

Roots of organic food disagreement

As the battle for the soul of the organic food industry continues to rage across the world, South Africans have not been spared the conflicting data and often inflamed exchanges that have underpinned the debate.

As in much of the world, the food sector in SA has been sharply divided over whether organic production methods offer benefits. Both sides are now hoping that they can find more common ground as the country moves closer to developing a national policy.

With so many vested interests, especially those of big fertiliser companies and large-scale commercial farmers, it has been a difficult road to negotiate.

And this has not been helped in recent months by a series of conflicting reports and marketing data on organic foods. These have not cleared the uncertainty of an industry said to be worth over US\$50bn globally and which is expected to grow to \$104,5bn in 2015.

Organic foods are produced without using modern synthetic pesticides, chemical fertilisers or animal antibiotics, and many countries now require strict food labelling to distinguish organic food from that produced by the larger commercial farmers who use such synthetic methods.

Raymond Auerbach, professor of soil science & plant production at the George campus of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, is one of the few academics in SA working in this field and is founder of the Biodynamic Agricultural Association of SA.

Auerbach says SA has a long history of producing organic foods and other products, largely because in rural areas most of the food came from the smallholdings and private gardens of subsistence farmers.

According to Auerbach, SA had only about 100 large-scale commercial farmers until the late 1990s, and even though there appears to be a strong consumer demand for organically produced foods, the country has been slow to catch on to this.

"There is the common misconception that organic farming doesn't work on a big scale," says Auerbach. "Even with fertiliser becoming so expensive, organic farming is becoming more mainstream."

According to the organisation Inspired Evolution Investment Management, SA's organic sector consists of about 250 certified farms and 450,000ha of certified organic land. It accounts for just a fraction of the land used for agriculture. Yet this area remains one of the fastest-growing in the food market, driven mostly by the private sector and independent organisations.

Government has developed a policy for the organic food market and it was launched earlier this year. However, there have been hardly any further developments. Now a number of private organisations are attempting to draft a set of protocols and standards that will regulate the sector.

"We have more than 100 farmers who now produce organically, but the certification process remains a headache," says Auerbach.

And because only a few big supermarket chains, such as Woolworths and Pick n Pay, have dedicated organic food sections, SA consumers are turning mostly to private food markets.

This could be to the detriment of most large food stores, as research shows that SA could potentially be one of the largest-growing markets for organic foods on the continent.

A market survey by the African Organic Farming Foundation undertaken in 2005 estimated the SA organic market to be worth R100m across all categories of produce, and predicted that this would grow by 30% by 2010.

But the sketchy data and poor policies may also have cost SA a foothold in a burgeoning global market that other developing countries are already serving.

Uganda is now the world's leading organic-producing nation, with Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zambia also in the top 10.

India, Mexico and Peru are within this range of countries as well.

In the US alone, organic food and drink sales totalled more than \$27bn (4% of the overall market) and market research shows that customers are prepared to pay higher prices for organic produce.

One of the chief selling points of organic food is that because of the way it is produced it tastes better while offering additional health benefits.

But last month widely reported research from Stanford University in the US found that organic produce, including meat, isn't any better for you than conventional food when it comes to vitamin and nutrient content.

And though it does generally reduce exposure to pesticides and antibiotic resistant bacteria, the risks of these are minimal.

Using the data from more than 200 studies comparing organic with regular food, researchers found that the latter did not have more nutrients or minerals, nor did it have any significant effect in preventing infections or diseases.

The report was just one of many used in the debate, but the fact that it came from a prestigious institution gave its findings more heft and greater coverage.

However, Auerbach says there are reasons beyond the nutritional benefits for organic foods to remain a better choice.

"The environmental factors alone should be cause for worry," Auerbach says. "We can show that just because of the use of chemicals there are 15% fewer proteins [in meats] and 15% more calories in vegetables and grains."

The main problem, he says, both in SA and in the rest of the world, is that there should be better marketing research and training around the production of organic foods.

The question is - can organic farming be commercially viable?

Just a fraction of those producing organic products are commercial farmers. But production by small emerging farmers could have a significant impact on the demand for their produce. A study undertaken three years ago by the department of trade & industry found that there was enormous potential for the development of small-scale organic farmers, and that this could be extended to large-scale ventures.

But costs, both in production and at supermarkets, have been a key disadvantage in the organic food sector.

In Europe and the US, these foods can cost between 30% and 50% more than standard goods. In SA it is closer to the 50% mark.

Nevertheless, the potential for the export market is promising, even though there are still questions about whether it can be seen as a realistic option for a commercial farming venture.

For many a big concern is that because of its limited scale, organic farming cannot effectively address the serious challenges of food security and world hunger, and that these issues will be overriding in the debate about the virtues of organic foods.

Source: Financial Mail

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