

Consumers' Demands and Preferences for Organic Foods: A Survey Study in Mashhad, Iran

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Abstract

Agriculture has always been an important sector of the Iranian economy. For this reason, the investigation of consumers' demands and priorities in relation to organic products is our concern since no study has been conducted in this area in Iran. This paper aims to investigate consumers' knowledge concerning organic foodstuffs and the factors influencing consumption of organic product in the families of Mashhad so that some recommendations may finally be presented. In fact, while organic farming has been promoted as an environmentally-friendly approach and has been developed during the last few years in most developed countries, there is little emphasis placed on this in developing countries such as Iran. In order to identify consumer demand for organic foods, 180 respondents were interviewed by means of a questionnaire.

Introduction

The future of organic agriculture will, to a large extent, depend on consumer demand. Thus, a consumer-oriented approach to understanding organic agriculture is important not only in its own right, but also in terms of a response to shifting market dynamics (Bonti-Ankomah and Yiridoe, 2006).

The literature on the demand for organic food is not particularly deep and given the dramatic changes in organic food availability over the past decade, it is not surprising that some of the findings have been somewhat contradictory (Zepeda et. al., 2006).

The market for organic food has increased considerably over the last decade due to consumers' increasing awareness of both health and environmental issues (Soler et. al., 2002). This growth in demand is expected to continue in the coming years, even though the situation differs from one country to another in terms of type and quantities of production (Vindigni et. al., 2002).

Many farmers in Iran are long-term traditionally applying organic practices. It means their cultural practices are adjusted fully or partially with organic regulations: they never use agrochemicals, apply integrated pest management, and improve soil and agroecosystem fertility by sustainable means. Furthermore, indigenous knowledge of Iranian farmers is consistent with organic farming. Data shows that 113'659 ha of field crops and 125'802 ha of horticultural lands in Iran are cultivated without application of agrochemicals. In other hand, however, the process of certifying farms as organic is an expensive procedure which many traditional small-holders which can be classified as organic can not pay for. Therefore, we have not yet formal certified organic farms by organizations like IFOAM, etc.

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Within this framework, this study aims to find out more about consumer demand and preference in the Mashhad Province of Iran. To achieve this main objective, the study has been broken down into the following secondary objectives:

- Determine the level of awareness about organic foods.
- Determine the tendency for consumption of organic foods.
- Determine the factors driving the trend towards consumption of organic food.

Method

Data from 180 surveys conducted among Iranian consumers in the city of Mashhad, situated in Northeastern Iran, have been used to carry out this study. The study was conducted using the random sampling method.

Results and Discussion

Sample description

The sample consisted of 69 women (38.3%) and 111 (61.7%) men. The average age of the respondents was 36.55 years. More than half of them had finished secondary school (55 percent), 20 percent had a university education and 25 per cent of respondents had only completed primary school.

Consumer awareness

Developments in the demand for organic food have been related to an increased awareness of the importance of organic foods. Increase in demand for organic products depends on consumer awareness. If consumers are not aware of the attributes related to organic products their motivation to demand these foods will decrease.

Consumers were asked "Do you know what organic food is?" Table 1 shows that only 20.6 percent answered "Yes" and the most of respondents cited "not aware". This indicates:

- Without doubt, the organic farming boom has not begun in Iran.
- The Government has not yet invested in organic farming.

Table 1: Consumer awareness about organic foods

Do you know what organic food is?	Frequency	Percentage	X ²
YES (aware)	37	20.6	62.42
NO (unaware)	143	79.4	

The chi square analysis shows a significant difference between the responses. In other words, there is a significant difference between the observed and expected frequencies. Therefore, the results can be generalized for the whole population.

Consumer trend towards consumption of organic foods

The results of Table 1 show that the majority of respondents do not have a good level of knowledge related to these products. Therefore, as a first step, some information

has been presented to the respondents, and their resulting tendency has then been assessed as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Consumer trend for consumption of organic foods

Do you have a tendency for consuming organic food?	Frequency	Percentage	X2
YES	173	96.1	153.1
NO	7	3.9	

Based on this Table, 173 respondents answered positively and due to the chi square result ($X^2=153.1$), it is clear that this finding is significant. In other words, enhancing the respondents' knowledge can be considered as an effective method to increase their demands.

Trend drivers

There are several factors driving the trend towards the consumption of organic food. Respondents were asked for "the reasons for consumers' consumption organic foods". Answers are given show in Table 3.

Table 3: Trend drivers towards consumption of organic foods

Reasons	Percentage
Belief that organic is healthier	45
More tasty (better flavor/smell)	25
Better quality	12
Concern about pesticide residues	8
More environment-friendly	3

As shown, the factors relating to health and taste have a much greater influence in comparison to the rest.

Conclusions

Due to the results, 80% of the respondents have no knowledge related to the organic products. As the chi square analysis was significant, therefore, it seems crucial to enhance the respondents' knowledge about organic products through appropriate extension-educational methods so that it leads to increasing the consumption of organic products that consequently could increase the supply of these products.

The public also needs to be made aware of the problems associated with conventional agriculture. Direct and indirect support by the Government will, however, be necessary to achieve this.

Understanding the affective factors influencing organic production makes it clear such factors as superior food healthiness, flavor, and quality have the greatest influence.

References

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