

“BIOAGRO”: A PORTAL THAT AIMS TO THE PROMOTION AND IMPROVEMENT OF ORGANIC AGRICULTURE IN EUROPEAN UNION

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ABSTRACT

Global community has recently shown a significant interest in environmental conservation in order to assure food safety and quality. Organic Agriculture (OA) as an alternative approach to the conventional intensive farming responds to these demands and has significantly been developed in many European countries and elsewhere. Organic Animal Farming (OAF) systems and the related grassland farming have also gained a significant importance for these systems.

However, ten years after the application of organic agriculture, a combination of problems (lack of technical knowledge and information, reliable system for promotion of organic products) are present. In order for the organic agriculture to continue its growth, solutions to these problems have to be found. Through this frame, the use of Internet can give solutions to the problems listed above.

The aim of this study is the presentation of a reliable service platform, that can operate as the major information source for people related to organic agriculture (veterinarians, agronomists, farmers, food enterprises, consumers etc) in European Union, and in parallel provide e-services regarding OA. The platform is designed and implemented according to the European Union programme e-Content 11293 “Bio@gro”. ²The countries participating in this programme are Greece, Germany, Romania and Cyprus. The content of the portal is given in English and in the four languages of the participant countries, thus the portal can be accessible by a vast number of users. The information provided through the platform is taken from all possible sources (e.g. Ministries, Research Institutes and Organisations) that deal with OA in general. In particular the aim of Bio@gro as regards access to information is the presentation of reliable information (legislation, practice guides etc) and services for the promotion and support of organic agriculture. However, Bio@gro is more than that. It is a comprehensive e-services platform, covering: a) E-commerce b) E-learning c) Digital Library d) Calendar of events related to organic agriculture e) The option of exchanging opinions.

METHODOLOGY

The role of the Bio@gro project is to provide all the interested actors with OA information. This can only be achieved by providing multilingual (and furthermore, multicultural) content. Hence,

² More information about e-Content 11293 project and the use of BIO@GRO portal can be accessed through web address <http://www.bioagro.gr>.

all Bio@gro content is available not only in English but also in each project partner's language (Greek, German and Romanian) with the only exception being the content regarding national legislation, which is provided in English and the corresponding language of the countries participating in this project.

The definition of the content categories, is in line with the methodology followed during the analysis of the user requirements. More specifically, a multi-disciplinary group of content experts has been allocated to identify possible content categories, as well as to assess the results.

Content categories of Bio@gro Web portal

The need for up-to-date information about the OA sector, including events from all around the world and legislative, agricultural, scientific and economic developments, is what has driven the categorization of content for the Bio@gro portal. Using information from governmental (e.g. Ministries of Agriculture, AGROCERT) and non-governmental organisations (e.g. IFOAM, certification bodies) of each country, the daily press, scientific journals, on-line scientific associations (e.g. European Association for animal production – EAAP), educational institutions, processors, traders and consumers' associations, various OA related websites, as well as *de novo* content produced by Bio@gro itself, the portal comprises one of the most comprehensive sources of information available.

The information is classified in eight main categories (see Figure 1).

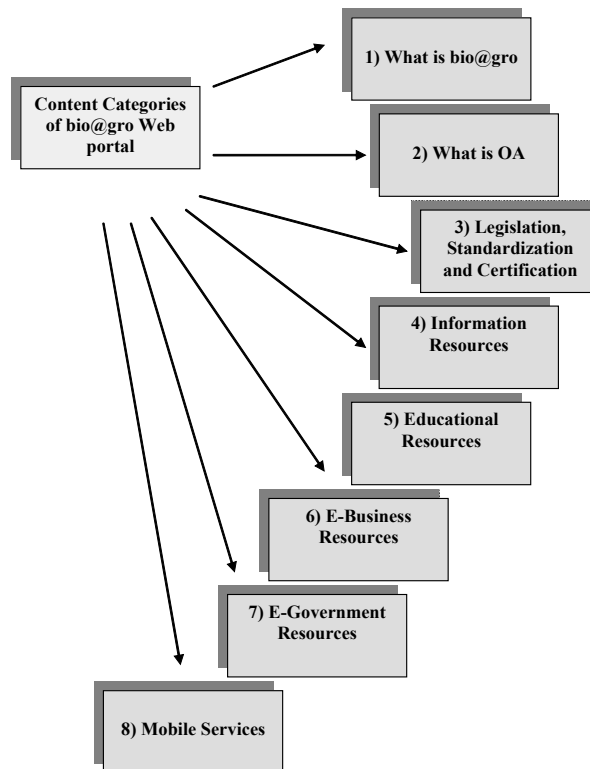


Figure 1. List of Content Categories of Bio@gro Web portal

A detailed description of the categories of the portal is given below.

