



Further reading

Regional Organic Task Force (2008), Pacific Organic Standard
http://www.ifoam.org/partners/projects/pdfs/Pacific_Organic_Standard.pdf

Regional Organic Task Force (2008) Pacific Region Organic Strategic Plan (available on request)

Various useful documents are available from the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) www.ifoam.org including:

IFOAM (2007), Organic agriculture and food security
http://www.ifoam.org/organic_facts/food/pdfs/Food_Security_Leaflet_new.pdf

IFOAM (2007), Role of organic agriculture in mitigating climate change http://shop.ifoam.org/bookstore/product_info.php?cPath=64_22&products_id=69

IFOAM (2007), Organic agriculture and the Millennium Development Goals http://shop.ifoam.org/bookstore/product_info.php?cPath=64_22&products_id=401

UNEP/UNCTAD (2006), 'Best Practices for Organic Policy: What developing country governments can do to promote the organic sector'. http://www.ifoam.org/growing_organic/7_training/training_pdf/Best_Practices_UNCTAD_DITC_TED_2007_3.pdf

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Photo: Animal Health & Production Team (AHP) SPC LRD



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Benefits of Organic Agriculture

Purpose

This brief focuses on four questions:

- What is organic agriculture?
- How can organic agriculture help address regional challenges, such as environmental, cultural and economic sustainability, health and food security, and trade and rural livelihoods?
- What are the constraints to developing Pacific organic agriculture?
- What can governments do to promote the organic sector?

What is organic agriculture?

Organic agriculture is a production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local conditions, rather than the use of inputs with adverse effects. Organic agriculture combines tradition, innovation and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and a good quality of life for all involved.

Key messages

- Organic production is both old and new in the Pacific. Many rural producers use traditional farming methods that are generally in harmony with the environment and with modern organic principles. But Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) are only starting to recognise the benefits of obtaining organic certification, which will give them access to external markets and higher returns for their products.
- Organic agriculture can help address many of the challenges facing the region.
 - **Better for health** By providing safe and nutritious food and income-generating opportunities for rural communities it can contribute to combating escalating rates of non-communicable diseases and to improving food security.
 - **Better for the environment** The use of environmentally friendly farming methods can contribute to addressing the environmental challenges of adapting to climate change, maintaining biodiversity, conserving soil and water and managing waste.
 - **Better for the economy** The global market for organic produce is growing rapidly with international retail sales of over USD 46 billion in 2007 – double the 2002 market value. It represents an opportunity for the Pacific to capitalise on its traditional agricultural practices and its image of clean, green islands to boost livelihoods, incomes, exports and foreign exchange earnings, and reduce rural-urban migration.

How organic agriculture can help address regional challenges

Health, food and nutritional security

Non-communicable diseases such as heart disease and diabetes are the leading cause of deaths in PICTs. Poor diets and consumer preferences for processed and imported food, especially in urban areas, have contributed to this problem. Increasing reliance on imports also makes PICTs vulnerable to global economic events such as escalating food prices, which can lead to food insecurity.



Photo: SPC

Organic agriculture emphasises sustainable farming methods that enhance the health of ecosystems and produce safe, nutritious food. Farming methods such as slash and burn and heavy use of fertilisers and pesticides damage the long-term productivity of the land, undermine the sustainability of food production systems and will not support increasing populations in the Pacific as land availability decreases.

Environmental challenges – climate change, biodiversity, soil and water conservation and waste management

Pacific agriculture takes place in diverse environments that host a high level of biodiversity. However, many island ecosystems are vulnerable and under pressure from increasing populations and higher levels of pollution and non-degradable waste.

Organic agriculture protects and enhances biodiversity and soil and water conservation, and minimises the impact of agriculture on downstream activities and aquatic ecosystems such as mangroves and coral reefs. Organic practices can also reduce the production of greenhouse gases from agriculture by rejecting the use of fossil-fuel and chemical inputs and encouraging carbon sequestration in soils.



Rural livelihoods, niche markets and rural-urban migration

Increasing numbers of Pacific Islanders leave their rural homes in search of employment in towns and cities. This places stress on urban infrastructure and weakens traditional support systems. Securing rural livelihood opportunities, particularly for young people, is a significant challenge.

