

Innovating Production and Consumption Using Organic Value Chains to Support Biodiversity

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Author's Background

He is IFOAM's Value Chain Facilitator and the SOAAN Secretariat. He has worked over 20 years in the organic and sustainable food and non-food sectors, from raw material to finished product.

He is Director of Research & Development for Istituto per la Certificazione Etica e Ambientale (ICEA) with over 20 years experience pioneering organic standards in food and non-food sectors.

Summary

This session explores the ways in which farmers, value chain actors, and consumers interact, and the effects their choices have on biodiversity and ecological health, farm economic security, cultural diversity and knowledge, and product quality. Solutions are sought to understand and overcome limitations of current behaviors and marketing patterns to increase benefits for all stakeholders.

Background

Biodiversity is a crucial characteristic of ecosystem sustainability, which organic agriculture supports through its stated principles and practices. Biodiversity can be considered in two ways: wild biodiversity and farm biodiversity. Both kinds are desirable. Wild diversity serves as a genetic bank and an ecological equilibrating buffer. Biodiversity in farm production is conducive to natural balance for controlling pests, weeds, and diseases; facilitates selection of desirable characteristics; and buffers against economic hardship due to crop failure or market fluctuations, compared to when fewer crops are produced. Farmers can draw on wild biodiversity as a source of new or traditionally useful crops (or animal products) to bring to market. This has potential to intensify the ecological benefits of biodiversity, safeguard and share useful products, perpetuate cultural knowledge, and promote economic prosperity.

Main chapter

Discussion:

Value chains in the predominant global marketplace on the other hand – even organic ones – often work against biodiversity by streamlining product flows for the sake of efficiency and economics of production, trading, and manufacturing. Existing market channels should be leveraged to spur demand for production of more quantities and kinds of organic crops – for foods, personal care products, textiles, and other product categories. Even though there are tens of thousands of edible or otherwise usable species on the planet, humans continue to rely on fewer and fewer of these for more and more of their consumption needs. There is a vicious cycle: the less familiar consumers are with the diversity of options that may exist, the less they are enabled to support them in the market. For traders and manufacturers, the less familiar they are with the particular characteristics and value of certain species/products, the less likely they are to use them in processing or product innovations. These effectively decrease the motivation by farmers to protect or produce them.

Organic principles and practices generally avoid synthetic or toxic materials. But for certain kinds of processed products and even whole product categories, especially non-food items, most mainstream organic market channels still rely largely on a limited selection of raw commodities, and on manufacturing processes whose environmental performance could be improved. Furthermore there are limitations on the availability of alternative raw materials, and on people's knowledge of the characteristics and processing methods of such alternatives. Traders and manufacturers may also limit their raw material choices for economic reasons (including needed investments in infrastructure) and/or due to challenges of marketing new products.

Core messages and conclusions

Can consumer expectations for product performance and healthiness be harmonized with value chains' logistical and economic constraints? How can increasing consumer awareness about sustainability and demand for organic products be leveraged to benefit from a greater variety of useful species, promote greater ecological stability, and support biodiversity on and around farms? How can we support innovation based on enhanced use of natural materials and reduced negative environmental impacts? What incentives can the organic sector implement? This session will explore the potential and limitations that the organic sector faces with respect to these challenges.