The many meanings of organic farming in Indonesia: State actors and civil society

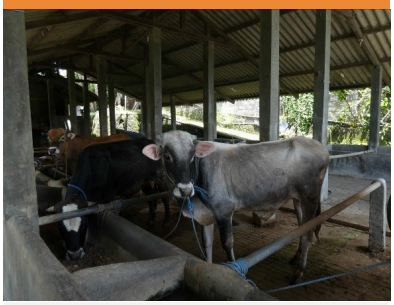
The many meanings of organic farming for civil society and the state

Organic farming was initially adopted by non-state actors in Indonesia, first by faith-based organizations (1) and then by small farmer associations (2), while the state support for organic agriculture (3) followed at a later date. The three groups adopt different positions with regard to the definition of organic agriculture. By comparing their understanding of organic farming we reveal the many meanings of organic farming.

We base our findings on a comparative case study, looking into a pioneering civil society organization, a national peasant alliance, and the state as actor. Data on the history and perspectives the civil society organizations were obtained through interviews (face-to-face or via video link) and interactions with members during workshops held in 2017. These were complemented by content analysis of the organizations' publications and internal documents. Data on the state were obtained by reviewing official documents and relevant academic literature.

For the faith-based foundation, organic farming is both a spiritual worldview and a practical philosophy. For the peasant union, organic agriculture is foremost a political tool to resist global capitalist agriculture. Despite their very different outlooks, both these two civil society organizations see organic agriculture as a post-materialist enterprise directed towards explicitly social-political goals. By contrast, the government's engagement in organic agriculture, although including notions like "back to nature", is driven primarily by visions of developing a new niche market for Indonesian exports.

TOPICS



In Indonesia discussions over food security (ketahanan pangan) and the interrelated yet different concepts of food self-sufficiency (kemandirian pangan) and food sovereignty (kedalautan pangan) are subject to contestation. Although both Indonesian state and non-state actors frame food security, food self-sufficiency, and food sovereignty in normative terms, they disagree in their definitions as well as approach how to reform the country's food system. We show how actors of the organic farming movement frame these terms and how to they correspond or diverge from the official food policy discourse.

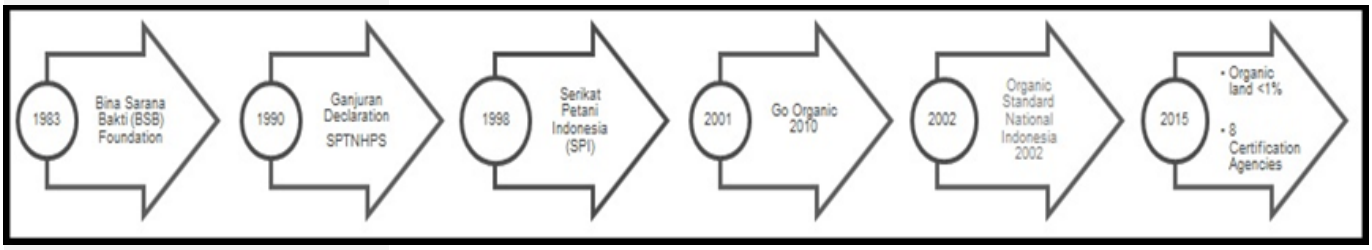


FIGURE 1:

Important milestones in the development of organic farming in Indonesia.

Different civil society organizations and different ways of certification

The faith-based organization (1): For the investigated faith-based organization, founded in 1984, organic farming describes a worldview that draws on Asian agro-philosophy and the Franciscan conceptualization of humans and nature as God's creation, in which the human and non-human are parts of a single organism. This connection between religious beliefs and environmentalism is a powerful driver of the transformation of farming practices and the adoption of conservation agriculture. Muslim eco-theology also inspires many Indonesians to become actively involved in environmental protection. However challenges by adherents of 'green Islam' to the government's development agenda remain largely ignored by the State.

The umbrella organization (2): For the peasant union, founded in 1998, by contrast, organic agriculture is first and foremost a political issue: organic farming is inseparable from political resistance. Specifically, adoption of organic agriculture is one way to resist global agribusiness, and part of the wider struggle for peasants' rights, environmental justice, and food sovereignty. The union agrees with the government's focus on (national) self-sufficiency and the use of protectionist trade policies to achieve this goal. However it disagrees with the state's productivist conceptualization of food sovereignty, arguing that sovereignty over agricultural and food policies need to be placed in the hands of farmers in order to tackle food insecurity effectively. The union also rejects the idea of organic agricultural production for the export market and advocates "sustainable agriculture based on family farming".

