

FPOs and organic food production: strengthening and scaling

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About 65.4 percent of landowners in Haryana are small and marginal who can profit from the Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs). However, despite numerous interventions from the government and other relevant agencies, the expected success is yet to be realised, particularly among FPOs in Haryana with a primary goal of organic farming. FPO's principal goal is to assist small farmers in achieving economies of scale by bolstering support and services in emerging value chains. The purpose of this study was to document the current state of FPOs with organic farming as a primary goal, as well as to identify pain spots, intervention areas and solutions to help them achieve their objectives. Organic farming approaches are new to Haryana farmers and as a result, knowledge levels among most of them are low. The adoption rate in the state is now relatively modest, necessitating increased government and community attention. A state-wide organic awareness campaign is required to shift producers' and consumers' attitudes toward organic farming and to encourage them to pursue it.

Keywords: Farmer Producer Organizations, Food production, Organic farming

ORGANIC farming has been witnessing a steady increase in recent years at the global level. India was among the top 10 countries with 1.94 million hectares (mha) under organic cultivation in 2018, according to a survey by Switzerland-based Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL) and Germany-based International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements-Organics International (IFOAM). International sales of organic food and drink reached 112 billion US dollars in 2019. The market has expanded by 55% since 2013. In particular, the share of developing countries such as China, India, Brazil and Indonesia is likely to grow at a fast rate in the coming years. In India, by March 2021, the cultivated area under organic farming had increased to 2.66 million ha, while roughly 0.73 mha had been brought under the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS). As a result, approximately 2.4% of the

net farmed land is currently under certification or in the process of conversion to organic farming. The government of India has set a target of bringing a minimum of 4% net cultivated area under organic farming by March 2026. During 2020–21, the total volume of organic export was 888179.7 metric tonnes. The organic food export realization was around ₹707849.52 lakhs (1040.95 million USD).

All this has been triggered by the surge towards sustainable development which has caught the imagination and action all over the world for more than a decade. Sustainable agriculture is necessary to attain the goal of sustainable development. Organic farming is one of the several approaches found to meet the objectives of sustainable agriculture. High-input intensive agriculture harmed the environment, humans and animals. Looking at nutritional-health benefits and positive

impact on the environmental and socio-economic status of organic food, its demand has increased. Therefore, for achieving sustainable food-livelihood-environmental security, an array of alternatives to chemical-intensive agriculture is to be developed. To address various challenges faced by small and marginal farmers having small landholdings and limited resources, the government has been trying to empower farmers in many ways. Recently, many new bills have been passed to empower farmers and enable them to unite and get good prices for their produce. In such a scenario, the producer groups, viz. Farmer Producer Organizations seem to be the potential tool to address these issues, empowered with the adoption of organic farming systems which can address both human and soil health by judicious use of available resources.

The main aim of FPOs is to help the small farm holders to achieve the

economics of scale by strengthening the support and services in the emerging value chains. But despite loads of interventions from the Government and other relevant bodies, till now the predicted success couldn't be achieved, especially among FPOs having the main objective of organic farming. However, an appropriate policy framework is yet to be laid down by the government. Considering this, a study was conducted to capture the current status of FPOs having organic farming as a major objective, trying to identify the pain points, identify areas of intervention and formulate solutions to help them achieve their goals.

A study has been conducted in Haryana state, collecting both primary and secondary data from various sources. The purposive sampling technique has been used to study the FPOs majorly focusing on organic production, with a sample size of 20 FPOs. Also, some individual farmers were contacted and information was collected using questionnaires, survey forms, interviews and field visits. The secondary data related to the study has been collected through the mandated records maintained by the FPOs, SAFIC, state departments, the internet, online survey (Email), books and journals, online blogs etc. The observations were collected in the form of pictures, questionnaires,

interview notes etc. The data collected was presented in tabular form and analysed using standard statistical means.

Status of Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS)

Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) are locally focused quality assurance systems. They certify producers based on the active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange. Despite the difficulties related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the number of PGS initiatives and producers involved in and certified by them has been growing in all regions of the world. Currently, there are 15 countries and territories that recognise PGS in their legal framework for organic agriculture, India is one of them. There are 235 PGS initiatives in 77 countries, with at least 1,153,220 producers involved and 1,110,964 producers certified as per the latest IFOAM database. The absolute majority of PGS certified producers and producers involved in PGS are found in India, where according to the data from the Indian Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, a total of 1,078,535 PGS certified producers manage 614,504 ha of agricultural land. These figures represent a significant growth compared to 2019; an increase of over 120% in the number

of PGS certified producers and a 65% increase in hectares of PGS certified area in India.

