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The current status of organic farming in the world - focus on developing countries

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Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that organic agriculture can contribute to socio-economic and ecologically sustainable development, especially in poorer countries. The market for organic products is growing and offers producers and exporters in the South opportunities to improve their incomes and living conditions. But what role does organic farming play in the poorer countries? Some current data are presented in this paper, based on the global survey on organic farming carried out annually by the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture FiBL and the Foundation Ecology and Agriculture SOEL in co-operation with the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements IFOAM.

Organic agriculture is developing rapidly and is now practiced in more than 120 countries of the world. Its share of agricultural land and farms continues to grow in many countries. According to the latest survey (Willer/Yussefi 2007), almost 31 million hectares of agricultural land are managed organically (data as of end 2005). This constitutes 0.7% of the agricultural land of the countries (123) covered by the survey. In total, Oceania holds 39% of the world's organic land, followed by Europe (23%) and Latin America (19%). Currently, the country with the largest organic area is Australia (11.8 million hectares). The proportion of organically compared to conventionally managed land, however, is highest in Europe. In the European Union almost 4% of the land is under organic management.

Results

The analysis of the global organic data for the countries on the list of recipients of Official Development Assistance (DAC List¹) shows, that one third of the world's organic land is in countries on this list. Most of this land is Latin America followed by Asia, Africa and Europe. The leading countries in terms of organic land are Argentina (3.1 million hectares), China (2.3), Brazil (0.85) and Uruguay (0.76). The highest percentages of organic land are in East Timor (6.3 %), Uruguay (5.1 %), Mexico (2.9 %) and Argentina (2.4 %) – in these countries the shares of organic land of all agricultural land are thus comparable to those in Europe. These countries are, however, clearly exceptions. Out of the 80 DAC countries covered by the survey only ten have a higher share of organic land than one percent of the agricultural area. Thus, compared to the developed countries, organic farming in the DAC countries is lagging behind.

Table: Main land use in organic agriculture in the countries of the DAC list (hectares)

	Africa	Asia	Europe	Latin America	Oceania	Total
Arable land	60'999	66'956	247'907	306'840	0	682'703
Permanent crops	292'522	55'104	16'120	488'934	100	852'779
Permanent grassland	35'716	710'900	10'440	3'776'461	0	4'533'516
Other (e.g. forest)	37'396	990	60	10'531	0	48'977
Other crops	7'796	998'122	75'419	38'890	0	1'120'226
No information	456'076	993'253	1'852	1'187'664	0	2'638'846
Total	890'504	2'825'325	351'799	5'809'320	100	9'877'048

Source: FiBL-SOEL Survey 2007 (Willer/Yussefi 2007)

¹ For this paper the countries listed on the List of Recipients of Official Development Assistance (ODA) of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) were analysed. The list is available at www.oecd.org/dataoecd/23/34/37954893.pdf

Even though not for all DAC countries land use details were available the statistics show that the shares of grassland (almost half of the organic land in these countries) and those of permanent crops are, compared to Europe and North America, relatively high. Arable land is of minor importance. This can be attributed to the fact that export plays a high role – either of meat products (mainly from Latin America) or of permanent crops. The most important permanent crops are export crops such as coffee (309'000 hectares); olives (85'000 hectares), cocoa (76'000 hectares) and sugarcane (30'000 hectares) showing that certified organic products provide access to attractive international markets (Kilcher 2007). Local markets are, however, still underdeveloped, even though in most countries of Latin America (Lernoud 2007), Asia (Kung Wai 2007) and also some African countries (Elzakker et al. 2007) they are growing. According to Organic Monitor (Sahota 2007) Europe and North America generate most global revenues with organic products.

Conclusions

Clearly a strong organic movement and government support has a positive influence on the development of the organic sector. Many countries, particularly in Latin America (Brazil, Bolivia), are now launching action plans for organic farming, one motive being to increase domestic food sovereignty. Another form of government support is the implementation of government regulations in order to ease export of organic products. In Latin America more than ten countries on the DAC list have an organic legislation, in Asia six countries and in Africa two countries (Huber et al. 2007). More countries are in the process of drafting laws. Some countries are now on the Third Country list according to EU regulation of organic farming (Argentina, Costa Rica, India).

From the data gained through the global organic survey it is clear that in many countries of the South organic farming plays an increasingly important role. In the light of booming organic markets (reaching 40 billion US dollars in 2006) it can be assumed that the market/export potential for organic products continues to be high. However, to assure food security with organic products not only in industrialised countries but also in countries in the south, more effort should be put in developing local markets.

In order to be able to draw clear conclusions on the potential organic farming has for food security including supplying domestic markets more data than available so far are needed, covering for instance information such as domestic supply with organic food, export volumes and information on yields. There is a clear need for governments to provide better data. With more and more countries implementing organic farming regulations data collection activities should be eased in the future, and governments should support such activities.

Reference

Willer Helga and Minou Yussefi (Eds.) (2007): *The World of Organic Agriculture - Statistics and Emerging Trends 2007*. International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), Bonn, Germany. Information is available at www.organic-world.net.

All other authors mentioned in the text have written chapters for the above book.

Biographies

Helga Willer

- Research Institute of Organic Agriculture FiBL, Switzerland, head the communication department; www.fibl.org
- Work areas include dissemination and research communication activities (internet sites, publications, organisation of conferences and PR). Co-editor of the annual yearbook on organic farming since 2000.

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