

Philippines: Organic farming is cost-effective

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Organic farming is not just chic food on the table; it has reached policy levels.

"It is no longer only the concern of farmers making decisions on what organic crops to grow and livestock to raise, but also for researchers and policy makers," said Reynaldo L. Villareal of the National Academy of Science and Technology (NAST).

NAST convened a roundtable discussion on organic farming and its role in agriculture; the deliberations will be discussed during NAST's 33rd annual scientific meeting in July.

Villareal, NAST's lead person on organic agriculture and formerly a professor at the University of the Philippines Los Banos (UPLB), defined organic agriculture as farming which excludes the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, growth regulators, livestock feed additives and genetically modified organisms.

Organic agriculture is one approach to reduce production cost for 75 percent of Filipino farmers who are poor, said Dr. Charito P. Medina, National Coordinator of MASIPAG (Farmer-Scientist Partnership for Development). "Their yields is often low, their farming technology inappropriate."

While chemical fertilizer is still needed, he said, it is too dependent on oil, requiring 1 ton of oil and 108 tons of water to make 1 ton of nitrogen fertilizer, for example.

It is a viable enterprise, Medina said, citing a net income that is higher with organic rice farming compared to conventional systems that use chemical inputs

like pesticides and fertilizers.

MASIPAG-trained farmers have not used chemical pesticides for decades now, he said, with ducks for example an excellent natural control against golden snail; "it converts biomass into eggs and meat as well," he observed.

MASIPAG organic farms, he said, average 6.7 tons of rice per hectare in North Cotabato, more than 7 tons per hectare in Laguna but only 5.1 tons per hectare in Surigao del Sur where soils are poor.

Edgardo S. Uychiat, president of the Negros Island Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development Foundation, pointed out that in Bago, Negros Occidental, for example, a farmer averages 7 tons per hectare of organic rice compared with 6.3 tons per hectare for conventional rice farming.

A diversified organic farming system managed by Iliranan tribals at Mt. Kanlaon earns P332,000 in annual gross sales compared with P72,00 gross sales with traditional monocrop rice farming.

In Sagay town, an organic sugar farm averages yields of 60 tons per hectare, compared with 65 tons per hectare in non-organic farms. There are about 400 hectares of certified organic sugar farms in Negros Occidental, Uychiat said.

Farmers growing organic coffee in a rainforest, not plantation, setting have improved yields from 0.8 kilogram per tree in 2207 to 1.2 kgs per tree in 2009. They report a 20-percent increase in income; this year, Negros farmers will plant 1 million trees of arabica coffee to offset imports.

About 880 small farmers and 12 companies are certified as growing organic crops in 1,300 hectares in Negros Occidental; the province has banned the cultivation of genetically modified crops.

"You can debate about the ban for years, but the organic market doesn't like gene-modified crops," Uychiat said.

"The Philippines has great prospects for organic chicken and meat," said Dr. Angel L. Lambio of the Animal Breeding and Physiology, Animal and Dairy Sciences Cluster, UPLB College of Agriculture.

"We have our very own native chickens as stocks, we have large tracts of fertile lands to produce organic feeds, we could produce medicinal plants for maintaining flock health, and production could be year-round with minimal expense on housing and facilities," he said.

One constraint is that the free-range colored chickens called Sasso and Kabir that are used for organic production are imported; because supply is erratic, native chicken is an attractive option.

Almost half of the country's chicken inventory is native and raised by small farms primary for home consumption and as a source of extra income, Lambio observed.

"Their production and reproductive performance are variable, indicating a high potential for genetic improvement through the application of appropriate selection methods and mating systems," he said.

The quality attributes of native chicken include strong and distinct flavor; lean ,with very, very small amount of fat; and no harmful chemicals.

"Our problem is actually limited volume to supply a niche market," Lambio said. "There is a demand, as shown by the 3,000 to 7,000 heads of native chicken traded in a Batangas market every Friday.

"The supply of organic feeds like corn, soybean and legume, is also a constraint," he said. "Other organic feeds are still being imported by commercial producers of organic chickens."

Self-sufficiency is doable the natural way, he said, with feeds that include rice and corn and their by-products, legumes, chopped root crops, banana and coconut meat.

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