

IICA Activities in Organic Agriculture: A Way to Activate Sustainable Development in the Americas



Interest among countries and their governments on the topic of sustainable development is reflected in agreements and declarations from different Summits of Heads of State and of Government held over the last decade. As a response to those mandates, sustainable development occupies an important place on the agendas of different technical and financial cooperation agencies worldwide.

The Inter-American Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture (IICA), aware of its hemispheric role, and responding to the mandates of its member countries, restated its institutional orientation towards sustainable development in agriculture and the rural milieu. Activities will now be concentrated in two thematic areas: i) the search for agricultural competitiveness within a framework of equity and sustainability; and ii) improvement of living conditions and sustainable development in rural spaces or territories.

Under this new vision, IICA favors conservation of natural resources and promotion of sustainable systems of agricultural production. In this context, organic agriculture is seen as a channel interrelating both, agriculture and environment, and as an option for economic and socially just development.

Within this topic, the individual and joint initiatives that IICA has put into motion by means of its 34 Cooperative Agencies (CA) and its five Regional Centers are focused on institutional, legal, productive, and commercial development of organic activities. This article selects several cases worthy of note.

BARBADOS

A course was developed locally on CD ROM called "Organic Production for Entrepreneurs". The course consists of nine modules and concomitant activities, for a total of 45 hours. It can be used on an individual basis merely by installing the disk in a computer or by means of the course tutorial. This program is aimed at farmers and technicians and includes, as well as the disk, computer use training and concludes with the design of organic production projects on the part of participants. The first tutorial was successfully held in Barbados with 14 students; it is currently promoted in other countries such as Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, and St. Lucia, where there are Distance Training Centers. The production of some of the modules relied on the collaboration of the CA in the Bahamas.

BELICE

IICA and the Regional Unit for Technical Assistance (RUTA) of the United Nations Development Programme supported the private sector in establishing the Belize Organic Producers Association (BOPA), which is supported by the Ministry of Agriculture with public official involvement. In a similar vein, in November 2000, support was provided to authorities from this Ministry to identify potential areas for establishing an Organic Agriculture Program, taking advantage of the preparation of a proposal for national legislation on this topic. Furthermore, IICA collaborated in drafting a project proposal to carry out the activity, in order to present it to donor organizations.

In the area of legislation, IICA, together with the German Technical Cooperation Agency (GTZ), supported BOPA in drafting a proposal, which is currently in a first draft. In May 2001, they facilitated field days to familiarize organic producers with the management and the internal controls needed to apply this legislation.

Recently, IICA and the Tropical Agriculture Center for Research and Education (CATIE, Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza) drafted a project to promote organic production of cacao, citrus, and other fruits in Belize,

BOLIVIA

In the Bolivian case, IICA is working with the Carrasco Municipality (Cantón) Growers Association to formulate projects to develop organic coffee production in Nor Yungas and Caranavi zones, in the Department of La Paz. This organization is interested in transforming its whole production to organic; it includes 32 colonies with approximately 1200 families.

At the same time, the IICA-GTZ joint project on a "Regional Fund for Appropriate Technology in Sustainable Natural Resource Handling" provides support for the Agricultural Producers of Cascada, Alto Bení, in improving organic technology competencies in pre-roast processing of coffee beans, in order to achieve better quality and better market prices.

Similarly, this project supports transformation through dehydration of organic locoto (Bolivian chili peppers) production, in communities belonging to the Peasant Agricultural Corporation of Portal, in Cochabamba Department, as well as production, processing, and marketing of seeds and fruit from cayú, or organic cashew (*Anacardium occidentale*), in communities in Chiquitania, Santa Cruz Department.

COLOMBIA

In Colombia, IICA has developed a continuous training program for producers, technicians, and professionals on topics related to ecosystem principles, plant and insect biology, microorganisms, soil and plant nutrition, organic and mineral substances, soil protection, and technologies in accord with these principles. This education and training process is based on questioning values referring to the health and eating habits of humans and the environment, and introducing tropical agriculture concepts as well, in their ecological and economic aspects.

In addition to the training program, the Cooperative Agency has a high and positive impact organic technology bank available, which may improve farm utility in comparison to similar farms working in conventional agriculture. Educational materials that serve as the basis for courses, as well as texts with strategic concepts on rural tropical development, education, and the environment are also available in this office.



