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COMPETITIVENESS OF ORGANIC PRODUCERS IN LATVIA

Vita Zarina[1], Dr.oec., professor; **Velga Vevere**[2], Dr.phil., professor

[1, 2]EKA University of Applied Sciences

Abstract. There is a growing demand for organic products, which have a high potential for development and the need to study the basic conditions for the competitiveness of organic producers, this issue is also relevant for companies in other sectors, as the internal market often sets production and profit ceilings. Research goal: based on the analysis of the situation in the Latvian organic products industry, to identify opportunities for improving the competitiveness of organic producers in Latvia. Research methods: both quantitative and qualitative research methods have been used in the study. In order to obtain an overview of the situation in the organic farming sector and its regulatory enactments, data collection methods have been used: literature analysis, secondary data analysis, expert interviews and organic producers' survey. A comparison method will also be used to compare the largest companies in the studied market in order to find operational differences and analyse the competitive advantage. The research question of posed: What are the factors that influence the competitiveness of Latvian organic producers? At the end of the paper the recommendations for Latvian organic producers to improve their competitiveness have been developed.

Keywords: organic product manufacturers, competitiveness, improving competitiveness.

JEL codes: Q1, Q01, Q13

Introduction

Reducing the adverse impact caused by industrial activity in the environment is a crucial factor in greening the economy. Moreover, improving environmental performance leads to the development of new business streams. The green transformation is ambitious commercial opportunity for the business sector. Thus, the green business operations provide profit growth, potential cost reduction, green customer loyalty, entrance on the new market, increasing the competitive advantages etc. There is a growing demand for organic products, which have a high potential for development and the need to study the basic conditions for the competitiveness of organic producers. This issue is also relevant for companies in other sectors, as the local market often sets production and profit ceilings. The general economic conditions have a major impact on the food and agriculture sector, in addition, their impact may increase. As the vast majority of the population lives in urban areas (68%) areas, infrastructure and services are generally less developed and unemployment is higher there. About 76% of the total labour force investment in agriculture is unpaid family work. Low productivity in the economy is also reflected in agriculture and food production; and low wages in rural areas partly explain rural poverty and urban migration. Similar to other sectors, the food and agriculture sector also supplies global value chains mainly with low value-added raw materials or products (OECD, 2019). Organic products play a dual role. On the one hand, they provide a special market for consumers' demand for organic products. On the other hand, they are products that promote environmental protection, animal welfare and rural development. The development of organic farming is most often limited by the lack of experience in production methods, insufficient marketing strategy and infrastructure, low consumer awareness, and the public policy.

Assessing the competitiveness of companies is economically important for a number of reasons. First, the assessment of the competitiveness of enterprises makes it possible to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the economy. Second, it makes it possible to predict the ability of companies to survive the competitive pressure, and third, it helps to determine the conditions necessary for the creation of effective incentives for market participants (Malakauskaite & Navickas, 2011). In the age of rapid market and

1 E-mail: vita.zarina@eka.edu.lv
2 E-mail: velga.vevere@gmail.com

technological change, small businesses, national and international market will only exist if the products offered are competitive in terms of quality and price.

The research goal of the current paper is as follows: based on the analysis of the situation in the Latvian organic products industry, to identify opportunities for improving the competitiveness of organic producers in Latvia. To attain this goal, both quantitative and qualitative research methods have been used in the study: literature analysis, secondary data analysis, expert interviews and organic producers' survey. A comparison method is also used to compare the largest companies in the Latvian market in order to find the operational differences and analyse the competitive advantages. At the end of the paper the recommendations for the Latvian organic producers to improve their competitiveness have been developed. The research question posed is the following: What are the factors that influence the competitiveness of Latvian organic producers?

1. Development of organic farming sector in Latvia

Shortly after accession to the European Union, in the period 2004-2006, the organic agriculture in Latvia began developing. Since 2007, there has been a steady increase in the land areas. The situation in the Latvian organic farming has been researched by a number of scholars (Veveris & Puzulis, 2020; Tambovceva, 2016; Melece et al., 2009). In 2011, 184 thousand hectares were managed by the organic farming methods or 10% of the total agricultural land in the country. Of these, 130 thousand hectares were certified as organic farming areas (Association of Latvian Organic Agriculture, 2012). The organic farming is the fastest growing market in the world; also in Latvia the organic agricultural sector continues to develop. The number of holdings engaged in the organic farming agriculture reached 4173 at the end of 2019 (Figure 1).

