Poverty Alleviation in the South - can Organic Farming help?

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Introduction

The past 20 years are characterised by important milestones towards an ecologically-oriented agricultural development in the southern hemisphere. Growing consciousness in the '70s, strategy development in the '80s and the implementation of these strategies in the '90s have made Sustainable Agriculture a mainstream issue and Organic Farming an important niche in the discussion on agricultural development. Both are propagated as suitable strategies to alleviate poverty by increasing agricultural production and, at the same time, using natural resources in a regenerative way. At the same time, however, the gap between population growth and food production is widening and our natural resources: biodiversity, land and water are deteriorating in an alarming speed. On a global scale the situation is dramatic: The next 50 years will require a doubling of food production in order to feed an increasing population but, according to estimates, 5-10 million hectares of agricultural land are lost annually, more than half of it by inappropriate agricultural practices (Oldeman et al. 1991, Pinstrup-Andersen 1994, WRI 1994). What is the capacity of Sustainable Agriculture and Organic Farming to solve this problem? This is the main theme of this paper.

Impact of Sustainable Agriculture Concepts

Within the last two decades, various initiatives have striven towards an ecological agriculture. "Ecofarming", "eco-development", "low-external input agriculture", "site-appropriate agriculture" and many other concepts can be brought together under the umbrella of Sustainable Agriculture. All of them were confounded in the context of agricultural or rural development in the South, mainly promoted by governmental or non-governmental donor organisations. They aim at achieving productivity under low-external input conditions and, at the same time, at maintaining or re-establishing a balanced ecosystem (Kotschi & Adelhelm 1984).

Sustainable Agriculture concepts played an important role in changing the paradigm of agricultural development. In a first step, they put an end to the unilateral transfer of technology from the North to the South, they helped to re-discover traditional knowledge, and - relying on a new understanding of ecological principles - they demanded local technology development based primarily on local resources. Prominent sectors of technology development are agroforestry, soil and water conservation and use of organic manure (composting). In a second step, participatory approaches and methods were integrated (PRA, PTD and PLA). It became clear that not only soil, climate and vegetation mattered but also creativeness, initiative and ownership of ideas by the people who farm the land (Chambers 1983, Richards 1985). Today, there is widespread consensus that the optimal use of both physical and human resources at a given site is the most important aspect for an intensified and sustainable land use.

Sustainable Agriculture concepts have proven feasible to effectively halt or greatly reduce natural resources degradation and to intensify agricultural production. Developmental work in many projects and programmes has given us suitable technologies and concepts (Kotschi et al. 1989, Kotschi 1990, UNDP 1992), whereas agricultural research remained largely untouched by this development. Successful cases have convinced development workers, decision makers and politicians. Meanwhile, new initiatives are sprouting all over and they are demanded by farming communities themselves. Sustainable Agriculture concepts are not limited by compulsory standards. This openness helped to integrate various opinions and perceptions among professionals. Almost everybody can identify him/herself with Sustainable Agriculture. Thus, it became widely supported in developmental co-operation.

However the other side of the medal is that this openness caused a loss of identity. There is large-scale extension of Sustainable Agriculture, but are the basic principles of ecology really understood and made operational in practical work? The broad definitions of Sustainable Agriculture are used not only by ecologists, but also by high-tech advocates, who propagate a second green revolution with gene-technology and a new generation of agro-chemicals. This is an indicator that the consensus on Sustainable Agriculture among professionals is fallacious and may come to a dead end. At the same time, we have to observe a stagnation in up-dating SA concepts and they do not satisfy the high demand for innovations. In summary, Sustainable Agricultural lacks a clear profile and is in danger of becoming an empty shell.