COSTA RICA

In this country, IICA is working fundamentally on creating the necessary institutions for promoting organic agriculture.

In 1999, IICA supported the National Organic Agriculture Program (PNAO) in its process of institutional strengthening, providing technical cooperation in planning and development of governmental policies to promote organic activities, as well as holding the First National Encounter on Organic Production.

During the year 2000, PNAO received cooperation to draft a plan of action for the activity and to implement a process to define a national strategy for organic agriculture development. Similarly, IICA collaborated with the Second National Encounter on Organic Production.

Currently, IICA, PNAO, and other national institutions from the organic sector are implementing a project on "Development of a national strategy to develop the Costa Rican organic product market", with the support of the Costa Rican Initiative on International Competitiveness (ICCI).

With regard to legislation, IICA, together with GTZ, has supported a review of legislation on organic production, and a new version has been evaluated by a mission from the General Directorate of Health and Consumer Protection of the European Commission; Costa Rica has been recommended for recognition in the European Union as a "third country". It is important to point out that this legislation has been duly communicated to the rest of the countries in the Central American region, serving to energize the legislative development process in each one of them.

Other activities include incorporation of organic topics in the Costa Rican Agricultural Information System (INFOAGRO, Información Agropecuario Costarricense), an initiative promoted by IICA since 1997. Among the contents that can be consulted on the website (<http://www.infoagro.go.cr/organico/index.htm>) are information related with PNAO, production, certification, a directory of those involved, and bibliographical references, among other topics.

DOMINICA

In this country, IICA held a sensitization workshop on organic products, designed for agricultural extension workers, small and medium-sized farmers, input suppliers, and consumers. The topics included in the activity were: current situation of organic agriculture, its characteristics, materials, methods, and costs, and the organic certification process.

ECUADOR

In the case of Ecuador, organic topics were included in the Ecuadorian Information System (ECUARURAL), an initiative of the Ecuadorian agricultural sector promoted by IICA since 1999. Information available on the website (http://www.ecuarural.gov.ec/ecuagro/paginas/cult_org/index.htm) includes guides for harvesting sesame, cotton, cacao, coffee, sugarcane, chestnuts, cashews, coconuts, macadamia, mallow, mangoes, peanuts, papaya, pepper, pineapple, plantain, tea, and vanilla.

EL SALVADOR

The National Fruit Program (FRUTALES) sponsored by the Ministry of Agriculture, and implemented by IICA, promotes conventional fruit cultivation such as: cashews, Persian lemons, coconuts, avocados, mangoes, and native fruits (sour sop [anona], zapote, and níspero). Among the firms benefiting from technical assistance (project consulting, processing, and marketing) by the project, four have achieved certified organic production.

Furthermore, in coordination with IICA, GTZ is implementing an Agro-Industrial Project: Reactivation of Indigo in El Salvador, which sponsored the participation of the Indigo Workers Network (Red de Añileros) in the International Organic Product Fair, BIOFACH, which is held each year in Nuremberg, Germany.



GUYANA

Starting in June 2000, IICA and the National Agricultural Research Institute (NARI) have been jointly implementing a project on organic cacao production to increase the income of small and medium-sized growers. To meet its objectives, they carry out activities such as: training on the principles and practices of organic agriculture, production enhancement, organic cacao marketing, access to high quality genetic material, and international marketing assistance for marketing this product.

One of the principal achievements of this project has been the establishment of the Mabaruma/Hosororo Organic Cacao Growers Association (MHOCCA) and export of a ton of organic (in transition) cacao to Europe, the first shipment of this product in decades.

HONDURAS

In Honduras, IICA has provided technical support for the development of the National Organic Agriculture Committee, current leader in promoting this activity. Similarly, within the framework of the Fund for Technological Acquisition, technicians and producers have been trained on the standards, trade, quality, safety, phytosanitary demands, and information systems.

JAMAICA

In this country, a project on "The Rio Cobre Goat and Vermicomposting" is currently underway. It was established by the Rio Cobre Goat Breeders Association (RCGBA) and is administered by IICA. The project is designed to introduce economically efficient and environmentally friendly agricultural practices, create a sustainable development plan for Rio Cobre, educate local growers on agricultural impacts, as well as utilize agricultural and agro-industrial wastes as organic fertilizers. Currently several producers involved in this type of technology are producing organic fertilizer with waste produced by goats and coffee.

