

Imposing organic standards or rekindling local values? Encouraging local ownership of the organic concept for raisin exports from Kandahar, Afghanistan

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Abstract

The global principles of organic agriculture were designed to represent the overarching values of organic groups around the world. Similarly, basic organic standards were intended to provide a common language for cross-cultural agreement on the production of organic products. In practice, however, the widespread promotion of organic export trade has created a situation whereby organic agriculture continues to be perceived by many in the development sector as a western, industrialised concept and one which is not compatible with the realities of many of the exporter, less-industrialised countries. This paper argues that to reverse this trend and perception, attention must be paid to encourage debate and tease out local and national concepts of organic agriculture and of healthy food - concepts which do exist within every nation, and to demonstrate their compatibility, or resonance, with internationally agreed principles. A case study from Afghanistan is provided, which highlights the measures taken to encourage this and the specific challenges encountered. The paper concludes by suggesting that much may be gained by sharing lessons with organic export initiatives from other countries and regions, and developing 'best practice' guidelines for linking local values with organic principles within organic export initiatives.

Introduction

Market orientation has led to organic production being perceived as based on standards rather than principles (Sherriff & Howe, 2002), a perception especially common in lower-income regions where the organic concept has been imported as an income-generating, development initiative. This perception is exacerbated by organic export projects which, with their need to achieve a functioning value chain within a relatively short period, may not have the time or resources to pay attention to nurturing local values and demonstrating their resonance with the standards of the importing country. Instead, they rely on their experiential evidence that farmers who at first are attracted by premium prices over time become 'converts' as the organic principles are increasingly understood. Organic agriculture is similarly perceived by development donors as a niche activity for better-resourced farmers to exploit small, elite western markets (DFID, 2004). One downside of this is that many like-minded individuals and organisations are reticent to join forces with the organic movement. In parts of Latin America in particular, the organic model was, for a period at least, rejected as a neo-colonial strategy, in the knowledge that meeting the minimum organic standards does not necessarily mean that the full agro-ecological potential of a system has been achieved.

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Yet the basic values of health and food quality, and of working in harmony with and respecting nature, are common throughout agrarian communities worldwide. The recent development of Participatory Guarantee Systems provides a case in point of how grassroots initiatives are attempting to promote their own, localised organic values and so reclaim the concept of organic agriculture from the global domain (IFOAM, 2006). Encouraging the resonance of organic principles with local values is vital as a perpetual reminder of the commonality of values that unify the global organic movement. This has several benefits. It may encourage buy-in to the movement by like-minded entities, and thereby consolidate and strengthen the organic movement worldwide. For export-oriented initiatives, this buy-in or embeddedness in the grassroots may add to their long term sustainability. In addition, it may work to attract more widespread policy and funding support as donor agencies increasingly realize that organic values are shared by citizens worldwide and are not simply delivering to the minority values of an elite western market. Export initiatives are well placed to take a lead in encouraging resonance, and a case study from Afghanistan provides suggestions on how to do this.

Methods and results

A specific attempt was made to encourage resonance of local values with global organic principles during the process of developing an initiative to export organic raisins from Kandahar, Afghanistan. This project arose out of an alternative rural livelihoods development programme implemented by the NGO Mercy Corps, and was subcontracted to the Henry Doubleday Research Association, UK. The initial remit was to assess the feasibility for the export of organic tree crops from southern Afghanistan, and a positive evaluation led to the development of a pilot scale organic conversion and export project of raisins with a group of 20 farmers from the village of Mandisar, about 3km outside Kandahar (Wright & Chubb, 2006).

