DENMARK ORGANIC
LESSONS FOR U.S. FUTURE

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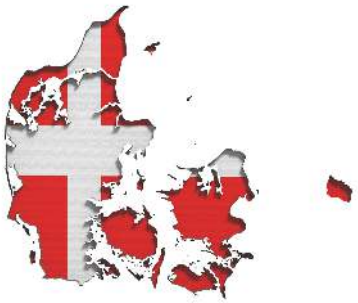
While the growth of organic in the U.S. is mostly market-driven, other governments around the world have chosen to use their policies and tax dollars to aggressively grow organic agriculture and food purchases. Denmark has led the way in organic planning with astounding success. Many European countries have seen the benefits of the Danish model and have integrated similar activities. We in the U.S. can learn much from these policies and the positive results.

Organic food purchases in Denmark have the highest market share of any country in the world, at 12.8 percent in 2020 (U.S. organic food sales were just under 6 percent in 2020). Ninety percent the citizenry can specifically name organic practices and why they are beneficial. Eighty percent of the people buy organic food, with fifty percent buying organic on a weekly basis.

Denmark's numerous organic products, are exported to nearby countries, where eager consumers trust the Danish organic label. Almost ten percent of the agricultural land is certified organic. This organic success was achieved through a concerted effort by the Danish government with many non-governmental partners playing pivotal roles in building the capacity and demand to make this happen. This country of 5.8 million people, implemented an Organic Action Plan in 1995 and has consistently met its targets for growth as Denmark continues to set new goals for the future. One Danish organic promoter stated that over a five-year period, the Danish government has invested an equivalent of $10 per person in organic agriculture.

PESTICIDE CONTAMINATION MOTIVATED CHANGE

Denmark is a small country, about twice the size of Massachusetts. It is composed of a long peninsula surrounded on three sides by the North Sea as well as a series of islands. All drinking water is sourced from wells, tapping into the groundwater under the landmass. In the early 1990s, wells were becoming contaminated with pesticides and the Danes became alarmed. Instead of digging deeper wells, or trying to desalinize the ocean, they decided to stop the source of the contamination and encourage the transition to organic production. They spent five years developing their first plan and relied on many non-governmental agencies to partner with them to encourage farmers and consumers to welcome organic, as well as build appropriate marketing strategies and infrastructure that aid organic agricultural growth.



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SUCCESSFUL SOLUTIONS WERE HOLISTIC

The Danes approached the issue holistically. They felt it was important to have a stable market, and that everyone should have access to organic food regardless of income. When they started to implement their Organic Action Plan, they knew farmers would need both financial and technical help during the transition to organic. Cooking, processing, packaging, storage, and distribution of organic foods would need to be modified to maintain the freshness and integrity of the organic foods. Consumers would need to be educated about how organic food is produced and its numerous benefits as well as help in purchasing higher-priced products.

Twenty-five years ago, my husband and I spent 10 days in Denmark visiting organic farmers, educators, processors, and policymakers. One of the first dairy farmers we visited had newly transitioned to organic and I asked him why he made that choice. He answered that he could not lose the farm on his watch. I asked what he meant by that and he explained his family had lived on that farm since the mid-1600s. He saw himself in a long line of family members, both past and future, and he needed to do his best for all of them. **To help him succeed in his organic transition, the government provided him an organic transition subsidy, funded by the government by taxing pesticide sales and giving that specific tax to transitioning farmers.**

EDUCATION & TRAINING BEYOND FARMS WAS NECESSARY

During our visit, we visited numerous educational institutions. In the late 1990s, organic processed foods were much less common and organic foods tended to be fresh--not frozen or highly processed. To preserve the nutrition and flavor for this fresh product, a new set of skills needed to be taught. One institution focused instruction on fresh food handling for food service workers in institutional kitchens (hospitals, schools, daycare centers, retirement homes) and restaurants. They were taught how to purchase, cook, store and present organic foods.

The Danish government supported the purchase and use of organic foods in institutional kitchens called “public kitchens,” which provided a quick and stable market for the growing number of organic farms.

CHANGING CONSUMER PURCHASING

In order to encourage Danish consumers to also adopt an affection for organic foods, the government incentivized a change of purchasing by sending most Danish citizens coupons in the mail that could only be used to lessen the cost of organic foods they purchased in their local stores.

This government subsidy was very popular and many organic foods sold out quickly in the early part of the month when everyone had their coupons. This effort helped to equalize access to organic food while at the same time providing a strong market, which encouraged more farmers to transition.

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FREE ORGANIC CERTIFICATION

From the beginning, Danish government officials reached out to farmers to identify barriers to organic transition, and farmers stated they wanted the cost of organic certification to be free.

