

FACT SHEET

Overview of organic food in Hong Kong

1. Introduction

1.1 Organic food refers to food that is grown, handled and processed according to a set of organic agriculture and production standards. According to the Guidelines for the Production, Processing, Labelling and Marketing of Organically Produced Foods of the Codex Alimentarius Commission¹, organic agriculture is "a holistic production management system which promotes and enhances agroecosystem health, including biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil biological activity". In organic agriculture, chemical herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers are avoided to be used in growing crops while antibiotic, growth hormones and chemical feed additives are avoided to be used for livestock husbandry. The primary goal of organic agriculture is to optimize the health and productivity of interdependent communities of soil life, plants, animals and people.

1.2 This fact sheet provides an overview of the organic food sector, certification and labelling of, regulation of, and concerns about organic food in Hong Kong.

¹ The Codex Alimentarius Commission was established under the Joint Food Standards Programme by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Trade Organization in 1963 to develop food standards, guidelines and related codes of practice. The main purposes of the Joint Food Standards Programme are protecting health of the consumers, ensuring fair trade practices in the food trade, and promoting co-ordination of all food standards work undertaken by international governmental and non-governmental organizations.

2. The organic food sector in Hong Kong

2.1 In Hong Kong, a wide range of organic food products are sold in channels such as supermarkets, department stores, wet markets, health food stores and farmers' markets. These products include fresh vegetables, fruits, nuts, beans, meat, eggs, cereals, soya milk, tea, coffee, biscuits and baby food. Except for some organic produce that is grown in local organic farms, most organic food products are imported from other places including China, the United States, Australia, Canada and New Zealand². Organic food is generally more expensive than conventional food as a result of its limited supply compared to demand, and higher production, marketing and distribution costs³.

2.2 There were about 405 organic farms in Hong Kong as at November 2011⁴. Since December 2000, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department ("AFCD") has been providing technical advice and marketing support to assist conventional farmers to switch to organic farming under the Organic Farming Support Service (formerly known as the Organic Farming Conversion Scheme). As at November 2011, a total of 182 farms had joined the scheme. On average, these farms produce a total of 4.5 tonnes of organic vegetables per day, equivalent to about 10% of the supply of locally produced fresh vegetables⁵.

² *Official Record of Proceedings of the Legislative Council* (2006), 消費者委員會 (2005 年) and 消費者委員會 (2010 年).

³ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2012).

⁴ Food and Health Bureau (2012).

⁵ *Ibid.*

2.3 According to a consumer survey conducted by the Hong Kong Organic Resource Center ("HKORC")⁶ in 2008, 90% of the respondents interviewed had ever purchased organic products, up three times when compared with the findings of a similar survey in 2005. While the findings reflected that the market demand for organic food had increased, many consumers still had reservations to purchase organic products on a regular basis⁷. Their reservations included: "absence of organic certification label on the packing material" (54% of the respondents); "do not know how to discern genuine organic products" (40%); and "mixed-up display of organic with non-organic products" (32%).⁸

3. Certification and labelling of organic food

3.1 As organic food cannot be differentiated from non-organic food by appearance of the products, organic farms and food processors rely on the organic certification system to assure consumers that their products are genuine organic products.

3.2 Organic certification is the system to inspect organic farms and food processors by independent certification organizations to ensure their processes comply with the specific set of organic agriculture and production standards. The organic certification system emphasizes on the production process rather than the quality of the food products, such as the material inputs must be organic or harmless to the environment; the production process must not bring damage to the environment; and organic and non-organic production must be separated. Certified organic farms and food processors can affix organic certification labels on their products to assure consumers that their products meet the specific organic standards.

⁶ HKORC was co-founded by the Hong Kong Baptist University, the Produce Green Foundation and the Sustainable Ecological Ethical Development Foundation in December 2002 with funding support from the Agricultural Development Fund of the Vegetable Marketing Organization. It has provided independent organic certification services to farmers and food processors since 2004 to facilitate the development of organic farming in Hong Kong.

⁷ The survey indicated that over half of the respondents purchased organic products less than once a month and only 2.4% of them purchased organic products three times or more per week.

