

Organic farming in Bhutan: a way of life but also hard work for happiness

Practicing organic farming is a main component of the “Gross National Happiness” strategy in Bhutan. Sonam Tashi, an agricultural scientist and doctoral student at ZEF, carries out a feasibility study of his home country's plans to have a 100%-based agriculture by 2020. He compares the performance of organic and conventional farming

“Organic farming is increasingly being promoted worldwide as a better alternative to conventional farming in terms of producing healthy food and alleviating poverty. It is also considered more sustainable because it causes relatively less environmental damage”, tells Sonam Tashi. For his feasibility study, he looks into factors such as yield, soil nutrient status, cost-benefits and socio-economics and analyzes support provisions, including policies to achieve the country's ambitious goal of being fully organic by 2020. “By looking into the constraints prevalent in Bhutan and into the increasing influence of conventional farming, I analyze how and to what technological, management and social extent organic farming can meet the expectations”, he explains.

Organic farming: challenges and constraints

“Organic farming, though theoretically based on the principles of low-cost and low-input such as fertilizers, also has its price”, says Mr. Tashi. “First of all, organic farming is mainly a small-scale business, which means farmers generally have less yield and produce to sell. Furthermore, this type of farming is labor-intensive, especially if you keep in mind that Bhutan consists of up to 70% of forests – spread over hills and mountains. The government has stipulated that this level of forest cover has to be maintained. Fifty-one percent of our land is so-called protected area. So, you have many regulations to stick to as a farmer, which limits your options. Most farming areas are surrounded



Practicing organic agriculture is a labor-intensive endeavor.

by forests, full of wildlife, which poses further challenges. Finally, to be competitive on the international markets for organic products, you have to certify and label them, which is a complicated and above all expensive process to follow”.

Solutions: preliminary insights

Although Mr. Tashi has not come up with final conclusions yet, he definitely sees a need for more support for Bhutan's farmers. “Bhutan may be statistically one of the happiest countries in the world, but it does not belong to the monetarily richest ones”, he says. “Our main sources of income consist of exports of hydropower, tourism, construction and agriculture. Bhutan has no seaside and therefore no ports, so exports costs via air are too high. In addition to financial support, farmers need to be trained to succeed in organic farming methods. We actually do receive support, e.g. from the Vandana Shiva Foundation in India, which has extended its training programs for organic farmers in India to Bhutan. We also receive help from Japan in developing and improving agricultural technologies. But still, as an academic I think more needs to be done to make the whole endeavor a success story”, Mr. Tashi concludes.

His Majesty the King of Bhutan awarded Sonam Tashi with the National Order of Merit for academic excellence in 2012. He is one of the few academic experts working on organic farming sector in his country.



Sonam Tashi was interviewed by Alma van der Veen

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