

Solomon Islands Government Policy on Organic Agriculture Systems

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Executive Summary

Organic agriculture has received insufficient attention over the past decades although its health and environmental benefits have been advocated. The absence of a detailed explicit policy or strategy for the development of the organic agriculture sector is a contributing factor. Organic agriculture has great potential in Solomon Islands, because traditionally this has been the farming method practiced. Organic agriculture as we understand it today combines tradition, innovation, and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and a good quality of life for all involved. In addition we should view organic agriculture as a means to decrease cost of production, while increasing productivity and profit for the farmers, to mitigate climate changes and to avoid price fluctuations in food there by contributing to sustainable food security. Organic agriculture systems sustain the health of soils, ecosystems, and people thus contributing towards the strengthening of the food and nutritional security policy of the MAL, MHS and MOF. This policy therefore provides a guideline to promote organic agriculture in Solomon Islands within the next five (5) years.

The overall aim of this policy is to provide safe and nutritious food to the population of this country as well as foreigners visiting the country. In addition, promotion of organic agriculture systems in the Solomon Islands will contribute to improved environmental conditions, and income generating opportunities. Despite its many benefits, promotion of organic agriculture practices and products for commercial purposes has not been undertaken by the Solomon Islands Government, or donor partner agencies on a large-scale leaving only the Zai Na Tina Organic Research and Demonstration Farm, with its very limited resources, to demonstrate organic agriculture. The Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAL) has therefore taken the bold step of advancing the organic farming concept by incorporating into its normal annual work programs and integrating its promotion throughout its activities and operations.

This policy document outlines how MAL will achieve the objective of fully integrating organic agriculture into all aspects of its work. Some initial actions have to be taken as outlined in the sections under “Initial Recommended Policy Actions” and “Policy Implementation.” Some problems are likely to happen and thus suggested actions to be taken to avoid them happening are also highlighted under the “Implementation Constraints.” The policy timeframe at the end of the document will guide the MAL in its implementation.

This document is structured in the following manner: Executive Summary, Introduction/Background, Purpose, Aim, Current Status on Organic Agriculture, Benefits of Organic Agriculture, MAL Initiatives, Government Assistance, Initial Recommended Policy Actions to Protect and Enhance the Development of Organic or Natural Agriculture, Policy Implementation, Implementation Constraints, Policy Implementation Time Frame.

Introduction/Background

Solomon Islands as a country with its indigenous population have since time immemorial, been practicing organic agriculture methods without fully knowing the whys and the how's of plants susceptibility to insect pests or diseases and ways to combat them. These traditional methods are generally in harmony with the environment and with modern organic principles.

Crop (and animal) pests and diseases were not as common as they are today. The introduction of commercial farming methods and modern technologies has tended to prioritize profit-making and increased food production to keep-up with growing populations over sustaining the health of soils, ecosystems and people over the longer term. That has contributed to the perception that traditional methods of organic agriculture and their simple appropriate technologies are inferior. They are often considered irrelevant by modern agriculturists and the elite society in our country. This attitude has cost the country millions of dollars in terms of importation of all forms of agricultural chemicals and external technologies. As a result we have experienced increased soil degradation and increased incidences of crop (and livestock/animal) pests and diseases. Strong well thought out national organic policies and strategies to protect our traditional methods and its simple and appropriate technologies could have helped to avoid some of these effects. This policy aims to address this and put the protection and promotion of organic and traditional agricultural systems at the heart of the Solomon Islands vision for the development of the agriculture sector.

Purpose

The purpose of this policy document is to outline the benefits of producing and consuming organic products. It provides a guideline on how the Solomon Islands Government should capitalize on opportunities, address challenges and constraints and develop promotion strategies for organic agriculture for the betterment of Solomon Islands and its people.

Aim

To produce products that are safe and healthy for the people of Solomon Islands, by adopting good agricultural practices such as reducing reliance on synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, and minimizing practices that contribute to land and soil degradation such as slash and burn. Organic agriculture will pave the way to improve farmers' income through the first step of having a national organic certification of their products which will provide the benefits first to nation's organic agro-producers. Once the critical mass has developed to get organic farming on a strong footing, some organic farmers may move towards exports markets to Papua New Guinea, Australia, Japan, Singapore, etc. and thus get higher returns, thus enhancing farmers' livelihood.

