

Organic Agriculture: Will the 'Meek' Inherit the Earth?

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The practice of organic agriculture combines traditional methods with today's knowledge of health and environmental sustainability. In Morocco it is generally observed that the more remote the farming communities – and most often the more disadvantaged – the less they apply pesticides and other chemicals to grow their crops. That is simply because their economic status, unlike that of communities closer to the cities and with more available access to information in regard to agricultural trends, results in their not having the means to transition to cash crops that do require the application of chemicals.

Thus for example in Morocco's High Atlas mountains, whose inhabitants produce 35 percent of the nation's walnut crop, it is the communities furthest up the valleys – the most marginalized and most difficult to access – that can secure organic certification. This is in contrast to the villages in lower-lying areas which grow not only walnuts but also apple, pear and other trees requiring the application of pesticides that prevent them from acquiring organic certification for years to come.

Market trends in nations around the world that have demand for organic product can be a direct boon for the poorest of farming communities and developing nations. By adopting methods to ensure their agricultural product does not become contaminated, farming families – who represent the highest proportion of the world's poor – can dramatically increase the price of their raw and value-added products.

Will it be the case that public, civil, business and international agencies assist these communities in the certification process, in the provision of the training that is necessary and in the purchase of their certified products? If so, then the meek (or the least wealthy) shall inherit the earth – that is, attain greater income and environmental sustainability from the rewards of organic agriculture.

A successful organic agricultural enterprise and the new profit it generates can have a twofold effect, increasing household income and enabling communal reinvestment in human development projects in education, health and the formation of further new businesses. In this way an organic initiative can actually be an engine not only for a green economy but also for broader social change.

What will further buttress the agricultural economy of the rural poor is the creation of additional value-added activities – for example, pressing walnuts into oil, introducing greater water efficiency, tree and plant nurseries, building cooperatives and establishing direct links with international buyers.

In undergoing this transformational process in Morocco with the High Atlas Foundation's social enterprise, HA3 (High Atlas Agriculture and Artisanal), one can readily understand the enormity of the challenge. In order to achieve success, the necessary outside partners must gain the trust of rural people – something which is not given away, but earned over months and years. Within communities there can be discord and thus the process of building cooperatives must also be one of building confidence.

From the other direction, even as the organic movement champions traditional agricultural approaches, there are still methodological changes, particularly at harvest time, that need to be adopted by the farmers, who have undertaken the same procedures for generations. Concomitant to this is the requirement for training to be both ongoing and experiential; the delivery of such

workshops requires constant proximity to the people, something which agencies too often do not have the capacities or interests to do.

Even with the great dedication of communities and partners, there still remains a strong element of what can only be characterized as good fortune. Project viability and persistence are probably the major determinants to raising the necessary financing, for example. Nevertheless, individual donors are in uncharted waters as they make the necessary investment in a start-up that begins as an untested value chain. In sum, the financing aspect must be far more systematized and available, and less seemingly up to chance, in order for organic agricultural production to take-off in marginalized rural communities.

With all the hurdles to the achievement of these goals, those long dedicated to the practice of community organic agriculture and local human development have good ideas of what must be done. The reward of helping to realize relative prosperity and the fulfilment of human potential, while at the same time nourishing and replenishing the soil, provide an undying energy. Through this, the meek shall experience greater social justice.

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