

CHOKEPOINTS IN SUSTAINING ORGANIC RICE PRODUCTION IN NORTHERN MINDANAO, PHILIPPINES

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Abstract Organic agriculture is sustainable on the ecological aspect, but other external factors influence its sustainability. The present paper covers the different chokepoints in the sustainability of organic rice production in Northern Mindanao. A total of 380 farmers served as respondents from the five provinces of Northern Mindanao that were selected through purposive sampling. The data were gathered through FGD and personal interviews using a structured questionnaire and data was analyzed descriptively. The study identified production, technical and marketing issues in sustaining the organic rice production. The issues include changing priorities of the Department of Agriculture, unavailability of commercial organic inputs, neighbor rice farm practiced conventional rice production, no price premium received, limited market outlets for organic produce, and high cost of organic certification. The identified issues are areas to be considered for improvement in order to effect improvement and sustainability of organic rice industry in the region.

Keywords: *Organic Rice, Sustainability, Northern Mindanao*

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INTRODUCTION

Organic agriculture offers developing countries a wide range of economic, environmental, social, and cultural benefits. This results to increase in production areas and global markets for certified organic products in the past decades (Cabigas and Morala, 2011; Ara, 2003).

The Philippines has ranked 8th in the highest increase of organic agriculture land, 5th of the highest organic producers, and 1st in the largest organic area in Asia (Willer and Lernoud, 2019; Willer and Lernoud, 2017). Such achievement is attributed to the passing of the Organic Agriculture Act of 2010. The legislation was created to boost the countries organic agriculture.

It is well accepted that organic agriculture is sustainable on the ecological aspect but

sustainability on the financial and the social or cultural aspects are still being questioned (Maghirang, et.al, 2011).

This paper is part of the research entitled: “Documentation of Organic Rice Production and Provision of Technical Assistance towards Organic Certification for the Enhancement of the Organic Rice Industry in Northern Mindanao” funded by the Department of Agriculture Regional Field Office 10. The Department of Agriculture acknowledges the inadequacy of the database apart from the minimal and fragmented research and development (R&D) efforts on organic farming in general and organic rice production in particular. Hence, the Department of Agriculture embarked on the packaging of this R&D activity to obtain baseline information of the organic rice industry in the region

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which will serve as a basis in the formulation of policies and intervention to boost the development of a progressive and sustainable organic rice industry in Northern Mindanao.

Meanwhile, this paper only focused on the chokepoints or hindering factors in sustaining organic rice production technology in Northern Mindanao.

The desire for a sustainable agriculture is common, however the road towards it is accompanied with challenges. The role of the support agency, marketing, and production issues are considered in the context of this discussion of sustainability in organic rice production in Northern Mindanao.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study was conducted in the five provinces of Northern Mindanao namely, Camiguin, Lanao Del Norte, Misamis Occidental and Oriental, and Bukidnon. The respondents of the study were lowland and upland rice farmers practicing organic or semi-organic production.

In the selection of respondents, purposive sampling or convenient sampling was used since the total number of respondents were unknown. There was a total of three hundred eighty (380) rice farmers that were interviewed which was composed of 174 upland rice farmers and 206 lowland rice farmers.

The data were gathered through personal interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). Personal interview was conducted using home visits and arranged group meetings. It was personally administered by the research staff and hired enumerators. The data were analyzed descriptively to come up with the results presented.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Farmers are aware of the benefits of organically grown products especially rice which is the country's staple food. However, a number of them are constrained to sustain the production because of the hindering factors. The following are the identified chokepoints in sustaining organic rice production among rice farmer-respondents in Northern Mindanao.

