

A study of undergraduates' perception of organic-only agriculture and organic foods in Sri Lanka

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1. Introduction

This study was focused on the students' understanding and appreciation towards organic agriculture and organic food products. Questions were prepared to gather information on the definition of organic agriculture, quality and other differences between organic and conventional foods, availability of organic products, respondents' preference to purchase organic foods, and their perception towards promoting organic agriculture and certification requirements in Sri Lanka.

Organic farming is a long-standing tradition in Sri Lanka. Traditional planting strategies (astrology, various forms of biodynamic applications, particular time schedules, pest and disease management methods: "Kem" approaches, etc) were once trusted by local farmers. To provide a long-term remedy, the Sri Lankan government established the 'Vasa Visa Nethi Ratak' national program in 2016, intending to rid the country of poisonous agrochemicals and, as a result, poisoned or polluted food items such as rice, vegetables, and fruits (Malkanthy, 2020).

According to the Sri Lankan government's new policy decision, the country is moving towards an environmentally friendly, long-term agricultural system by supporting organic farming. Hence, the government published Gazette Extraordinary No. 2226/48 on May 6, 2021, banning the importation of chemical fertilizers and pesticides (Kumara, 2021).

Organic food demand is rising worldwide due to the numerous health issues that consumers are experiencing. Organic food purchasing behavior is expanding not only in developed countries but also in developing countries, and as a result, the organic food market is widely recognized as one of the most potentials in the food sector (Wijesinghe & Aththanayaka, 2021).

2. Materials and Methods

For this study, 264 students enrolled in various Agricultural sciences and allied sciences faculties at Selected government universities in Sri Lanka, were randomly sampled. The distribution and demographic characteristics of respondents and their relationship with Organic agriculture and Organic food awareness results are shown in Table 1. There were 81 male students and 183 female students in the group. Female students make up around a quarter of the total number of students enrolled in these faculties. All of the participants completed two sections of the questionnaire. Whereupon covered general demographic information, such as age, gender, degree program, academic year, and work status. And respondents' perceptions about organic agriculture furthermore organically produced foods. Definition of organic agriculture, quality and other perceived distinctions between organic and conventional foods, availability of organic products, respondents' preference for either, certification requirements, and readiness to purchase organic foods were among the questions asked. The Google form and MS Excel were used to record and analyse all of the data obtained, and the results were presented descriptively as frequencies and percentages.

3. Results and Discussion

According to the results, the majority of the respondents were female (69.3%) while the male respondents accounted for 30.7%. There were about 71.2% of respondents who belonged to the 20-24 age group and the majority were following their degrees in the Agricultural allied faculties (36.7%) and the second-largest (33.3%) of respondents were from the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences of Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka presented the highest respondents' percentage (35.2%). Among all the universities, the majority were second-year students 38.2% and the third-year, first-year, and fourth-year students were responded to the questionnaire amounting to respectively 28%, 18.2%, and 13.3%. Only 7.6% of respondents were engaging employment would have been the 2.2% of postgraduates who are having employment.

When asked to define organic agriculture 40.5% of respondents said it was "Use of organic inputs for production" 17.4% thought "It takes into consideration the welfare of the environment" The majority of the students' respondents (37.8%) got their knowledge through school/university. Others were all minor sources.

Approximately, 65.2% of students stated that they would not purchase expensive organic foods. The price of organic foods is the major obstacle in their purchasing decision. And also 3.7% of less percentage mentioned low prices as a reason for preferring Organic Foods. The vast majority (95.8%) of the students responded that Organic foods are healthier. This finding indicates that a significant proportion of the respondents are more concerned about their health

The respondents were asked if they thought organic agriculture should be promoted among farmers. 96.5% thought that encouraging organic agriculture was significant. The key reasons for encouraging organic agriculture were that it is environmentally friendly (24.5%) and promotes good health (18.3%).

Consumers are considered in the certification program with a high average of 89.4%. The female (88%) and males (92.6%) who answered the awareness question were approximately equal.

The awareness of Organic agriculture was typically high with an average of 95.5% among 264 respondents. The female (96%) and male (95%) percentage who answered the awareness question was approximately equal. When considering the faculty of studying, an appreciable percentage was amounted by the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, Faculty of Agriculture and Plantation Management, and Faculty of Agriculture. Almost all the students from the fourth year, third year, second year, and first-year had (averaging 96.3%) a similar level of understanding about Organic Agriculture. There was no considerable difference in the knowledge of students of different age groups and levels of studies (Table 01).

Organic food awareness was high, with an average of 98.1% among the 264 respondents. The ratio of females (97.8%) and males (98.8%) who answered the awareness question was nearly equal. When considering the faculty of studying, Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, Faculty of Agriculture and Plantation Management, Faculty of Agriculture contributed a significant percentage (98.8%). Almost all fourth-year, third-year, second-year, and first-year students showed a similar level of awareness of Organic Agriculture (averaging 97.8%). There was a higher percentage of awareness about organic food in the 20-24 and 25-29 age groups (Table 01).

Table 01. Familiarity of respondents towards organic agriculture and organic food

Factor	Are you familiar with the term "organic agriculture"?				Have you heard about organic foods?			
	Yes	No	Total	Yes%	Yes	No	Total	Yes%
Gender								
Male	77	4	81	95.06	80	1	81	98.77
Female	175	8	183	95.62	179	4	183	97.81
Total	252	12	264	95.45	259	5	264	98.11
University								
Sabaragamuwa								
University of Sri Lanka	93	0	93	100	93	0	93	100
University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka	27	2	29	93.10	29	0	29	100
University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka	26	1	27	96.29	25	2	27	92.59
Uva Wellassa								
University of Sri Lanka	54	5	59	91.52	57	2	59	96.61
University of Rajarata, Sri Lanka	29	3	32	90.62	31	1	32	96.88
Wayamba University of Sri Lanka	23	1	24	95.83	24	0	24	100
Total	252	12	264	95.45	259	5	264	98.11
Faculty								
Faculty of Agricultural Sciences								
Faculty of Agriculture	97	0	97	100	97	0	97	100
Faculty of Animal Science and Export Agriculture	82	6	88	93.18	85	3	88	96.59
Faculty of Agriculture and Plantation Management	50	5	55	90.90	53	2	55	96.36
Faculty of Livestock, Fisheries and Nutrition	16	1	17	94.11	17	0	17	100
Total	7	0	7	100	7	0	7	100
Total	252	12	264	95.45	259	5	264	98.11
Age of students								
20-24	180	8	188	95.74	184	4	188	97.87
25-29	59	3	62	95.16	61	1	62	98.39
30-34	8	1	9	88.89	9	0	9	100
More than 34	5	0	5	100	5	0	5	100
Total	252	12	264	95.45	259	5	264	98.11
Level of study (Year)								
First	47	1	48	97.92	45	3	48	93.75
Second	95	6	101	94.06	101	0	101	100
Third	69	5	74	93.24	72	2	74	97.29
Fourth	35	0	35	100	35	0	35	100
Postgraduate	6	0	6	100	6	0	6	100
Total	252	12	264	95.45	259	5	264	98.11

4. Conclusions

Organic agriculture and organic foods have great potential in Sri Lanka to improve the agriculture sector, according to this study's results. Producing organic agricultural products necessitates a strong knowledge. Nevertheless, there is a significant need to raise awareness of the socioeconomic, health, and environmental benefits of organic farming and organic foods. If the agricultural production is promoted as a purposeful government policy and also by educational institutions, notably in the agriculture sector, organic agriculture will make a great success. Because it is said that producing organic agricultural products necessitates a strong knowledge.

5. References

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