



organic  
growth

by Su Kahumbu

Agriculture in Africa is becoming an increasingly high-risk business for millions of small-scale farmers across the continent. They are subject to ever increasing costs of inputs, to soil degradation, to changing weather patterns, to cultural practices that result in reduced plot sizes, to conflict, to lack of land tenure and lack of information.

Yet, despite all this, our farmers are expected to produce enough food not just to feed their families, but to supply a surplus for the national basket — those who are not themselves food producers depend on their efforts for survival. We simply do not give our farmers the right support or respect while expecting them to produce commodities that are, after all, more important than oil for human survival.

My introduction to the world of organic produce began on the day my mother became violently ill when caught in the drift of a toxic chemical we were spraying on our tomatoes. As a mother of two young children myself, I began to question the logic and dangers of feeding my girls with crops carrying such toxins. Months of research and experimentation later, I began to produce a variety of crops following organic principles.

Trial and error ruled my days for years as I became totally absorbed in the challenges and toil of the career that had found me. But I cannot describe the inner satisfaction in working so close with nature, almost as one with it. I began to discover the intricate synergies that exist between our crops, insects and diseases — and between our livestock and ourselves.

My new-found passion led to a budding business which I called Green Dreams Ltd., founded in 2000, under which we branded and sold our products on the local market in Nairobi. As demand for our products increased, we began to develop an outgrower scheme, providing access to premium markets for hundreds of small-scale organic producers all over Kenya.

On a national level, the Kenya Organic Agriculture Network was founded in 2004, networking all the country's stakeholders in the organic industry. This rapidly led to the development of both national and private sector supporting structures. We now have a Kenyan set of Organic Guidelines as well as two certification bodies.

In 2006 we started our own shop in Gigiri on the outskirts of Nairobi, selling local organic products and sourcing others from the East African region. Since then, we have developed a further five small outlets in the city, including a shop-in-shop concept in a supermarket chain. Farmers are paid premiums of between 25 and 150 per cent for their products and we insist that all organic products we market are certified. We have even helped young people in Kibera, East Africa's largest slum, to establish an organic farm among its shanties and rubbish-strewn land.

I eventually left my farm last year to concentrate on other areas of my business. But over eight years had we successfully produced not just organic fruit and vegetables and fruit, but eggs, pro-biotic yoghurts, goat and cow's milk, goats, beef and free range chickens

Developing our supply chain is naturally the most important aspect of our business, and it takes us into the fields across East Africa. We also encourage, teach and help producers to venture into affordable value addition, such as solar drying and the making of preserves.

The recent increase in agricultural input costs has led to the failure of crop production and an increase in poverty for many commercial farmers. But this has not been the case for their organic counterparts who produce their own soil and plant fertility solutions and pest and disease control inputs.

Government decisions to subsidise fertilizers and pesticides are not a sustainable option for farmers or for fragile ecosystems. We can solve the problems of sustainable food production if we educate farmers about organic production methods. I believe we can do this on a continent-wide scale using the technologies and networks now available across Africa. I wish to see Government spending in this area of development, together with television, radio and newspaper, extension programmes and documentaries dedicated to organic production and value addition.

I also believe we must support our farmers with information and access to affordable technologies that can help them become less labour intensive and reliant on rain-fed production. Organic farming is fun and rewarding though very labour intensive. Most of our farmers in East Africa are elderly. If African farming is to be sustainable, we need to encourage young people with technologies that will reduce hard labour and increase incomes, knowledge transfer and skills through adding value.

Drip irrigation and shade nets can be used very effectively in small plots and so can a small Chinese tractor. Affordable micro-finance should be made available to help farmers buy them, and a local hire service could be created for the tractors to minimise costs. Adding value will increase farmers' income and create viable sustainable businesses.

We also need to recognise and remove regional trade barriers, such as occur when regional standards are not harmonised: this is about to take place in East Africa. Another problem is that African organic producers face huge costs for international certification. As a result, large traders pay for certification and so maintain custodianship of the certificate. The farmers are thus deprived of ownership of the organic status of their products and become no more than raw material suppliers at the bottom of the value and income chain. So we need to lobby for international acceptance of our African local and regional organic standards.

Africa is burdened with an overwhelming increase in human illness. To add to the scourge of HIV, TB and malaria, relative newcomers like hypertension, diabetes and cancer are invading our lives at an alarming rate. The wealth of any nation ultimately relies on its work force, the people. Given the challenges mentioned above, can Africa really afford to produce foods that add to the human toxic load? Or should it adopt organic agriculture as a means of survival? 