PERU

Ever since 1997, IICA has promoted and supported in close collaboration with the Export Promotion Commission, PROMPEX, institution building in the field of agricultural production and certification. For example, within the framework of the IICA-GTZ project: "Orientation of Agrarian Research towards Alternative Development", a national commission was established to develop National Regulations for Organic Agricultural Product Certification, a document to be published soon. Based on the foregoing working group, it was possible to officialize the National Commission of Organic Growers (CONAPO).

In addition, IICA held a seminar-workshop with the National Agrarian Research Institute (INIA) dealing with organic agriculture, which allowed them to identify products and topics of interest for research and technology transfer, with a special emphasis on small farmers from the Sierra and the Ceja de Selva in Peru. In this regard, IICA has discussed the possibility with INIA of signing an agreement to begin actions such as implementation of demonstration plots at their Selva agricultural stations and installation of an organic garden in the Pachamac Valley (30 km south of Lima), in alliance with "Nueva Era", an NGO.

Another example of IICA's activities in Peru is a proposal for an activity called Minimal Intervention Organic Agriculture (AGROIM). At variance with organic agriculture, not only does it completely remove ground cover occurring over the whole crop area, but also makes

maximum use of sunlight and the daylight hours available in the tropics (the Sun and Week focus promoted by Brazil and Colombia).

SURINAME

With IICA support, Suriname has initiated two projects with a focus very close to organic production. The major objective of the first project, "Integrated Rural Development", is to promote and support sustainable agriculture in hinterland communities, where agro-chemicals are neither used nor promoted. The second project is to support the expansion of the Caribbean Fruit Growing Industry in 2000-2003, where the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, and Fisheries (LVV) has shown interest in organic alternatives.

In addition to these projects, IICA collaborated with LVV in validating the productive process with improved pineapple and zero agro-chemicals in a very practical and successful manner.

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

In Trinidad and Tobago, IICA, together with FAO and other international institutions, organized a workshop on organic vegetable production in October 2001. In this country, the Caribbean Agricultural Development and Research Institute (CARDI) has taken a leadership role in promoting this productive system. It is hoped that IICA will be able to train growers on organic topics using the different Distance Education Centers that are available.

OTHER REGIONAL ACTIVITIES

IICA has carried out other activities in the Central American region. In 1999, at the request of area Ministers of Agriculture, a project on "Promotion of Organic Production in Central America and Market Development" was drafted, with four components to be carried out in the respective countries: i) Establish legal and technical standard frameworks; ii) Establish institutional and political frameworks; iii) Develop markets; iv) Information systems. As a part of this project, and with the support of the regional organizations and international cooperation, such as the Central American Commission on Environment and Development (CCAD) and the GTZ, some activities have been carried out. Meanwhile, a process is being carried out to search for resources, sensitize authorities, define counterparts, and establish working commissions to implement the different components.

In legal aspects, and specifically in the Costa Rican case, IICA supported a revision of the respective legislation, which permitted the country, as was mentioned above, to be recommended before the UE for recognition as a "third country". The new version of Costa Rican legislation will be used to energize processes for establishing legislation in the rest of area countries, where there are Commissions set up to handle this process.

With regard to the second project component, IICA, through its regional Cooperative Agencies, is working to establish institutional and policy frameworks necessary to promote organic activities. In countries such as Honduras and Belize, the authorities have appointed national coordinators; in Panama and Guatemala, these appointments are currently under study.

With regard to market development, IICA terminated seven national studies and a regional one on the "production and marketing situation of organic products in Central America". Furthermore, it held a workshop seminar: "Central American Organic Product Trade: Guidelines for building a regional strategy and development of local markets", which was attended by more than 300 individuals from the region and beyond it. The workshop results are available and doubtless will become an important input for the countries desiring to design strategies referring to organic product trade.

Finally, with regard to information systems, as has been mentioned in the different activities carried out by IICA in Costa Rica, support was provided to PNAO to incorporate information related to organic agriculture to the Costa Rican Agricultural Information System, INFOAGRO (). It is hoped that this experience can be repeated in other countries, as a response to the problem of scant and disperse information referring to organic product production and marketing in the Americas.

