

5 – Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 – Creating a coherent ‘alternative’ agricultural movement

The evidence in this report suggests that there is a rapidly growing interest in the South in the potential of OAA as a means for achieving a number of objectives. These include:

- increasing farmers’ incomes
- increasing yields and productivity in traditional, marginal, agricultural systems
- improving soil fertility and long term sustainability of farming systems
- reducing farmers’ dependency on artificial inputs and the exposure of rural populations and environments to their side effects
- assisting with the restoration of degraded or abandoned land
- maintaining and improving biodiversity
- promoting and valorizing local knowledge and building self confidence.

Knowledge of the extent to which OAA is practised in the South is far from complete. Official data relating to land under certified organic management suggests that organic farming is still very much a minority activity. Only one country in the South (Argentina) has more than 1% of its agricultural land under organic management. While such data may be incomplete, there is a far bigger gap in our knowledge of the extent to which de facto organic and agroecological systems are employed throughout the world. Evidence suggests that these two latter approaches are much more widely practised than the formal organic approach, although there is no reliable means of estimating by how much.

Reasons for adopting these different

approaches vary significantly. Formal organic approaches to farming are generally adopted to gain access to and/or competitive advantage in export markets. Where governments are involved in promoting organic farming it is generally with the aim of boosting agricultural export earnings. Other actors, however, are promoting OAA for very different reasons. A range of rural development and environmental agencies and NGOs are beginning to use OAA as a tool to meet a range of broader developmental and environmental objectives. The emphasis of different programmes and projects may vary, but there is evidence that they often yield multiple benefits. At the same time farmers in many developing countries are withdrawing, either partially or completely, from the ‘agrochemical treadmill’. Thus there is a clear convergence of interest between the agendas of different agencies and many farming communities. Such a convergence could lead to a widespread uptake of OAA in what might prove to be a truly green ‘Green Revolution’. In our opinion the potential of these individual approaches and the synergies between them has yet to be fully explored.

Because the issues and agencies driving the uptake of OAA are many and diffuse, information regarding the incidence and successes of OAA, and the constraints it faces, is spread across many different sources. Differing approaches to OAA, (e.g. certified organic, agroecology, agroforestry, and ‘de facto’ organic practices adopted in rural/participatory development programmes) mean that there are many professional groupings who have knowledge and experience of the issues, but who do not necessarily share these resources or experiences with colleagues in other fields.

Rist (2000) identifies that the lack of co-ordination and communication between different disciplinary approaches (such as agriculture, livestock production, forestry, agroforestry, research, education and agricultural extension) provides a major

obstacle to developing more robust forms of OAA and in communicating the benefits of OAA to a broader audience. Greater cross-disciplinary and cross-professional communication would significantly enhance the comprehensiveness of current knowledge of the benefits and potential of OAA. Whilst this may be difficult to achieve on a global basis, it may be possible to create linkages between different professional groupings on local, regional and, sometimes a national scale. This would be a valuable first step towards creating a more unified and coherent ‘alternative’ agricultural community, one which shares broadly similar values but has yet to learn to work together in the pursuit of common goals – something which would enable it to share experiences and present a more unified front to the world at large.

5.2 – Promoting OAA: defining objectives

A central objective of this report was to identify mechanisms through which relevant funding and advocacy bodies might best engage with promoting the development of OAA. We believe that there are two main avenues through which such efforts could be channelled: through global advocacy and supporting grassroots initiatives. Each approach has its attractions and drawbacks (see Schoones and Toulmin, 1999, in chapter 7 for a general discussion of these issues). Before discussing these approaches in any detail we raise a number of questions (below) regarding organizational capacity and priorities – questions that we feel will help organizations clarify the issues and choices involved in selecting the most appropriate approach (or combination of approaches).

- Which geographic areas can we most effectively work in?
- How can we most effectively work (e.g. direct involvement in research and projects or financing and contracting others to do so)?

- Which areas of work do we wish/feel best able to support (e.g. pure and/or participative research, promoting knowledge transfer, supporting training and extension programmes, assisting with the development of mechanisms for inspection and certification, or education and advocacy)?
- What criteria will guide our choice of involvement (e.g. promotion of conservation interests promoting food security, restoring degraded land, promotion of specific OAA techniques)?
- Do we have the capacity to build direct links with grass-roots organizations in the South, or would we rather work with ‘first world’ institutions with proven expertise and existing links?
- Do we wish to work in areas where OAA has established itself and where there is a baseline of local expertise and institutional capacity, or to develop seed-corn projects in regions where OAA has yet to achieve a critical mass?

Such questions are best answered by organizations themselves in view of their aims, objectives and capacities – we do not presume to advise on such issues. What follows is a discussion of two broad approaches to promoting OAA, those of advocacy and building local capacity, which might be pursued in isolation or combination.

5.3 – Global research and advocacy

In this report we have identified a range of projects and initiatives that illustrate the benefits and potential of OAA in a range of different ecological, agricultural and socio-economic contexts. We have identified a number of ways in which these methods and approaches can address a range of problems facing farmers, rural (and sometimes urban) communities and policy-makers in the South. Yet we are acutely aware that the desk-based

nature and relatively short time span of this study have limited its scope and comprehensiveness. We are also aware that the report raises more questions than it can answer. We feel that further research in this area has potential in at least three respects, outlined below.