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, 2020

Fig. 1. **Number of organic farms in Latvia, 2011-2019**

According to T. Tambovceva (2016), there have been no significant changes in the number of organic farms in Latvia, but the area of organically certified agricultural land in Latvia has been slowly growing by approx. 5-6% annually (Table 1, Table 2).

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Table 1

Areas of organic crops, thousand ha

Indicator	2014	2015	2018	2019
Agricultural area	203.4	231.6	280.4	289.8
Arable land	103.6	124.6	141.4	150.6
cereals	31.4	36.9	52.3	58.5
potatoes	1.1	1.2	1.4	1.4
open field vegetables	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.4
Fruit trees and berry bushes (incl. strawberries)	1.0	1.4	2.9	3.1

Source: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2021

Table 2

Share in respective total area in the country, %

Indicators	2014	2015	2018	2019
Utilised agricultural area	10.9	12.3	14.3	14.8
Arable land	8.6	10.1	10.7	11.4
cereals	4.8	5.5	7.1	7.9
potatoes	4.1	4.8	6.2	6.3
open field vegetables	3.2	3.3	4.5	5.0
Fruit trees and berry bushes (incl. strawberries)	15.2	19.5	31.8	33.2

Source: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2021

Although for about a half of the work of farmers engaged in non-commercial agriculture the efficiency is not a concern, Latvian commercial farms face the rising prices of the domestic production, in particular regarding labour, land and raw materials. Prices are affected also by the weak transport infrastructure and the distance to the first consumers. Weather and the short growing season are also part of the production cost equation together with the changing market conditions, distortions caused by the different levels of support and the EU Member States' decisions on the choice of policy measures. The use of risk management tools is one of the management measures that, together with productivity investment opportunities, promote the competitiveness of agricultural holdings over time (OECD, 2019).

The organic production is a comprehensive farm management and food production system that includes best environmental practices, a high level of biodiversity protection, nature conservation of resources, the application of high animal welfare standards and the production method according to the desire of a certain group of consumers to use products produced using natural substances and processes. The sector is active in the agricultural and aquaculture sector, as well as suppliers, food producers and distributors, all of whom follow strict rules. The most difficult task for the organic production sector is to ensure a constant supply and supply growth in demand while maintaining consumer confidence. It is important that the reliability of this scheme and its added value would be ensured in the long term. As you can see, not always organic products reach the consumer, they are often used on the farm or is sold as conventional.

The challenge is to expand supply and meet demand without losing consumers' confidence in the principles of organic farming and the quality of organic products. In this regard too many exceptions to the applicable rules, some of which are variable in the context of outdated market conditions may undermine the integrity of organic farming. Under the European Green Deal, the EU has set an ambitious target for 2030: at least 25% of EU agricultural land to be farmed organically; a significant increase in organic aquaculture (fish farming). This action plan will help consumers, farmers, business operators, national governments and local authorities to reach this target. It will drive investments and innovations in the sustainable farming to respond to increased consumer interest in organic food (European Commission, 2020).

Although the number of companies is increasing, their production capacity is relatively small, in the organic sector There is a large number of small and home - based processing companies (for example, among the meat processing companies, from 45 processing companies 26 are domestic producers), which in turn is due to the relatively low population's purchasing power. In turn, the export market for the processing of organic products in almost all sectors lacks the necessary capacity. (Ministry of Agriculture, 2020). Table 3 depicts data regarding the processing of organic products during 2017-2019.

Table 3

Processing of organic products (2017-2019)

Indicators	**Number of companies**			**Production volume, t**		
	2017	2018	2019	2017	2018	2019
Manufacture of meat and meat products	27	34	24	1362	1645.7	1553.1
Processing of fruit, berries, vegetables and potatoes	69	76	86	852.1	1857.9	2655.9
Manufacture of vegetable and animal fats	3	4	5	3	3.6	2
Manufacture of milk and milk produce	22	24	30	3992.9	4442.1	7380.4
Products of cereal processing and starch manufacture	13	13	13	7680.4	16767.2	23024.3
Bread, manufacture of pastry goods and cakes	19	18	20	1057.3	1161.4	1220.1
Fodder	4	5	6	953.9	1299.8	1577.3
Manufacture of beverages	12	14	16	160.7	1073.8	846.6

Source: Ozola & Kirsanova, 2021

This brings forth the question of the organic producers' competitiveness as the competitiveness of companies is described as an ability in a particular time to realize its offer and operate in the chosen market environment in comparison with competitors. The competitiveness is one of the most important factors in business that affects all companies' operating in the economic sector.

