

# Promoting organic agriculture in Uganda

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In Uganda, East Africa, agriculture involves more than 85 percent of the employed labour force and is the basis for the livelihood of more than 3 million smallholder families. In spite of generally favourable agriculture conditions, agricultural productivity remains low and poverty afflicts more than 40 percent of the national population. Since 2000, the government of Uganda has been implementing the Plan for Modernization of Agriculture as a main pillar of its comprehensive Poverty Eradication Plan. According to current government policies, modernization of agriculture should be based on increasing the use of inorganic inputs. This has been the policy of all post independence governments, though the level of use and impact of inorganic inputs among smallholder farming systems remains negligible and is likely to remain so under the current socio-economic and agro-ecological conditions.

Since the late 1980s, Ugandan civil society organizations have been working with poor small scale farmers to reverse declining farm productivity by developing sustainable farming systems, based on organic agriculture principles. Organic farming systems have been found to be particularly suitable for small scale farmers since they rely on local resources and build on indigenous knowledge. This allows for the development of highly productive farming systems that yield a variety of products and services that sustain the livelihood of smallholders. It increases the food security of farmer families while the international market for organic agricultural produce offers good value for their products.

## Organic agriculture in Uganda

Organic certification in Uganda started in 1993 and this sub-sector has now grown to more than 33 000 certified organic farmers. Exports of organic products are estimated to have totalled US\$ 7.5 million in the 2003/2004 financial year. Since 1994, export of certified organic products has expanded rapidly from pineapples and sweet bananas to include coffee, cotton, cocoa, sesame, vanilla, mangoes, ginger and papaya. More organic export projects are being developed for essential oils, spices, honey and hibiscus tea (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*). In addition to the certified farmers, there are another estimated 120 000 smallholder farmers practicing organic agriculture, who are also looking for marketing opportunities.

Organic certification and access to the international organic market means the farmers need to be well organized. It also requires continuous provision of information and development of technical skills to enable smallholders to meet the rigid requirements for participation in the specialized organic product chain.

## Role of local organizations

In northern Uganda, in the region of Lira, about 12 000 farmers are organized under the umbrella of a farmer owned membership NGO, the Lango Organic Farming Promotion (LOFP). LOFP is facilitating the production of organic crops with farmers, and is responsible for quality control through an Internal Control System, while it also monitors the marketing of organic cotton and sesame. When a multinational company for cotton processing and exporting was established in the same region,

LOFP also became involved in lobby and advocacy work on behalf of its members. As this multinational company started distributing inorganic cotton inputs to farmers, the organic certification approach of LOFP and its farmers was jeopardized, as the organic certification was based on a group approach that prohibits the introduction or use of agro-chemicals in the area of the participating farmers. In 2003, LOFP launched a campaign aimed to protect its organic area from infiltration by inorganic crop inputs. This campaign involved lobbying the chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on Agriculture to help protect the organic cotton farmers in the area.

The lobby was successful and resulted in the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) being asked to study the organic cotton sector. The resulting report concluded that organic cotton production should be promoted as it was making a significant contribution to reducing poverty and was generating significant amounts of foreign currency for the country. It pointed out that there is a need to mobilize research support in the development of organic technologies and practices as well as to organize the provision of loans to farmers. Moreover, it was established that there are effective indigenous biological methods of controlling cotton pests based on predatory black ants (*Lepisiota* sp.) that the local cotton farmers were actively employing. The introduction of inorganic pesticides in the organic area would threaten the populations of these black ants and their role in controlling cotton pests in the fields of organic farmers. In June 2004, the President of Uganda wrote a letter to the Prime Minister, directing the protection of the organic cotton project by dividing the area into organic and conventional production zones, ensuring the continuation of the organic production activities.

