

FACTSHEET: WHAT IS ORGANIC AGRICULTURE?

An overview

Organic agriculture is a way of farming that keeps soils, ecosystems and the life that inhabits them, including people, healthy. It uses natural processes and products to produce food in a way that does not harm the environment and that provides people with the nutrients they need for a healthy life. It respects traditional practices, encourages non-harmful innovation and acknowledges the role that science can play in improving farming practices. It also focuses on ensuring that farmers and consumers enjoy mutually fair relationships to support a better quality of life for all involved in the production and consumption of food.¹

Principles of organic agriculture

Organic agriculture is based on four principles of Health, Ecology, Fairness and Care.²

- **Health:** Organic agriculture maintains and builds the health of soil, plants, humans and animals because the health of these elements is interconnected. There is a focus on building immunity, resilience and regeneration. Organic agriculture therefore tries to avoid the use of synthetic fertilisers, animal drugs, food additives and pesticides that may cause harm to soils, ecosystems and people.
- **Ecology:** Organic agriculture works with and mimics living ecosystems and natural cycles to help support their continuing functioning. There is a focus on building and enhancing living soils and ecosystems, recycling materials, maintaining genetic and agricultural diversity and working within context-specific cycles and cultures. Agricultural systems are designed to support these objectives.
- **Fairness:** Organic agriculture emphasises and ensures fairness, justice and respect in relationships between farmers, processors, distributors, traders and consumers, and between these groups and the Earth. There is a focus on supporting a good quality of life for all involved and in helping to support food sovereignty and reducing poverty. This principle also extends to the ethical treatment of animals in accordance with their rights.



- **Care:** Organic agriculture supports the precautionary principle in all its management decisions to protect the environment and the health of people today and in the future. No farming practice should be used that puts environmental and human wellbeing at risk.

What makes organic agriculture different from other agricultural approaches?

It differs from conventional farming in three main ways:

- Farmers may not use synthetic inputs such as fertilisers, pesticides and routine animal drugs in organic farming. They should work with natural remedies and systems to ensure the long-term health of soils, crops, animals and people.
- Farmers may not use genetically modified seeds in organic farming. This technology has not been proven unequivocally safe for long-term use and some of the accompanying inputs may have negative effects on the environment and human health.
- Farmers can apply for organic certification if complying with criteria set by third-party certification bodies, or for organic assurance using participatory guarantee systems.

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Organic agriculture falls under the broader approach of agroecology, with its focus on environmental, social, cultural, economic and political dimensions. Agroecology, however, is not a prescriptive approach and some farmers still use synthetic inputs, although they are encouraged to reduce usage over time. Many other approaches, including regenerative agriculture and sustainable and ecological intensification, may support organic production techniques but are either not prescriptive about external inputs or do not comply with the principles of organic farming.

Extent of organic agricultural production

The uptake of organic agriculture is growing significantly as farmers and consumers realise the benefits of farming and eating food grown in a way that does not damage the Earth. Globally, the land under organic production has grown by more than 20 percent in the last decade to reach 71.5 million certified hectares in 2018.³ There are also millions of smallholders practising organic agriculture that do not use third-party certification schemes, so the figure is, in reality, much higher.

Benefits of organic agriculture

Organic production is increasingly viewed as a strategic way to address challenges of rural poverty, malnutrition, biodiversity loss and climate change. It focuses on building soil health by growing the carbon content of the soil, boosting its ability to retain water and supporting effective nutrient cycling. This plays a significant role in producing plants rich in nutrients that are more resistant to drought, pests and diseases.

Healthy soils contribute significantly to climate change mitigation efforts by sequestering carbon. Studies show that organic practices can yield carbon sequestration of up to 2.245 kilograms/hectare/year.⁴ Healthy soils also slow down erosion and land and ecosystem degradation. Organic production contributes to building resilience to climate change through more consistent yields in the face of a changing climate, increased availability and quality of water, and the production of a diversity of nutritious foods. The benefits to farmers include lower costs of production over the long-term because there is no need to purchase external inputs, more consistent yields, a premium market price, and the creation of an agricultural system that is generally more resilient to external shocks.

¹ International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements [IFOAM]. n.d. *Our Library*. [Online] Available: www.ifoam.bio/en/about-us. Accessed: 18 May 2020.

² IFOAM. n.d. *Principles of Organic Agriculture*. [Online] Available: www.ifoam.bio/sites/default/files/poa_english_web.pdf. Accessed: 18 May 2020.

³ IFOAM. 2020. *World Organic Agriculture 2020*. [Online]: shop.fibl.org/chde/mwdownloads/download/link/id/1294/. Accessed: 18 May 2020.

⁴ Rhodes, C.J. 2012. Feed and healing the world: through regenerative agriculture and permaculture. *Science Progress* 95(4):345-446.

The Knowledge Hub for Organic Agriculture and Agroecology in Southern Africa (KHSAs) is part of the Knowledge Centre for Organic Agriculture and Agroecology in Africa (KCOA), a collaborative country-led partnership funded by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH and non-governmental organisations across Africa. The KCOA aims to scale up adoption of organic farming practices through five knowledge hubs in Africa over a four-year period.

The South African-based **Sustainability Institute** supports project implementation in southern Africa. Activities are focused in Zambia, led by Participatory Ecological Land Use Management (PELUM) Zambia; in Namibia led by the Namibia Nature Foundation (NNF) in collaboration with the Namibian Organic Association (NOA); and in South Africa led by the South African Organic Sector Organisation (SAOSO). The project will extend to Malawi in 2021. The other hubs are implemented by GIZ in North, West and Eastern and Central Africa. For more information about KHSAs, contact the Project Director Angela Coetzee on angela@sustainabilityinstitute.net.

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