

A Step Closer to Nature: Promoting Organic Farming in East Africa

As a niche opportunity, organic farming in the East African Community (EAC) is still in its primary stages and faces challenges pertaining to its implementation arguably due to the high conversion costs, lack of knowledge among farmers and weak technical support. By monitoring compliance with standard and bearing some transition expenses, EAC country governments would take a weight off farmers' weak shoulders.

In the last ten years or so, the global market for organic food and drinks has grown exponentially and now provides unprecedented opportunities for organic farmers in developing and least developed countries. Although they are mostly small-scale farmers, collectively they make up a remarkable 80 per cent of the world's organic producers. The East African Community is particularly well endowed, with Uganda having the most organic arable land in Africa.

The sector has high potential not only for the attainment of economic benefits, but also for building social capital and coping with the upcoming challenge of climate change. In fact, organic farming is less energy consuming, reduces greenhouse gas emissions (averaged at 64 per cent lower per hectare), and preserves biodiversity and soil fertility which should result in higher yields.

Yet, the total number of organic farmers in East Africa is still relatively small. Lack of knowledge of organic and sustainable agricultural techniques is often a limiting factor, and disseminating information in remote and marginal rural areas is often difficult. Other constraints faced by farmers changing to organic systems include lacking technical support, as well as high initial investments related to learning and adoption of new technologies. Greater and targeted investment by the government and regional institutions would help overcome some of these problems. In particular, they should ensure that:

- ❶ There is active promotion of organic farming amongst smallholder farmers, including through incentives for conversion. This could include more flexible certification and less costly conversion, possibly with the governments bearing some of the transition expenses.
- ❷ There is access to credit, extension services, marketing information, agricultural inputs, and improved infrastructure systems capable of facilitating the smooth farming and supply to domestic and international markets. In this regard, the quality of organic goods must be monitored effectively so as to avoid market access restrictions related to non-compliance of standards. The East African Organic Products Standard (EAOPS) developed in 2005 should facilitate this.

← QUICK FACTS

» The global market for organic agricultural products has been growing steadily in the past decade, increasing by US\$ 30.9 billion between 1999 and 2007.

» In Uganda, the exports of organic products almost doubled in the period 2003-2005.

» In Kenya, bean yields increased by 158 per cent after plots were converted to organic production under the Environmental Action Team programme.

» Of the 15 case studies on organic agriculture and food security in East Africa, 87 per cent of the cases showed an increase in farmer and household incomes (Hine and Pretty 2008).

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What is organic farming ?

In contrast to the conventional intensive agricultural systems, organic farming represents a deliberate attempt to make the best use of local natural resources. The aim of organic farming is to create integrated, humane, environmentally and economically viable agriculture systems in which maximum reliance is put on i) local or on-farm renewable resources, and ii) the management of ecological and biological processes. The use of external inputs, whether inorganic or organic, is reduced as far as possible.

Many traditional farming systems found in developing countries practice organic techniques without seeking or receiving the premium price given to organic food in some domestic markets. Owing to their nature, traditional systems do not use synthetic agricultural inputs but apply ecological approaches to enhance agricultural production. Many of these traditional systems may not fully meet the production standards for organic agriculture but can be considered near organic.

What market opportunities for organic farming ?

In the period between years 1999 to 2008, the global market for organic food and drinks was reported to have grown by 335 per cent, with more than 97 per cent of the sales revenue being generated in industrialized nations. Europe, in particular, is in high demand of organic products and accounts for more than half of the global market share. Interestingly enough, the supply side to this equation lies on developing countries whose organic farmers mostly operate in small-scale but collectively, make up a remarkable 80 per cent of the world's organic producers (EAC 2007, p. 2). The amount of organic arable land in the EAC region in itself is commendable with Uganda earning the top spot in Africa with its 296,203 hectares worth of land (followed by Tunisia and Ethiopia) and Tanzania being ranked fourth in the continent for its 62,180 hectares respectively (UNEP 2010, p.11). Through the ongoing market access provisions negotiated in the Multilateral Trading System (MTS), the EAC may afford turning the niche sector of organic farming into a profitable venture for the regions' economic development.

Why does certification matter?

In East African countries where an established and widespread domestic market for organic produce is not present, organic production is for export. For exports to the most important markets of Europe and the U.S, certification is essential.

However, the costs of becoming a certified organic producer are often prohibitive for small-scale farmers which have sometimes been reduced either by i) the exporting company paying the certification costs or ii) farmers joining together to form groups and co-operatives and thus reducing the costs to the individuals.

USEFUL RESOURCES

-  Hine, R. and Pretty, J. *Promoting Production and Trading Opportunities for Organic Agricultural Products in East Africa. Capacity Building Study 3: Organic Agriculture and Food Security in East Africa.* University of Sussex, May 2007.
-  UNEP-UNCTAD. *Organic Agriculture: Opportunities for Promoting Trade, Protecting the Environment and Reducing Poverty - Case Studies from East Africa.* 2010.
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