2. Evaluation of competitiveness and influence factors

The definition of competition can be approached from three different aspects, where competition is like an element of the market mechanism for balancing supply and demand or as a benchmark to determine the market type or model of the industry. It should be emphasized that the concept of 'competition' is very diverse, therefore, it is impossible to describe it with a single universal definition. Today, competition no longer exists within an industry or at the national level alone within the country. Competition must now be understood on a much broader scale than international or global competition. This means that the market is the whole world, not the marketplace of a city. Although the effects of global competition can easily be seen in the city's market square, as one showcase shows the same product from different countries, and the buyer can buy the product from Latvia, China or Finland. In a competitive environment, companies compete with each other to get buyers or, in other words, a situation in which the buyer chooses the product produced by that company rather than the product of a competing company. The competition is what determines, drives and develops the company's capabilities to adapt to the requirements of competition and to continue to develop in this process.

The competitiveness is characterized by a set of consumption characteristics that distinguish products from those of competitors' product supply to meet the needs and requirements of society, in accordance with the tasks and expected income. The most important competitiveness indicators can be summarized as "competitiveness classification tree" in three major branches. (1) Price competitiveness (prices compared to other competitors; price differentiation; discount system); (2) Quality competitiveness (product functionality, reliability, ease of use; consumption benefits, which determine how quickly and qualitatively consumption needs are met; prestige of products); (3) Competitiveness of sales system, advertising and service (convenience and profitability of the sales system; advertising effectiveness; attractiveness of the service system; public opinion and the efficiency of its formation) (Zvirbule–Berzina et al., 2004).

Companies need to be very flexible, able to adapt to the effects of the external environment while maintaining their own competitiveness in the future by making skilful use of their knowledge and available resources. They must develop the ability to adapt to a constantly changing environment, as well as the ability to constantly change their own in strategic operations (Zelga, 2017). Of course, small businesses are more resilient to change, the bigger ones have harder time for making drastic changes.

When analysing the competitiveness of companies, there is a suggestion to divide it into our constructions (external environment, internal company factors, company performance and host impact), three dimensions (potential, process and economic performance), and four properties (long-term orientation, controllability, relativity and dynamics) (Man et al., 2002; Bulis et al., 2016).

The concept of competitiveness sometimes causes discomfort, the main reason being comparison with a competition. The competitiveness is seen as a sporting event for participants competing in economic discipline; this view of competitiveness is popular among entrepreneurs. Failure to compete causes loss or even bankruptcy. It is important to determine the competitiveness at different levels: at employee level; at company level; at industry level; at the level of the national economy.

There are different measures to improve competitiveness at each level of evaluation. Most companies does not carry out a competitiveness assessment due to a lack of information and disbelief that its assessment could bring a positive result. Companies are also afraid of the costs that could result from implementing or personalizing one of the methods. However, assessing competitiveness is important for a company development, it is part of strategic management that is suitable for monitoring and company performance optimization (Kozena & Chladek, 2012).

The objectives of the competitiveness assessment have not changed significantly over time, but the evaluation methods are being improved. Nowadays there are many complex factors to identify the competitive advantage of a country, a region, an industry, a company or a product. (Lise, 2013). Competitiveness assessment can be related to factor influence - company's ability to respond quickly to market changes, skilled use of resource,; results-based market share, i.e., comparison of financial results with industry average indicators (Zelga, 2017).

The authors conclude that the level of company competitiveness is significantly increasing due to the following factors: increase of the labour productivity through modern management and marketing techniques, application of the latest scientific and technological advances in production, and ability to innovate. Companies need to develop the advanced products and processes to remain competitive and move forward successfully. For this to happen, an environment is needed that fosters innovation, supported by both the public and the private sectors.

All the factors of the external and internal environment are important for every company individually, but the current research pays more attention to the factors of the external environment. In order to determine the factors of influence concerning the organic production in Latvia we have carried out an empirical research – the expert interviews and the survey of the organic producers.

