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CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ORGANIC FRUIT AND VEGETABLE FARMERS IN THE WESTERN PROVINCE OF SRI LANKA

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Introduction

Global sales of organic foods have risen rapidly over the years because of people's evolving perception of health and the environment (Willer & Lernoud, 2019). Reganold & Wachter (2016) reveal that organic farming practices are beneficial as they promote the conservation of biodiversity, enhance the health of the soil, and reduce pollution in the environment. But, organic farmers all over the world have some problems including high production costs, pests, and limited market access (Constance et al., 2008). Organic farming principles and practices mainly focus on the improvements of soil health and plant health through natural sources and processes. However, the published statistics show that the agriculture sectors in Sri Lanka heavily depend on chemicals such as fertilizers and pesticides. These chemicals have contributed to negative impacts such as eroded soils, polluted water resources, and increased cases of diseases. However, there is a shift in the current trend due to the rising consumers' concerns regarding health issues, safe food, and government support towards organic farming. However, there are some facts and issues warding off the organic farmers in Sri Lanka which restrict their production from the market. It is obvious that the tradition of using organic farming has been the practice in Sri Lanka for many years. However, there are some problems that have characterized the process of transition towards organic farming in Sri Lanka including, but not limited to, inadequate technical know-how, high costs of inputs and equipment, and a restricted market (Jayasinghe, 2021). Thus, the objective of this study is to identify the challenges faced by the farmers of organic fruits and vegetables in the Western Province, to understand the potential for enhancing the current situation and enhancing the market access for the products, and to, therefore, provide suggestions for enhancing the difficulties faced by the stakeholders with the purpose of improving the growth of the necessary sectors for the farming of organic produce in the area.

Methodology

The current mixed-method research employed both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. The research is conducted in three phases: A literature review, indepth interviews, and a survey. A quantitative study using a structured questionnaire is carried out on 80 organic fruit and vegetable growers in the Western Province. The interview instrument comprises questions on demographic characteristics of the respondents, crop management, problems encountered, marketing, and views on organic farming. To determine the trends and the significant factors that influence the practice of organic farming in the region, statistical analysis is applied. To get detailed information, the current research employs 10 farmers and market intermediaries through in-depth interviews. These interviews are written down and the written texts are analyzed for themes of the difficulties and possibilities of organic farming.

Results and Discussion

The results of this survey showed that respondents appeared diverse in terms of age, education levels, revenues, production capacity, and years of farming. A few farmers have engaged in organic farming because they have proper knowledge about the health aspect of it, environmental conditions, and the market potential of organic fruits and vegetables. However, organic farmers in the Western Province of Sri Lanka face several inherent issues.

Organic Production Challenges:

- Controlling pests and diseases without the use of synthetic chemicals (fertilizers and pesticides).
- Developing soil fertility through organic principles and practices.
- High cost of labor as a result of the labor investment that goes into organic farming.
- Lack of organic inputs; certified seeds, compost, and bio-pesticides

Organic Marketing Challenges:

- Market restriction and inadequate facilities to market organic products and goods.
- Low consumers' awareness and confidence towards the authenticity of the organic label.
- Competition with the cheaper and other conventional fruits and vegetables that are sold in the market.
- No branding and marketing to enable the farmers to sell the products at higher prices.

Policies and Institutional Issues:

- Not enough awareness and promotion by the government for organic farming.
- Problems that were experienced in the course of acquiring the organic certification.
- Comparatively low levels of credit and funding extended to organic farmers.
- Little or no research and extension services have been done concerning the issues of organic farming.

Despite the above-highlighted challenges, there are numerous opportunities for growth in the organic farming sector in the Western Province.

