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Myth Buster #23

An ongoing Land
Stewardship Project
series on ag myths
and ways of
deflating them.

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Myth: Organic and sustainable farming systems are a luxury only well-fed countries like the U.S. can afford.

Fact:

It's long been argued by the conventional agriculture community that food production systems that rely on organic methods and sustainable, low-input techniques are only viable in nations where there are not large numbers of starving people. This argument

is based on the assumption that organic/sustainable systems are inherently low-yielding. This belief has gained even more traction in recent years as it's become clear we have more chronically hungry people than ever in the world. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the number of hungry people has increased by 20 percent since 1990, according to the United Nations. Recent food riots in places like Haiti and Egypt provided a glimpse at how dire the situation could become as the world population continues to grow.

The theory is that since chemical- and energy-intensive agriculture has given us immense yield increases in places like the U.S., the only way to fill all those hungry bellies in impoverished countries is to redouble efforts to industrialize agriculture. In fact, in places such as much of Africa, industrialized agriculture is a humanitarian necessity, goes this argument. Promoters of large-scale industrialization of agriculture say organic food is a "lifestyle choice" for communities that have surplus food, and that only pesticides and genetically modified organisms can save starving people in developing countries.

But a growing body of evidence is showing that the current problems with food insecurity are proof that a total reliance on conventional production systems will not fulfill the needs of Africa. This is particularly true when maximum productivity of a few export crops is emphasized. Recent studies have shown that in fact organic and sustainable farming systems are not as much of a luxury as some would have us think. In fact, such natural systems may be the only hope for attaining

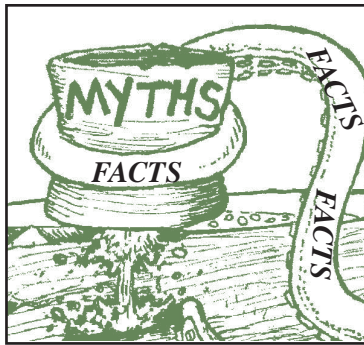
long-term food security in places like Africa, concludes a recent report put out by the United Nations.

"Organic and near-organic agricultural methods and technologies are ideally suited for many poor, marginalized smallholder farmers in Africa, as they require minimal or no external inputs, use locally and naturally available materials to produce high-quality products, and encourage a whole systemic approach to farming that is more diverse and resistant to stress," concludes the report.

The report is based on an extensive analysis of 286 projects covering tens of millions of acres in 57 countries. These projects found that in general sustainable systems increased per-acre productivity of food crops in Africa. In fact, when sustainable agricultural practices covering a variety of systems and crops were adopted, average crops yields increased by 79 percent, according to the UN. In one study, crop yields in East Africa rose on average of 128 percent under organic and near-organic systems.

The UN report credits organic and sustainable systems for helping make local farm operations more resilient in the face of disease and weather problems, while reducing the cost of purchasing expensive fertilizer and pesticides.

This could be good news for small farmers in developing countries, who make up the majority of the chronically hungry in the world. But the UN report says sustainable farming systems are not only good for subsistence producers who are only raising enough to feed their own families. The growing demand for food



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This Myth Buster is brought to you by the members and staff of the Land Stewardship Project, a private, nonprofit organization devoted to fostering an ethic of stewardship for farmland and to seeing more successful farmers on the land raising crops and livestock. For more information, call 612-722-6377 or visit www.landstewardshipproject.org.

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produced under organic and other sustainable systems opens up new, lucrative markets for these farmers, offering hope for pulling them out of poverty.

Interestingly, one major impediment to adopting more sustainable (and more management/information intensive) farming systems in the developing world is lack of good information and research, according to UN investigators. This is also often cited as a major roadblock to widespread adoption of such systems in places like the U.S. Decades of university and government agency focus on high-input conventional systems has left little room for alternatives, whether you're in Iowa or Ethiopia.

"...this calls for a shift of emphasis in research and science budgets, and for the creation of better linkages between scientists, agricultural training and extension providers and farmers," says the UN report.

Sound familiar?

More information

- To read the UN report, *Organic Agriculture and Food Security in Africa*, see www.unep.ch/etb/publications/insideCBTF_OA_2008.pdf.

- To read the article, "Organic farming 'could feed Africa'," see www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/organic-farming-could-feed-africa-968641.html.



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