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REVIEW

Organic Agriculture in Tunisia, Africa

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ABSTRACT

Tunisia reports 279,389 hectares of certified organic agriculture, accounting for 2.87% of the country's farmland. Most of Tunisia's organic production is exported. Organic olive oil accounts for 74% of organic exports, and organic dates for 22%. In 2021, Tunisia bid and won the right to host the Organic World Congress (OWC) 2024. After almost half a century of OWCs, the prospective OWS Tunis 2024 was to be the first such event to be held in Africa. It would be an opportunity to showcase Tunisian and African organics, and to provide a welcome impetus to grow the organics sectors of the country and the continent. In 2023, OWS Tunis 2024 was cancelled in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the loss-making OWC Rennes 2021, and changed economic, political and social circumstances. The African continent is an under-performer in organics; 15 countries report no organics, 28 countries report less than 1% organics and only a single country reports greater than 5% (viz. São Tomé and Principe, 21.2%). Tunisia is an organics leader in Africa. The present paper tracks the stop-start growth of the organics sector of Tunisia over the past two decades.

Keywords: IFOAM, Olive oil, Organic World Congress, OWC Tunis 2024.

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1. Introduction

Tunisia won the right to host the Organic World Congress (OWC) 2024. It was a measure of the strength and confidence of the organic agriculture sector of Tunisia that the bid was made. Others concurred and the bid was won (in 2021). The Tunisian bid attracted 33% of the votes to host the pre-eminent organics triennial event in its capital city, Tunis (Fig. 1). The Tunisia bid beat the four other contenders: Copenhagen, Denmark (with 23% of the vote); Brisbane, Oceania (21%); Puerto Varas, Chile (19%); and Tel Aviv, Israel (4%) [1].

Tunisia was set to host the first OWC to be held in Africa. It was a chance to showcase organics in Tunisia and Africa. A year out from the event, the OWS Tunis 2024 was cancelled (in 2023) [2]. None of the losing candidates nor any new candidate city nor country has since that time picked up the mantle for a relocation. No substitute OWC has been scheduled.

A press release of IFOAM-Organics International (the OWC organiser) stated that their 'rules of engagement' were changed: "While Tunisia continued to demonstrate its commitment and ability to organise the OWC and negotiated the new model, the change in procedures and requirements was not compatible with the business model on which the original Tunisian bid was based. Despite the best of intentions and efforts made by all parties, it was not possible to sign the contract for the OWC and the General Assembly in Tunisia in 2024" [2]. IFOAM had 'moved the goalposts' and 'spat the dummy'.

The OWC is the premier event for the global organic food and agriculture sector. The first such event was held in 1977 in Sissach, Switzerland, [4]. The OWC historically has been held at three-year intervals. The immediate past Congress was OWC Rennes 2021 (France). OWC Rennes was scheduled for 2020 but was delayed by 12 months due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Prior OWCs have included OWC New Delhi 2017 (India); OWC Istanbul, 2014 (Turkey); OWC Namyangju, 2011 (South Korea); OWC Modena, 2008 (Italy); OWC Adelaide, 2005 (Australia); and OWC Victoria, 2002 (Canada).

The bid documents stated that OWS Tunis 2024 anticipated 2000 participants [5]. OWC Modena 2008 attracted more than 1,700 attendees [6]. OWC Rennes 2021 was offered as "a hybrid event … with a possibility for 500 participants to attend physically in line with health and safety measures", with the requirement that participants present a "French Sanitary Pass" for entry [7], [8]. Although OWC Rennes 2021 was touted as a "success" [9], in reality, it was more of a 'fizzer'. There were fewer than

Fig. 1. Tunisia won the right to host the organic world congress (OWC) 2024 [3].

Fig. 2. Organic date production in Tunisia [3].

400 in-person attendees [9], and it was a loss-making event [2], and it has left the future of OWCs under a cloud of uncertainty.

Tunisia has a long history of agricultural exporting, dating back many centuries. The port city of 'Carthage' of ancient times is the present capital, Tunis. Tunisia claims its ancient author Magon (aka Mago & Magon Barca) (circa second century BC) as the "father of agronomy" [3]. The stop-start progress of Tunisian organics over the past two decades is presented in the current paper.

2. Methods

Data for the timeline of certified organic hectares for Tunisia and the data of certified organic hectares of agricultural land for African countries are sourced from FiBL [10]. The density equalising world map of organic agriculture is sourced from Paull *et al.* [11]. The African map of the percentage of organic agriculture is created by the author using the software of mapchart.net and data of fibl.org.

3. Results

Tunisia reports 279,389 hectares of certified organic agriculture, which accounts for 2.87% of its agricultural land [10]. This puts Tunisia as fourth in Africa for organic

Fig. 3. Organic logo for Tunisia since 2010 (image source: ctab.nat.tn).

