

# Conversion to Organic Farming

## A project approach from China

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The Organic Farming Development Project co-operates with advisory staff and experts from agricultural universities and local government to support farmers in converting to organic farming.

### Initial situation

Following the high demand for organic products on the international markets, traders are the dominant actors in the organic farming movement in China. They try to identify farm products, which are on a low external input regime already and thus respond to the minimum requirements of international certification bodies. They are not interested in lengthy conversion processes and leave the solving of technical problems to farmers. There are no experts or technical staff specialised in organic farming yet. Staff who lack expertise in dealing with the highly diverse problems in organic farming, advise farmers to simply replace conventional inputs with biological ones. Farmers request blueprint solutions from experts and advisory staff and are not well prepared to start indigenous innovation processes themselves.

### The project: conversion as a process

The project has introduced conversion to organic farming as a process in Yuexi, Anhui Province, with the following objectives:

- to develop an extension methodology on conversion, based on a participatory approach,
- to stimulate technical innovations in local farming systems,
- to organise smallholders for internal quality control, technical support and marketing, and
- to attract political support to organic farming.

**Extension methodology on conversion**  
After the pilot villages in Yuexi county were selected, a first assessment of the potentials and problems for development of organic farming was conducted in 1998. This did not provide farmers with a ready-made solution, but proposed a number of options for conversion. The framework elaborated by the advisors made clear that the conversion would be a farmer-led process of gradually modelling the organic farming system by testing various options and possibilities.

At the time, the advisors could only refer to a few experiences in organic farm-

ing available in China. The first workshop, held in Yuexi in 1998, provided farmers with a basic understanding of the organic farming concept. It encouraged them to work on specific technical issues like inter-cropping, biological pest control, and green manure. A second training was held in 1999. Meanwhile, farmers fully understood the principles of organic farming and undertook organic practices. They selected the technical innovations they were going to try out during the coming season. A third workshop, held in early 2000, evaluated the experiences gained during conversion. Workshops served as focal points to summarise and exchange experiences and document the joint decisions made in the communities. Apart from these formal training workshops, the advisors have undertaken regular visits to the pilot areas to discuss the ongoing experiments and propose additional options. Through the process, they have developed methods to systematise information on local farming systems and feasible options for conversion.

### Stimulating technical innovations

During the process of conversion, farmers have gained experiences with a number of organic farming techniques. They have become more self-confident and are willing to solve problems locally. Their production systems have improved significantly, and some innovations have already spread to their neighbours following conventional practices. In order to cope with the higher demand for organic fertiliser, farmers have increased their livestock production and integrated green manure into their annual cropping cycle. Green manure was common in traditional agriculture, but has been replaced by chemical fertiliser during the "green revolution". As a result, traditional manuring techniques have fallen into oblivion and seeds of green manure plants have disappeared. Initially, some varieties were made available by the project, but then farmers started searching for seeds of traditional varieties from their region. Experiments with green manure have been very successful and others who wish to purchase seeds of green manure varieties are approaching the organic farmers now.

Even though the conversion process started just three years ago, farmers are already experiencing a visible improvement of the agro-ecological environment. They find that the biodiversity is enriched by beneficial organisms, which have returned to their gardens after a long absence: bees now replace the artificial

pollination of the kiwi flower and snakes control the population of rodents. Farmers have become more aware of soil fertility issues. The project has introduced the spade analysis as a simple tool for monitoring processes within the soil, and farmers have learned that the texture and consistency of the soils under green manure has greatly improved within this short period.

### Organising smallholders

In the beginning, conversion was confined to a demarcated area of land on which a single crop is converted to organic production. But, the project has encouraged a voluntary approach with only those farmers who are interested in organic farming participating. As a result, some farmers within the designated area have been sticking to conventional production, while others outside this area have converted to organic farming. Altogether, a higher number of farmers and a higher acreage have been converted to organic farming than originally planned. The voluntary approach with dispersed plots has placed higher demands on the organisation of the internal control and certification system.

Farmers in Yufan Village have established the first association of organic kiwi growers in China with the objective of providing technical support and information, and organising marketing of organic products. The kiwi farmers now plan to establish a direct marketing outlet in the provincial capital. The Organic Kiwi Association has put much effort in the development of their own requirements and in the internal documentation system. Each member keeps his own records on inputs and outputs. Recently, those farmers who have been participating in the conversion from the beginning received organic certification.

### Attracting political support

The objectives and framework of conversion planning have been carefully communicated with the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) in Beijing, which showed great support for the development of organic farming. The conversion plan resulted from a month-long communication process between project staff and the farmers. Finally, the conversion plan has been integrated into the master plan for ecological reconstruction of Yuexi. The political support has raised the significance of the conversion process for environmental policies and further motivated the administrative staff engaged in this process. At the same time, Yuexi has gained importance as a national pilot area for organic farming. ■

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The project publishes a quarterly newsletter (English/Chinese), subscription free of charge.