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## Recognizing and realizing the potential of organic agriculture in Kenya

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**Keywords:** development of organic agriculture, non-governmental organizations, declining agricultural productivity, shifts in consumer preferences

### Abstract:

*Formal organic agriculture in Kenya dates back to the early eighties when the first pioneer organic training institutions were established. During the same period, a few horticultural companies started growing organic vegetables for export. Initial efforts to promote organic agriculture in Kenya were made by rural development non-governmental organizations (NGOs), faith based organizations and community based organizations (CBOs). They seek to help rural farmers in addressing the issue of declining agricultural productivity (especially the degradation of soils and natural resource base), high poverty incidences, food insecurity and low incomes which prevented farmers from assessing high costs inputs. Currently Kenya has five major players in organic agriculture namely Kitale-based Manor House Agricultural Center, Baraka College in Molo, the Sustainable Agriculture Community Development Program in Thika, the Kenya Institute of Organic Farming (KIOF), a training center on the outskirts Kenya's capital Nairobi, and the Association for Better Land Husbandry (ABLH), headquartered in Nairobi. The organic sector is relatively small; however, it is growing very fast, led mainly by NGOs and private sector (companies growing organic produce for export). Exports of organic products have been taking place for the last two decades, mainly with vegetables and fruits produced on large scale farms. Over the years exports have developed beyond vegetables and fruits to include other products such as essential oils, dried herbs and spices as well as products for the cosmetic and pharmaceutical industries which are more often produced by smallholders. Currently, there are five international certifiers operating in Kenya, namely: the Soil Association (SA), EcoCert International; IMO (Institute for Market Ecology); USDA's (United States Department of Agriculture) National Organic Programme (NOP) and Bio Suisse.*

### Introduction and Objectives:

In the pre-colonial period agricultural production was mainly in traditional form and involved use of non-purchased inputs. It mainly entailed soil-building practices, non-use of synthetic inputs and use of non-chemical material like ash, cow dung etc. to control pest and diseases. On the arrival of the white settlers land occupation was high especially in the high productivity highland areas, and larger farms developed with an emphasis on high external input agriculture. As a result, many of these inputs were made available to the surrounding smallholder producers. With the exit of the white settlers and the transfer of land to the locals in the early sixties agricultural productivity continued showing an upward trend. However, as was in the rest of the continent was short-lived, as the cost of the external inputs continued to be unsustainable for the smallholders and the natural fertility declined rapidly probably due to toxicity problems of chemical fertilizers. Coupled with declining food security was poverty that resulted from low agricultural productivity, consequently calling for alternative sustainable production systems. Organic agriculture includes all agricultural systems that promote the environmentally, socially and economically sound produc-

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tion of food and fibres with a greater emphasis on soil fertility (UNCTAD 2006). This study aimed at identifying the status and institutional infrastructure available in support of organic farming in Kenya.

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#### **Current status of organic farming in Kenya:**

Kenya has a two decades history of institutional development for promoting organic and sustainable agriculture. Six major players in the field are the Kitale based Manor House Agricultural Center, Baraka College in Molo, the Sustainable Agriculture Community Development Program in Thika, the Kenya Institute of Organic Farming (KIOF), a training center on the outskirts Kenya's capital Nairobi, The Sustainable Agriculture Centre for Research, Extension and Development in Africa (SACRED-Africa) and the Association for Better Land Husbandry (ABLH), headquartered in Nairobi. All of these organizations have attracted major support from American and European donors, without whose long-term investment much less progress would have been made. Side-by-side with these national groups its dozens of local organizations, scattered across the country, practicing and teaching environmentally sound farming techniques but not specifically organic farming. Many of these groups employ diploma holders from Manor House, Baraka or KIOF.

The organic sector is relatively small; however, it is growing very fast, mainly led by NGOs and private sector (companies growing organic produce for export). Over 182,000 hectares of land are under organic management, which accounts for 0.69% of the total agricultural area in Kenya. About 30,000 farms have changed over to organic cultivation methods so far (IFOAM & FiBL 2006). However, in Kenya as in other developing countries statistics about organic farming are usually sporadic and thus becomes difficult to quantify the exact acreage under organic farming. Currently other public stakeholders like the Universities are taking up the initiative and integrating them in their curricula. For example, Egerton University situated in the Rift valley province has taken up the lead in this sustainable agricultural production, culminating into the establishment of an organic demonstration unit. This is being strengthened by the growing number research initiatives and establishment of an institute of organic farming in Egerton University. Exports of organic products have been taking place for the last two decades, mainly with vegetables and fruits produced on large scale farms. Over the years exports have developed beyond vegetables and fruits to include other products such as essential oils, dried herbs and spices as well as products for the cosmetic and pharmaceutical industries which are more often produced by small-holders (UNCTAD 2006).

