



Training on organic farming in northern Vietnam © Ecolink

The choice for organic agriculture

A view on four organic projects supported by the Trade for Development Centre

To make global food production more sustainable, more and more scientists advocate organic agriculture. The Trade for Development Centre (TDC) grants financial support to some ten projects that have made this choice. We highlight four of them: two of them are starters and two are national cupola organisations with a long-standing record. Our global trip starts in Tanzania, passes via Vietnam and Bolivia and ends in Uganda.

Organic and certified

Throughout the last century agriculture quickly evolved to become an industrial production system with extreme chemical input and a dramatic score for sustainability. During this so-called 'green' revolution, organic agriculture was often seen as an old relic. Today, awareness is growing that organic agriculture can play an important role in crucial issue such as soil degradation, water shortages or climate change.

Other prejudices such as lower productivity are also increasingly being refuted. IFOAM, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, puts it like this: "Industrial agriculture is not about feeding the world but about maximising profits. That is why we must protect family-run farms, who still produce more than half of all global food, and choose for organic agriculture."

"Organic' is often narrowed down to 'certified organic'. In the early nineties, Europe did indeed create a legal framework for organic agriculture. Today, 82 countries have recognised certification systems and consumer labels. Such regulations focus exclusively on ecologic criteria even though within the organic movement a great deal of attention is also being paid to social and economic sustainability.

IFOAM considers anyone who farms in accordance with its four principles – Health, Ecology, Fairness and Care – as an organic farmer. But if you produce for the market – domestic or exports – you are usually better off with a recognised label. For many agricultural organisations in the South obtaining certification is not an easy step.

Owing to a lack of technical know-how or financial means the threshold is often very high. In such cases, genuine backing – as offered by the TDC – can make a difference.

Stop 1: Tanzania

KIWATA (Kikundi cha Wakulima wa Tangawizi) is a good example. It is an association of some 300 farmers in the southeast of Tanzania who grow ginger and red kidney beans as cash crops. The group could not make the transition to full organic farming on its own, but with the help of the NGO Rucodia and of the Tanzanian cupola organisation TOAM (Tanzanian Organic Agriculture Movement) and the TDC's financial support it is making progress.

The endeavour started a few years ago when each village appointed one person to be trained in organic cultivation techniques. This person could later pass on the knowledge attained to his or her fellow villagers. Theoretical insights were tested on trial plots under the guidance of Rucodia staff. The low prices in 2012 slowed down the process, but in 2013 strongly improved quality boosted interest from traders. Yields increased by 20% and the price that farmers obtained for ginger grew fourfold in the space of half a year.



A member of the association KIWATA shows his ginger harvest © KIWATA

Step by step

So it seems KIWATA took off, but the road is still a long one. The organisation has to deal with familiar problems that most emerging farmers' organisations face: structures are weak, the means to transport and store the harvest are limited, membership is not sufficiently loyal to the organisation and sells its crop directly to third parties, etc.

"Still, we work hard to take further steps," says Rucodia's Joseph Mhagama. "Customers visited us and showed an interest in a significant monthly purchase of ginger. Right now, the farmers of KIWATA cannot guarantee such volumes yet, but with the extension of the TDC project we can mobilise more farmers, provide more training and try to solve the logistics issues." In addition, KIWATA also wants to complete organic certification for ginger and red kidney beans so the products can be sold as organic on the local market.

Stop 2: Vietnam

Our second example takes us to south-east Asia. This past decade Vietnam has not been in the news much, but – like China – it has faced major food scandals. An increasing number of consumers are aware of the negative effects of the massive use of pesticides in agriculture.

In this context Ecolink (Vietnam Ecological Linkage Company) was created in 2004 which is a subsidiary of Hiep Thanh. Ecolink has proved to be a genuine pioneer in the search for trade models for organic products. In 2011 the TDC decided to support a project in the Tien Nguyen community and in 2014 it was extended to five more regions in the northern Vietnamese highlands.

Ambitious organic pioneer

With these projects Ecolink shows it has a long-term vision. It starts with the farmers of particularly remote regions where primarily ethnic minorities live. Poverty is endemic, but pesticides are not used as massively as elsewhere. The transition to full organic cultivation, organic certification and the international organic and fair trade market also offer opportunities to reach concerned consumers in the home country with safe, organic produce.

In Tien Nguyen, with the TDC's financial support, hundreds of tea farmers were brought together. This led to the establishment of a cooperative and a whole series of courses and training in farmer field schools. Beside the local tea variety (Shan tea), increasing attention went to planting ginger between the tea bushes. A nursery for young shoots and an installation for curing and processing tea leaves were developed. These efforts led to the cooperative gaining both organic and fair trade certification for tea and ginger in 2014, while Ecolink signed its first contracts with European purchasers. Local authorities are also fully involved in this organic story.



