obviously due to the wide sensitisation campaigns carried out in the UK.

It may be interesting to note that in Great Britain the growth in the agro-biological sector is led essentially by consumer demand, while in Italy the biggest role is played by government funding and by the support to the producers. Italy's production (mostly concentrated in the South and islands) largely exceeds Italian consumption (mainly in the North, where processing takes place). Nearly all the finished product is exported. The recent downsizing of government funding to the sector has effectively reduced the number of organic food companies in Italy. One of the main problems is the high number of organic food companies, who have an average extension of area for organic farming of almost 20 ha. This leads to a reduced competitiveness at international level.

On the subject of research and development, the representatives of the agricultural government bodies in the two countries have spoken about their annual public funding budgets (respectively, 2 M€ in Italy and 2 M£ in the UK) and their aims and strategies. Italy is focused on coordinating its research, still quite fragmented, and the RISBIO project (funded by the Ministry and at the origin of this bilateral meeting) is a clear example of this policy. In the UK, since 1998, research has been mainly re-addressed from marketing to aspects connected to environment protection, economy and product quality.

During the meeting several possible strategies have been presented, both by the Italian and the British parties, aimed at improving the companies' capabilities and better consumer information. The methods range from the use of "focus groups", to the application of "lean thinking" in the quantitative assessment of the production process. One particularly interesting proposal, produced within the Italian RISBIO project, concerns the use of an integrated system of localisation and information, available through the web, which will employ a GIS system for land visualization and will therefore allow high-precision tracing of the product. This will not only comply with European Community rules, but it is a major information requirement of the buyer. Tracing (together with monitoring and legal verification by the relevant institutions) is an essential instrument in the sensitive subject of certification. In this regard, the assembly has critically reviewed the difficulties the two countries face in the certification process, often slowed down by bureaucracy.

In conclusion, all participants have agreed that there is common ground for further co-operation among the companies of the two countries, and that further exchanges will take place in the following months.