

ORGANIC GLOBALISATION

Farming locally and trading globally?

The worldwide trade of organic products is a rapidly growing reality, and for so-called third world countries, a chance for development. A preference for local and regional organic food, complemented with organic products from the world, should guide consumer preferences and choices.

Coffee, tea, chocolate and bananas – once considered luxury products, have become normal components of our diet. In Germany, for example, the average annual coffee consumption is higher than beer. A dogmatic demand to consume exclusively local or regional products is unrealistic and will not be widely accepted. International trade of organic products is a rapidly growing reality, which is so vividly on display at the BioFach fairs in Nuremberg, Tokyo, Washington and Rio. The organic market is increasingly making its way out of the niche. The worldwide turnover of certified organic products was about 25 billion US\$ last year.

In one of his essays, the late philosopher Ivan Illic concluded that today we are living in a system of “modern long distance feeding”. Organic agriculture per se cannot stop this development: producing organic food on a farm does not automatically influence consumption patterns and the food and dining culture of societies, but can contribute to a significant change.

Organic products are increasingly traded globally, and even fast food giants are beginning to integrate them into their overall marketing strategy. McDonalds, for example, has begun to sell certified organic milk in Sweden and the United Kingdom, taking advantage of growing consumer awareness of organic agriculture and its benefits. There are good arguments for international trade of organic products – especially from the viewpoint of the so-called developing countries. For many such countries, the export of food and other agricultural products is the only possibility to participate in the international system of trade. They have production advantages such as decentralized and smallholder production structures and lower labour costs, and can produce food and fibres that countries in the northern hemisphere cannot grow. They often benefit from a better price for organic products, and the additional income is even larger when combined with a fair trade premium.

Internationally traded organic food is a delightful enrichment of national markets. If one has witnessed the positive impact the conversion to organic coffee growing and the access to fair trade markets has on smallholder communities in Mexico, for example, the cup of fair trade organic coffee not only tastes good, but also provides the consumer with a reassuring feeling that their money, their choices, can make a tangible difference in the lives of real people. The conversion to organic is not done solely for the export cash crop of coffee- all the crops of these campesinos are consequently grown organically. This means farming families and the local community also grow their daily food in organic quality, and more and more of these producers are developing local markets for their products.

For many, if not most consumers, the first reason to choose organic food is the rather egocentric motivation to stay or get healthy. If this is the only motivation, it doesn't matter how far food has travelled and whether it comes from socially acceptable production methods (fair trade).

However, there is a growing consumer interest to know where food comes from and under what conditions it is produced. Double certification to fair trade and organic standards is generating increasing interest and creating growing demand. Consumers also have a preference for more and more local or regional foods. Organic standards and regulations do not yet cover aspects of regionalism, seasonality or “food miles”. Organic farming is also increasingly producing raw materials for processed food. Organic

agriculture is not in itself an alternative to fast food. It is the responsibility of processors, traders and the consumers to change to sustainable production and consumption patterns.

The discussion surrounding the “ecological footprint” of farming and food miles is intensifying. Initiatives to include such aspects in organic standards are beginning. The possibility of tracing products back to their origin through the organic certification systems allows consumers to make the right choices. Yet, it seems that also in organic marketing and trade the most money is made through processing, transporting and trading – especially if the raw material is bought for rather cheap prices in developing countries. It remains a challenge for the organic movement and industry to make sure that the farmers get their fair share on the money earned with food.

It also remains a fact that the buying power in the richer countries makes it very difficult if not often impossible for organic food to be sold in developing countries. It is often amazing to see the enormous price increase for organic products in these countries. For example, organic vegetables in China may sell for up to 400 percent more than conventional products. IFOAM and the international organic movement are putting more emphasis and devoting more resources towards the development of local and regional markets for organic products in the Third World. There are successful and impressive developments all around the world that are gaining recognition. SEKEM in Egypt for example, an IFOAM member organization, recently received the Right to Livelihood Award for its innovative practices in marketing organic products in a way that contributes significantly to the local economy”) With its focus on regional marketing, BioFach Latin America in Brazil is also a good example.

This new orientation on local, regional and national trading strategies is supported by creative activities to make certification more accessible and affordable for smallholders in the South. Crucially, IFOAM has developed and aided in the implementation of procedures for smallholder group certification (Internal Control Systems) for cooperatives and producer groups, which has been officially sanctioned by the EU, and holds significant promise for groups of small farmers who might otherwise be unable to afford the cost of certification: Another recent activity of IFOAM and the organic movement is the coordination and promotion of participatory guarantee systems for small producers, which are being established not only in southern countries like Brazil, but all over the world.

The slogan “think globally and act locally” is very popular and widely accepted. But this is not enough. Should we leave the global “acting” in the hands of WTO, multinational companies and corporate interests, and can we act locally without thinking? The globalisation realities of today require that we think and act locally as well as globally.

If this understanding guides more and more consumers, it will lead to a change in consumption patterns towards a sustainable and organic lifestyle. In concrete terms this means a preference for seasonal, local and regional food – complimented and “spiced” with organic and fair trade products from those beautiful countries, which are categorized right or wrong as “Third” World.

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