Firstly, we believe that such research and advocacy has value in informing the debate about global food security, sustainability and the relationship between the two. One of the main constraints on the development of OAA appears to be the attitudes of governments and other policy makers – who are often indifferent, and occasionally hostile, to OAA. The FAO notes that there is a ‘widespread belief among many sections of society that organic agriculture is not a feasible option for improving food security’ (1998, p.12). This it argues is a major constraint upon gaining greater support for OAA. The growing recognition afforded to OAA by international agencies (such as the FAO and UNCTAD) and foreign donors may well result in governments in the South adopting more sympathetic and pro-active approaches to OAA. The organic and agroecological movements could help accelerate this process through building up and maintaining a capacity for ‘global advocacy’: publicizing the ‘how, what and why’ of OAA. The task of promoting diverse and self-reliant systems of food production becomes ever more urgent given the dominant trends of centralization and commodification within food production systems and the vested interests which promote these processes.

Research of this nature is also of considerable potential interest to practitioners in the field. As we noted earlier, one of the paradoxes surrounding OAA is the variation in the levels of knowledge available to different communities. Gathering (and disseminating) information about best practice is one crucial way of improving the knowledge base within knowledge-poor areas.

Such research would also be of potential interest to the academic community, as it resonates with a number of key current concerns within the social sciences including:

- How communities and decision-makers in the South evaluate and implement competing models of ‘traditionalism’, ‘ecological modernization’ and the (GM-led) ‘second Green Revolution’
- How different ‘quality conventions’ are negotiated and implemented along food supply chains and how these affect access to, and competitiveness within, markets
- The relevance and effectiveness of ‘oppositional’ strategies to globalization and commodification, particularly in relation to issues of agrobiodiversity.

In relation to the issues discussed in this report, two potential research areas emerge that may prove of interest to the rural development research community:

- The existing common ground, tensions (and potential for resolving these) between the organic, agroecological and sustainable approaches to agriculture and specifically, how these are played out on the ground in project development and prioritization
- Whether and how OAA can develop as a ‘paradigm of innovation’ which can build an effective strategy of research and development capable of widely diffusing best practice while absorbing new lessons from those areas where it is being adopted.

5.4 – Building local capacity

As well as developing a capacity for global advocacy, there is clear need for further support in developing local abilities to implement OAA techniques and systems. Two different approaches might be adopted which help to build such capacity. The first involves working with established Northern-based agencies

(consultancies, NGOs etc.) who have experience and links in the South. The second involves working directly with grassroots NGOs in the South.

This study identifies a number of agencies with a proven track record in researching, developing and disseminating information regarding organic and agroecological practices. Individually and collectively they have a wealth of experience in developing programmes for research and development, training, extension and marketing. A number of these organizations are identified in Appendix 2a. They include research institutes, international NGOs, and private sector consultancies. Most of these agencies are dependent on external funding (from either the commercial or public sectors) to carry out their work. Inevitably in their work, they will have identified projects, schemes and initiatives which they feel merit further investigation and/or development for which they may have been unable to attract funding. Thus they are well placed to advise on specific projects with development potential as well as those that have a potential for transferability. Organizations with little prior experience in this area are likely to find that institutions such as these are well placed to identify, develop and execute projects and programmes.

A second option available to organizations wishing to involve themselves in this area is that of building direct contact with NGOs in the South. This is clearly the most attractive option in terms of providing value for money and producing direct benefits on the ground. Yet it is also a relatively high-risk strategy, as it involves identifying and selecting groups who have the administrative capacity to manage funds and to monitor and evaluate project performance. Some governmental developmental agencies and many development charities work on this basis (although more often they have local field staff overseeing projects). The projects that they finance may include those with a significant OAA

component but are rarely solely, or even primarily, geared towards these types of project.

Two private charities (SARD and the Amber Foundation) are primarily oriented towards supporting NGOs and producer groups involved in OAA. SARD have established an annual prize, worth \$10,000 and normally split between three winners every year. Thus they simultaneously lend financial support to grassroots NGOs and also publicize and celebrate the successes and achievements of NGOs in providing workable, sustainable solutions.

Throughout this project we identified a number of grassroots organizations often in need of funding to develop projects and research initiatives. Most frequently the concerns of these groups fell into one of three areas:

- Developing educational/training/extension and marketing facilities to support farmers wishing to convert to organic and agroecological methods of production
- Developing certification programmes so as to put OAA on a formalized basis in order to maintain standards markets, the credibility of organic produce in domestic markets and enable participation in export markets
- Building up infrastructure to permit organic and agroecological producers to add value to and more effectively store or market their produce.

Some NGOs and producer groups who replied to the survey took the opportunity to send detailed (and sometimes costed) project proposals (although we assume that they were not drawn up solely in response to our request for information). More commonly, these organizations discussed plans and aspirations and the problems of accessing funds to develop their capacity as effective ambassadors for OAA. Appendix 2b contains summary details

of, and contacts for, NGOs responding to our survey. Inclusion within this list does not imply any seal of approval of the organizations on behalf of the authors (nor does omission from it imply disapproval). Rather the list provides an overview of NGO activities.

This information might be used to identify direct opportunities for supporting grassroots organizations or, more generally, to identify the priorities of such groups with a view to developing programmes that effectively address issues of prime concern.