

ORGANIC FOOD IN METRO MANILA

INTERVIEW WITH MARLYNE SAHAKIAN

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1. The Organic Agriculture Act of 2012 is criticized for being too similar to the United States law governing organic production. Why is this the case?

The Philippines was a United States colony for half of the twentieth century, and there continues to be strong ties between the two countries. Many Acts tend to be inspired by the US counterpart, including the National Solid Waste Management Act of the Philippines. Regarding organic food production, the Philippines Act uses language from temperate zone agriculture. In this video, Mara is arguing that any food production Act would need to take into account the tropical context. There are some other reasons why the US version could be criticized, including less stringent policies on the type of feed allowed for ingestion by “organic” cattle.

2. There seems to be a tension in this film, between a national law promoting organic agriculture, and more community-driven schemes. How is this playing out today?

The peer-to-peer certification schemes predate the Organic Agriculture Act, they were devised by associations and committed individuals in the Philippines to promote more “sustainable” farming. With the introduction of the national law, certification now takes place through a third-party, recognized by the government, and is quite costly. On the one hand you could argue that a national standard for organic production is a positive thing, on the other hand if it’s cost prohibitive to smaller farmers, what does it mean to have or not have the national organic label? Some say that this initiative has been put in place mostly for the export of organic products, in relation to APEC trade agreements and to give Filipino produce a competitive advantage. At the end of the day, more people in the Philippines should be able to access health food through more “sustainable” farming practices.

3. One of the speakers suggests that organic food was a trend that begun among foreigners living in Metro Manila, as well as Filipinos who travelled abroad. Can you comment on this?

People like Mara Pardo de Tavera, who started the organic movement in the Philippines, had lived abroad and experienced efforts including peer to peer certification for organic, slow food, shortened farm to fork supply chains, or community supported agriculture, to name but a few. These trends were brought to the Philippines by people who had lived abroad and initially, many of the people buying organic-labelled produce were the foreigners living in Metro Manila, who visited these high-end outdoor markets.

4. The annual cost of certification seems to be quite high. Does national certification merit such a cost and how will it affect smaller farmers?

Clearly smaller farmers are not able to afford the certification scheme. It will be interesting to see what happens in the coming years: perhaps smaller farmers will organize into cooperatives; or they will continue peer to peer forms of certification.

5. What does organic food mean in this context and can you have organic food without a label?

Keep in mind that people cultivate “organic produce” because they have been doing this for hundreds of years, or because they can’t afford chemical inputs. You can find “organic” tomatoes in Baguio markets, for example, even if they are not labelled as such. The notion of “organic” also doesn’t include questions of social equity. So workers conditions, for example, would not be revealed through such a label.

6. Is organic food solely for an elite consumer in Metro Manila who can afford it?

Initially, probably only a small niche market of elite consumers bought organic food – more than purchasing power, it was also about accessing farmer’s markets in the high-end neighbourhoods of Makati. This is now changing, our research shows that more middle class families are now accessing organic and local produce, mostly for health reasons.