Current status of organic farming

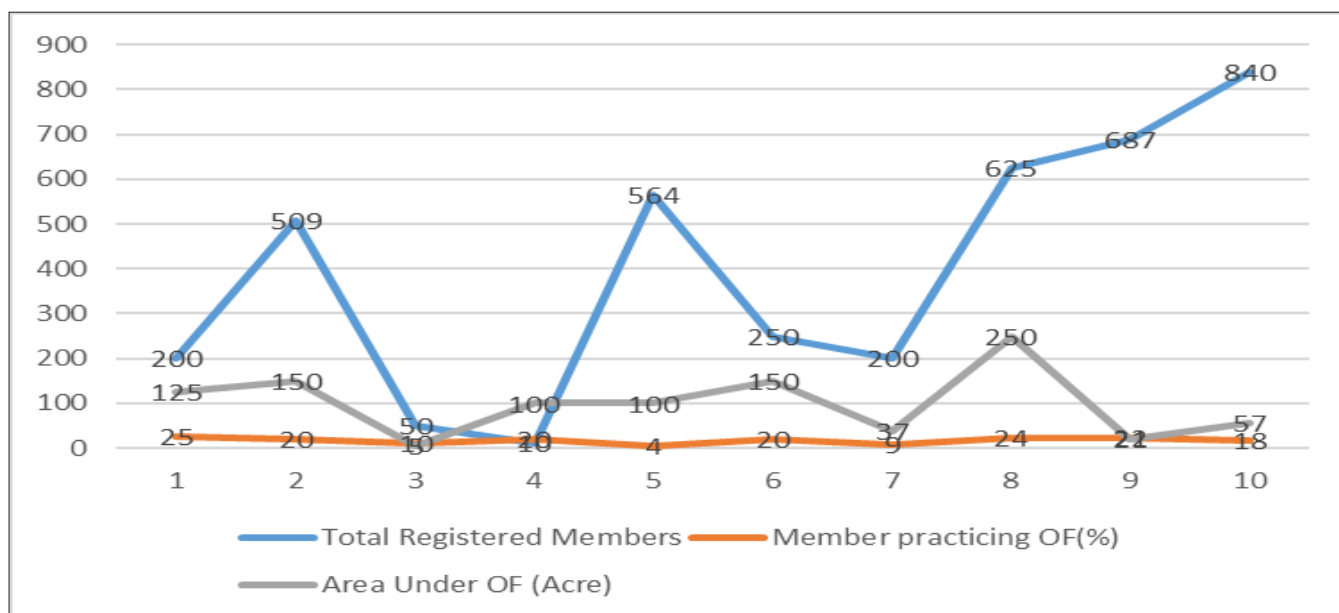
Currently, organic agriculture is reported to be practised in 187 countries, and 72.3 mha of agricultural land managed organically by at least 3.1 million farmers. The global sales of organic food and drink reached more than 106 billion euros in 2019. Although at the global level India stands 5th among the Asian countries, currently India is leading in organic farm acreage (2.66 mha + 1.68 mha for wild harvest collection) followed by China (2.2 mha). India has the greatest number of organic cultivators but only 1.1% of the acreage.

Socio-economic impact

Organic farming is believed to be less harmful to the environment as it does not allow synthetic pesticides, most of which are potentially harmful to water, soil, local terrestrial and aquatic wildlife. In addition, organic cultivation requires a higher level of labour, hence producing more income-generating jobs per farm. With the increasing demand for organic food and readiness for the masses to pay for good food, if handled properly organic farming can change the socio-economic status of our growers substantially.



Growth of cultivated area under organic certification in India



Status of organic farming practices in organic farming FPOs

Status of organic farming in Haryana FPOs

The average registered membership of the studied groups was 393 members, out of which only an average of 17% of members practised organic farming. Wheat was the most widely grown crop (62%) popular among the FPOs organic members, followed by vegetables, which were grown by 46% FPOs. The reason for the popularity of traditional crops is the ease of cultivation and ease to sell the produce. Only 40% of the FPOs producing organic produce were found to have their own retail counters to sell the produce and that also was not continuous in most cases. Only 20% knew about PGS and that also they were not able to utilize due to lack of handholding. Most of them pointed out that the cost of organic cultivation prohibits the adoption of certification among the members; also many were not even aware of certification or felt the need for certification. Only 30% used certified organic products available from various govt and private vendors. Others were either not aware of any such products or were highly resistant to the adoption of such products, as they thought anything except cow dung, cow urine or other crop products were probated in organic farming. Also, only 30% of them had got any formal

training on organic farming, which they were not even practising fully due to various reasons. The study material was found to be insufficient, and most of the protocols they were using were quite different from those suggested by IIFSR, Modipuram. The knowledge of the respondents regarding organic farming practices was accessed by interview and scored on a 1–10 scale, where the information gained at IIFSR was considered standard. The average was only 4.4, and it ranged from the highest at 7 to the lowest at 3. Most organic farming practising farmers used only farmyard manure and cow urine and buttermilk preparations. Half of the FPOs were found to be unaware or lacked guidance on the certification process and the rest half didn't feel the need to adopt certification as it didn't fetch them any additional returns looking at its cost. 42% of them felt the cost of organic certification was prohibitory, while a similar percentage was found to be unaware of the certification process or didn't feel the need.