As in the example above, grassroots efforts to influence policies tend to take place in reaction to immediate threats. However, once the threats are eliminated, the policy action of the group ends. In this case, there was no follow-up of the many recommendations given by the National Environment Management Authority. This is basically because grassroots organizations lack technical capacity and financial resources to pursue sustained advocacy and lobbying efforts. Hence there was need for action at a different level.

## Role of an umbrella organization

LOFP is an active member of NOGAMU, the National Organic Movement of Uganda. NOGAMU works to advance the adoption of organic agriculture, by bringing together all stakeholders such as farmers, farmer organisations, NGOs, extensionists, traders, processors and researchers. NOGAMU finds that an explicit government policy is necessary to address the numerous constraints to organic agriculture development in Uganda. Therefore, an advocacy and lobbying sub-committee was established as one of its standing committees to specifically pursue the policy advocacy agenda. Participation of members in this committee is voluntary. Other allies that bring technical competency in policy analysis, policy advocacy and policy development into the alliance include the Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE) and the Organisation for Rural Research and Development (ORREDE). This alliance has pursued a broad objective aimed at developing a comprehensive policy that covers all aspects of organic agriculture, including production, education, research, extension, processing and marketing.

In the absence of a national organic policy, the full potential of organic agriculture for the rural smallholders cannot be realised. Policies matter, because:

- policies have goals, objectives and strategies. Allocation of government resources is directed towards the realisation of policy objectives and goals. Without a government policy for organic agriculture, government resources cannot be invested in education, research and extension in support of organic agriculture development;
- policies inform other policies. Without an explicit government policy, other policies can easily have provisions that contradict the basic principles of organic agriculture. Such a situation could have serious implications on the practitioners of organic agriculture. For example, Uganda is currently in the process of developing policies for the introduction of questionable agricultural inputs such as the pesticide DDT and genetically modified organisms in the country. Without guiding principles to inform such policy development processes of what already exists and what needs to be protected, such new policies could work against organic farming;
- without such a policy the country would not be able to actively contribute to multilateral trade negotiations around organic agriculture. Yet organic agriculture is considered the most regulated segment of agricultural trade in the world and Ugandan operators already face many barriers and constraints in accessing the organic markets in Europe, the United States and Japan. These trade negotiations are closed to NGOs, farmer organisations and companies. Only governments can take part.

One of the consequences of not having an explicit government policy on organic agriculture is that the organic sector cannot develop beyond the resources made available by the private sector and civil society, or beyond the non-tariff barriers that the sector can overcome on their own. Recognizing these limitations, Ugandan civil society organizations and partner organizations have been at the forefront of lobbying and advocating for a government organic agriculture policy and in spearheading its formulation. The aim is a government policy that formally recognizes the sector and will allow mobilization of technical and financial government resources, including bilateral resources, for the development of this sector. However, it is not the intention of the civil society organizations to replace the current agriculture policy with an organic policy. It is about recognizing that there are several approaches to achieving agricultural development and that the organic approach is a viable alternative that has proved its potential among resource poor farmers. This recognition should result in the incorporation of organic agriculture in the Government's Plan for Modernization of Agriculture.

In advocating for policy development, NOGAMU and its partner organizations have been confronted with the following challenges:

- lack of unity among the major stakeholders to network effectively and mobilise resources towards a sustained policy advocacy effort;
- a lack of adequate empirical data on the performance of organic agriculture, information that the government always considers to be a prerequisite to bring forth policy response.



Organic agriculture tries to make good use of all available biomass: a farmer in Uganda incorporates weeds into the soil.



Most of the information on the performance of organic agriculture in Uganda is only based on field experiences of farmers and field-based organizations, mostly described in a qualitative manner and not published. Documenting the impacts of organic agriculture is a difficult undertaking because of its holistic nature. It requires multidisciplinary research teams to cover agronomic, ecological, economic and social dimensions of the system. The organic sector in Uganda has not yet acquired resources to mobilize such research teams;

- a lack of knowledge and information about organic agriculture among government bureaucrats and other influential actors in educational and research institutions, leading to poor appreciation of its potential in poverty eradication;
- an active opposition to organic agriculture from some influential circles who claim that it is technically incapable of meeting the food needs of a rapidly expanding population.

