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“Solidarity in a competing world —
fair use of resources”

The Future of Smallholder Farms in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Ethiopian smallholder farmers face a long list of challenges. Is organic farming the solution? A conversion to organic confronts the following facts: Productivity is compromised by extensive soil erosion, soils pH below 5, low soil fertility. Farmyard manure is often burned; animal density is nearly 100% above the carrying capacity of the land; a decline of natural forests; lack of crop rotation, ploughing with oxen up to five times; low seed bed quality; no application of lime; harvest and post harvest losses up to more than 50%; inadequate or non-existent storage facilities and processing equipment. Land: farm size is limited with approx. 0,5-2,0 ha per farm; pressure on communal land through growing population and land grabbing; and finally, farmers' land rights are limited. Markets: weak value chains and linkages to markets; high fees demanded by market brokers; export crops like vegetables or flowers, or organic coffee or honey, currently do not offer an opportunity to seriously raise income.

This snapshot describes the living conditions of rural farm households and documents the dramatic situation of the agricultural sector in Ethiopia. Conversion toward organic is not a question of one farm but a regional challenge. Conversion means: to open a 'repair shop' for soils and biodiversity; to adjust pH, crop rotation, alley and tree farming, humus, nutrient and fodder balances, etc. - or in other words resetting the farming system. Beyond the farm boundaries, it demands a fundamental transformation of the local and international market - current organic and fair trade systems alone cannot stabilize the farm economy -, including broader rural and urban development policies, educational, training and research.

Based on this situation analysis, we discuss a series of systemically coordinated activities that could be established autonomously at the regional level and contribute to a more sound development of Ethiopians future agriculture. One part of this transformation will depend upon a fundamental change in international development aid and research that moves away from separate and individual donor projects to truly coordinated policies and programs.

Keywords: Ethiopia, organic farming, policies, smallholder, transformation