Changing priorities of the Department of Agriculture. The "Organic Agriculture Act of 2010" opted for the promotion, propagation, development, and implementation of the practice of Organic Agriculture in the country. It was during this year where there was high adoption rate of the

technology among rice farmers. However, with the change in administration, there were changes in the program priorities of the Department of Agriculture. The support services extended by the agency are often compelled in the promotion of high-yielding varieties hence, the input support provided by DA are synthetic inputs, which does not encourage organic rice production. Further, with the change in priority, lesser trainings are conducted among farmers on organic agriculture. Some farmers may opt to adopt organic rice production technology but they were not able to attend to trainings related to it.

Unavailability of commercial organic inputs. Preparation of organic materials such as concoctions and solid fertilizers tend to be laborious to most farmers hence, one of the reasons that hindered them in practicing organic rice production. Meanwhile, this dilemma can be lightened if there were readily available organic inputs available in the market, but this is not the case. The organic inputs are not as available in agricultural supply stores compared to synthetic inputs. Most of the suppliers are usually far from the farm which will incur higher transportation cost when farmer will have to purchase it. Further, the high transportation cost is exacerbated by poor farm to market road which added to farmer's constraint of getting the organic inputs.

Neighbor rice farm practiced conventional rice production. A farmer cannot fully say that he/she is producing organic rice if his neighbor rice farm is using the synthetic inputs in his/her rice production especially that they are having the same irrigation source. This is also one important aspect that will be complied when applying for organic certification that the area must be some distance from farms using synthetic chemicals in the production. In addition, the presence of banana and pineapple plantations operated by multi-national companies which, uses heavy chemicals in the production added to this issue. This is the case of some farms in Bukidnon. Some of the rice farms are located near these plantations which, chemical residues from the plantation will be transported to the organic farms.

No price premium received. According to Maghirang et.al (2011), to become economically viable and competitive, there must be a premium for organically produced food. Most farmers who produced chemical-free rice (white variety) cannot impose higher price for their produce because of the absence of organic certification. In effect, most of the farmer-respondents are producing chemical-free rice for home consumption only. Farmers are discouraged to subject their farms for certification because of the stringent requirements and high cost of processing. Further, there is no ready and attractive market for certified organic rice that will

encourage farmers to subject their farms to certification. On the contrary, imposition of price premium results in higher food prices to consumers and thereby more food insecurity to the poor. However, it has been shown repeatedly that if done properly organic products can be produced cheaper and with a better overall quality than conventional foods (Maghirang et.al, 2011).

Limited market outlets for organic produce/product

Most farmer-respondents sold their organic rice to neighbors and acquaintances who were health conscious. Colored organic rice can command higher price compared to white varieties. The usual practice of organic rice farmers without intervention from any party in marketing is peddling. With this, farmers were vulnerable to unjustified payment and excessive price bargain especially that buyers were often people from their neighborhoods or family-relatives. Pre-planned arrangements were also common. Buyers which are often private connections pledged to buy the standing organic rice crop after harvest. Regardless of the outcome, farmers were able to secure markets however at flexible prices. Organic product markets are commonly the high- and middle-income groups. Likewise, the demand is also centralized to these groups of people.

Meanwhile, a commendable practice is observed in Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte. Upland rice produced by farmers in the area sold in their organic trading post located in the municipality, where all the products sold are chemical-free. This gives farmers a secure market and price premium of their produce given the municipality's tag as organic producer.

High Cost of Organic Certification. According to Maghirang et. al (2011) to protect organic producers from spurious labeling and unfair competition, and to assure consumers of the integrity of their food, a need for systems of organic certification had to be in place thus, adding to the cost. The farmer-respondents are willing to undergo certification but were discouraged to do so considering the costs and requirements the farm and the farmers have to go through. Organic rice farmers are smallholders which rice production area does not exceed a hectare of land. Despite being enticed by the promising opportunities of organic rice farming, farmers showed indifference since they think the proceeds of certification might not be able to justify the costs of certification.

CONCLUSION

The organic rice producers in Northern Mindanao are faced with technical and marketing issues that hinder the sustainability of the adoption of the organic rice production technology. These challenges are the same that may be addressed through program and intervention projects to improve and sustain the organic rice industry in the region.

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