3. Results and discussion

The expert interviews in the current research were aimed at clarification of the scope of main factors influencing the competitiveness of the organic producers in Latvia in order to compose a questionnaire and conduct a factor analysis, applying the SPSS program. An expert interview is an interview with someone who possesses specific knowledge of a consumer segment, industry or product type. The expert interviews are usually conducted early on in the research process to clarify a research problem (Kolb, 2008). Participants for expert interviews are usually chosen on the basis of referrals, still they have to fall under certain criteria. For the current research we chose 8 experts. The experts were asked the following questions:

- The number of producers of organic products in the world has grown rapidly over the last decade. How do you assess development of the organic farming In Latvia?
- Competition is an objective element of a democratic society that accentuates the need to focus on maximizing consumer needs. How do you evaluate competition among the companies that produce / process organic products?
- What, in your opinion, does hinder development of the organic farming companies in Latvia?
- Is the general public sufficiently informed about the visibility of organic products?
- To what extent does the government influence the competitiveness of organic producers?
- Three factors that in your opinion characterize a competitive business.
- What factors do affect competitiveness of the Latvian organic producers?

Summarizing the experts' opinion, the authors conclude that price and purchasing power have a very significant impact on Latvia's competitiveness of organic producers, as market prices for organic products are currently high, but the purchasing power of the Latvian consumers is very low, thus other countries offering production at a much lower price have a huge competitive advantage. In addition, the experts also point out that in addition to high prices, the organic products also have an unattractive packaging, which does not speak to consumers, so the only ones who choose the organic produce are consumers aware of the value and specific nature of such products. . Based on the expert recommendations, the organic producers have to consider the mutual cooperation to assist each other in the production process thus reducing costs in order to be able to compete better.

Evaluating the competitiveness of quality, the experts admit that producers of the organic products obtain a significant competitive advantage over other farmers because the products are organic and environmentally friendly, healthy for the consumer, but the problem in this area, according to experts, is a lack of information on the superiority of quality. It is difficult to distinguish the organic products from others at points of sale, so more information that would highlight the quality would be necessary. Analysing the competitiveness of the sales system, it should be noted that, the organic product manufacturers already have their own customer base, so they do not try to develop the sales system.

By researching the scientific literature and summarizing the results of the expert interview, the author obtained information on competitive factors that are important and significantly affect the company opportunities to increase competitiveness. The authors created a questionnaire for producers of the organic products (farms) in order to find out which of competitiveness factors are important for entrepreneurs. In cooperation with the Association of Latvian organic agriculture the questionnaire was sent to the available farm e-mails. The questionnaire consisted of 6 blocks of questions, where the factors had to be rated from 1 to 7 (1 – not significant, 7- very significant). The following factors affecting competitiveness had to be assessed during the survey:

1) Economic;
2) Socio-demographic and cultural;
3) Legal-political;
4) Institutional and informative;
5) Technological and scientific;
6) Ecological, natural and climatic.

The results were processed by SPSS program. Altogether 85 responses were received from the organic producers of Latvia. The results are represented in Table 4.

