

Organic farming in South Africa - Prospects for the future

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Introduction

The recent interest in nature farming or organic farming not only in South Africa, but also in the neighboring countries to the north, has seen the necessity of the urgency to the creation of a comprehensive database of those who are producing food naturally. Hence those who wish to convert into biological methods of farming formed an association, to provide assistance in education, research resources, government updates and possible international links. Therefore, the Organic Agriculture Association of South Africa (OAASA) was formed a few years ago, by a few dedicated producers to achieve this purpose. The purpose of setting up the Association was to assist professional producers to gain a certification program, to maintain standards for organic production and ensure that consumers would have assurance of naturally grown food. Today, it has expanded its membership to include all regions of South Africa.

Organic Farming in South Africa and OAASA

Back in 1970 when IFOAM was formed to safe guard the production of healthy food and sustainable agriculture, South Africa. was one of the 5 founding members, represented by the late Pauline Raphaeli, founder of the Food Garden Foundation. However, the development of this feature was not encouraging thereafter.

Many consumers are increasingly concerned about the way in which their food is produced, and are prepared to pay more for produce that is free of pesticide contamination, preservatives, and food colorants. In contrast, there is considerable ignorance about the facts, both amongst consumers and farmers, about nature farming in the broader sense. However, the nature of small emerging farm holdings producing food of high nutritional quality for their local communities, not only builds a sustainable community, but also provides much needed employment and education, there by creating stable and purposeful lifestyles.

There is a significant lack of information on organic farming in the region. Hence, OAASA is now pursuing activities to draw upon the energies, of the young dynamic concerned people. to assist in this forward drive of education. In this endeavor, the Association is seeking assistance, funding and guidance, to encourage as soon as possible a local certification body for organic farming, to encourage potential producers from the emerging farmer community. It is pursuing with vigor to call upon Universities, Colleges, Technicons and Agricultural Co-Operatives, to acknowledge that the small farmer holds the key to increased organic food production.

In spite of these attempts to promote and regularize organic farming today, is still in it's infancy in South Africa. Therefore, state administration, marketing boards that control marketing, technical support and regulated price structures for the local as well as the International trade have focused on large-scale farming.

At present there is little or no incentive or support, for the small farmer who cannot not compete with large scale subsidized agri-business. Therefore, OAASA is endeavoring to promote a class of yeoman farmers using organic principles to restore the land to full production. Organizations like Food Garden

Foundation (8000 members) including church groups and schools or privately sponsored units, concentrated on the disadvantaged urban and rural populations, educating them to grow their own food based on organic principles. For example, the Trees for Africa (3000 members) and organizations called Participatory Ecological Land Management and Feed the People focused on the same concepts. With regards to sales of organic produce for the local market these organizations have little impact, it is here where a significant potential still awaits to be developed.

At present, there are no more than 250 farming operations whose principle income is from the sale of organic produce mainly for export. These include rooibos tea, the fruit industry, and vegetables and some sugar. As organic farming offers opportunities to increase agricultural production in a more self-reliant way, there is great potential in this country and region, not only because our season being opposite to Europe, but mostly because there is a vast potential from the emerging native farm producer. I am personally substantially involved in the development of this field, in terms of education, structural and marketing. To extend the potential of organic products, funds are being sought with regard to training and establishing a certification scheme. The present membership fees cannot possibly support these efforts.

The government is keenly aware of creating jobs in rural areas. I feel that agriculture with the assistance and backup from modern technologies, including the EM Program, will have far-reaching pragmatic effect on all the rural communities throughout this region. This I feel is not just another academic concept, but having practiced natural farming for some 13 years, adding value on the farm and dealing with the retail industry. I strongly believe this is the way we must go.

Too much reliance in the past has been placed on large agri-business to provide the goods, and as we all know agro-chemical farming is not sustainable and places enormous pressure on farmers to produce more and more per unit and area. This creates vast imbalances in the natural environment, massive pest attacks and herbicide resistances. The low prices and poor nutritional quality of produce results in a situation that many large farmers are in a state of despair. Unless we encourage in a professional manner to look at change, and making some time investment to biologically activate their soils, the end of the road for some is not far.

Grouping of people, at this conference who have traveled from far and wide, to encourage rural people to use their innate intelligence, to promote long-term soil and environmental stability, can only encourage our association and the region. It is surely our responsibility, to assist these people, with research funding to run trials, to hold field days, broaden knowledge, and assist in any way possible to make nature farming enjoyable and profitable.

There is undoubtedly enormous potential in our country, with our stable sunshine hours our climatic diversity and a constantly integrating cross-cultural community willing to work together, to make all this a success. It is with this in mind, that we look forward with anticipation to the establishment and development of a thriving nature farming sector in this country and the region.