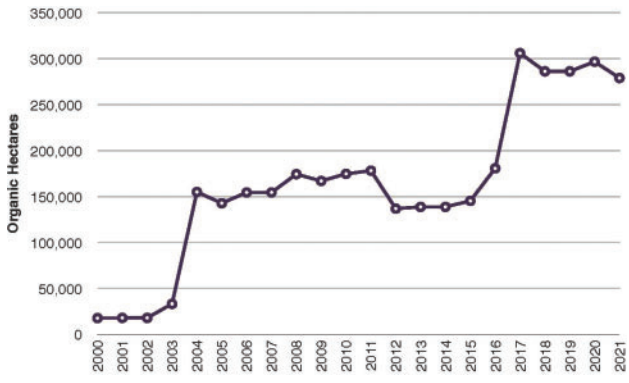

Fig. 4. Timeline of certified organic hectares for Tunisia; plateaus and growth spurts rather than steady year-on-year growth (data source: fibl.org).

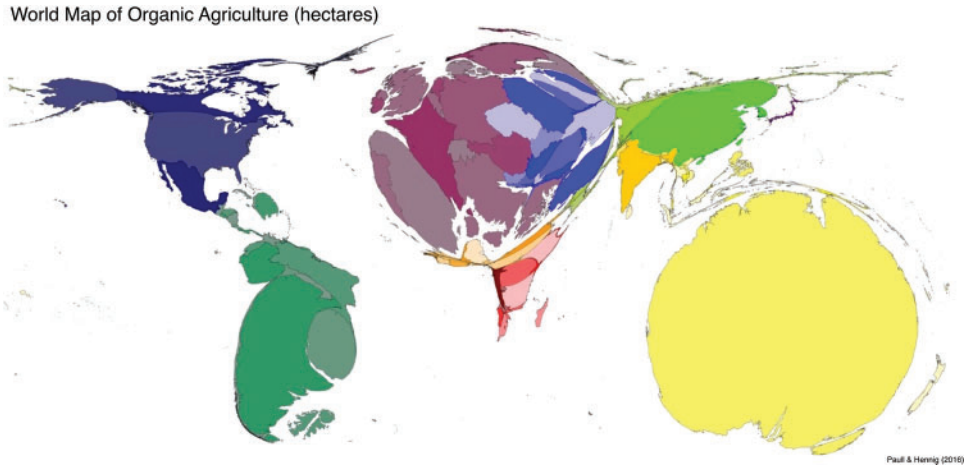

Fig. 5. World map of organic agriculture (a density equalising map); Africa is the 'disappearing continent' [11].

hectares (after Uganda, Ethiopia, and Tanzania) and seventh in Africa for percentage organic agriculture (after São Tomé and Principe, Sierra Leone, Réunion, Uganda, Togo, and Egypt).

Most (93%) of Tunisia's organic hectares are for olive production (260,408 ha). Organic olive oil accounts for 74% of the organic exports of Tunisia, and organic dates for 22% [12] (Fig. 2). Tunisia is the leading exporter of organic olive oil to Europe. Twenty percent of Tunisia's olive production hectares are certified organic. The yield of organic olive production is claimed to be higher than non-organic production "because of organic fertilisation efforts" [13]. Most organic production of Tunisia is for the export market (the domestic market for organics is negligible).

There are 699 ha managed as Biodynamic and certified by Demeter (second in Africa for Biodynamic hectares, after Egypt) [14]. There are 25,486 ha of certified organic wild-culture (for wild collection of herbs, medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPS)) [13].

There are a reported 7,101 organic producers, 669 processors, 159 exporters, and 6 importers in Tunisia [15]. The Tunisian bid for the Organic World Congress 2024 claimed Tunisia as "the only African country having mutual recognitions for the purpose of equivalence [of organic certification] with the EU since 2009, Switzerland since 2011, and the UK since 2020" [5].

There is a national certified organics mark for Tunisian organics [5], [13] (Fig. 3). Organic production is supported by the government. There is some supporting infrastructure including the Technical Centre of Organic Agriculture (CTAB), the General Directorate of Organic Agriculture (DGAB), and the National Commission of Organic Agriculture (CNAB). There are subsidies available for organic producers reported as "up to 1,650 USD per farmer and 3,300 USD per company" [13] and as 30% for the cost of equipment specific to organic production and a grant of 70% for certification fees [16].

The growth of organics in Tunisia over the past two decades has been of a stop-start variety rather than a steady increase. Data have been reported from the year 2000. The data indicate overall growth; after a low and slow start, there have been two strong growth spurts, each followed by growth plateaus (with some recidivism within those plateaus). The present plateau dates from 2017, with a peak in 2017 and some backsliding since then (Fig. 4).

Most of Tunisia's organic production is exported [12]. Organic exports are destined mostly for Europe (55,717 tonnes, including 45,000 tonnes of organic olive oil) and the USA (12,362 tonnes) [15]. Although olives and dates account for most of Tunisia's organic hectares, there are also small areas devoted to organic fruit, cereals, vegetables, and aquaculture. These lesser organic productions offer opportunities as loci for future growth and diversification of the organics sector.

