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## Cultivation and processing of organic agro crops for export

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### Workshop with an international perspective

The full-day workshop organised by TJ Associates, World Trade Centre, Colombo, on 'Cultivation and Processing of Organic Agro Crops for Export' concluded successfully on 2 March at Hilton Colombo Residences attended by over 80 participants.

Speaking on the relevance of the workshop content, Vice President – Projects Chandani Dias Abeygunawardene, who was instrumental in putting the workshop in to place said that the present Government under the leadership of the President and the Minister of Agriculture has launched a three-year national program giving high priority to encourage farmers to engage in a sustainable system of agriculture thereby promoting a healthy population.

Therefore, she said it is opportune to train decision makers and practitioners engaged in agriculture from both private and public sectors, in organic method of cultivation which is been followed in many countries across the world successfully bringing in economic, social and health benefits to people.

Managing directors, directors, general managers and senior level executives of exporting and plantation companies, land owners who are looking to start organic farms or to convert their existing farms to organic cultivation, horticulturists, investors, researchers, coordinators from Non Governmental Organisations and higher management level representatives from banks such as Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Sanasa Development Bank and HDFC bank followed the workshop with a keen interest.



The workshop in

progress

### Organic agriculture in Sri Lanka and its potential

The main presentation on 'Organic Agriculture in Sri Lanka and its Potential' was made by Dr. Sarath Ranaweera, Chairman, Bio Foods Ltd., a dedicated organic and certified Fairtrade company established in 1993 exporting organic and Fairtrade products such as green tea, black tea, herbal teas, spices, coconut products and traditional rice to many developed countries in the world.

Dr. Ranaweera explained why Sri Lanka needs to create self sustaining agricultural production systems in the country which would lead to developing a stable and balanced ecosystem, encouraging all natural cycles, protecting soil, water, animals, plants and human health, which would in turn result in creating a stable and economically viable production system in the long term.

As a practitioner and an international consultant with over three decades of experience, he very aptly dealt with many important subjects such as the current definition of organic agriculture, why organic cultivation is needed, types of organic agriculture, current challenges in organic farming and how to sustain organic farming.

Explaining why organic agriculture is needed, he said that organic inputs do not leave toxic residue in soil and the general environment promotes biodiversity of crops and animals to ensure complete and sustainable ecological systems with each species complementing the other for common good of nature.

### Principles of organic farming

Tamilnadu Agricultural University in India College of Horticulture Former Dean Dr. Sambanda Murti who arrived in Sri Lanka to make a special presentation on 'Principles of Organic Farming', enumerated objectives of organic farming, principles of organic farming, modified approaches of organic farming and components of organic farming. His detailed explanations of topics such as bio fertilisers and plant protection methods under organic cultivation captivated the audience.

Speakers from the government sector institutions such as Sri Lanka Export Development Board, Ministry of Agriculture and Industrial Technology Institute also made their presentations. Speaking on the role of the Ministry and Department of Agriculture in promoting organic agriculture, Ministry of Agriculture Additional Secretary Dr. Hemantha Wijewardene explained measures taken by the Government to promote the use of organic and bio fertilisers and gradually reduce the use of synthetic fertilisers. He said that the ministry is engaging in formulation of policies and extension of technologies to support and improve the organic agriculture sector in Sri Lanka.

### **EDB support**

Sri Lanka Export Development Board (EDB) Chairperson Indira Malwatte speaking on the occasion said that measures have been taken by her Board to develop EDB as an important focal point in developing the organic export industry in the country.

EDB Assistant Director Gayani Wijethilake presented an overview of organic export trade in Sri Lanka and global organic trade. She said that EDB is offering exporters of organic products and cultivators a package of assistance for market development, supply chain development, technical assistance and awareness creation among growers targeting export markets.

M.N.A. Mubarak, a senior research scientist from Industrial Technology Institute, the pioneer scientific research and development organisation and first state laboratory to be awarded the ISO 17025 accreditation by SWEDAC (Swedish Board for Accreditation and Conformity Assessment) for microbiological and chemical parameters in water, waste water, food and agro products in June 2002, presented testing services available for agro products exporters in Sri Lanka with state-of-the-art analytical instruments and a well established quality management system to ensure worldwide acceptability of results.

