Awakening the sleeping giants through organic agriculture

The author thinks that a wall of money from the global organic agriculture sector is about to collapse on the side of Uganda. But is the country awake and ready to tap into this fund and if not can this conversation awaken all the stakeholders in this sector?

While the global market for organic agriculture has reached 75 billion Euros (~$80 billion), Uganda only received confirmed orders of organic produce worth only 300 million UDS for export in 2015 (~about 250 million euros). According to International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) and the Uganda National Organic Agroducers (UNOA), in 2015, the biggest share of the organic market is taken by USA worth 24.3 billion euros, followed by Germany (7.6 billion euros), France (6.4 billion euros) and China (2.4 billion euros). However, a recent scientific publication by a PhD student at Makerere University (Sreejith Balakrishnan) has indicated that Uganda has the second largest number of certificated organic farmers (193,495) in the world after India (530,000) but with the largest area under organic agriculture in Africa.

According to the National Organic Movement of Uganda (NOGAMU), organic products sourced from Uganda includes coffee (fraction), tea and finished garments, coffee (Arabica and Robusta), soya, sorghum, ground nuts, fruit (Pineapples, apple bananas, mangoes, jack-fruits), fresh fruits (pineapples, apple bananas, passion fruits, avocados, jackfruits, mangoes, jack-fruit), vanilla, cocoa, fish, blue butter and Shea nuts, bird eye chilies, dried beans, honey and bark cloth. These products are exported to Europe, USA, Asia and other parts of Africa where demand is driven by tourists with health concern coupled by increase in numbers of informed consumers that are nutritionally and environmentally conscious. Consequently, the number of organic exporters in Uganda has been growing and now totals 46. However, research on the impact of organic agriculture development by Balakrishnan and Stephen Anesu (Mk, Student of Agricultural Policy and Management) and determinants of their preferences for organic products as well as their readiness to pay for organic products in Uganda that found our researchers readily meet the volume orders required by the world market and highlights the infrastructural limitation for processing export-quality grade dries pineapples. These studies have pointed out that mere volumes could be available for local, regional and export markets.

i) Basic interest rates were lowered to encourage investment in infrastructure by processors

ii) A range of organic pineapple products were produced through value addition supported by research

iii) There was better coordination among stakeholders in the pineapple value chain

iv) There was enabling policy environment that favours organic sector.

Despite these challenges, all sources of organic produce are fully certified or are in conversion to quality assessed through participatory guarantee system (PGS). The organic products from Uganda meet the export standards and are internationally accredited by certifying bodies including TUV, IMS, Cosmos, Ecocert, Soil Association and BCS.

Organic agriculture is the producer’s opportunity to capture the fact that consumers are willing to pay more for organic products because they believe they are healthier, less contaminated with chemicals and better for the environment. It offers non-contaminated produce and is a potential cancer risk from ingesting certain pesticides. Health concerns coupled by increase in numbers of informed consumers that are nutritionally and environmentally conscious. Consequently, the number of organic exporters in Uganda has been growing and now totals 46. However, research on the impact of organic agriculture development by Balakrishnan and Stephen Anesu (Mk, Student of Agricultural Policy and Management) and determinants of their preferences for organic products as well as their readiness to pay for organic products in Uganda that found our researchers readily meet the volume orders required by the world market and highlights the infrastructural limitation for processing export-quality grade dries pineapples. These studies have pointed out that mere volumes could be available for local, regional and export markets.

Productivity and growth in organic value chains (ProDVOC)

Continental efforts to promote organic agriculture is in line with the Productivity and Growth in Organic Value Chains (ProDVOC) project which was internationally inspired by ERDOS from 2011 but funded by the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA). The project was initially regionally coordinated by Makerere University (SME), College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES), University of Nairobi (UoN) and Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA) in Tanzania. This involved the national organic umbrella organisations including NOGAMU, KISS, TUGAM for Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania respectively, as associate private sector to implement the project. The main objective was to strengthen regional capacity in generating research based knowledge for supporting increased productivity and sustainable growth in organic agriculture production and value chains, and contributing to human resource capacity building (5 PhDs and 6 MSc) for future development of the regional organic agriculture (OCA) value chain.

How farmers willing to take up agricultural innovations from scientists?

While the one hand scientists are often puzzled by the inability of smallholder farmers to adopt innovations that would help in eliminating poverty farmers on the other hand seem to be amazed by the scientists who unilaterally impose on them unaffordable technologies. Moreover, smallholder farmers believe they are isolated by majority of African governments, particularly through under-investment in basic infrastructures and limited extension services, which makes the transaction costs of agricultural production very high. High transaction costs of doing agriculture, poor communication of information to farmers and disregard of their innate wealth of indigenous knowledge, biological resources, practices and traditional innovations has resulted in failure by smallholder farmers to take up majority of scientific innovations to the disadvantage of many scientists, extension agent and policy makers. The high transaction costs of doing agriculture coupled with limited accessibility of unprocessed products to lucrative markets is a big disincentive to production using conventional technology. For the same reason, high input agriculture is not sustainable among smallholder farmers and has consistently failed as earlier manifested by inability of such technologies. For the same reasons, high input agriculture is not sustainable among smallholder farmers and has consistently failed as earlier manifested by inability of such technologies.

How does organic agriculture contribute to health?

It is true there has been a lot of debate as to whether organic farming can sustain food security just like there has been debates on how dependence on conventional agriculture characterized by high input of agricultural chemicals negatively impacts on the welfare, poor human nutrition, increased costs for public health and vulnerability to external shocks. Promotion of consumption of organic products at local, regional and international levels will not only cut down on the cost for public health but will also attract money into Uganda through global OA. Non-communicable diseases such as cancer and non-communicable diabetes mellitus (Type II) are on the rise among consumption. The medical personnel are not so sure about the exact triggers of the surge of incidences but they cannot rule out nutrition and lifestyle changes. It is however also possible that food contaminated with other agricultural pesticide residues or aflatoxin due to poor chemical soil and poor pest management could be polluting the environment and causing such a surge. Similarly, male sterility possibility due to lower sperm count has also been documented by useful health organization (WHO, 2019) as one of the effects of long term exposure to organophosphate pesticides. There is also a potential cancer risk from ingesting certain pesticides. This is exacerbated by lack of information, knowledge and awareness plus lack of supervision of farmers especially in developing countries where most farmers are insufficiently educated in different methods of agricultural chemical handling and application. With continued awareness, organic agriculture will continue forcing high premium from consumers who get conscious about their health and very soon it will be "true" to eat organic in local and regional markets just like it is in developed countries.

What is the policy environment?

The national organic agriculture policy has remained in draft form on the shelves in the ministry of agriculture and at NOGAMU for a while. However, working with the national organic movements of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, Makerere University with its regional partners has generated knowledge needed to inform national policies on organic agriculture.

Conclusion

Can the sleeping giants in Uganda be awakened by the wall of money which is about to collapse from the global organic sector? The answer lies in the preparedness of government of Uganda and all stakeholders to make the right choices informed by research in order to reduce on the transaction costs along the value chain. Favorable OA policy environment and strong institutional arrangement including cooperatives to solve market across challenges is quintessential in driving the sub-sector that favours the majority of smallholder farmers.

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