Organic agriculture, underpinned by the principles of social justice, can provide income generation and employment opportunities for rural farmers and access to external niche markets.

Achieving certification

All over the world, organic standards provide quality assurance and protect producers and consumers of organic produce. The Pacific Organic Standard was developed and published in 2008 and is now being implemented. The process of achieving certification can be complex and costly but it offers producers the opportunity to get premium prices, access the rapidly growing global market for organic produce and meet national consumer demand for certified organic produce.

However, Ministries of Agriculture in the region often encourage the use of chemical inputs directly (through subsidies) or indirectly (by promoting inorganic solutions to pest management problems or soil nutrient deficiencies). These practices undermine farmers' ability to achieve organic certification.



Photo: MAFFF Tonga

A number of Pacific organic products are currently being produced and exported. They include beef, cocoa, coffee, fruit and fruit juices, herbs and spices, honey, noni products and vanilla.

Cook Islands Noni Marketing Ltd is exporting around 15 tonnes a month of certified organic noni juice. This is providing livelihoods for around 70 Cook Islands farmers and total revenues of around NZD 20,000 a month.

In 2008, Women in Business Development Incorporated (WIBDI) began exporting organically certified virgin coconut oil (VCO) from Samoa to the Body Shop in the UK. In the first year 9 tonnes were exported generating around ST150,000 and supporting the livelihoods of 6 smallholder extended families. A further 14 tonnes are under order for export to the Body Shop in 2009 and other markets are developing. By December 2009 there will be 20 families producing VCO.

Constraints to promoting organic agriculture

Need for national organic policies or strategies

Many governments do not have an explicit policy or strategy for the development of the organic sector. Several government departments have a role to play (Agriculture, Health, Environment, Education, Tourism, Trade, Commerce and Finance) but they need to cooperate to support the development of agricultural policies that in turn contribute to wider government objectives.

More research, education and training

Research conducted at government research stations, agricultural colleges and universities concentrates on non-organic solutions to agricultural problems. Increasing demand from organic producers could help to change this. While some organic modules are integrated into agricultural education and training, dedicated organic courses are lacking.

Greater public awareness needed

Organic agriculture is closely aligned with traditional Pacific farming practices, but there is a lack of awareness about what it means to be a certified organic producer and how to achieve organic certification. There is also a lack of awareness among consumers and policy makers about the potential benefits of organic production for health, environments, economies and income generation.

Cost of organic certification

Organic producers currently use certification agencies from outside the Pacific Islands region. The cost of organic certification by an international certifier is high and many producers do not have large enough volumes to warrant the cost of certification and meet the demands of the international market. The development of the Pacific Organic Standard should lead to more cost-effective options for certification. Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS), which are a form of certification for the local market, are being established in some countries. PGS are not based on international certification but rely on a system of trust between consumers and producers.



Photo: Spices of Fiji, FACT - SPC LTD

Initial recommended policy actions

- Review and integrate organic agriculture into national and sectoral strategic plans and policies and set targets for the development of the sector.
- Assess policies and practices that discourage organic agriculture, such as chemical input subsidies and extension services that focus only on non-organic agriculture.
- Promote and provide funding for organic agriculture research and certification.
- Promote organic farming to rural communities by emphasising its potential benefits for health, environments, economies and income generation.
- Support education and training on the benefits of organic production methods and traditional practices targeting consumers in general, schools, agricultural colleges and universities.
- Conserve traditional knowledge and language relating to organic production techniques.
- Organise campaigns and events to raise awareness of the benefits of organic agriculture, for example, promotion of local organic food in schools and at farm fairs.

Technical assistance

SPC, IFAD and FAO are working with the ROTF and PICTs to support the development of organic policies and strategies that integrate organic agriculture into overall strategic development plans and sectoral plans.

The Pacific Regional Organic Taskforce (ROTF) includes members from non-government organisations, the private sector, government agencies and educational and research institutions.

The ROTF, supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), has promoted the development of the organic sector in the Pacific. The Pacific Organic Standard, the third regional standard recognised by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), was developed by the taskforce, endorsed by the Pacific High Level Organics Group at the Pacific Leaders meeting in Niue and launched at the Heads of Agriculture meeting in Apia in 2008.

The Pacific Region Organic Strategic Plan will guide the work of the ROTF to 2013.