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Demand for organic products continues to grow and outstrip the supply. How organic are these products, when they have to be transported over many miles to reach consumers? And how sustainable is organic produce, when it is grown on large farms, leaving less and less room for biodiversity? Questions like these add another dimension to a debate that has been going on for many years: do we need a new standard? One that doesn't just look at inputs, but looks at impact on the environment as well?

How sustainable is

“Organic food production is beginning to resemble conventional food production.”



Vanaja Ramprasad, board member of IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements) and managing trustee of the GREEN Foundation.

“Organic farming is more than just farming without chemicals. Apart from safe and healthy products, it also takes into account the health of the soil, safety to other fauna and flora, and friendliness to the environment. So organic farming is a good thing, yes. But there is such a large demand for organic agriculture, that business has started to hijack the organic principles. More and more organic farms are appearing that are large-scale, industrial monocultures. They contradict the organic tenet of crop diversity. It might be that these farms have to meet with certain demands in order to be qualified as organic, but they cannot really be considered high in biodiversity. They also contribute to a centralised food production system that sees food products shipped over increasingly large distances. This raises concerns about the paradox of using millions of gallons of fossil fuel for shipping organic products across countries and continents.

“You may wonder whether organic is still synonymous with sustainable, as organic food production begins to emulate conventional food production. It would be a shame if organic agriculture should become a victim of its own success. Also, today’s concerns have gone beyond providing food that is clean and safe. We need to understand the larger issues, such as reducing the trade-offs among food security, climate change and ecosystem degradation. I would like to see ‘organic’ be interpreted a little wider than is being done at the moment. Now it simply relates to inputs. We should look at the impact as well. I would welcome a standard that looks at these larger issues. That’s why I really appreciate an initiative like that of the ISEAL Alliance, that strives to connect ecological sustainability to social justice.

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organic farming?

“At the moment, ‘organic’ in India basically means ‘for export’. It’s not that I am against a farmer exporting his Basmati rice, but there is enough of a market within the country itself. I would prefer it if organic farming would be considered mostly as an opportunity for small-scale farmers for self-provisioning, and not to exclusively reach the market. Organic agriculture can be beneficial to small-scale farmers without trying to produce for export markets. It could help their sustenance.

“For one thing, farming organically is cheaper than farming the conventional way. There are people who say that small farms are not viable, and that therefore we should do away with them. But in India alone, 60% of the farms are small. What are these farmers to do? Migrate to the city? That doesn’t seem a feasible option, and it also wouldn’t do much for biodiversity. Because when it comes to that, small farmers have a lot more to offer than large scale organic farms.”

The GREEN Foundation, for which Vanaja Ramprasad (earthbuddy@gmail.com) is a managing trustee, works with disadvantaged groups of, among others, small and marginal farmers, in south India.

“From an environmental point of view, a new standard is a good idea.”



Miguel Gamboa, producer co-ordinator at Utz Certified, a certification programme for “environmentally responsible” products – products that are not necessarily organic, but that do take into account social and environmental responsibility.

“Is organic agriculture beginning to approach conventional agriculture in the sense that produce is grown in such large areas that biodiversity suffers? I work in the coffee business, and there things are a little different from other sectors. Organic coffee is

still a niche product when compared to products like vegetables or dairy, it doesn’t involve huge areas yet. And of course, with coffee not being grown in Europe, there are food miles involved. But 95% of coffee gets exported by ship. This also puts a claim on the environment, but less so than if it would travel by plane.

“Where organic agriculture does start to resemble conventional agriculture, is that it is becoming a business like conventional agriculture. To grow organically, you need products that aren’t necessarily cheap, at least not when you want to comply with the regulations. I was once able to help out a group of farmers who aimed to start growing organic products in an exemplary way, and they found that the organic fertilizer and other materials they needed were very expensive. Of course, you can use chicken manure or something, but that is not always good enough. Say the nitrogen/phosphorus/potassium ratio you need, to be able to comply with the demands of soils and plants, is 17/8/17. Chicken manure will give you no more than 1.5/0.8/1. So you would need a lot of it, and you still end up spending quite a bit of money. A standard for sustainable agriculture that wouldn’t just look at input but at impact as well, could make organic products even more expensive. Consumers might not want to pay the extra price, and then producers would suffer. But from an environmental point of view a new standard is a good idea.

“A higher demand for organic products in the countries where these products are grown would mean a huge opportunity in terms of market. But people in these countries are not so much aware of the added value of organic produce. Their main selection criterion is price, they go for the cheaper option. People in these countries are not so much looking for better things to eat, but simply for things to eat at the cheapest price. And because farming organically is not necessarily cheaper, organic produce wouldn’t be their first choice. There is a task for governments here to inform people about the benefits of organic agriculture.”

As a producer co-ordinator, Miguel Gamboa (miguel.gamboa@utzcertified.org) supports producers in Latin America in complying with certification demands and in implementing programs to meet with certification demands.

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