

Organic farming 'could feed Africa'

Traditional practices increase yield by 128 per cent in east Africa, says UN

By Daniel Howden / The Independent

NAIROBI (22 October 2008) — Organic farming offers Africa the best chance of breaking the cycle of poverty and malnutrition it has been locked in for decades, according to a major study from the United Nations to be presented today.

New evidence suggests that organic practices – derided by some as a Western lifestyle fad – are delivering sharp increases in yields, improvements in the soil and a boost in the income of Africa's small farmers who remain among the poorest people on earth. The head of the UN's Environment Programme, Achim Steiner, said the report "indicates that the potential contribution of organic farming to feeding the world maybe far higher than many had supposed".

The "green revolution" in agriculture in the 1960s – when the production of food caught and surpassed the needs of the global population for the first time – largely bypassed Africa. Whereas each person today has 25 per cent more food on average than they did in 1960, in Africa they have 10 per cent less.

A combination of increasing population, decreasing rainfall and soil fertility and a surge in food prices has left Africa uniquely vulnerable to famine. Climate change is expected to make a bad situation worse by increasing the frequency of droughts and floods.

It has been conventional wisdom among African governments that modern, mechanised agriculture was needed to close the gap but efforts in this direction have had little impact on food poverty and done nothing to create a sustainable approach. Now, the global food crisis has led to renewed calls for a massive modernisation of agriculture on the hungriest continent on the planet, with calls to push ahead with genetically modified crops and large industrial farms to avoid potentially disastrous starvation.

Last month the UK's former chief scientist Sir David King said anti-scientific attitudes among Western NGOs and the UN were responsible for holding back a much-needed green revolution in Africa. "The problem is that the Western world's move toward organic farming – a lifestyle choice for a community with surplus food – and against agricultural technology in general and GM in particular, has been adopted across the whole of Africa, with the exception of South Africa, with devastating consequences," he said.

The research conducted by the UN Environment Programme suggests that organic, small-scale farming can deliver the increased yields which were thought to be the preserve of industrial farming, without the environmental and social damage which that form of agriculture brings with it.

An analysis of 114 projects in 24 African countries found that yields had more than doubled where organic, or near-organic practices had been used. That increase in yield jumped to 128 per cent in east Africa.

"Organic farming can often lead to polarised views," said Mr Steiner, a former economist. "With some viewing it as a saviour and others as a niche product or something of a luxury... this report suggests it could make a serious contribution to tackling poverty and food insecurity."

The study found that organic practices outperformed traditional methods and chemical-intensive conventional farming. It also found strong environmental benefits such as improved soil fertility, better retention of water and resistance to drought. And the research highlighted the role that learning organic practices could have in improving local education. Backers of GM foods insist that a technological fix is needed to feed the world. But this form of agriculture requires cash to buy the patented seeds and herbicides – both at record high prices currently – needed to grow GM crops.

Regional farming experts have long called for "good farming", rather than exclusively GM or organic. Better seeds, crop rotation, irrigation and access to markets all help farmers. Organic certification in countries such as the UK and Australia still presents an insurmountable barrier to most African exporters, the report points out. It calls for greater access to markets so farmers can get the best prices for their products.

Henry Murage had to travel a long way to solve problems trying to farm a smallholding on the western slopes of Mount Kenya. He spent five months in the UK, studying with the experts at Garden Organic a charity in the Midlands. "I wanted to see how it was being done in the UK and was convinced we could do some of the same things here," he says.

On his return 10 years ago, he set up the Mt Kenya Organic Farm, aimed at aiding other small farmers fighting the semi-arid conditions. He believes organic soil management can help retain moisture and protect against crop failure. The true test came during the devastating drought of 2000-02, when Mr Murage's vegetable gardens fared better than his neighbours'. At least 300 farmers have visited his gardens and taken up at least one of the practices he espouses. "Organic can feed the people in rural areas," he says. "It's sustainable and what we produce now we can go on producing."

Saving money on fertilisers and pesticides helps farmers afford better seeds, and composting and crop rotation are improving the soil. Traditional maize, beans and livestock farming in the area have been supplemented with new crops from borage seeds to cayenne peppers and honey, with buyers from the US to

Europe. Now he is growing camomile for herbal tea, with buyers from the UK and Germany both interested.