Impact of Organic Farming

The Organic Farming movement is much older than the Sustainable Agriculture one. It started already in the 1920s in Europe (Demeter in Germany, Organic Soil Association in Great Britain). And in the South in 1929, a German farmer started to produce Demeter Coffee in Mexico. Other examples followed in New Zealand, Australia and Africa, all of them initiated by European pioneers. Over many decades these projects remained isolated with no sign of proliferation. Only in the `80s did a new wave of initiatives start and since then projects have been sprouting all over the world. The driving force is a booming international market for organic food (and textiles). Be it green tea from China, coffee from Mexico, or cotton from Tanzania: food or textiles are produced organically for wealthy people in the North. They live in Europe, in North-America or in Japan and demand high-quality products. Therefore, quality control through inspection and certification is done according to standards set by the importing countries. Since 1991, the EU regulation on organic farming regulates the import of organic products from non-EU countries into the EU. The European Union has a turnover in trading organic products of approximately 6.3 billion US$, which is equivalent to a market share of 1.5% (ITD 1999). As the EU represents the world's biggest market, the EU regulation has become the dominating international standard.

There are two strong arguments in favour of Organic Farming. One is the basic principle of Organic Farming: to give priority to the optimal use of inputs (including externalities) instead of the maximisation of outputs. This includes the concept of production in cycles and the use of renewable resources and it clearly aims at sustainable use of natural resources (soil, biodiversity, water, nutrients and energy).The other argument which caused the success of Organic Farming are the rules which have to be respected. Unlike Sustainable Agriculture, it follows detailed standards on production and processing (IFOAM 1998, Demeter 1986 etc.). Compulsory standards create confidence of consumers in organic food. Furthermore, strict application of standards means that new ways of managing the agro-ecology have to be sought. This made Organic Farming a generator of innovation in agriculture. The development of methods in biological pest control for European fruit growers is a good example, and many of these technologies developed so far became part of the agricultural mainstream.

Both arguments give Organic Farming high credibility and are part of the success story. The growth rates in European market shares within the past 10 years are impressive (SÖL 2000). But, they may be misleading. If related to global scale, the impact of Organic Farming in the South is almost negligible. And there are considerable constraints to large-scale extension. These limitations are due to the fact that Organic Farming has not yet freed itself from being dominated by the North. This has consequences in several ways.

- The extension of Organic Farming in the South is stimulated by cash crops. They are premium priced and produced for an international market. Subsistence-oriented food production is often excluded from Organic Farming. For instance it can happen that revenues from organic coffee are used to buy pesticides for food crops (Rottach 1998). This is supported by the EU regulation, which allows partial conversion, and many farms have a two-tier production system: organic for cash crops and conventional for subsistence production. To grow the latter organically is considered too expensive.
- It is true: the conversion to Organic Farming creates innovative technologies. But how many farmers do really convert and improve their farming system? An estimated 80% of the land, which is assessed as certified organic in the South has not undergone any changes. The existing production systems with low-external input often comply with the new standards and inspection and certification is accepted as a necessary formality to sell products at a higher price. This applies for the 12.000 cocoa producers in the Dominican Republic (CONACADO), for the 1.800 banana farmers in Costa Rica and many other groups.
- A real conversion to Organic Farming requires considerable investment. Yield decreases, technology development and inspection and certification (Walaga 2000) make it expensive. These costs are often underestimated and they can be carried only by wealthier farms.
- Organic Farming in the South is often done according to standards set by the North. It is common practice, for instance, that the EU regulation on Organic Farming is adopted. Such laws and regulations from consumer countries impair the development of own, national standards. Independent concepts related to the specific ecological and socio-economic conditions of the respective region/country are thus ignored or not even developed (Schulz 1998). The same applies to the transfer of technologies which, in many cases, are inappropriate and prevent full utilisation of the potential of participatory technology development.
- Organic Farming in the South is largely controlled by international traders, who – being in need of products - take the initiative. In order to secure a contract-based production, they quite often support farming communities by pre-financing all steps from advice in production to certification and labelling. This practice may be the only way for quite a number of farmer's groups to establish Organic Farming. However, it does not consider sufficiently that different fields of work represent different interests which are not compatible as such. For instance, advisory services and quality control do not fit together, as it is problematic if an advisor evaluates his own work. Both, the mixture of interests and the foreign influence impair the organisational development of Organic Farming support systems. In the

countries themselves, independent commercial companies are needed for technology development, advisory services and quality control. Also public institutions are required for the development of standards, the administration of a label and the supervision of inspection/certification (Kotschi 1999).

