

OPENING ADDRESS

The 1st International Forum on Environment friendly/ Organic Agriculture-
‘Yangpyong 21’, 23~24, Oct. 2001, Yangpyong, Seoul, Korea

Why Sustainable / Organic Agriculture and What Can We Do to Foster It?

By Prof. Sung-Hoon Kim
Chung-Ang University, Seoul, Korea
Senior Adviser, The Coalition for Korean Farmer Associations

For the past decades, I, myself, have been deeply involved in the so-called ‘environmentally-friendly agriculture(EFA)’ : i.e., sustainable agriculture in Korea, as an organic farm leader, as one of the consumer-farmer joint cooperative founders, and as the chief agricultural administrator of the government.

It is, therefore, not strange at all to me, if anybody ask me whether or not sustainable agriculture is self-sustainable in the world of fast commercialization cum globalization?

The answer is “Yes, of course”. Even under the circumstances of no conspicuous governmental supports, “Yes, it can survive, but may not thrive on as fast as many people wish.”

Is the sustainable/organic agriculture worthwhile to receive much more public attention as one of the solutions to cure the world wide sick phenomenon of modern food and agricultural industry?

Yes, for that alone it deserves world wide attention and support. I have long witnessed that the number of organic farming population and the acreage devoted for sustainable agriculture have been growing continuously but very slowly during the last decades, resulting in not only the good causes and merits for the society and the

environment as well, but also for the benefit accrued to the farmers themselves.

Environmentally-friendly agriculture, first of all, conserves the soil and natures capabilities, and allows for a sustainable cyclical usage of agricultural resources with the help of modern biological technologies and natural predators, thereby minimizing the use of chemicals.

A recent Korean government survey reveals that approximately 20 thousand farm households (1.6% of total farms) participating in the EFA program for the last 4 years have reduced the application of chemical fertilizers by 39 percent, the number of usages of pest/insecticides by 50% (from 6 times to 3 times per crop) and yet maintained the 99% level of the average rice yields per hectare (that is, 4.92 tons). The Korean-type sustainable agriculture, which is characterized as a sort of 'precision farming', based on the Integrated Pest and Nutrient Management (IPNM) system has been so far successful in maintaining the stable level of high yields without undermining the current productivity. As a result, the average farmers income has increased by 6.2% for the 4 years period, largely owing to the higher prices received by the farmers. But remember, to do it requires a strong will and commitment and a lot of sweat. Needless to emphasize, the lions share of the benefits resulting from the environmentally-friendly agriculture goes to the consumers and the society in the form of safe food, disease control and environmental protection. The latter part does not need a further elaboration as the effects are already well-known publicly.

Can sustainable/organic agriculture continue to feed the world and improve environmental performance?

The answer is 'yes, it is very feasible'. As far as OECD member countries are concerned, the rapid increase in public interests and the technological progress in EFA indicate that the total production of food and agricultural products may not reduce drastically even in the early stage of introducing the sustainable agricultural system.

However, taken into account for the socio-economic conditions of the non-OECD member countries, mainly less developed areas, the prospects look gloomy as they are yet suffering from the absolute shortages in food production and supply. Furthermore, the present food distribution system seemingly continues to shed clouds over the famine-stricken people of this planet. Another worldwide ad hoc measures to tackle

the fundamental problems of the least-developed countries should be taken place for the sake of the mankind sustainability.

Will further trade liberalization help progress towards sustainable/organic agriculture?

'Oh, no!,' unless otherwise the contemporary schemes and policies of trade liberalization being pushed by both food exporting countries and major transnational corporations add on a new dimension aimed at taking the full costs of environmental degradation into account in their intensive production and trade enterprises. As environmentally-friendly agriculture performs the wholesome multifunctional effects upon society, it needs to be fostered in a compensatory manner with public encouragement in the form of various governmental supports. By the same token, the food security concerns for the less developed countries need to be duly respected of the unique characteristics of the individual countries beyond major trade liberalization issues.

Which social dimensions of sustainable/organic agriculture are most important for developing and developed countries?

Relatively small-scale family farms in most developing countries may first look upon the income aspects of EFA, whereas the public oriented consumers and environmentalists in the advanced countries emphasize the importance of environmental social costs and benefits of the intensive corporate farming system.

Therefore, the progress in disseminating sustainable agriculture in less developed countries may be slow, if not retarded, unless otherwise the respective governments provide various incentive programs including supply of needy techniques and materials, direct income payment schemes, and adequate market outlets. For instance, the Korean government since 1999 has launched a direct (income) payment program for the EFA-initiating farmers in the selectively designated districts for the maximum period up to 3years, aiming at the reduction of use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides by 30-40%, respectively by the year 2004. On the other hand, the food sufficient/exporting countries may have different features that relate to the public awareness and concerns with respect to health, life and environmental priorities of the society. It becomes, however, certain that the major trend of thoughts in the 21st century moves toward re-building

the sustainable society on the earth as one.

How far can market deliver sustainable/organic agriculture and which complementary policies might be needed?

As people's awareness with the importance of EFA in place for intensive chemical-dependent agriculture which has brought such disastrous panic as BSE, FMD and food toxication (poisoning) and hazardous additives in recent years, market for EFA products appears to grow to a noticeable extent, along with the growing importance of food safety and environmental concerns. Even though the world-wide science magazine 'NATURE(April, 2001)' reports that it takes, on the average, 9 years for the pure organic farming reaches the break-even point of revenues and expenses, it might be the unavoidable path that contemporary mankind on the planet should pursue. Fortunately, in most recent, the market grows rapidly even over the national borderlines with the timely aid of electronic development; that is, rapid internetization and e-business. As Alvin Topler adequately pointed-out, e-business has made possible a variety of small-scale production relatively easy find their own markets in the new economy of knowledge-based society. What we need at the foremost to accelerate marketing and trade of EFA products is to establish the domestically cum internationally acceptable codes of index for EFA food, together with the governmental acknowledgement and guarantee systems. FAO and WHO further need to play a positive role in this endeavour, too.

To wrap-up the discussion, the environmentally-friendly agriculture appears more sustainable than highly intensive chemical-dependent systems in the coming knowledge-based sustainability-concerned era in every aspects of the task. In this context, not only the respective national agricultural policies and programs but also the international convention like the forthcoming WTO ministerial conference should pay due attention to the growing importance of environmentally-friendly agriculture for the ever-sustainable human life, happiness and peace as a whole.

Thank you very much.