Several strategies were taken to encourage local buy-in to the concept of organic agriculture. Information and training was provided to both local project staff and the farmers' organisation (Mandisar Organic Farmers' Association). This was in the form of comprehensive text books and IFOAM training packages on organic agriculture, and simple pictorial materials with support to translate these into the local language, Pashtu. During two workshops with farmer representatives, the history of the global organic movement was related, and emphasis was placed on its resonance with traditional farming techniques, on organic agriculture as developing as a reaction to Green Revolution and Industrial agriculture, and with the goals of ensuring food security and environmental resilience over financial ends. A major focus of discussion with farmers was on sustainable and traditional husbandry techniques and their experiences with using agrochemicals and the impacts of these. The link between husbandry practices and perceived food quality was also brought in. Although many of the changes required in conversion to organic were of an administrative and logistical nature, a strong experimental husbandry component was also developed in order to emphasise the roots of organic agriculture in good husbandry practices. Meanwhile, organic standards were described as a more recent coping strategy: a common language for communicating values in the market place. The export of organic products was placed in the context of organic food systems which imported a small percentage of foodstuffs that could not be grown locally. Parallel to discussing the export chain, the concept of local markets for quality food produce was raised and options identified for the subsequent marketing of surplus organic produce in the country and region. In relation to this, farmers were asked for their local definition of

quality local food. They all came back with the word 'watani' which signified domestically produced foods of local breeds and varieties which generally held higher perceived quality than imported, mass produced products. Typical watani produce were domestically produced chickens and eggs, which sold for double the price of imported poultry produce from Pakistan. Descriptive words associated with watani produce were 'tasty', 'luscious', 'sweet', 'big', and 'higher value'. Thus there already existed traditional, quality produce commanding a higher price. Linking the concept of watani with 'organic' enabled recognition that organic production was not simply an externally-imposed intervention.

Notwithstanding the efforts described above, certain challenges have hindered progress of the full uptake of the organic concept by the farmers involved in the project. Mainly, the project is operated by a foreign NGO with more foreigners hired as consultants, using foreign certifiers and a foreign buyer. Therefore it is difficult to hand over the concept of organic as being a local, already-existing feature, or to encourage its local interpretation. Farmers are historically accustomed to a trading relationship whereby they meet the buyers demands, and whether these demands resonate with traditional practices is of lesser concern to the farmer than that the sale goes through. At the same time, traditional smallholder agriculture is widespread in Afghanistan, with little incidence of high-input approaches or experiences of the negative side-effects of such. Thus farmers are not looking for alternatives, agrochemicals are not perceived as negative and to be avoided, and there is little environmental thinking or awareness on which to hang the organic approach. The concept of product quality has also caused confusion. For the farmers involved, their highest quality grapes traditionally go to the fresh market and these grapes are unblemished and large and command a higher price than can be obtained even by exporting organic raisins. Meanwhile low quality grapes traditionally go to the red or black raisin market, these comprising smaller grapes and those which have fallen from the vines, and these are historically dried on the ground and contain dust and stalks. The export project is requesting these 'low quality' red/black raisins and therefore contradicting the concept of quality organic produce. In terms of information, the translation of materials into Pashtu is making slow progress as a completely different publishing package is required for the different script. The project and farmers are also influenced by other development initiatives in the country which may also be contradictory. These developments include the subsidised production and export of industrially-produced grapes, and the development of 'local' produce markets in Kabul which, although set up to encourage local markets for local produce, grow up non-traditional crops and varieties which have had no time to adapt and develop genuine regional flavours and other qualities symbiotic with their natural environment. Finally, the security situation in Afghanistan prevents the free flow of communications which would otherwise aid the more rapid development of locally owned concepts of organic agriculture.

Discussion and conclusions

This export raisin initiative will continue through the three year conversion process, culminating in the first crop of certified organic raisins in 2010. During this time it is hoped that farmers will be better able to own the organic concept as something more culturally meaningful than simply a set of instructions being imposed by a foreign buyer. At the same time, development donors in the country looking to stimulate domestic markets will be able to pick up this localised concept of organic, which better resonates with local consumers, and use it to support domestic market chains for quality organic-watani produce. Interestingly, although the organic concept did not

seem to resonate with local religious beliefs, the concurrent development of fair trade produce did strike a cord with Islamic approaches to trading relationships. Meanwhile, much may be gained by sharing lessons with organic export initiatives from other countries and regions, and developing 'best practice' guidelines for linking local values with organic principles within organic export initiatives.

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