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More organic

‘The European Commission says that the agricultural land devoted to organic farming needs to have increased from 8.5 per cent to 25 per cent by 2030. In the Netherlands, organic farming methods are used on 3.7 per cent of the land, despite several incentive schemes for organic farming. More than 20 years ago, for example, the Dutch government introduced incentives for farmers to switch to organic methods but neglected to stimulate demand. This created a surplus that kept prices low for organic farmers. So, about 15 years ago, a lot of attention was paid to stimulating demand. The market share of organic produce then grew significantly, but it didn’t come near the target set at that time of 10 per cent. The balance between supply and demand is fragile. Dutch organic farmers face high land prices and are partially dependent on exports, which makes them extra vulnerable to market disruptions.

‘The EU wants to subsidize farmers who switch to organic, and to boost the demand for organic products. But to make really big progress, the price difference between conventionally farmed and organic products must be drastically reduced. A reduction in VAT is not enough. I think we should also recompense farmers for ecosystem services such as biodiversity and carbon sequestration.

‘Another bottleneck is the availability of nutrients. Organic farming excludes the use of artificial fertilizer and relies on nitrogen fixation by legumes and on reusing waste streams such as manure. But until the use of the “human manure” waste stream is legalized, the target of 25 per cent organic is not likely to be feasible.

‘It is also questionable whether the underlying goals such as lower greenhouse gas emissions, improved resilience, less pollution and more biodiversity can be achieved with 25 per cent organic farming. Organic farming is ahead on many of these points, but that is not enough to achieve sustainability targets. So we need a revamped form of organic farming that performs better on sustainability across the board.’

*Wijnand Sukkel, senior agro-ecology researcher
at Wageningen University & Research*