Current Status on Organic Agriculture

Organic production methods are both old and new. Many farmers use traditional farming methods that are generally in harmony with modern organic principles but formal organic farming and certification is very limited. To-date, the only full time organic farm is Zai Na Tina Organic Research and Demonstration Farm located at Burns' Creek area, east of the capital city, Honiara, owned and operated by Mr. Joini Tutua- the father of organic farming in the Solomon Islands. This farm is not certified but there are properties certified by NASSA that Kokonut Pacific work with. The Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAL), although advocating the idea, have done very limited research on organic pesticides, economic impacts, linking to markets, and other socio-economic aspects of organic production.

Organic certification can currently be a lengthy and expensive process as there are no local certifiers. It is therefore only likely to be appropriate for farmers that will benefit from the certification as a result e.g. those exporting niche products. Hence, as a start, local certification should be developed through Government sponsored programmes. However, the promotion of organic methods is applicable to all farmers and by integrating organic agriculture into all aspects of MALs work the Ministry hopes to grow the sector and leave it well placed to capitalize from future opportunities that might arise as certification costs fall.

Benefits of Organic Agriculture

The benefits of organic farming fall under three broad categories: Improved health, environment and economy. They are as follows:

- Since organic practices are sustainable farming methods, it does not require huge financial inputs to start with unless going through certification process.
- Reduce production costs thus increasing revenue to the farmer
- Avoid soil degradation caused by heavy use of chemical fertilizers
- Avoid environmental pollution caused by chemicals and by rejecting the use of fossil-fuel
- Avoid contamination of drinking water sources by not using inorganic chemical inputs
- Soil organisms are not killed and thus protects and enhances biodiversity
- Avoid food poisoning caused by abuse and misuse of synthetic chemicals
- Internationally organic certified products fetch higher market prices than products produced using inorganic pesticides and fertilizers
- Enhances consumers' health against non-communicable diseases (heart disease, diabetes, etc.)
- Organic practices can reduce the production of greenhouse gases from agriculture by avoiding the use of fossil-fuel and synthetic chemical inputs, and encouraging carbon sequestration in soil.

- Rural income generation and employment opportunities and access to external niche markets Reducing pressures for rural population migration into urban areas,

MAL Initiative

The Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAL) is keen to avoid the long-term effects that inorganic chemicals can have on the soil quality and the farmers' livelihoods. Therefore, MAL would like to encourage organic farming amongst its farming population, as the benefits of this production method highlighted above out-weigh the negatives and enhance sustainability.

MAL, in its support to this policy will be introducing in its rice growing program a method of rice growing called the System of Rice Intensification (SRI). This method is organic in principle because it discourages the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. Instead it encourages the use of mulch/ organic matter (biomass) to substitute for fertilizers, and enhancing the naturally-occurring biological agent actions for sustainable pest management. This method will also be encouraged to farmers who are growing other crops, other than rice. Organic farming will be encouraged as well with backyard "sup-sup" home gardening both in rural and urban areas.

Many Solomon Islands producers are using organic production methods but are not certified therefore MAL will be looking into possibilities of increasing the number of certified producers and exporting organic products of our commodities to fetch higher market prices than the country receives from commodities.

Government Assistance

In order to support the promotion of the sector the MAL will integrate organic agriculture into all aspects of its service delivery and give priority to organic enterprises for funding opportunities.

MAL will lead this initiative working in partnership with several government ministries such as health, environment, education, tourism, trade, commerce and finance, etc whose cooperation will be vital to support the development of national organic agriculture policies.

Initial Recommended Policy Actions to Protect and Enhance the Development of Organic or Natural Agriculture

1. All educational institutions (schools, colleges, and universities) or levels of learning, curriculum must include sustainable, cost-effective organic farming as a core subject.
2. Organic agriculture must be taught as a separate subject or integrated into the following subject areas:

