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Science Day Opening Speech – Biofach, Feb 13, 2015

Welcome to Science Day
Once again, it is a great honour and pleasure for me to be here at this important event. As I have stated many times, as part of the next shift in organic agriculture, what we are calling the third phase of our movement, Organic 3.0, it is important that we use credible, published peer reviewed science to inform our practices and the decisions on how the organic sector continues to evolve.

The fact is we do have a lot of good science, in reality thousands of papers that show the multi-functional benefits of OA. Yet despite this and over 40 years of advocating as a global movement, we are still less than one percent of agriculture, if we define ourselves by the certified organic industry.

The other critical issue is that while 'organic' is a credible brand with consumers, with most studies showing that in the developed countries over 60% of consumers purchase some organic products, the same cannot be said in the research, government, industry and NGO sectors. Here we are still seen as a minor fringe, lacking in scientific and production credibility. The majority of them still believe that because of the yield lag, the world will starve if resources were invested in organic agriculture.

From my perspective, three issues come to the forefront in what we need to do to overcome these perceptions so that organic agriculture can move from being less than 1% and into the mainstream.

1. Close the Yield Gap

The yield gap is the biggest constraint in getting accepted as a viable solution to some of the economic, social and environmental problems facing the world. Yes, we do have solutions for many of these issues, however the criteria to feed the worlds' growing population in the face of climate change is the critical one - the first priority when funding decisions are being made in agriculture. Because organic is considered as resulting in lower yields, it is ignored in the initial decisions in favour of other solutions such as GMOs and Sustainable Intensification, even though there is limited and contentious evidence to back the claims that they will produce more yields.

It is a priority that we have to research organic systems that are high yielding. We have some preliminary science on this and we need to scale up the R&D on this as the top priority.

2. Make it easier to be Organic

Our practices, standards and guarantee systems were important from the 1970s to the first decade of this century to build our $70 billion market. However now, as the original one page standards developed by famer organisations of the 1970s and 80s turn into libraries of complex regulations controlled by distant bureaucrats, we are seeing this act as a great disincentive for producers to become organic. Even in the countries where growth was the fastest this is levelling off now. Some will ask, why am I raising this at a meeting with scientists and researchers, when it is an issue for the bureaucrats, certifiers, standards

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committees etc? This is because I believe we need to bring in the social sciences to look at the issue with academic rigour, analyse it and suggest solutions as part of the process of ensuring the integrity of organic products without a huge regulatory burden that acts as a disincentive to farmers adopting OA.

The other issue around the difficulty for many farmers transitioning to organic to goes back to point No.1. - Maintaining good yields without having to do extra work and costs. We need to ensure that we can design resilient low input, high output systems that are easy for farmers to adopt. Many of these systems exist – using resilient functional biodiversity to replace many of the inputs used for nutrients, weeds, pest and diseases. Push–Pull and SRI are examples. I have visited farms in several countries where farmers have applied these principles to other crops – not just grains. I have seen it working effectively in vegetables and orchards. They get nitrogen, weed control and pest control through the innovative application of eco-function intensification and it results in high yields and less work.

The uptake of GMO technology, in the countries that permit it, has been spectacular in the last 20 years as they are simple systems that farmers can easily adopt. We need to learn from their success when looking at our systems – ease of adoption is critical. Without this good research just gathers dust in libraries.

3. More Research Funding

And finally – I state the obvious. We need more funds for Research, Development and very importantly Extension. Without making this a priority, we will find it difficult to achieve all our other priorities. So I will end with this. I hope that as part of the many issues that you have to discuss today, that you make getting funding for TIPI the No 1 priority. It would make an incredible difference to the uptake of organic systems if TIPI could get the same levels of funding that are received by farming systems in the CGIAR network. And please work with IFOAM on this. We need to partner on getting the much needed funding, as investing in good science is critical to our future as a relevant part of the mainstream in agriculture.

I wish you a very productive day.
Thank You

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