The unions' stance on certification is consistent with its anti-capitalist perspective. Self-certification, which also appears to be supported in principle by the foundation, and participatory guarantee schemes (PGS) could be a viable alternative to conventional certification schemes in situations where producer–consumer relations are very close, for example when products are sold at the farm gate.

Supporters of this approach argue that it fosters knowledge exchange and builds on a foundation of trust, based on the direct engagement of actors. Yet, it is claimed that conflict avoidance, free riding and partiality, as well as time constraints can threaten the sustainability of PGS schemes.

The Indonesian state (3): The government's engagement in organic agriculture, although employing words such as "back to nature", "holistic" and "local knowledge", seems to be driven primarily by visions of developing a new niche market for Indonesian exports. The State has adopted a contradictory approach, making it difficult to frame consistent strategies to support organic agriculture. For example, policy measures make provision for training of government staff in organic techniques, while still keeping crop yields as the main benchmark. On paper, the state appears to be open to alternative visions of organic agriculture, but productivist and export orientation dominate the policy framework and leaves little room for constructive engagement with non-state actors and their evolving ideas about the meaning of organic agriculture. The Indonesian State has an all-encompassing interest in maintaining control over the still-evolving organic sector.

The Indonesian organic agricultural sector is highly fragmented, with 8 national and 14 international certification systems coexisting. More than half of the so-called 'organic land' has not been certified yet. As producers often do not extend their certification, the figure differs greatly from year to year. The cost of certification can hinder smallholder producers in entering the formal organic market that now requires certification. Nonetheless, the Indonesian state aims to expand official certification according to the national standard (SNI), and so far rejects alternatives like self-certification or PGS.

An outlook on future developments

The different positions adopted by state and civil-society actors in the organic farming movement will influence the future development of organic farming in Indonesia. The Indonesian State has the power to define organic agriculture in legal and regulatory terms. A one-dimensional productivist definition excludes the different meanings and traditions of organic farming practiced in the civil-society. Specifically, the reduction of the meaning of 'organic' to 'organically certified products' excludes many farmers who consider they are practicing organic agriculture and makes it illegal for them to claim to be doing so. It also discriminates those farming organically by default, such as the occupants of upland swidden farms in remote areas of Indonesia who do not possess the financial means to obtain synthetic fertilizers.

Different civil society organizations and different ways of certification

The faith-based organization (1) and the umbrella organization (2):

The two civil society organizations define organic agriculture very differently and draw inspiration from different philosophical, political and social-cultural traditions. However both see organic agriculture as a post-materialist enterprise explicitly directed towards social-political goals.

As the Indonesian state is issuing more and more detailed regulations and forms more government bodies to ensure compliance, civil society institutions are demarcating their positions from the government agenda. Small-scale farmers or peasants whose ideas about organic agriculture are diametrically opposed to export-oriented vision of the State might engage in unauthorized 'guerrilla organic farming' in order to stay with their conviction in practices of farming in an organic way.

As the sovereign authority, the state asserts its right to define the content of organic agriculture, to demarcate its boundaries, and to decide on the rationale for supporting it. By doing so from a privileged position of power, the State delegitimizes different understanding of organic farming and its role in other policy fields. In response, civil society actors are adopting an alternative interpretation of sovereignty as vested in the voices and interests of small organic farmers. Inspired by spiritual and humanist values, this involves a shift in perspective away from purely ecological considerations towards a vision of organic agriculture as an ex-pression of peasant sovereignty, inseparable from struggles for access to land, markets, dignified living and working conditions.

Recommendations for a more inclusive government approach

1. The Indonesian State should relax its regulatory grip on the organic sector. Allowing for openness and diversity would create room for sorely needed innovation and cooperation among the different actors involved. The State would display true sovereignty by enabling an open and inclusive debate on the ways forwards for organic agriculture in Indonesia.

2. Instead of reconciling the tension within the different framings around organic agriculture, the State may productively work with this frictions resulting from the legitimate diversity of meanings attached to organic agriculture. While regency and district level policies are much more flexible to accommodate local requests for support of organic agriculture, their room of maneuver is restricted by the overall contradictory agricultural and food policies of the Indonesian State.

3. We propose establishing platforms for debate on the future of organic farming in Indonesia, tying in agribusiness as well as social movements and smaller deviants, including possibly influential, innovative and powerful groups and organizations. The debate on how to create a diverse and localized version of organic value constellations must include motivations and value beyond the market perspective. Thinking beyond economic perspectives might offer new alliances and strategies. Yet, the existing political will to promote organic farming is a promising way forward.

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Research Project IndORGANIC
Prof. Martina Padmanabhan
Chair of Comparative Development and Cultural Studies (Focus: Southeast Asia)

Dr.-Hans-Kapfinger-Straße 14b
94032 Passau, Germany

Author:
Martina Padmanabhan

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