

CFS Special Forum

IFOAM Event on Organic Agriculture and Food Security

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In the context of the current discussions of the Committee on World Food Security on trends and prospects for regional and global food security, I am glad to see that IFOAM has taken the initiative to hold this meeting that puts organic agriculture on the agenda of options to consider in our common search for a better world.

Reaching the targets of the World Food Summit of halving the number of malnourished by 2015 is not an easy task. In fact, FAO studies foresee difficulties in reaching this target. The mid-term review of achieving the WFS target mentions, among others, the need to design policies that improve small farmer access to technology that complement local knowledge. Hence, the question of access of poor farmers to technology that increase food availability and sustainable resource use is widely recognized. I believe that organic agriculture has something to offer on this front, though the best approach to agriculture development remains insufficient to ensure food security. In discussing food security, factors such as poverty, epidemics, natural disasters, public investments, trade, population shifts and urbanization, political stability and peace are not to be underestimated.

Organic agriculture offers lessons to the transformation of food systems. Indirectly, organic agriculture creates a market for environmental goods and services. Farmers are rewarded for their stewardship through price premiums. But although agroecological approaches to food production are performing, they imply a readily available public good: knowledge. Are we equipped with the required investments and can we afford the luxury of waiting years to see the results of training and education translated into improved food supplies? These are only a few questions that may have many answers, based on different assumptions and information at hand: what is required is a thorough evaluation of the “organic option” for food security.

FAO has been observing the spectacular development, and change of attitudes related to the organic sector. I would stress the term “sector” because what

organic is about is not a production approach as such, but an alternative food supply chain. To the despair of its opponents, organic agriculture has been offering lessons in the application of agroecological science, empowerment of rural communities, feasibility of certification and traceability systems, ability to respond to consumers' demands, and functioning of short supply chains. And it happened from the base, out of people's ingenuity and search for sustainability. Now that organic agriculture is a market reality, it is increasingly attracting public sector and business interest - but also attracting more attacks in the struggle for shelf space.

FAO responds to its member countries' demands that ultimately shape the Organization's priorities and agenda. In the last years, we have been involved in implementing organic agriculture projects in some countries. These projects respond to governments' requests for assistance on specific issues and so far, the main concern has been strengthening countries' capacities to export organic products. More recently, government's request has been increasingly geared on strengthening rural livelihoods through organic agriculture, mainly because poor farmers have no access to agricultural inputs or are trapped in debts that often results in farmers' suicides.

As a reflection of our member countries' views, we are convinced about the economic and environmental benefits that organic agriculture can bring, provided that the right conditions are in place. However, we remain hesitant to affirmations such as "organic agriculture can provide a solution to food security". It is for this reason that FAO will organize an International Conference on Organic Agriculture Food Security in Rome, 3-5 May 2007, prior to the next session of the Committee on World Food Security.

The objective of the Conference is to shed light on the contribution of organic agriculture to food security, through the analysis of existing information in different agro-ecological areas of the world. We will analyze the organic "offer" to each of the four dimensions of food security, including: food availability, access to food, stability of food supply and food utilization.

The Conference will identify organic agriculture's potential and limits to the food security challenge, including conditions required for its success. Hence, the outcome of the Conference will be a thorough assessment of state of knowledge on organic agriculture and food security and recommendations for areas for development. We intend to bring the results of this Conference to the attention of governments attending the CFS, with the hope that the organic agriculture "option" will be taken-up in food security policies.