These include testing for pesticide residues, industrial pollutants, natural toxin residues, antibiotic residues, chemical adulterants, allergens, and vitamin and nutritional analysis.

Kavindu Ratnapriya, Project Executive from Eco Planet Ltd., a commercial producer of organic fertiliser presented the production process involved and explained how field-based trials are carried out from samples taken from each batch before the final product is issued for sale in the market. He introduced different bio fertilisers available for tea, spices, fruit crops and vegetables.

The next speaker Bio Power Lanka Ltd. microbiologist Tharini Nadesalingam presented a range of bio fertilisers, foliar applications, bio-pesticides and a bio- vaccine available for organic farmers.

### **Processing organic agro crops for export**

A presentation under the title 'Processing Organic Agro Crops for Export – An Insight in to 25 Years of Experience' was made by Lanka Organic Ltd. Marketing Manager Sewwandi Bandara. She said that Lanka Organics works with a network of 2,000 farmers comprising community farmers, out growers and processors in different regions spread across Sri Lanka and has been a pioneer in implementation of 'Analogue Forest and Forest Garden' principles. She enlightened the audience on the steps taken by her company in processing organic agro products such as tea, spices, cashew and coconut products.

Thilini Perera, Certifier – Organic of the Control Union Inspection Services Ltd., the leader in providing organic inspection services to organic agro product cultivators and processors, made a detailed presentation on the main certification programs and other private certification programs available in Sri Lanka. She also enumerated steps in organic certification, basic requirements to fulfil in cultivating agro products to be certified as organic and explained how Small Farmer Group Certification method could bring down the cost of certification to an individual farmer.

Control Union Organic Certification Program is accredited by Dutch Accreditation Council (RVA), United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) in Japan, International Certification Bio Suisse AG in Switzerland, APEDA for NPOP in India, and by NAQS for Organic Korea.

Sricert Managing Director Tissa Kariyawasam briefly explained how the Sricert certification body was formed. Sricert, he said, is the local member of the Certification Alliance which is promoting Small Organic Farmer Group Certification across Asia to enable their products to reach the world markets establishing traceability. Presently, Sricert is providing certification services to the small organic farmer groups engaged in production of fruits and vegetables and marketing in the leading supermarkets chains and other retail institutions.

Kariyawasam said Sricert adopts methods that keep the cost of organic certification low and affordable to the small farmer. He explained that Sricert provides training to local inspectors with the services of recognised international consultants and the methodologies used for inspections are based on EU regulations.

Sarvodaya Development Finance Ltd. Chief Executive Officer Ravindra Ranjith explained in his presentation that his organisation is servicing 135,000 customers in all regions of Sri Lanka through 30 branches and 28 customer service centres with a loan portfolio Rs. 3 billion. He also said that out of micro loan recipients, 58% have been women entrepreneurs of which 16% have been from agriculture and fisheries.

Global Salam International Division General Delegate Phillipe Hannequin gave an introduction to Salam Contracts. He explained that farmers can sell their uncultivated agricultural produce on a forward basis, with the buyer paying the full price at a pre arranged rate on day one and the parties agreeing on the quantity and time of delivery. This way, farmers could use the money paid as capital to start cultivation. Upon maturity, the farmer delivers the agreed quantity of the produce to the buyer. Salam Contracts he said is an exception to the general rule of a forward sale. 'Salam' is an Arabic word derived from the financial product name Bai-us-Salam, which means to pay in advance for goods mainly agricultural to be delivered at a future date.

Two question and answer sessions were held during the day. There were many questions from participants to the panel of resource persons that were promptly answered. Several participants who were keen on starting their own organic agriculture projects observed obstacles such as the lack of organically certified seed and planting materials to start organic cultivation and absence of a dedicated institution to obtain training on organic agriculture.

The participants also requested government intervention to make cost of organic certification more affordable to individual growers.

The need for policy formulation and legislation in the country favouring organic farming, inclusion of organic agriculture in school syllabus at all levels, promoting research to improve knowledge and methods that will enhance productivity in organic production, development of common standards in organic agriculture, developing and strengthening local markets, export markets and home based processing of organic products was emphasised by Dr. Sarath Ranaweera as the way forward to develop organic Agriculture in Sri Lanka.

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