

Urban Farmers between Visions of Alternative Futures of Consumption and Market Demand – an Ethnographic Study of Farmers’ Markets in Pakistan.

Certified organic agriculture (COA) is a much debated alternative to conventional and industrialized farming. Organic commodities have become an integral part of the global agro-food system and link producers in the global South with consumers in the global North. While the origins of organic agriculture lie in Europe and the US, today, South Asian countries are among the biggest producers of organic commodities. Different models of organic agriculture such as Demeter, BioSuisse and USDA NOP travel globally and are translated into practice at their points of arrival. Over the past years, social science scholarship has paid attention to different aspects of COA and literature often reads as a critique of a neoliberal food system (Campbell/Stuart 2005; Galt 2011; Guthmann 2004; Reynolds 2004) and has contributed to an understanding of COA as part of an emerging “green capitalism” (Friedmann 2005), in which companies and retailers appropriate the “green consumerism” for their interests. This literature has been helpful in pointing out that COA is a very market-driven alternative.

In comparison to other South Asian countries, Pakistan features a small but fast-growing organic agricultural sector. The number of certified producers has risen from 28 in 2004 to 1,045 in 2012 (Willer/Yussefi-Menzler/Sorensen 2008; Willer/Lernoud/Kilcher 2013). Besides the rural farmers and the private sector (certification bodies and export firms), the greater network of organic agriculture also includes urban farmers and the media, who engage in the dissemination of knowledge and the promotion of organic agriculture in Pakistan. A systemic bias against alternative, organic agriculture necessitates a close cooperation of all actors involved in organic agriculture. The systemic bias appears on two levels; (1) in agricultural science and practice, it is difficult to acquire funds for research on alternative agriculture; (2) prevailing land tenure systems in large parts of Pakistan have hindered innovation and experiment by smallholders for a long time.

In addition to the bias against alternative agriculture, agrarian and environmental issues only find little space on the public agenda which is perhaps due to the paralyzing effect of everyday violence and ongoing political power struggles. But recently, organic agriculture has become present in the media. Different English-language newspapers (Dawn, The News, Tribune) cover the farmers’ markets in Islamabad and Lahore and report on the development of consumer demand. Coverage of organic agriculture has increased and changed in quality. For example, while in 2010, an article titled “Promoting Organic Farming” (Dawn, 27.12.2010) had to explain the basic principles of organic farming to the reader, recent articles discuss issues of organic agriculture in detail, such as in the articles “Demand for Organic Vegetables Increases” (Dawn, 04.11.2013) and: “Growers confident organic food market will grow” (Dawn, 15.09.2013)

The “Kuch Khaas Farmers’ Market” in Islamabad and the “Khalis Food Market” in Lahore have taken place weekly and monthly respectively since summer 2013. Both urban farmers’ markets have developed into vibrant platforms for organic agriculture and organic food. Besides processed and unprocessed food (including live animals), exhibitors display farming practices as well as processing and marketing techniques and exchange knowledge. These markets represent the first domestic markets for certified and uncertified organic food.

Over the past years, consumer demand for certified and good quality food has increased. Due to food scandals and high residues of pesticides in fresh foods, especially urban consumers have developed a growing consciousness of healthy food. In response, a growing

number of retailers and supermarket chains have started to offer fresh food that comply with the standards of ISO (International Organization for Standardization) and GlobalGAP (Global Good Agricultural Practice). While all of the internationally certified organic food crops are exported, some entrepreneurs have started to produce organic food for the domestic market.

Responding to the quality issues and a growing demand for healthy and ecologically just food, these entrepreneurs have developed a range of products that are sold in the farmers' markets and selected supermarkets. Together with export firms of certified organic commodities who also have an interest in entering the domestic market, entrepreneurs have asked the National Institute for Organic Agriculture (NIOA) at the National Agricultural Research Council (NARC) to draft national organic standards that could provide a tool for value adding and be an incentive to increase quality in food crops.

As observed during my field research, two opposing camps are developing in the emerging organic sector. On one hand, entrepreneurs and committed urban farmers work together with export firms and national institutes to draft standards and develop better quality foods not only for export, but also for the domestic market. On the other hand, urban and some rural farmers envision alternative futures of consumption and produce and circulate knowledge on a healthier and ecologically just lifestyle and oppose the standardization of food crops.

Urban farmers belonging to the former group are driven by the low food standards present in Pakistan and view the growing demand for certified food as a possibility to increase overall standards and, more specifically, provide fresh and healthy food to urban population. One example is an entrepreneur who started her own food label a few years back. She founded her business after she, while visiting local mills to purchase high-fibre content flour, learned that local millers were spilling moth balls and mercury into the flour in order to preserve it. Likewise, an urban farmer in Lahore who himself suffers of a heart disease, decided to grow certified organic food for the domestic market as he is convinced that one should primarily consume local organic food that complies with certain standards (Field Note, Lahore, 11.09.2013).

An example for the latter is the small business "Isloo fresh", a fusion of three urban farmers in Islamabad, who produce, process and sell dairy products, cheese and vegetables. They have also established a home delivery service that distributes the regional products to Islamabad residents. One of the co-partners had lived in California for a few years and experienced and criticizes the "organic hype" there. For him, organic agriculture means, above all, regionality. He believes that the soil adds natural antibodies to the crops and hence people should consume locally grown food. He disapproves of the long-distance transportation of certified organic commodities as well as the market-driven selection of crops to be grown. While discussing these matters on the farmers' market in Islamabad in September 2013, he told me: "I dislike standards. Nature is not standardized." (Field Note, Islamabad, 07.09.2013). Likewise, a peri-urban farmer who regularly sells his products on the "Kuch Khaas Farmers' Market" states: "We do not need organic labels. We just use the nature. We have cowdung." (Field Note, Islamabad, 07.09.2013).

The futures envisioned by both groups differ by their view on food standards. While one group views standards as a means to improve food quality and consumer protection, the other group criticizes standardization for conventionalizing food crops and decreasing local food sovereignty. Both camps work towards their envisioned futures and it remains to be seen whether certified organic commodities find their way into the domestic market.