⁸ Hong Kong Organic Resource Centre (2009).

3.3 Independent organic certification organizations in overseas places have developed organic certification systems and standards for their local farms and food processors with reference to the guidelines set by international bodies such as the Codex Alimentarius Commission and the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements ("IFOAM")⁹. In some places like the United States and Japan, the organic certification systems and standards of certification organizations are regulated by the government.

3.4 HKORC and the Hong Kong Organic Certification Centre¹⁰ are the two independent non-for-profit organizations providing organic certification services in Hong Kong. Their certification systems and the standards are not supervised by the Government. HKORC had certified 89 local crops production farms, three processing and handling operations and two aquaculture operations as at December 2011¹¹. The Hong Kong Organic Certification Centre had provided services to around 50 organic farms and food processors in Hong Kong and the Mainland since 1998.

⁹ IFOAM is a non-governmental organization leading the organic movement worldwide. It has more than 750 member organizations in 116 countries. IFOAM has set basic standards of organic agriculture to facilitate the development of organic standards and third-party certification systems worldwide. *IFOAM Basic Standards for Organic Production and Processing*, the private sector's equivalent to the guidelines of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, sets out the general principles, recommendations and standards for the production, processing, packaging and labelling of plants, livelihoods, bees, aquaculture and other organic products. IFOAM also provides accreditation services for organic certification organizations worldwide to ensure their certification standards comply with the IFOAM basic standards.

¹⁰ The Hong Kong Organic Certification Centre, established by the Hong Kong Organic Agriculture & Ecological Research Association, has provided organic certification service in Hong Kong and the Mainland since 1998.

¹¹ Food and Health Bureau (2012).

4. Regulation of organic food

4.1 Organic food, same as conventional food, is regulated by the food legislation in Hong Kong, including Part V of the *Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance* (Cap. 132)¹² and the *Food Safety Ordinance* (Cap. 612)¹³. The making of organic claims for food products must also comply with the relevant provisions in the *Trade Descriptions Ordinance* (Cap. 362)¹⁴.

5. Concerns about organic food

5.1 The lack of specific regulations governing the production, certification and labelling of organic foods in Hong Kong has been the key concern for protecting consumers' interest and strengthening consumers' confidence in organic food. At the Council meeting of 8 March 2006, a Member raised a question on whether the Administration would plan to introduce legislation to require organic food labels on the packages of food to be certified by an authorized independent body. The Administration replied that there was no significant difference between the risk of organic and conventional food from the perspective of food safety and whether or not the organic labels were certified by an authorized independent body would not bring about concrete improvements on food safety. The Administration considered that there was no pressing need to introduce such legislation.

¹² Part V of the *Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance* sets out the legal provisions governing general protection for food purchasers, offences in connection with sale of unfit and adulterated food, composition and labelling of food, food hygiene, and seizure and destruction of unfit food.

¹³ The *Food Safety Ordinance* provides for food safety control measures, including a registration scheme for food importers and food distributors, and a requirement for food traders to maintain proper records of the movements of food to enhance food traceability.

¹⁴ The *Trade Descriptions Ordinance* contains provisions for prohibiting false trade descriptions; false, misleading or incomplete information; and false marks and misstatements in respect of goods provided in the course of trade or suppliers of such goods.

5.2 According to a survey conducted by HKORC in 2010 on the certification labelling status of organic vegetables sold in wet markets¹⁵, only 10% of the surveyed retailers claiming to sell organic vegetables could provide organic certifications. Around 72% of these stalls sold their vegetables at an average price above HK\$15 per catty. This contrasted with the average price below HK\$15 per catty charged by 94% of the stalls selling non-certified organic vegetables. The survey suggested that some retailers might have sold non-organic vegetables at a higher price by making fraudulent claim that they were organic products.

5.3 In the light of the survey findings mentioned above, HKORC and the Consumer Council have urged the Government to introduce specific legislation for regulating the production, certification and labelling of organic food in order to safeguard consumers' interest and promote the development of the organic food sector.

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¹⁵ 香港有機資源中心(2010年)。

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