



Activity report 2010

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Organic farming stands up well to comparison

Since 2007 extended system comparisons, designed to run for fifteen to twenty years, have been running in Kenya, India and Bolivia. These field trials are comparing organic and conventional cultivation systems. The aim is to investigate the long-term contribution of organic agriculture to food security, natural resource conservation and the fight against poverty.

Experts regard organic farming as having a key part to play in the transition from resource-intensive conventional agriculture to sustainable land management. They base this on numerous experiences of organic farming projects in developing countries. In contrast to the industrialized countries there has been virtually no systematic study and documentation of the economic and ecological outcomes and services of organic farming in the developing world, let alone in long-term trials, even though scientifically validated data is vital in order to set up robust development projects.

For Dionys Forster, Monika Schneider, Juan Guillermo Cobo and Christine Zundel of FiBL, who are running the trials in India, Bolivia and Kenya, the system comparisons have various purposes: “They are important for moving the debate about organic farming away from polemics and onto a rational basis, but as well as this they are meeting places where farmers, traders, consumers, scientists, consultants and politicians engage in constructive dialogue.”

Cotton, maize and vegetables, and cocoa

The studies in the three countries include amongst other things the development of yields, soil fertility, biodiversity and the efficient use of nutrients and energy. However, for the farming family the decisive element remains economic profitability.

In India FiBL is researching different cotton growing systems, in Kenya a maize/vegetables/fruit rotation is being tested and in Bolivia a trial of cocoa in monoculture and in various agro-forestry systems is taking place.

In the Narmada River valley in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh cotton is the cash crop, i.e. the crop which puts money into farming families’ pockets. FiBL is carrying out the trial with a two-year fruit rotation typical of the region, in which soya and wheat are grown as well as cotton. As the producers are unsure whether they should embrace organic farming or genetic engineering, a trial of genetically modified Bt cotton is also underway. Those responsible are pleased with the results from the first years of the trial. Although the yield from organic cotton was somewhat lower than from cotton in conventional trials, that is entirely to be expected in the conversion phase. “The premium paid for organic cotton compensates for the drop in yield,” says Dionys Forster and draws attention to the long duration of the comparison trial.

Christine Zundel points out too that, at the Kenyan site with high yield potential (near the small town of Chuka), yields from organic and conventional plantations reach similar levels. It is only at the site with low yield potential (outside Thika, the district capital) that the organic trials produce a lower yield. As yet there is no data available from the comparison trials in Bolivia.

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To complement the comparison trials, FiBL is working with its partner organization bioRe and smallholder families to carry out practical trials near Kasrawad in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. The aims are to improve soil fertility and to make more efficient use of raw phosphate.

- ① A group of farmers discuss various techniques of using raw phosphate.
- ② bioRe consultant Ramesh Verma (left) and farmer Madan Kadwa with his wife Kalindi assessing the quality of compost.
- ③ Optimising the use of raw phosphate: Rajeev Verma talking to a group of farmers.
- ④ Rajeev Verma and Sitaram Ramsingh of bioRe evaluate the quality of the wheat grain.
- ⑤ Wheat grain from trials using raw phosphate (left) and without it (right).
- ⑥ Nadika Anandram harvesting wheat at one of the field trials.



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