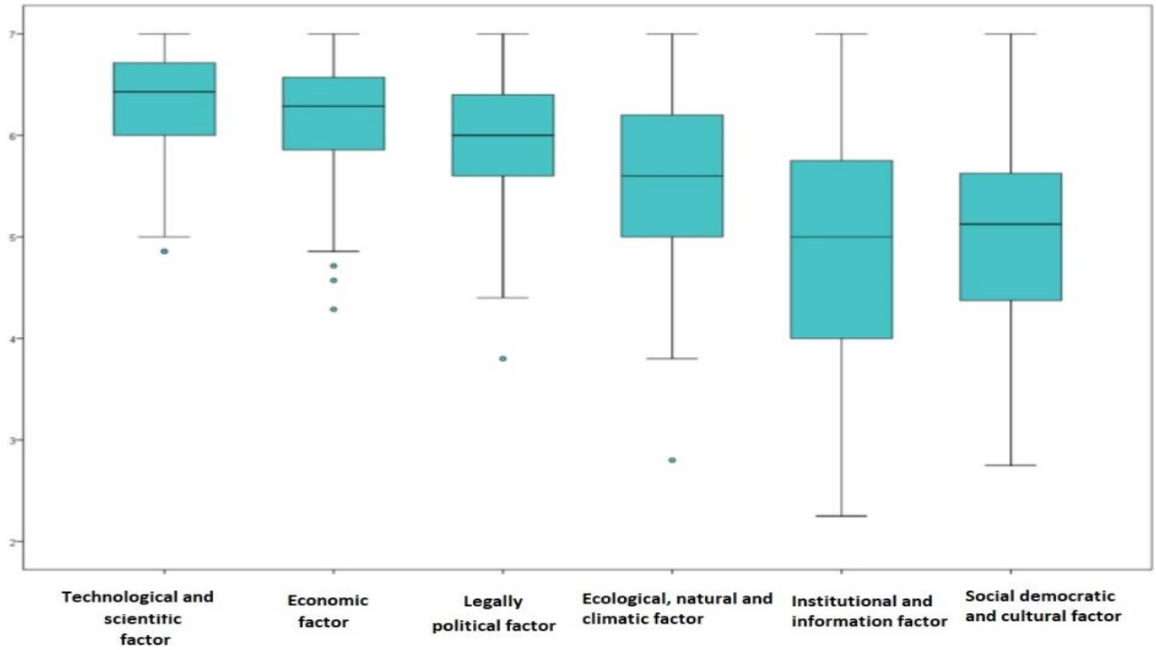
Table 4

Difference in the average estimates of factor effects

Factors	**N**	**Mean Rank**	**Kruskal-Wallis H**
Economical factor	85	341.79	154.34*
Socio-demographic and cultural factor	85	157.11	
Legal-political factor	85	278.89	
Institutional and informative factor	85	160.72	
Technological and scientific factor	85	365.21	
Ecological, natural and climatic factor	85	229.26	

Source: authors' calculation

The organic producers value higher the influence of the technological and scientific, as well as the economic factors. These are followed by the legal-political, then the ecological, natural and climate factors. In turn, the factors of the least impact were the institutional and informative, as well as the socio-demographic and cultural ones. The distribution of the impact factors is presented in Figure 2.



Source: authors' calculation

Fig. 2. **Distribution of the impact factors**

Factor F1: The technological and scientific factor. This group of factors, according to the organic producer survey is rated as the most relevant. Use of information technologies promote a higher productivity. Today the market is evolving and changing very fast. Entrepreneurs need to be flexible and be able to adapt to different situations. Market changes bring about new habits and rules of business, as well as unprecedented marketing challenges. The internet provides the opportunity to communicate across time-zones and geographical boundaries. In its turn, technology satisfies the growing consumer expectations and increases the competitiveness of the entrepreneur.

Factor F2: The next most important group of factors, according to the organic producers, consists of the economic factors, i.e., the purchasing power of the consumer. Buyers no longer line up after deficit goods, as was in the case of the socialist economy, but are purchasing only the most necessary goods. A sense of security is created by the many stores that are crowded with a wide variety of goods. Consumer income, their purchasing power undeniably affects the choice. The organic farm products are relatively more expensive. The organic farming requires more human resources, and that is good, but at the same time bad, because the unit costs increase. In this context, attention and resources must also be given to informing the consumers about the benefits of organic products. One of the ways to make the organic farming more competitive is to reduce the VAT rate application to the organic products.

Factor F3: Legal-political factor. This includes the interaction between the businesses, the government and the legislators. The most important subfactors are, according to the organic producers, the industry regulations and subsidies. At the same time, the organic farming allows farmers to maintain their occupation and stay on their land, preserving and caring for the landscape and offering consumers qualitative, healthy products. Despite the fact that the organic farming is promising and forth of support industry, it is still in its infancy stage and needs a special attention and nurture. At present, the large farms are over subsidized, while the small and the medium-sized ones are under subsidized.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

1) Organic farming is a promising industry in Latvia. In the period between 2012 and 2019, the areas of organic farming have increased from 196 thousand ha to 280 thousand ha. Since 2013, the area of organic farming in Latvia has increased by 52%.

2) According to the survey of the organic producers, three groups of factors have been identified that have the most significant impact on the competitiveness of organic producers - the technological and scientific factor, the economic factor and the legal-political factor.

3) The results of the survey have provided to the research question, namely that the information technologies, the consumer purchasing power and the industry regulation are the factors that can play a key role in increasing the competitiveness of the organic producers in Latvia.

4) An important role in increasing the competitiveness of Latvian producers of organic products is the strategic management decisions related to the company's long-term goals by developing the appropriate solutions for the organization of the production and management at all levels of the company.

5) The competition among the organic producers is less pronounced than among the traditional producers, as the companies are mostly small, with their own regular customer base. The production volumes are not large enough to penetrate the supermarket chains. If competition in the sector increases, then the industry would potentially grow faster as the organic producers would be forced to develop, to innovate, to make processes more efficient in order to gain a competitive advantage.

6) The analysis of the possibilities to increase the competitiveness of the organic producers demonstrates that it is significantly affected by the price of organic products, which is much higher than of the mass-produced goods, and the purchasing power of the Latvian consumers, which is much lower than in other countries of the EU. The experts in their interviews also pointed out that the organically produced product packaging is often unattractive and does not appeal to the consumers at points of sale, thus it impairs the overall competitiveness of the producer.

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