To this day, the Danish government manages organic certification free to all producers. Organic certification in Denmark is free because the value of the ecological services of organic production far outweighs the certification costs. The government also continues to encourage the transition to organic by providing a day-long consultation with an organic expert to help them understand the changes and opportunities resulting from organic production on their individual farm.

Research and innovation are deeply embedded in the Danish organic plan. From agricultural production to developing new food products and processing techniques suited to organic, Denmark has become an important global leader in visioning and building the infrastructure, policy examples, and public support that can be replicated to create an organic world.

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DENMARK'S PANDEMIC RESPONSE PROPELS ORGANIC

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The COVID19 pandemic has disrupted economic and health systems across the globe. In Denmark, where extensive organic agriculture policies already exist, the government made a notable effort to supplement national crisis pandemic management with ambitious green initiatives, including organic. Danish policymakers argued that economic crisis management and sustainable development spending needed to go hand-in-hand. In response to the unique and urgent needs of the economy, Denmark launched the Danish Recovery and Resilience Plan (DRRP) in April 2021 to foster a strong recovery and prepare the economy for future challenges.

The DRRP provides needed stimulus to the staggering economy while simultaneously constructing more sustainable systems of production. The more supply chains reflect sustainable practices, the easier it is for entire economies to transition to green economies. Denmark has taken proactive steps towards converting conventional agriculture into organic systems for the last two decades[1], and the DRRP continues this commitment with a reinvigoration of green transition policy.

GREEN TRANSITION OF AGRICULTURE

Although the DRRP encompasses a wide range of investments and reforms, its central mission prepares Denmark to face necessary adaptations for future technology and green transitions. Having made binding and ambitious commitments to cutting total emissions by 70 percent by 2030[2], the Danish government will again focus on transitioning more land to organic production as a tool for cutting emissions and promoting sustainability. It has always been Danish policy to approach organic growth through demand-based interventions and innovative research-based solutions. The DRRP continues this policy by pursuing three main initiatives.

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[1] Over 11%of agricultural farmland in Denmark (280,000 ha) is certified organic, almost twice as high as the European Union (EU) average. Most organic farmland is in Jutland, the Northern continental part of Denmark. Last year, an additional 34,000 ha were converted to organic.
[2] https://www.fas.usda.gov/data/denmark-government-introduces-climate-action-plan-agriculture and https://climate-laws.org/geographies/denmark/laws/the-climate-act

3 DANISH ORGANIC INITIATIVES IN 2021

1. **Increasing Organic in Public Institutional Kitchens:** This intervention increases previous efforts to convert domestic public kitchens to healthier and climate-friendly organic meals in thousands of schools, hospitals, retirement homes, ministries, and military bases. Addressing both public health and environmental sustainability, this national reform will increase organic food in all public kitchens to 90 percent by 2030, finance education for kitchen workers, add climate emissions to Organic Cuisine Labels, and provide technical assistance to help kitchens transition. Denmark has committed $10 Million (M) DKK ($1.51 M USD) per year to this initiative.

2. **Organic Research and Development:** In order to support continual improvements, research and development is highly emphasized in the Danish model. The Innovation Centre for Organic Farming will support farmer information exchange, research, experiments, and organic education for the general public. The government has allocated $40 M DKK ($6.07 M USD) to the program for the next four years.

3. **Increased Funding for Transitioning Farms:** The aim of these measures is to encourage more farmers to transition to organic farming because of the positive & quantifiable environmental services that organic management achieves.[3} To support this growth in the marketplace, Denmark aims to double domestic consumption of organic products by 2030. In order to meet this consumer demand domestically, the country has allocated $45 M DKK ($8.1 M USD) per year to support transitioning farmers. This subsidy directly addresses the major concerns of farmers regarding loss of revenue and the steep learning curve during organic transition.

Despite the Coronavirus's global disruption, Denmark's organic model has capitalized on economic decline and recovery to **build back production systems and consumer demand in a manner that accelerates sustainable development.** The Danish model provides a straightforward model for replication to accelerate the consumption and production of organic goods as a means to mitigate climate change and pollution concerns. The positive relationship between the government and the agricultural sector increases the well-being of farmers and rural communities. We can look to the successful Denmark example for how federal policy and organic sector partnership can support the growth of organic agriculture to achieve better environmental and health outcomes for the whole community.

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[3] EU quantified environmental services: https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/knowledge/ecosystem_assessment/index_en.htm
https://biodiversity.europa.eu/countries/denmark/maes
https://biodiversity.europa.eu/countries/denmark