



## HOW IT ALL BEGAN

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When I was invited to write a paper for the 25th IFOAM anniversary, to provide some highlights on the first moments of IFOAM, I began by reading Mary Langman 'Memories and Notes...' in the 20th Anniversary brochure (which is reprinted in this publication), I felt relieved because this was beautifully done and, consequently, my own paper would not need to be so long. Perhaps, the only main omission of Mary's paper is concerning her own role. It is not by chance that she was able to write IFOAM's history from the very beginning, she had been herself a very faithful and contributing member.

### THOSE WERE THE DAYS...

What I can add to the already recorded history, is instead a handful of memories of what occurred before the initial meeting in November 1972, when IFOAM officially came to life.

My first contact with the idea of IFOAM was in June 1972. I had just completed a BA in a business university but was mainly interested in alternative economies and the growing concern for ecology, indeed my dissertation had been on organic agriculture in France. Therefore I did not get, nor look for, a position offered from Procter & Gamble, Renault and the like, as most of my colleagues did. Instead I took up one from Roland Chevriot. Roland had been appointed president of Nature et Progrès, some two years before; it was still a rather small association but Roland was a master in the art of getting the ball rolling, doing great things starting from nothing.

It was not a conventional recruitment interview. The headquarters of the association were located in his modest house, surrounded by a one hectare piece of land in a Parisian suburb. My first view of him that day was of two bare feet and a bit of leg. The rest of his body was hidden under an old Citroen 2CV that he was repairing. Roland was an engineer in Paris during week days, and a gardener and an organic activist in evenings and week-ends. When I could see more of him, we went in a small room full of papers and books which was then Nature et Progrès main office. He proposed I helped organise a big national conference which was to take place in November, and also to work on the launching of an international federation - the conference providing the opportunity for a first meeting of representatives from the other organisations. He could not pay me for that job but he was going to rent the neighbouring house, so as to provide accommodation for a few people like me who had the job of running the conference and the association. The association would also take care of our food, at least that which we could not grow ourselves in the surrounding garden. I said OK - and thus the first IFOAM volunteer was hired.

Later, Roland explained to me that this idea of creating a link between people around the world working for organic agriculture, came to him in May, when he made a trip to USA. Even though he had been sent there in the context of his engineering job, he took the opportunity to make contacts in the organic circle. He mentioned to me that he discussed the idea with Bob Rodale, and that this talk had played an important role in his decision to implement the idea.

I also remember me, (it was probably in July '72), typing and sending invitation letters to potential members of the federation, inviting them to an initial meeting at our November conference (see reprint). We gathered as many addresses as we could, using information from any magazines we could get hold of and from acquaintances of people we knew. I cannot remember how many letters we sent, probably more than fifty. I used a mechanical typewriting machine and stencil duplication, as was usual in those pre-

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historic times. Stencil duplicators were then the main activist's weapons against the huge coalition of conventional industry forces and post-war consumer culture.

It is probably then that the name of IFOAM was invented since we had to give a name to the project in the letters we sent around. Actually, we did not spend hours on that - no brain storming, no creativity techniques. From what I recall (which may be incomplete), we just wrote what Roland intended to do : a 'fédération internationale des mouvements d'agriculture biologique', i.e. a gathering of people like us, working for the development of organic agriculture in their own country. We assumed that the term 'mouvement' was adequate, even though we knew that at least some publishers we knew like Rodale Press could be included. Anyway, as we were not quite sure that this would be the final name of this organisation we proposed it as a start. Since Roland did not speak English, I translated it into English. I was not quite sure that 'movements' was a good translation of the French 'mouvements', but I thought that native English speakers would join and that this would be corrected, if necessary. As far as I know, this matter was not discussed at the initial meeting every one took the provisional name for granted, in both languages and this is how the name of IFOAM came into being.

