

Organic farming gains popularity

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DAR ES SALAAM, Tanzania - The historical background of organic agriculture in Tanzania goes back to the world history of agriculture, when people were farming more traditionally.



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This is to say, modern organic farming still has roots from the first half of the 20th century, when there was growing reliance on non-organic methods. After the industrial revolution had introduced synthetic methods, most of which were not well-developed and had serious side effects, an organic movement began in the 1940s, as a reaction to agriculture's growing reliance on synthetic fertilisers and pesticides.

Advances in biochemistry and engineering

The first 40 years of the 20th century saw simultaneous advances in biochemistry and engineering that rapidly and profoundly changed farming.

The introduction of the gasoline-powered internal combustion engine ushered in the era of the tractor and made possible hundreds of mechanised farm implements, where research in plant breeding led to the commercialisation of hybrid seed and a new manufacturing process made nitrogen fertiliser - first synthesised in the mid-19th century.

Organic agriculture is simply a method of crop and livestock production that involves much more than choosing not to use pesticides, fertilisers, genetically modified organisms, antibiotics and growth hormones. Organic production is a holistic system designed to optimise productivity and fitness of diverse communities within the agro-ecosystem, including soil organisms, plants, livestock, and people.

The main reason for the organic agricultural production system movement was that farmers wanted to cultivate organically and their concerns for the environment and their health.

Father of modern organic agriculture

Organic agriculture began more or less simultaneously in Central Europe and India. British botanist Sir Albert Howard is often referred to as the father of modern organic agriculture because he was the first to apply modern scientific knowledge and methods to traditional agriculture.

From 1905 to 1924, he and his wife Gabrielle, a plant physiologist, worked as agricultural advisers in Pusa, Bengal, where they documented traditional Indian farming practices and came to regard them as superior to their conventional agriculture science. Their research and further development of these methods are recorded in his writings, notably, his 1940 book, *An Agricultural Testament*, which influenced many scientists and farmers of the day.

Biodynamic agriculture as organic farming

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In Germany, for instance, Rudolf Steiner's development, biodynamic agriculture, was probably the first comprehensive system of what we now call organic farming. This began with a lecture series Steiner presented at a farm in Koberwitz (Kobierzyce now in Poland) in 1924.

Steiner emphasised the farmer's role in guiding and balancing the interaction of animals, plants, and soil. He writes saying healthy animals depend on healthy plants for their food, healthy plants on healthy soil, and healthy soil on healthy animals for manure.

His system was based on his philosophy of anthroposophy rather than a good understanding of science. To develop his system of farming, Steiner established an international research group called the Agricultural Experimental Circle of Anthroposophical Farmers and Gardeners of the General Anthroposophical Society.

In 1909, American agronomist FH King toured China, Korea, and Japan, studying traditional fertilisation, tillage, and general farming practices, finally publishing his findings in *Farmers of Forty Centuries* (1911, Courier Dover Publications, ISBN 0-486-43609-8). King foresaw a world movement for the introduction of new and improved methods of agriculture and in later years his book became an important organic reference.

Who coined organic farming?

The term organic farming was coined by Lord Northbourne in his book *Look to the Land* (written in 1939, published 1940). From his conception of "the farm as organism," he described a holistic, ecologically balanced approach to farming.

In 1939 Lady Eve Balfour launched the Haughley Experiment on farmland in England, Lady Balfour believed that mankind's health and future depended on how the soil was used and that non-intensive farming could produce more wholesome food. The experiment was run to generate data in support of these beliefs. Four years later, she published *The Living Soil* based on the initial findings of the Haughley Experiment. Widely read, it led to the formation of a key international organic advocacy group and the soil association.

In Japan, Masanobu Fukuoka, a microbiologist working in soil science and plant pathology, began to doubt the modern agricultural movement, hence in 1937, he quit his job as a research scientist, returned to his family's farm in 1938 and devoted the next 60 years to developing a radical no-till organic method for growing grain and many other crops, now known as natural farming.

Organic farming in Tanzania's context

In Tanzania, like any other country in the world, the push for producing products through organic systems is increasing day after day. Jordan Gama, the chief executive officer for Tanzania Organic Agriculture Movement (Toam), says organic agriculture has stepped in and many organisations, groups, and individuals are in for it.

Toam, which is an umbrella organisation registered in 2005, responds to the need for coordination and facilitation of organic farming to stakeholders in the country. It envisions a vibrant sustainable and mutually beneficial organic farming by stimulating development and promotion of organic agriculture through its objectives.

Gama says organic farming has been growing agreeably all over the country due to ongoing responses among consumers and other key stakeholders with similar mission and vision.

Already Toam is affiliated to Africa Organic Network (AfroNet), Tanzania Alliance for Biodiversity (Tabio) and the International Organic Umbrella Organisation, (Ifoam) and again works closely with the government of Tanzania.

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