

I want them to choose us because of how we farm and who we are: The changing role of organic certification and the importance of social capital on seven organic dairy farms in Maine, USA

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An iterative, interview-based methodology was used for collecting and analyzing data on dairy farmers working with organic practices in Maine, USA to answer the question: Can organic dairy farming provide a viable alternative to conventional dairy farming in Maine? The Theory of Planned Behavior was used to develop questions for semi-structured interviews addressing farmers' attitudes towards organic methods and organic certification; the importance of peers' and customers' opinions and behavior; as well as assessing farmers' perceived behavioral control over organic farming practices and organic certification. A grounded theory approach was used to weave a connection between the available literature and the creation of a new, place-based and place-specific theory based on the research findings.

Seven farmers aged 26 to 68 years were interviewed on six farms. Herd size on the farms ranged from 11 to 60 cows, farm size from 40 ha to 210 ha. Farms were selected using snowball sampling and criteria including: farmers work with organic practices on their farm; sell fluid milk or dairy products either wholesale or direct-sale at least once per week; consider farming as their primary source of income; sell more than \$5000/€4475 worth of products annually, therefore requiring them to be certified organic if their products are labelled "organic". Two of the six selected farms work with organic practices but are not certified organic. Interviews were done in-person, lasted about one hour, and were then coded and sorted into thematic clusters which were developed during the interview process.

The findings showed that organic dairy farming presents an economically viable alternative to conventional farming for this group. Farmers set themselves apart from standard organic practices by emphasizing that they are anchored in a set of values that go beyond what is required for organic certification in the United States. Local and regional social capital, and the creation of cohesive communities that include strong, trust-based farmer-customer relationships, particularly via direct-sale interactions, played a key role in allowing farmers to run viable businesses using organic practices and guided by their personal values.

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