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Organics as a business

Filipe Naigulevu

Tuesday, June 13, 2017

WITH the growing number of people becoming conscious of their health and what they eat, farmers need to think of organics as a business.

This was the view of Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises & Development (FRIEND) executive director Sashi Kiran who has been involved in promoting organic and natural farming methods in Fiji.

According to Ms Kiran, farmers can make the shift towards organics business because it is not only recognised worldwide but here in Fiji as well.

"People are becoming very conscious of their health, if you go online and search the type of chemicals we are using in Fiji and the impacts it has such as diabetes, cardio and the cancers which are the top three killers," she said.

"So more and more we find people are looking for healthy organic foods and farmers can make that shift and make organics as a business.

"Instead of buying organic fertilisers, they can actually make their own organic fertilisers and will be able to save money and have pretty good yields and that can be a very good business for farmers."

And while organics is still a niche market in Fiji, Ms Kiran said they were working with more than 600 organic farmers around the country.

"We have 200 in Labasa and more than 400 in Ra and just recently Rewa has started doing organic farming so we are just working on a day to day basis with more than 600 farmers," she said.

"There have been a few interests from Tailevu, Naitasiri, and some of the outer islands but we don't have the capacity to fully go out and work."

Ms Kiran also revealed that they would soon set up an organic restaurant in the West which is expected to be fully operational by July or August.

"We are also looking at an organic restaurant in Suva, immediately we can start serving organic food baskets in Suva and we are looking at spaces so that people have access to clean and healthy food," she said.

And in response to the growing interest for organics in Fiji, FRIEND recently developed and published a guide — Organics Simplified — which would help farmers to implement organic methods of controlling pests and farming.

"Through this handout, we are hoping that everyone is able to grow the food in their back yard which is healthy," she said.

"It's something that will save you from medical bills, it's a great learning and exercise and now our focus is that every household gets this information so that health is become a part of life."

But with the growing interests towards organic farming and production, major constraints to development of organic agriculture are the associated costs and complexity of obtaining organic certification.

Organic certification is the systems used to provide consumers with a guarantee that the produce they buy is grown and processed to organic standards in line with these principles.

According to the acting director of the Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community (POETCom), Stephen Hazelman, there were two ways of organic certification practiced in Fiji and the Pacific.

These are the third party certification and the participatory guarantee system (PGS).

"Third party certification is already happening in Fiji like places in Taveuni and Ranadi Plantation in Pacific Harbour," he said.

"It is where you work with an international accrediting certifying body and engage with them to come and do all the work required in your farm.

"So they will come and follow the process, document and map the soils with all the work necessary in the certification processes

"If you are approved, then they are given an organic brand or mark for a 12 months period.

"Every year they come and check and audit these farms at your cost of course, and if you have done and followed processes, then they give you another licence for another 12 months."

Mr Hazelman said the advantage of the third party certification was that it would allow organic farmers, producers and exporters to reach regulated organic markets such as the US, Japan, EU, South Korea and Canada.

"Organic certification is like a driver's licence in that it needs to be renewed every year and checked by certifying bodies.

"You cannot just take anything there and say that it is organic, you have to get third party certification," he said.

The other certification type, Mr Hazelman said, was the participatory guarantee system (PGS) which was developed by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) focused on engaging with rural and small farmers who could not afford third party certification.

"This is very good for local markets where farmers cannot afford the cost of third farmers," he said.

"What we are doing on Matuku, Cicia and with farmers engaged with FRIEND is to use the participatory guarantee system."

The PGS is based on peer reviews and farmer empowerment support for accessing third-party certification for regulated export markets.

This is being done in partnership with accredited certifying bodies from Australia and New Zealand.

These processes have also been supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the European Union Increasing Agricultural Commodities Trade (IACT) and Pacific Agricultural Policy Project (PAPP) programs implemented by the Pacific Community (SPC).

While there is a huge potential market for organic products in Fiji and the Pacific, Mr Hazelman highlighted the need to create more awareness on this.

"We have to do the marketing part and there is no doubt a huge potential of organics in Fiji and the Pacific," he said.

"It's new ground but we are almost reaching 20,000 organic farmers in the whole Pacific.

"We have to make sure that the supply is consistent and that needs a lot of research and development activities.

"People demanding for organic food comes at the right time with climate change and food safety issues prevalent.

"The people that visit Fiji don't want to come and eat overseas food, they want to come and consume clean, traditional Fijian food and if you add in the organic certification, then there would be a huge market potential, we need to create that awareness in order to drive demand."

The Fiji Government has also been very serious about developing Fiji's organic sector with ambitious plans of developing the country into the organic capital of the world out of the 172 countries engaged in organic farming activities.

The Ministry of Agriculture's deputy secretary for agriculture development Uraia Waibuta said there was also a need to drive awareness to the public too on the consumption of organic products and its benefits.

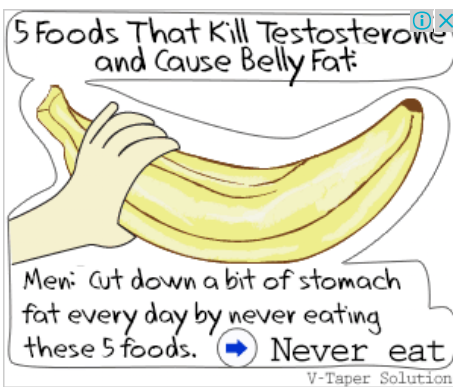
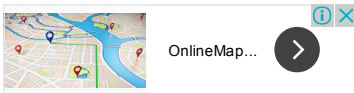
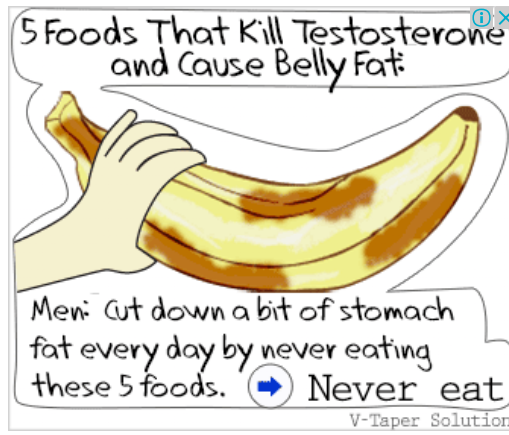
"It also boils down to costs, the production of organic products is not easy and cheap," he said.

"It requires additional input and costs and consumers also need to be prepared to pay for that difference in cost."



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