Abstract: Consumer Trends and Motivations for Eating Organic

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Some results of two recent studies of consumer attitudes and shopping practices with reference to organic foods are presented. These constitute parts of the CONCEPTS-project financed by ICROFS 2006 – 2010 with reference to Danish consumers and of the QLIF-project financed by EU 2005 – 2009 with reference to British, Danish and Italian consumers.

It has earlier proved difficult to pinpoint the role played by health concerns – as well as concerns about the environment or animal welfare – in the food choices made by consumers. The reason is that a majority of many national populations tends to declare some level of concern with each of these issues. It is also the case that not all consumers associate organic food products with any particular benefits related to these issues. The CONCEPTS survey confirms the well documented fact that health considerations are widespread among consumers today. The QLIF study of consumer accounts of their life stories with respect to food reveals that an interest in healthy eating habits generally pre-dates the emergence of all other value-based or practical reasons for having become a consumer of organic foods.

The results of 6 focus groups conducted among Danish consumers (N=50) identified the following 5 factors as those which strongly differentiate consumers with respect to their choices between organic and conventional food products: (a) extent of involvement in food quality, (b) the need for convenient solutions to everyday problems of food provision due to limited resources of time, money or skills, (c) the extent of satisfaction with the quality of organic food products, (d) the degree of trust placed in organic producers, production methods and labelling schemes, and (e) the extent to which consumer care exercised in everyday food provision takes the form of concern about long term effects on nature, ground water, plants, animals and future generations. *Latent Class Analysis* applied to survey data obtained from a representative sample of Danish households (N=1,767) reveals that 6 consumer segments can be identified on the basis of these factors, ranging from those who are most positive towards organic foods ('The fully convinced') to those who are least positive ('The sceptical'). More involvement, satisfaction and trust are associated with more positive attitudes towards organic foods. Preliminary analysis of these data indicates that the 3 more positive consumer segments together constitute approximately half of all households in the national population (52 %). When applied to purchasing data from the same households regarding all food purchases during the year 2006, it transpires that these 3 segments also account for 88 % of all organic sales on the Danish market. The distinguishing feature of those who are most positive (17 %) is concern about the long term effects of food production and consumption. This relatively small segment of consumers also accounts for almost half (46 %) of all organic sales.

Fat content is generally seen as being an important criterion of healthy foods disregarding whether products are organic or conventional. The conception that organic foods are healthy is strongly associated with the absence of unwanted substances, especially with respect to the absence of synthetic pesticides, medicine residues and unwanted additives in processed foods. A strong interest in healthy eating habits is characteristic of those who are most positive towards organic foods. This trend is confirmed in the QLIF qualitative studies among British and Italian consumers as well as Danes (N=54). It would seem that good news about the health benefits of organic foods would be greeted with great interest by many consumers, but especially by those who are already convinced about the health benefits – as well as other benefits – of these food products.