- Consumer demand has increased due to the increase in the awareness of consumers on the health implications of the foods they consume and the availability of outlets that deal in organic foods.
- The formation of Farmer Cooperatives and marketing structures can assist in acquiring better markets, better prices, and cheap costs.
- Through the tourism activities such as the eco-tourism and Agro-tourism organic farmers can look for other ways of generating income.
- Technology changes such as the use of biofertilizers, integrated pest management, and precision agriculture can increase productivity.
- Farmers have to take education and training regularly to practice organic farming properly.
- To support the growth of organic farming, the following policy recommendations are proposed:
 - Find and encourage farmers to embrace organic farming by offering incentives to discourage them from conventional farming.
 - Minimize the certification of organic substances to make sure that the farmers get it at a cheaper rate and with ease.
 - Improve the marketing strategies as well as consumer education by implementing certification and labeling policies.
 - Strengthen the research, extension, and advisory services to provide technical support and innovations fitting for organic farming.

Pest and disease control without the use of synthetically produced chemicals is a major problem. Organic farmers use organic ways of pest control but this is not as effective and takes a lot of time (Nellemann et al., 2009). The process of ensuring the soils are fertile using methods like composting and crop rotation is quite demanding. Farmers usually have challenges in acquiring organic fertilizers and other related inputs (Altieri, 1999). It is a fact that Organic farming takes more farm labor as compared to conventional farming. Activities like weed control, composting, and pest control are labor-intensive, and hence costly (Badgley et al., 2007). The climate is

rather variable in the Western Province, and this can negatively impact crop production. Organic farming which is a form of farming that depends on natural mechanisms can be highly sensitive to weather changes more so the extreme ones (Poudel et al, 2012).

Most of the organic farmers struggle with market access issues because of poor market infrastructure. The non-availability of specific organic markets and storage systems limits their chance of selling the produce at high prices (Munyua et al., 2010). Although there is an increasing concern for organic fruits and vegetables in the market however consumers' knowledge on the certification of products and the benefits of organic products is still lacking. This determines the consumers' willingness to purchase for the organic food products (Krystallis & Chrysosoidis, 2005). The process of certification of products as organic involves a series of processes which is time-consuming and costly. Furthermore, the fact that the certification program is relatively weak threatens the consumer's confidence in the authenticity of the organic labels (Gibbon and Bolwig 2007). Government Support: Despite the Sri Lankan government's encouragement of organic farming, the farmers complain of lacking support in the forms of subsidies, technical support, and policy enforcement (Jayasinghe, 2021).

There is also little research and extension services provided to farmers, especially in organic farming. Farmers have to avail themselves of new information and methods to enhance their farming strategies (Perera et al., 2020). The credit and financial services are not easily available to the organic farmers. The problem of the high initial capital costs puts many off the idea of converting to organic agriculture (Müller, 2009). The awareness of the health issues among consumers is a good chance for the organic farmers. The increasing concern for the consumption of safe and healthy foods is a major factor that is boosting the market for organically grown food (Hughner et al., 2007). It is possible to get better prices for the products by having special organic markets and brand names for the products. Raising the awareness of consumers on the advantages of organic farming and developing credibility through certification can increase consumer's confidence (Willer & Lernoud, 2019).

Bio-fertilizers, integrated pest management, and precision agriculture can be used in organic farming to increase the yield and improve the standard of the farming systems. The availability of these technologies can assist the farmers in solving the problems existing in the farming systems (Pimentel et al., 2005). The farmers should be provided with constant education and training to make them capable of efficiently implementing the principles of organic farming. Thus, cooperation with research institutions can help to share the experience and improvements in the practice (Reganold & Wachter, 2016). Supportive policies and financial assistance are essential to the farmers to increase the number of farmers choosing organic farming.

It has been experienced that reduction of the costs that are associated with certification and providing subsidies can help to reduce the costs of organic products (Department of Agriculture, 2020).

Conclusion

Organic farming in the Western Province of Sri Lanka has its unique obstacles and possibilities. Thus, the inadequacy of production, marketing, and policy concerns can only be solved through cooperation between the various governmental departments, farmers, and other market actors. Through the utilization of consumers' needs and new technologies, organic farming can be effectively practiced in the region. Thus, this research provides evidence of the necessity of complex support systems to improve the sustainability and profitability of the organic fruits and vegetables produced in the Western province of Sri Lanka.

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