The formation of NOGAMU and its work during the first two years in developing an activity profile and building its membership base addressed the first constraint mentioned above. Short term consultants assisted in the collection of basic, "quick-to-obtain" data such as tonnages of organic products exported, export values, number of farmers involved and premium prices obtained. A second strategy to increase the availability of data on the organic agriculture sector consisted of organizing farm visits for influential persons, including policy makers and researchers, and inviting such people to participate in exhibitions, such as fairs associated with World Food Day or World Environmental Day. This approach has proved to be very effective and NOGAMU now organises annual Organic Days throughout the country, during which organic farming technologies and products are exhibited and information on organic agriculture is disseminated. These events capture the attention of policy makers and enable them to understand organic agriculture better. Increasingly, other influential stakeholders are also being won over. NOGAMU and its partners encourage research, and host specialized researchers who are interested in Uganda's organic agriculture. For example, the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) and the Austrian University of Natural Resources and Applied Life Sciences (BOKU) have initiated strategic research on organic agriculture to generate information needed to inform the development and implementation of the policy. Makerere University, the premier agriculture education institution in the country, has started a collaborative training programme with the Institute of Organic Farming of BOKU while the Uganda Martyrs University has initiated a full degree programme on organic agriculture. This is in addition to its short courses on organic agriculture.

The lack of adequate technical knowledge and information about organic agriculture among government bureaucrats, as mentioned above, implied that in the beginning the civil society organizations (CSOs) played a leading role in generating the background concept papers needed as a basis for forming the policy. This has probably only been possible because the Government of Uganda decided some time ago to always pursue participatory processes, involving civil society, in developing and implementing policies. In this case, the government formed an organic policy development committee which co-opted members from the CSOs. The participatory approach implies that all stakeholders contribute to the process, not only ideas but also other resources necessary to move the process forward. CSOs have been instrumental in the mobilisation of both technical and financial resources to enable

the policy committee to do its work. Several stakeholder consultative meetings have been held to assess the development of the organic sub-sector to date and to identify the key issues which require policy support. Consequently, a concept note for an organic agriculture policy was produced. This concept note contains the issue papers produced by technical staff from both the government and CSOs and is now being used as a basis for formulating the organic policy.

## Conclusions

The LOFP experiences demonstrate that a farmer organisation can successfully be involved in lobbying and advocacy at the local level. But such successes require often the winning over of dedicated supporters. In this case, the chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on Agriculture represents a constituency in the organic cotton zone in northern Uganda and was knowledgeable about the importance of the sector on the livelihoods of local people. He was therefore willing to pursue the issue.

In spite of the obvious limitations, grassroots' lobbying and advocacy activities do matter because under Uganda's decentralised service delivery system, local governments are responsible for the delivery of agricultural extension services. Experiences in other organic areas like western Uganda indicate that the grassroots-organized lobbying and advocacy policy process have been effective in changing the perception of local government technical staff and policy makers. Increasingly, local government technical staff are cooperating with development NGOs promoting organic agriculture when planning agricultural interventions and in delivering extension services.

The field visits by politicians and other decision makers have enabled these bureaucrats to appreciate the potential of organic agriculture and its impacts. Even though the organic policy is not yet in place, the decision taken by the government to initiate the process of policy formulation is crucial. Decisions have already been taken to protect the organic cotton production in northern Uganda. Organic agriculture is now increasingly being considered as a viable approach to achieving sustainability in agriculture and meeting the livelihood needs for resource poor smallholders and many influential actors in the organic sector are beginning to pay attention. In the absence of empirical data on the performance of organic agriculture farming systems, visual approaches to demonstrating impact can be very effective in getting people to notice and in garnering support, especially at the start when research resources to conduct scientific studies are lacking. ■

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