What is Bio@gro

Bio@gro project proposal can contribute to the integrated development of the OA sector throughout Europe by offering improved conditions and new opportunities not only to organic farmers' agribusinesses, but also to European citizens. The overall objective of this proposal is to create a critical mass of OA material and mechanisms, including OA actors from all links of the value chain, and to develop an e-services system as a single point of access for OA information and business opportunities.

What is OA

This section includes the core definitions for each OA actor, the principles of OA, and glossary of terms, as presented by various validated OA sources, such as non-profit organisations, foundations, research institutes, universities and scientific journals.

A number of selected and representative definitions of OA will be provided, based on those given by organisations or individuals whose expert knowledge has been validated through their active and long term involvement in the OA field.

Basic principles of OA are presented, based on those determined by the International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements (IFOAM), as well as threats arising from conventional agriculture and differences between organic and conventional agriculture.

A list of terms along with a brief explanation of their meaning is provided in this part of the content with special emphasis given to terms that help in defining and differentiating OA practices from the conventional ones. This information originates from official, validated sources, such as EC information centres and educational institutes.

Legislation, Standardisation and Certification

An important part of the project is the legislation and certification that governs the field of OA. The Council Regulation (EEC) No 2092/91 on organic production of agricultural products and the national OA legislation of each partner country is described in this section, as well as the legislation and certification of other major European and third countries (such as UK and USA, Canada, Australia, Japan).

Information resources

The main categories of the available information resources are presented in the following:

- News about OA, announcements, events (such as eco-festivals, conferences), OA events calendar service.
- Digital library with OA reports, studies, papers, legislative documents.
- Directories of OA-related links, such as:
 - European and National OA Initiatives,
 - Related agencies, such as certification bodies and monitoring organisations,
 - Useful links to other related web sites.

Educational Resources

The Bio@gro project addresses the needs of a variety of users ranging from simple individuals who are not familiar with OA and simply require general information about OA, and professionals engaged in this area (farmers, processors and traders) and need more specific information. This project provides educational resources such as e-learning courses and best

practice guides in order to help these different categories of users fulfil their requirements and provide integrated services. This section also includes a catalogue of other online educational resources and a number of frequently asked questions (FAQs) related to OA.

E-Business Resources

A description of the resources covered by this subsection is described in the following:

Business outlook:

- State support, subsidies, organic advisory services and programs and related services, such as taxation related to OA (European and National).
- Market reports, market information and trends, OA product price reports and status, etc.

Online shops and markets with OA products directory:

- Advertising services, where interested parties can promote their enterprises and/or products by placing a logo or e-mail service.
- Presentation of offered (products and services in a common pool of all European OA enterprises (e.g. by a link from the European list to the specific homepage).
- Potential customers' support services, such as OA producers and markets recommendation services (provides support for sales of products and services which comprise potential purchases).

List of labels of Organic Products:

- Information about labelling of Organic Products for each Member State of the European Union or imports from third countries.

Directories of suppliers, traders, farmers:

- Information for contact making with suppliers, i.e. support for the purchase preparation of necessary products and services.
- Bio@gro registered members catalogue (registered OA producers / processors / traders / farmers / researchers/ /consulting and controlling bodies)

E-government resources

In this section, a brief description of the e-government resources available through the Bio@gro portal is provided. In details, this section includes:

- A directory of Governmental Organisations and agencies providing information for OA actors.
- A directory of online services offered by Governmental Organisations and agencies.

Mobile services

Mobile services are also an important part of the Bio@gro portal. These are based on the exchange of SMS messages that is used for the transmission of alerts and notifications regarding:

- OA news.
- Bio@gro portal updates.
- Weather forecasts.
- Crop protection alerts.

Structure of Customers / Users / Stakeholders Groups

Considering that one of the important goals in trying to establish Bio@gro in the field OA was to analyse the current structure of the Market in the field of OA, we started with a shortlist of

stakeholder classes and groups with similar or related functions and interests. According to the previous investigations carried out by the Bio@gro team, the following user classes and groups (stakeholder classes) were identified:

- Business class: Farmers, Processors, Traders, Consultants and advisers.
- Non-profit class (information and communication): Administration, Associations and organisations (NGO's), Control Bodies, Researchers and Consultants, advisers.
- Consumer's class: Consumers, citizens.

This classification is not static. Many users cannot be clearly assigned to a single specific group, or there are operators belonging simultaneously to different groups (farmers and processors, farmers and traders, traders and processors).

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