Identification of issues being faced by the FPOs

- **Financial barriers:** Unavailability of funds to start production and marketing and high rate of interest by private financiers.

- **Inputs related:** Non-availability of certified products, high cost of certified inputs, lack of proper knowledge about the organic inputs and how to make them.
- **Agronomic support:** No standard package of practice available as per local soil and other conditions; lack of structured guidance and costly weed control.
- **Certification related:** High cost of certification and misguiding certification consultants.
- **Post-harvest infrastructure:** Lack of dedicated post-harvest facilities for organic produce.
- **Marketing related:** Non-availability of organized organic markets locally, marketing for individuals is very costly, and FPO members are not able to work collectively due to intragroup issues and lack of marketing support from the government.
- **Other issues:** Difficult to organize farmers due to lack of faith and trust among themselves, lack of ethics among the growers, they don't mind using few chemicals, especially fertilizers and Improper information about organic farming circulating among the growers through peer groups and social media.

Recommendations

- Immediate need for spreading awareness about organic farming and clearing the prevailing myths and doubts.
- Proper practical training should be provided to all FPOs interested in uptake organic farming.
- Govt should form a working group that can keep in constant touch with such groups (FPOs) and provide hand holding till they are self-sufficient.
- There should be structured and regulated markets for organic food.
- More awareness and motivation need to be provided to inculcate ethical practices in growers and traders.

The fundamental issue facing organic farmers is a lack of consistent and reliable supplies of certified inputs (such as seeds, bio-agents, bio-fertilizers, manures, and so on) as well as cost-effective marketing of organic farm goods. As a result, in possible organic clusters, stable and trustworthy input-output linkages must be developed. To boost capacity utilisation and make

them responsible and sustainable, the organic input production units developed in the public and private sectors under various development programmes in the country should be linked up with appropriate marketing channels. For the expansion of organic farming, approved organic input marketing channels must be established. Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) across the country should be involved in organic food cultivation, processing and marketing. In reality, for organic promotion, establishing a connection with a reliable market will be critical. It is critical to establish sufficient and accessible labs for testing products, primarily for pesticide residues, in order to ensure the quality of organic produce and inputs.

SUMMARY

Although the Haryana government has been promoting organic farming and FPOs for a long, any visible significant results are awaited. However, FPO is a very potent means to organize farmers and help increase their socio-economic status, but multiple factors hamper

getting the desired results. Some factors identified as barriers to the success of organic farming in FPOs are lack of proper knowledge and regulated market, non-availability of certified organic inputs and costly certification process. There is a need for a comprehensive framework that integrates organic farming with bottom-up responses, technology diffusion with reciprocal knowledge flow from farmers' institutions and their local resources and innovation. A statewide organic awareness campaign is essential to change the attitude of producers and consumers both, encouraging them to go for organic farming. During the study, the lack of formal training on organic farming was identified to be one of the key factors where immediate attention is desired. The most potential tool which can bring significant momentum is proper training in organic farming practices and handholding to the groups in practising them on farms.

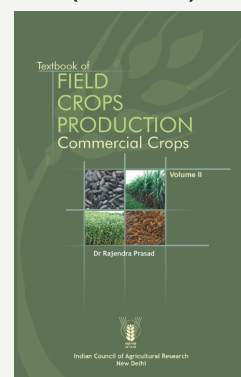
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The discipline of Agronomy has no longer remained mere field trials without application of discoveries emanating from the related disciplines of Genetics, Soil Science and Agricultural Chemistry, Plant Biochemistry, etc. The future Agronomy Landscape will face challenges of climate change, transboundary issues, TRIPS and other trade-related barriers, biotic and abiotic stresses, consequences of biotechnology and genetic engineering and increased market demands in terms of quality assurance, customized food crops, global competition, ecosystem services on land and social equities etc. The Agronomy must measure up to these futuristic challenges with well-defined metrics and methodologies for performance. The advent of hydroponics, precision farming, bio-sensors, fertigation, landscaping, application of ICT, GPS and GIS tools and micro-irrigation is in the horizon. This revised edition in two volumes covers fundamentals of the subject and at the same time will inspire and prepare teachers and students for the emerging frontiers.

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