Nursery for young tea plants

© Ecolink

Form a movement

Ecolink aims to go through a similar process in other regions with three tea cooperatives and one coffee cooperative. This must lead to a more stable supply of more and better organic products, and – for farmers – to better prices and opportunities for developing their communities. In addition to international client contacts, a breakthrough on the national market is aimed at. Ecolink was involved in the establishment of the Vietnamese cupola organisation for organic farming – where the example of Tien Nguyen is considered a showcase – and of the first Vietnamese organic certifier (Mekong Cert).

At the same time, many efforts are made to develop a training centre for organic agriculture (An Phu Farm) and an ecological market in Hanoi. "It is all still quite modest, resources are scarce, bureaucracy prevails and the Vietnamese consumer is still unfamiliar with the concept," says Than Dy Ngu, Ecolink's director. "But we're trying to form a movement with everybody who's into organic farming."

Stop 3: Bolivia

In South America we visit a country that is much further in the process. The establishment of **AOPEB (Asociación de Organizaciones de Productores Ecológicos)** goes back to 1991. Today, this Bolivian organisation brings together more than 60 producers' groups from 9 departments. Its years of lobbying have borne fruit.

In 1996, also BOLICERT started, which made organic certification for exports much cheaper. In 2006, organic farming was recognised by law and six years later the government created a legal framework for a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS). This is a form of organic certification in which farmers within a producers' group are controlled by their peers. Local members of the organisation are trained to become evaluators to carry out inspections and document all the data and an independent control body also carries out annual inspections. PGS is recognised by IFOAM and allows small producers' groups to put their products on the domestic organic market.



AOPEB promoting organic farming © AOEPEB

Follow-up project

Recently, the TDC supported the start-up of a PGS in five communities in the country. The result is that at the start of 2014, 108 evaluators were on the road and 942 families were certified.

"Certification is only a first step," admits Adolfo Valdez Laguna, AOPEB's director. Now, the fight for a spot on the market can start. However, this has been very hard to achieve. Right now we are fully focused on a short value chain, especially via local organic markets. Another opportunity is provided by school breakfasts. Bolivia's government wants children to eat healthy food at school and producers' groups negotiate with local authorities about which products they can offer for this. These are important experiments that we definitely want to test."

Stop 4: Uganda

According to the latest IFOAM figures based on the situation in 2013, Uganda is the front runner in Africa with 231,000 hectares of organic certified area. In international reports Uganda is often referred to as a success story for organic agriculture owing to a strong farmers' movement that received great support from the government in the nineties.

This resulted in the establishment of NOGAMU (National Organic Agricultural Movement of Uganda) in 2001, a national certification programme and a national certification agency (UgoCert) in 2004. With UNEP and UNCTAD's support, IFOAM coordinated the OSEA project (Organic Standards in East Africa), which resulted in a common label (East African Organic Mark – EAOM or Kilimohai Mark). Here also, certification can be obtained through a PGS system.

Uganda is also a frontrunner in other areas: research showed that 83% of the population is familiar with organic products and 29% knows the EAOM label. Still, even for NOGAMU it is tough to find markets, which may range from 'village organic stores' to local markets, supermarkets and schools. In Kabalagala, a neighbourhood of Kampala, the organisation has run its own organic shop since 2006 and an Organic Trade Point (OTP) was recently launched. This is an online service with market information for farmers, traders as well as export and import organisations.

Field work

A lot of work remains to be done at the basis. That is why the TDC approved a three-year project in 2010 to support three farmers' associations in three regions of northern and eastern Uganda in the transition to organic agriculture, with the certification process and with establishing relations with wholesalers.

Afterwards, NOGAMU evaluated the project as follows: "Farmers reacted massively. In total, 8,700 farmers were registered through their associations, which far exceeded expectations. In addition, their mangos, sesame, coffee

and chili peppers efficiently found their way to organic wholesalers. The limited know-how and lack of resources for pre-financing the harvest were the major inhibiting factors.” To deal with these issues, NOGAMU proposed a follow-up project with the TDC. The aim is to train the same groups in management and logistical planning, to allow them to find solutions and more farmers can join.

Initiatives to help farmers create more added value such as drying and processing fruits and vegetables are also important. Finally, the associations are supported in their climate change mitigation efforts. Uganda has to deal with changing seasons and longer periods of drought and unpredictable rainfall. This requires adapted cultivation practices and protection of natural resources.

For the TDC, fair and sustainable trade is a powerful means to fight poverty and achieve sustainable development. The four stories above are examples in case. They also show that the transition to organic farming is not solely an exports story as is often thought. Awareness is also growing in the South that the quality of food matters and organisations such as KIWATA, Ecolink, AOPEB and NOGAMU endeavour to open up their own domestic markets for organic products.



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Mango Farmers from the Ugandan district Namutumba consult with staff members of NOGAMU © Nogamu

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2015 European Year for Development

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