Most smallholders are organized into groups and some of these are registered. For example Mount Kenya Organic Farming (MOOF) is an independent registered non-profit making NGO in Kenya which seeks to promote the acceptance and implementation of sustainable low external input farming systems. MOOF has already developed a local network of Self-Help smallholder groups which it services with training and advice on certified organic farming technologies in accordance with IFOAM smallholder group certification guide (MURAGE 2006). The farmers' network is under the umbrella organization initiated by MOOF known as the Kenya Organic Oil Farmers Organization KOOF, for the organic certification and business management purposes. Three years ago, some small-scale farmers formed a national representative organization, the Kenya Organic Farmers Association (KOFA). Larger companies and commercial farms, who are already in the export market, have organized themselves into

Kenya Organic Producers Association (KOPA) (UNCTAD 2006). In 2005, organic agriculture stakeholders in Kenya, comprising KOPA and KOFA, formed the umbrella network Kenya Organic Agriculture Network (KOAN) to support the successful growth of the sector.

**Challenges to organic agriculture in Kenya:**

The development of Organic Agriculture in Kenya still faces a lot of bottlenecks stemming from agricultural policies, production and marketing. A close look at each of these challenges in a SWOT provides a good insight of the scenario (Tab.1).

Tab. 1: SWOT analysis of Organic Agriculture in Kenya.

Strength	Weakness	Opportunity	Threat
<b>Agricultural Policy</b>			
Focuses on the growth objective of mass production	Overlooks equity issues., largely neglects the small farmer in prioritizing agricultural research and setting research & development agenda	>85% of Kenyan farmers are small scale and presence of NGOs promoting organic farming	Policies focus on the development and commercialization of cash crops destined for export
<b>Marketing and Certification</b>			
Locally adapted guidelines and standards are almost in place now	Importers wish to buy organically certified produce	Apart from export market the local market for organic produce is picking up	High cost of certification coupled with too much paper work which local farmers are not familiar with

**a. Agricultural policy**

The Kenya government has not yet recognized the role of organic agriculture and thus no efforts have been made to promote the sector through its agricultural policies (MOA 2005). The government seems to embrace the Genetically Modified Organisms- GMO has the answer to the perennial food problems and poverty suffered by rural farming communities. This is evidenced by the big expensive (GMO) research complex in Nairobi, commissioned by the president recently and the onset of GMO maize trials. This has come about due to the number of strategies being used to butt the technology down African throats? Kenyans included. These include the mastermind siege on agricultural research centers (KARI), and Universities in Kenya. The mentioned development in political activities sets a grim picture towards Kenyan agricultural policy on organic agriculture. Consequently there are not many organic success stories so far reported in Kenya to convince the government to think and act into this direction. Subsequently since organic agriculture in Kenya is small and led by civil society organizations who work with poor and marginalized smallholder farmers its adoption may be constraint by lack of technological support, extension services and big funding associated with the government.

**b. Marketing and certification**

The main drawback in marketing of organic products is that importers wish to buy organically certified produce. Organic certification process is very expensive for smallholder farmers. The organic certification is tedious with a lot of paper work and farmer training which require financial support. For example the MOOF Borage seeds project organic certification was funded by USAID at US\$ 15,000 for five groups (MURAGE 2006). Though organized in groups there is a missing link between producers, traders and consumers of organic produce in Kenya which is usually a hindrance to marketing. Most of the times producers complain of lack of markets and abandon organic

production and on the other hand supermarket chains complain of lack of supply (Personal communication due discussion with one player).

### **Conclusion and policy implication:**

#### **I Education, research, dissemination**

- a) Enhance and support research in organic farming through its research institutions e.g. Kenya Agricultural Research Institution (KARI). Furthermore there is need to partner with other private Organic research based institutions to enhance research and dissemination of organic knowledge.
- b) Develop and expand organic curricula at all levels of education system. Development of curricula and research demo-farm as well as local adapted research at University

#### **II Policy, regulations and law**

- a) The government needs to come up with clear policies on organic farming through its ministries and extension agents.
- b) Kenya needs to legislate organic laws in favor of organic agriculture- thereby enabling Kenya to be included in the 3<sup>rd</sup> country list according to the requirements of EU regulation 2092/91.
- c) Finally in line with strategic plan for revitalizing agriculture (2005), there is a need to encourage and support value addition of organic produce at point of production to enhance incomes and motivate production.

#### **III Market development**

- a) Develop and enhance local markets for organic products through sensitization of consumers and advertisements- additionally have supermarket chains and tourism sector hotels offering organic foods for Kenyans.
- b) The many NGOs currently involved in organic farming should develop further to built linkages between producers, traders and consumers. Additionally they should be in inspection and certification in order to develop local market regulatory practices.

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