The 2017 General Assembly of IFOAM - Organics International passed a recommendation to ask all candidates running for the World Board the same questions regarding our strategy, policies and positions, for the voting members to know more about the people they vote for.

Neil Sorensen, USA/France

1. The strategic plan of IFOAM - Organics International 2025 refers to 3 key levers to promote the principles of organic agriculture: supply, demand and policy. On which lever would you like to put the emphasis in your work for IFOAM – Organics International, and why?

I would emphasize the Policy & Guarantee pillar. While supply and demand are important, a huge gap remains between policy support for organic systems in comparison to conventional agriculture in many countries. The EU Common Agricultural Policy supporting organic farming is bearing fruit, but we need this kind of support for organic farming throughout the world. UN agencies like FAO and IFAD, but also UNDP and many governments, still provide very little support for organic systems. Policies are crucial in shifting the status quo from environmentally damaging systems to those that support organic.

2. Please share your thoughts on which actors in our movement could contribute to which parts to make our common vision come true.

To achieve our common vision of truly sustainable agricultural systems in line with the principles of organic agriculture, the full diversity actors need to be engaged in transforming supply chains, increasing demand, and advocating for conducive policies. While farmers voices are primordial, convincing arguments can also be made by organic entrepreneurs in a way that garners support across the political spectrum. The organic movement is backed up by numerous research institutions and academics, whose voice is crucial for underpinning our policy arguments with facts. We would be amiss, however, without vocal organic activists driving the agenda for change forward.

3. What do you propose in order to get a real transformation in agriculture, in general, and more specifically, in your role as a WB member?

We need to take the fight to those who are poisoning our planet. We need to call out anyone who is benefiting financially from this ecological disaster in their communities, in their regions and in their countries. We also need to massively support any farmers willing to make the shift to organic through educational and support programs, and by supporting the creation of cooperatives, supply chains and the entire infrastructure necessary to scale up organic production. As a WB member, I will bring my international connections to bear to gain the support necessary for scaling up organic production worldwide.
4. Reflecting on the development of new GM breeding techniques such as Crispr CAS: where do you see challenges and issues for the organic sector?

There is no place in organic systems for Crispr gene editing. It is hyped as precision genetic engineering but is another way mad scientists cut and paste DNA without knowing the consequences. Proponents say Crispr is a solution for biofortified and drought resistant crops, was argued 20 years ago with GM crops that never came to fruition. There is room for technology in organic breeding, and specifically Marker Assisted Selection is entirely appropriate. It guides the breeder towards better traits without altering the genetic code. There is a great need for better organic seed, but Crispr is not a solution.

5. The SDGs of the United Nations are aiming at sustainability in all areas of life and development. How do you make the SDGs a reality in your own life?

I like to practice what I preach. I have an extensive organic garden, and I try to produce as much food as possible on my small parcel to nourish my own family, friends, and neighbors. I have no car, as I decided 20 years ago that I could not support car culture and the devastation that this wreaks on the environment. I compost. My house is full of used furniture and items I found on the street. I buy organic and have done so religiously for most of my life. I ride a bicycle, walk or take public transportation.

6. The work of IFOAM-Organics International is partly financed by membership fee, and for a greater deal by donors and foundations. What experience and skills can you bring to support acquiring financial resources?

I have extensive experience supporting the mobilization of resources for NGOs. As a result, I have an extensive network of contacts with bilateral donors and private foundations, and to those that fund agricultural projects. I know many of the key players in international organizations personally, having worked for organizations and institutions, including a United Nations agency, focused on agriculture. I also have a lot of experience generating service income, and I can provide guidance on how IFOAM can improve in this regard. I have ideas for how to enhance membership income.