- a) Environmental studies
 - b) Health and Nutrition
 - c) Soil health
 - d) Pests and diseases
 - e) Biology and ecology
 - f) Waste management
 - g) Climate change
3. The following ministries of the National Government, Provincial Governments, Education Institutions, Non-governmental organizations and Industry Associations should be included as key stakeholders or promoters or even benefactors of Organic Agriculture:
- a) Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock
 - b) Ministry of Natural Resources
 - c) Ministry of Forestry, Environment and Conservation
 - d) Ministry of Health and Medical Services
 - e) Ministry of Women & Youth
 - f) Ministry of Trade, Commerce and Industry
 - g) Ministry of Land and Housing
 - h) Town/City Councils
 - i) Solomon Islands Water Authority
 - j) Ministry of Provincial Government
 - k) Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development
 - l) Solomon Islands College of Higher Education
 - m) The University of PNG Open Campus
 - n) Tourist Authority – Hotel Owners
 - o) University of the South Pacific- Center Honiara
 - p) Zai Na Tina Organic Research and Demonstration Farm (Inc.)
 - q) Kastom Gaden Association (KGA)

At the provincial level the following stakeholders must be recognized and included:

- a) Tribal Chiefs and their land owning groups (Tribe)
 - b) Village elders
 - c) Women and Youth groups
 - d) Provincial Governments
 - e) Churches
4. The government through the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock will give full recognition to an Organic Farmers' Association or Council to be set-up by the practicing organic farmers. The Organic Farmer's Association or Council set-up is a bottom up, and

it will recognize the farmers' education as a prime mover of collaboration of farmers to link to markets. It must be recognized as a national body within and outside our country having its own objectives and govern its daily activities. The above stakeholders may send their representative or representatives by the invitation of the Association/Council whenever a subject or topic related to their function appears in their agenda list.

5. The Organic Farmer's Association or Council will work closely with the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock to coordinate technical and financial assistance received from MAL with that received from donors like FAO, IFAD, IFOAM, ACIAR, ADRA, OXFAM and other agencies. This must be done in a transparent and accountable manner to minimize any potential suspicion and mistrust between Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock and the Association or Council. Joint proposals by government and NGOs to foreign aid donors will be encouraged.
6. The Government will set aside in its annual budget a healthy amount of money for the promotion and advancement of organic agriculture system which embraces all aspects of true and real developments. MAL with other stakeholders organize campaigns and events such as organic farm walk, promotion of local organic food in school, and at farm fairs emphasizing the benefits on health, environment, economies and income-generation.
7. To make food safety a reality for our citizens and our visitors, the government must put in place a screening policy to eliminate imports of production inputs not allowed under the Pacific Organic Standard. .
8. A National assessment of arable land areas will be carried out annually focusing on the most populated areas in the country.
9. Climate change may cause irregularities of dry and wet seasons experiences increasing the importance of sustainable water management, Rivers, springs and water wells must be strictly kept clean from pollutants like oil, petrol, and diesel entry from logging companies and human wastes or excretion.
10. As water is an essential part of organic farming or gardening it is extremely important that farmers' have access to clean water sources or supply. In addition, water as part of education of farmers should focus on rain water harvesting and use of drip irrigation to optimize water use in relevant areas.

11. Consideration will be given to scaling down or banning the importation of non-degradable materials which escalate the amount of wastes seen in our townships and causes more toxicity in our soil.
12. The appropriate ministries should collaborate with MAL, KGA, and Zai Na Tina Organic Research and Demonstration Farm in research, education and trainings. More organic solutions to agricultural problems needs to be integrated in crop production and protections modules.
13. KGA partners and mature partners to jointly submit proposals with MAL on organic agriculture and livestock to foreign aid donors.
14. MAL and its partners will share organic agriculture school venues for dissemination of information as well as encourage farmer education, starting with indigenous crops:
 - a) MAL personnel's involve in supporting, teaching, and enhancing the development of organic agriculture must have the broad insight of both theory and practice of organic ideas.
 - b) He/She must see how the broad application of organic farming and its products are sold to consumers who are also stakeholders of the development and promotion of the program.
15. As the development and expansion of organic agriculture will depend entirely on our own environment and its organic resources both in the sea and on land, the relevant ministries must have strict policies for their protection. This must be so, in the view that they are also stakeholders of the most important and relevant understanding.
16. MAL will strengthen links with funding and implementing partners in the Pacific region e.g. IFAD, CTA, IFOAM, SPC, and FAO, but also with markets, especially supermarkets that are frequented by the richer part of the Solomon Islands population as well as expatriates.
17. Having a national policy is of paramount importance to the above funding partners, therefore our inclusion of the above materials in this policy statement must be taken seriously with our explicit desire that this country must be known as organic, free from all agricultural and medicinal chemicals which are known to be highly toxic.

