

LESSONS LEARNED

**from the IFOAM Animal Husbandry Alliance Conference 2026
on 28-30 April in Frick, Switzerland – "Organic Animal Husbandry:
A Role Model for the Future of Livestock?"**

Introduction

Globally, livestock farmers face major challenges, including climate change, limited resilience of feed sources, shrinkage of land for livestock farming and pastoralism, insecure value chains, and the trade-off between ecological impact and contribution to food security. Organic livestock systems face similar pressures. At the same time, they have specific characteristics that strengthen resilience and offer pathways towards solutions. With some trade-off in terms of immediate productivity, organic animal husbandry has demonstrated the potential for reduced disease load, lower dependence on chemicals, and the production of nutrient-rich, clean food. As such, if we are prepared to accept these trade-offs, organic animal husbandry can serve as a role model for the whole livestock sector.

Central discussions and core themes of the IAHA 2026 Conference

The recent IAHA Conference at FiBL, focusing on the pioneering role of organic livestock farming in achieving global sustainable animal husbandry, brought together a diverse range of stakeholders. Discussions revealed a rich diversity of experiences, pressing topics, and inherent challenges faced by researchers and practitioners working in organic agriculture worldwide. Participants from Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe described different realities shaped by local ecological, economic, political, and cultural conditions.

In Africa and the Americas, major challenges include animal diseases, ectoparasites, limited market access, high certification costs, insufficient farmer organizations, and limited governmental support. In Asia, farmers face difficulties in accessing affordable organically certified feed, financial and technical support, and land ownership, while the region's indigenous livestock diversity offers strengths for disease resistance. At the same time, increasing promotion of factory farming to meet the demands of growing populations threatens opportunities for developing sustainable organic livestock systems. Potential niche areas for organic animal husbandry should therefore be protected and strengthened through farmer education, awareness raising, and market development.

European livestock systems face different pressures, including insufficient prices to support high welfare standards, inadequate breeding strategies, limited processing infrastructure, and challenges surrounding surplus male animals. In pig and poultry production, discussions focused on consumer willingness to pay for higher welfare products, housing conditions, adapted genetics, stunning methods, and the market for male laying hens.

Despite these regional differences, participants shared many common concerns, including the need for adapted breeding strategies, improved soil health, biodiversity, fair value chains,

consumer awareness, and the preservation of ethnoveterinary knowledge. Above all, they shared a commitment to the core features of organic animal husbandry: animal welfare, holistic systems thinking, environmental sustainability, biodiversity, and social responsibility. Indigenous knowledge and locally adapted breeds were consistently recognized as valuable resources, while collaboration between farmers, researchers, advisors, policymakers, and consumers was identified as essential for future progress.

The conference also highlighted a common vision of livestock farming rooted in ethical responsibility, agroecology, and systems thinking. Animals were consistently presented as integral partners within agricultural ecosystems rather than merely as production units. Livestock farming was framed not simply as food production but as a relationship between humans, animals, landscapes, and communities. Organic animal husbandry was presented as part of integrated farming systems in which crops, animals, soils, biodiversity, and rural communities function together. Sustainability was understood in a broad sense, encompassing biodiversity, animal welfare, food sovereignty, farmer livelihoods, cultural continuity, ethical consumption, and long-term ecological balance, rather than focusing solely on climate change or productivity.

Finally, the conference placed strong emphasis on diversity, local knowledge, inclusiveness, and ethical reflection. Practical farming experience, indigenous knowledge, and scientific research were regarded as equally legitimate sources of knowledge. Rather than promoting universal technological solutions, contributors consistently emphasized context-specific approaches adapted to local realities. The discussions repeatedly returned to fundamental questions such as how much livestock production is enough, what role livestock should play in future food systems, and under what conditions animal husbandry can remain socially and ecologically legitimate. These shared values demonstrate that organic animal husbandry offers not only practical farming methods but also a comprehensive framework for developing resilient, ethical, and sustainable livestock systems for the future.