The domination of Organic Farming by interests and concepts of the North is a serious obstacle for a global development of the movement, as it excludes regional specific conditions and potentials. At present, Organic Farming feeds the egoism of northern consumers and, does it not rather increase disparity than being an option for poverty alleviation? Resource-poor farming communities have to care primarily for their subsistence needs (food and energy), whereby the risks and the costs of production have to be minimised. But conversion to OF temporarily increases the risks and the costs of production considerably and - until now - focuses on production of high-quality cash-crops. It is an option for the upper strata of farming communities, with better education, with higher means of investment, with the wish to improve their already existing market production and with the readiness to develop or adopt new technologies (Kotschi 1998). The poorer strata may only profit from OF technologies which have become part of the mainstream, or work de facto organic, because conventional inputs are not available.

Conclusions and recommendations

Poverty alleviation is possible only if agricultural production is intensified and - at the same time - natural resources are managed in a sustainable way. Among the concepts on agricultural development in the South, Organic Farming and Sustainable Agriculture have the best potential to achieve this objective. It has been development work in practice, not research, which has succeeded in finding suitable technologies and concepts, in convincing professionals and decision makers and in creating a high demand for Sustainable Agriculture and Organic Farming from farming communities.

Despite the merits of both movements, their impact to poverty alleviation is almost negligible and - looking ahead - there is no reason for entire optimism. Both have entered into a critical stage. Sustainable Agriculture suffers from a lack of conceptual clarity. Organic Farming has a clear profile but its concepts are too narrow; it is dominated by the North and not yet an option for large-scale extension. Both movements lack strategic thinking and future orientation.

A new impulse for agricultural development in the South is necessary and a strategy is needed which combines both movements, makes optimal use of their strengths and tries to overcome their weaknesses. Within such a strategy, Organic Farming should maintain and enlarge its forerunner position in technology and concept development, whereas Sustainable Agriculture can bring in the experiences and approaches in extending new ideas and linking it to participatory research and development (PTD, PLA). This task should be taken up by national and international organisations on agricultural development.

Furthermore, Sustainable Agriculture concepts have to be given a new profile. Binding criteria or simple standards have to be defined, which translate broad and general definitions into practical work (design of technologies, of cropping systems and of farming systems). Should we not think about different standards, for instance a grade B in Sustainable Agriculture and grade A for Organic Farming? Redesigning Sustainable Agriculture would be a challenging task for NGOs together with national and international research institutions.

Organic Farming must become accessible to larger rural communities. Therefore, several aspects should be reconsidered:

- There is an urgent need to increase advisory work in production and marketing and to separate such advisory services from export-oriented trade and quality control.
- More resources have to be channelled into technology development
- The costs for quality control should be reduced by making standards and procedures simpler and not more and more sophisticated, as it is the case at present. Respective savings should be invested in technology development and advisory services.
- Building up local and national markets for Organic products should become a focal point in development.
- More attention should be given to the organisational development of organisations in the countries of the South, with the aim to create fully-fledged support systems with a high degree of independence from foreign influence.

All stakeholders in Organic Farming, consumers, trade, advisory and inspection/certification services and, last but not least, consumers should promote a new basis for Organic Farming in a concerted action. A critical "in-house review" of IFOAM and its member organisations, the elaboration of suitable strategies and the promotion of special projects together with Development Organisations could be suitable instruments.

In the past both movements, Sustainable Agriculture and Organic Farming, have been playing the role of a defender with the back to the wall. Now, there is no need for defence any more, as ecological movements have proven their feasibility. The time has come to make them better and more widely applicable. This requires more modesty and self-criticism in the assessment of own achievements, refraining from dogmatism and seeking intensively the dialogue with the "outside world".

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