The continent of Africa is an under-performer in the organic agriculture sector. On the world map of organics, Africa is the 'disappearing continent' [11] (Fig. 5). Countries are sized on the density equalising map according to their certified organic hectares. Countries that appear larger than 'expected' (compared to their territorial area) are outperforming the global average (of 1.9% organic). Countries that appear smaller than 'expected' are underperforming the global average. Africa is a vestigial presence on the World Map of Organic Agriculture because of the under-performance of the continent for this parameter. Africa accounts for 3.5% of the world certified organic hectares (2,663,980 ha for Africa, 76,403,777 ha for the world) [15].

Tunisia is outperforming most other African countries with its 2.87% organic (compared to the African average of 0.24%), and it is also outperforming the world average of 1.9% [10] (Fig. 6). Six African countries and territories outperform Tunisia for percentage organic agriculture (viz.: São Tomé and Principe, Sierra Leone, Réunion, Uganda, Togo, and Egypt). These six countries each report organic agriculture at less than 5%, except the island nation of São Tomé and Principe, which reports 21.12% organic agriculture. At least 15 African countries report no organic agriculture (viz.: Angola, Botswana, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Gabon, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Libya, Mauritania, Niger, Somalia, South Sudan, and Western Sahara).

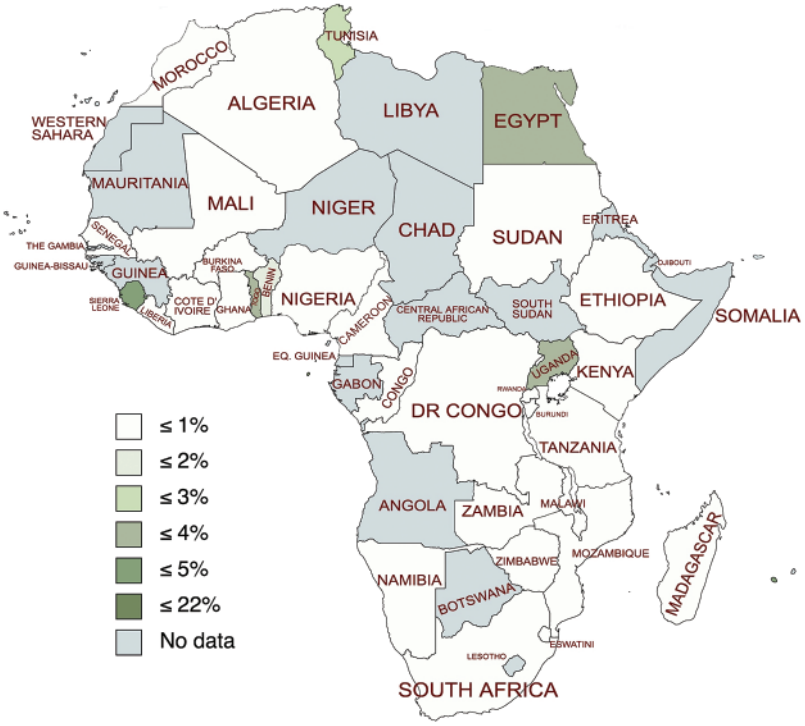

Fig. 6. Map of organic Africa; some African countries report no organic data (data source: fibl.org).

4. Concluding Remarks

When Tunisia was awarded the OWC 2024 (in 2021), this was anticipated to give a boost to both Tunisian organics and African organics. An OWC brings together organics researchers, academics, industry representatives, government officials, and producers. There were a reported 1,700 attendees at the OWC Modena 2008 in Italy [6]. But during Covid-19, the OWC Rennes 2021 in France, attracted less than 400 in-person attendees [9]. This collapse of attendance figures changes the economics of the event for organizers, and the incentive to attend for participants.

The OWC Tunis 2024 was cancelled one year out from the scheduled event. The organizer stated: *"It became clear that the OWC business model was not fit for purpose, as shown by the fact that the OWC in 2021 resulted in significant losses for IFOAM–Organics International. Therefore, the World Board [of IFOAM] decided to change the business model of the OWC in order to reduce the financial risk for future events, including the OWC in 2024"* [2].

Losing candidates for OWC 2024 have not taken up the opportunity of hosting the OWC at such short notice, and nor have any other prospective hosts stepped forward. The short-notice cancellation of OWC 2024 leaves the future of the OWC presently unclear.

The loss of OWC Tunis 2024 is a blow to the organics sector of Tunisia, particularly to Africa more generally, and to the global organics sector more broadly. A successful OWC Tunis 2024 could have been expected to give an impetus to Tunisian and African organics. It is a lost opportunity for the exchange of ideas and enthusiasms, for sharing of research, and for networking. The cancellation of OWC Tunis 2024 is a lost opportunity to provide a much needed boost of confidence for local producers, to spark an expansion of existing organic production and/or to convert non-organic agriculture to organic, to grow the clean green food production sector, and to earn organic premiums for producing premium products. Nevertheless, Tunisia is leading by example as a successful exponent of organic production in Africa.

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