Conclusions about defining features of organic animal husbandry

Organic farming is **experience-based**. It draws on decades of practical experience with holistic, multifunctional systems, where animals serve multiple roles, are integrated into local land use and ecosystems, and that rely less on external inputs than conventional systems. It is also adaptable to local contexts and farming concepts. Organic livestock farming is built on farmer knowledge, participatory learning, and long-term practical experience across widely differing ecological, social, and economic environments around the world. Mixed farming, grassland-based systems, circular nutrient flows, low-input breeding strategies, and preventive health and natural cure approaches are key system methodologies that are applied simultaneously rather than separately. Farmers are innovators who adapt livestock systems to local ecosystems, biodiversity, and available resources. Contributions on dairy, pig, and poultry systems highlighted reduced dependence on concentrates, antibiotics, and external inputs while emphasizing the multifunctional role of animals within crop rotations and grassland management. Farmer-driven research, case studies, and knowledge exchange remain central to the continuous evolution of organic livestock systems.

Organic farming is also **value-based**. Farm animals are regarded as sentient beings whose integrity and dignity are acknowledged. Respect for animal welfare and the environment is

integral to shaping organic systems. Organic farming is an ethical system grounded in IFOAM principles of health, ecology fairness and care, translating into empathy and respect for animals as sentient beings. Conference contributions on the One Health concept and ethical reflections on killing animals stressed that welfare is not an additional feature but a defining principle of organic farming. Participants discussed positive welfare, natural behaviour, cow-calf contact systems, and the importance of suitable breeds that allow animals to express species-specific behaviour. Several discussions emphasized reconnecting humans emotionally and ethically with animals and livestock farming. Organic animal husbandry was repeatedly presented as a holistic approach in which animal dignity, animal welfare, and care shape management, breeding, and system design rather than being secondary production goals. Animal welfare and animal sentience are therefore integral to organic animal husbandry.

Organic animal husbandry is **regulation- and certification-based**, creating transparency and reliability. However, certification remains a major challenge for smallholder farms in the Global South. Standards and certification are essential for transparency, traceability, and consumer trust in organic livestock systems and products. Nevertheless, discussions at the IAHA Conference highlighted that certification remains challenging for smallholder farmers, particularly because of administrative burdens, costs, traceability requirements, and the limitations of third-party certification in remote areas. Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) were discussed as possible alternatives to improve farmer inclusion and reduce certification costs. Future certification systems must therefore balance reliability with accessibility and adapt to regional realities while safeguarding organic principles and consumer protection.

Organic animal husbandry is **not a one-size-fits-all solution**. Through its holistic systems approach, organic farming provides opportunities for developing livestock economies of very different forms, adapted to widely differing conditions around the world. The common denominators are integrative systems and solutions, holistic thinking, and ethical values. Across the conference workshops, participants repeatedly emphasized that livestock systems must reflect local ecological, social, and cultural realities. Discussions on indigenous breeds, pastoralism, and regional value chains demonstrated that sustainability cannot be achieved through uniform industrial production systems. At the same time, the conference identified common principles linking diverse systems worldwide, including crop-livestock integration, circularity, biodiversity, and ethical responsibility. Diversity itself was presented as a strength of organic farming, while contributors warned against over-standardization that could undermine local adaptation and innovation. Nevertheless, a common international framework based on the core principles of organic animal husbandry remains essential.

By combining the IFOAM principles of ecology, fairness, health, and care, organic agriculture has strong potential to develop resilient livestock systems for the future. However, various goals, including sustainability and animal welfare, create trade-offs that limit desirable animal numbers within each farm or production system. Conference participants repeatedly acknowledged these trade-offs between productivity, emissions, animal welfare, and land use. They questioned how many animals can be sustainably integrated into organic systems and emphasized the need to reduce concentrate feeding, strengthen grassland-based systems, and respect ecological boundaries. These discussions point towards the concept of "sufficiency": sustainable livestock farming must operate within environmental and ethical limits rather than pursuing unlimited production growth. A **fifth IFOAM principle of "Sufficiency"** should therefore be considered.