

# DevPulse

NEDA Development Advocacy Factsheet

Visit the DevPulse Blog at <http://devpulse-neda.blogspot.com>

Vol. 13. No. 3 February 15, 2009

## Organic Agriculture: A Smart Choice



The increasing cost of chemical based inputs amid the global food crisis and the volatility in the prices of fuel has renewed the interest of many stakeholders in the agriculture sector to promote organic agriculture (OA).

OA isn't a new thing. Farming practices in the past have relied on nature to sustain harvests and feed the people. In fact, communities of indigenous cultural groups such as the Igorots of the Mountain Province and Ifugao retained their traditional farming practices to this day. The rice terraces continue to survive, the crops fertilized by "green" manure such as leaves and stalks of sunflowers and other plants which are gathered and left to rot. To this day, the soil in the terraces have remained as fertile as that several centuries back.

In major agricultural areas, everything changed with the introduction of chemicals to increase harvests. This came with a heavy price: the high cost of chemical pesticides and fertilizers translates into lower net income for farmers, declining soil fertility, food poisoning from the chemicals.

### What is Organic Agriculture?

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement (IFOAM), OA is a holistic production management system that avoids the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides and genetically modified organisms (GMOs), minimizes pollution of air, soil and water, and

optimizes the health and productivity of plants, animals and people.

The principles and practices of OA are closely related to the traditional farming methods, which have shown to be self-sufficient and sustainable over generations. With OA, farmers utilize crop rotations, green manuring, cover crops, and natural-based products to maintain or enhance soil fertility and bring back soil vitality and plant health, as opposed to the use of agro-chemicals.

In the Philippines, OA is fast picking up its pace, from its infancy stage during late 1990s. There is now a higher level of consumer awareness, bigger production areas, more farmers, and more varied fresh and processed products. There is also a shift from niche and weekend markets to mainstream markets, existence of policy framework and government programs, efforts at information generation and exchanges and greater support from the scientific community. OA production remains as one option to supplement and support the mainstream food production systems.

### Benefits of Organic Agriculture

Switching to organic agriculture has been reported to have varying contribution/benefits. It promotes the principles of health, ecology, fairness and care.

IFOAM reports that OA help maintains a healthy environment. Through its ecological approach, it maintains

the integrity of the ecosystem and the productivity of natural resources. It preserves natural landscapes and wild species, restores life to soils and maintain agro-biodiversity by using and developing local seeds.

In reducing the use of chemical inputs, OA provides a healthier working environment – decreases risks of farmers, agricultural laborers and the extended rural communities, whose health and prosperity depend on a healthy ecosystem.

Because organic food are high in nutritional quality and quantity and have no/low residues – organically-grown fruits, vegetables, livestock, poultry and aquaculture products obtain nutrients from healthy soils and unpolluted water – they can play an important role in promoting human health. Organic standards in processing are based on principle of leaving food as close as possible to its natural state, thus avoid over-processing, the use of synthetic processing aids and ingredients.

Hence, the use of unrefined ingredients (e.g., wheat, rice and other grains, sugar) results in a more nutritious food. Making this kind of food available could contribute to an improved health and educate the population on the ill-effects of highly processed food that lacks essential vitamins and micronutrients, leading to an increase of diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart ailments and other syndromes of “hidden hunger”.

### **Opportunities with Organic Agriculture**

OA helps create a vibrant rural economic space. Reduced mechanization and avoiding the use of agrochemicals could create employment and increase returns, specially to rural labor. Diversified production of quality products decreases the impact of crop failures and increases marketing opportunities. In fact, the global and local markets for organic products have been increasing annually, resulting in higher price premiums for our organic farmers.

Trading in organic agriculture around the world is estimated to be increasing by 20-30 percent every year. Retail sales for organic products amounted to US\$11 billion in 1998 and US\$17 billion in 2002 and are projected to reach US\$100 billion in 2008. In the Philippines, we exported US\$2.5 million worth of organic products in 1999, US\$6.2 million in 2001 and US\$10 million in 2003.

The Philippines can aim for more share of the world market with the effective partnership among the government, LGUs, and the private sector. The most popular organic products of the Philippines are bananas, beef, mangoes, muscovado sugar, papayas, peanuts, poultry, soya milk, vegetables from the uplands, yellow corn and

rice. Actually, organic rice is now produced in 19 provinces covering 15,000 hectares of farmland, with the potential for 39,000 hectares more of planting area. Production costs are 20-40 percent lower than traditional farming and net income is 10-30 percent higher. Productivity for converted farms ranges from 4-6 tons versus the national average of 3.5-4 tons.

### **Food Security and Organic Agriculture**

During the International Conference on Organic Agriculture and Food Security last 2007 in Rome, it was highlighted that organic agriculture contributes to the attainment of food security, especially in developing countries.

The Research Institute for Organic Agriculture (FiBL) based in Switzerland asserted that at the national level, organic markets have the potential to increase food security and national food supply. Stable, diverse farms contribute to the availability of food products on the national market. Organic agriculture, therefore, improves the viability of rural economies and increases food self-sufficiency.

### **Government Initiatives and Support**

Organic agriculture is supportive of the state’s policy to promote sustainable agriculture, conserve environmental resources and promote social equity and product access to foreign and domestic markets of agriculture and fishery commodities. The national target is to have around 100,000 hectares of organic farms in 2010 nationwide, from the estimated 39,458 hectares in 2005-2006.

In December 2005, President Arroyo signed Executive Order (EO) 481 which aims to promote the development of organic farming in the country. The salient provisions of the EO include the adoption of a Philippine National Standard (PNS) for organic products and the strengthening of marketing support to our farmers.

In the launching of the Go Organic! Movement in Quezon City in October 2008, Secretary Arthur C. Yap of the Department of Agriculture, being a believer of organic agriculture as a means towards increased food productivity and improved farmers’ incomes, pledged to convert 10 percent of the total rice lands in the country to organic.

*Sources: This issue was written by the NEDA Agricultural Staff. Information cited therein were sourced from : (a) IFOAM Leaflets; (b) notes from Dr. Maghirang; and (c) DA presentation materials*