One last memory of this period is at the end of a meeting with Nature et Progrès members, probably in September or October. We were introduced to a charming and dynamic lady whose job was to travel around the world. She had a plenty of ideas on what could be done at the international level and we thought she would probably be of a great help and this is how Karin Mundt rapidly became a major actor of IFOAM's first years. Karin not only had ideas but also acted efficiently; in particular, she played a key role during this starting period in contacting new members in all parts of the world and bringing information from and to them.

The problem with these memories is that they are related to 25 years old events and, of course, I could not imagine that it would be of interest to other people, 25 years later, to know what happened. Therefore I may have made some mistakes or forgotten some key contributions of that period. However, let me just mention Dr. Jacques Pez, who advised us in designing the first statutes and who took part in the first meeting and Suzanne Triolet-Roig, who helped gathering addresses of potential members. I apologise in advance for the probable omissions that I have made.

## SOME REFLECTIONS

Looking back to these early years, some aspects strike me. First, it sometimes occurred to me, during the ten years when I actively participated in IFOAM's life, that its name was perhaps not adequate. We created a federation of 'movements' at a time when organic agriculture was weakly organised and needed activists and volunteers to push the idea. Gradually, more professional and specialised organisations joined such as research institutes, producers or consumers unions, business companies etc.. This feeling was reinforced when I recently looked at what IFOAM has become today. If we had known in advance what the evolution would be, we might have instead adopted a name like 'World Council for Organic Agriculture' or something of that nature. This does not mean that the 'movement' aspect has disappeared, but that it is now accompanied by a more professional and institutional one, which is quite understandable when one considers the present development of organic agriculture.

But, at that time, we could not imagine it, even though we had strong hopes. This more modest name we gave to the federation reflects our ignorance of what it could become. We were so marginal and weak, in terms of power, means and credibility; I doubt that even Roland could have foreseen such an impressive and quick development.

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INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF ORGANIC AGRICULTURE MOVEMENTS  
FÉDÉRATION INTERNATIONALE DES MOUVEMENTS D'AGRICULTURE BIOLOGIQUE  
FEDERACIÓN INTERNACIONAL DE MOVIMIENTOS DE AGRICULTURA BIOLÓGICA  
INTERNATIONALE VEREINIGUNG BIOLOGISCHER LANDBAUBEWEGUNGEN

Second, looking at how an organisation was born brings to the question of what creates cooperation between human beings? This is a big question and an on-going debate among social scientists; this short paper is not the place to discuss this aspect in full but I have at least some feelings about it. Neo-liberal economists and some institutional sociologists, would explain that IFOAM exists because it fills a function which is necessary to its members; there is a need for it because we live in an international world, where strategic issues are often decided at multinational levels (within big companies, intergovernmental agencies etc.) with a world wide circulation of goods, people and information. But this is more true today than in 1972. What strikes me is that we did not need IFOAM in 1972 (this is of course my own point of view). Our problems as organic activists or farmers, at that time, were much more basic ones. The major concern was to survive in our local environments, i.e. to organise the exchange of goods and information already available at the regional or national level because a huge work had still to be done there. Our short or medium range agenda was full of more pressing issues than exchange on a wider scale, and I do not feel that *Nature et Progrès* benefited at all from the existence of IFOAM during its 6 or 8 first years.

How is it then that Roland Chevriot and the *Nature et Progrès* Board of Directors, who had to struggle for the life of their own national project and who in many cases could not read English, still kept on supporting IFOAM (I am speaking of *Nature et Progrès* for I know the example well, but I guess this might have been true within other member organisations)? I do not think this can be explained only by rational strategic choices - for a good part some ideal was at work. The ecological one, of course, but also the ideal of a borderless world, in a time when the roar of the last World War was still in many memories, and when the threat of a new one was very strong.

Finally, did we create IFOAM? This is not the way I see. We were carrying those emergent values (which, I hope, will be prevailing some day) and some other people would have done the job if we had not. Probably, the metaphor of the spring and the river is adequate to express my understanding of what happened. Once upon a time we helped water flowing from a spring and cleared the first metres of the small stream that came out of it - further away, it has become a beautiful large river. But no one can claim to have created the river because, whatever men and women say or do, the water will still run towards the ocean.

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