18. Town/City councils and households will be assisted by the government to acquire appropriate composting machines to turn all their organic wastes into compost materials for farmers.
19. Solomon Islands Government and other funding agencies must increase their assistance to fund more small livestock projects (chicken, duck, pig, and goat) to assist in compost making.
20. MAL will prioritize and promote more research on organic solutions to agricultural problems.
21. Government through MAL and in partnership with other line ministries, and stakeholders will look into ways to design a labeling system that is appropriate to the Solomon Islands situation, to be used for certifying organically produced products. Currently the move is for regional labeling system for products certified to the Pacific Standard. National systems are not likely to receive recognition in export markets, and labels need to be attached /guarantee production to a recognized organic standard. This mechanism is better and more cost effective to ensure that the policy links to the regional direction and labeling scheme. Solomon Islands have already been involved in these directions.
22. Greater public awareness among consumers and policy-makers about the potential benefits of organic production for better health, environments, economies and income generation is needed.

Policy Implementation

This policy will act as a guideline for the promotion of Organic Agriculture in the Solomon Islands and should be implemented in the following sequences to allow for a smooth technology transfer and adaptation so as to avoid a shock that may have negative consequences:

- a) Develop and integrate an organic farming programme into the extension and research division's work programs by reviewing and integrating national and agriculture sector policies, plans and policies, and set targets for the development of the organic sector.
- b) Establishment of organic agriculture demonstration programs in the provinces both in rural and urban areas.
- c) Training of extension officers in simple composting methods.
- d) Training and education of farmers, consumers in general, on the benefits of organic farming, and compost making, and other traditional practices.
- e) Conserve traditional knowledge and language relating to organic production techniques.

- f) Restricting importation and use of highly toxic synthetic chemicals, and residual chemicals that are harmful to both human, animals, and environment.
- g) Collaborating with the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Management – Curriculum Development Unit – to incorporate organic agriculture as a core subject in its syllabus for teaching at all levels of education.
- h) Organic campaigns and events (organic farm fairs, harvest food festivals, etc.) to raise awareness of the benefits of organic agriculture.

Implementation Constraints

The implementation of any policy can be hindered by factors that affect its success. Contingency plans must be in place so that hindrances and risks are limited and obstacles dealt with effectively.

i) Competency of Officers

Organic farming may sound simple, however, without good knowledge on how to do it, what to do, and when to do it, failure is bound to happen. To solve this problem, agricultural officers will be provided with training opportunities by MAL both within and outside the country on skills of organic agriculture and compost-making to improve their competency on organic farming. This will empower them to provide better training and other technical assistance to farmers and other partners.

ii) Quality Compost Production

Compost must have all the major plant nutrients as well as important trace elements required by plants for healthy growth to enhance production. It has been scientifically proven that plant materials combined with animal wastes produce good quality compost. Therefore, MAL will encourage the development of small livestock by increasing budget allocation for small livestock enterprises so as to make animal waste more available to farmers.

iii) Change of Policy

A change of government can lead to policy changes. A solution to this challenge is to partner with a wide range of stakeholders including Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and private enterprises to actively promote organic agriculture. Developing broad-based support for this policy through partnerships, education and awareness can help to institutionalize this approach. In addition, organic agriculture should be encouraged as a hobby through club organizations.

Policy Implementation Time Frame

Policy Issues	Implementation Period	Responsibility	Indicators
Development of Organic Agriculture Policy/ Plans/ Strategies	Jan-March 2010	MAL-Extension & Research Divisions	Policy document approval
Development of an Organic Farming Extension & Research Programme	April 2010-2015	MAL	Implementation of programme activities
Training of Extension Officers and Farmers	2010-2015	MAL, PAES, Zai Na Tina Organic Research and Demonstration Farm	Officers and farmers are trained in organic farming skills
Restricting Importation and Use of Highly Toxic Synthetic Chemicals	2011-2015	MAL, MFEC, MHMS, Business houses	Reduction in the number of imported synthetic chemicals
Incorporation of Organic Agriculture in Solomon Islands Education Curriculum	2011-2015	MAL, MEHRD	Teaching of organic agriculture in all levels of education institutions
Formation of Organic Farmers Association	2011-2014	MAL, MECI, Registrar of Coops	Active organic farmers association