



Students plant rice saplings at an organic rice plantation and demonstration centre in Chai Nat's Muang district. Unlike other rice farmers who engage in conventional methods, organic rice farmers can earn more income and enjoy good health. (Bangkok Post file photo)

Organic rice a saviour for struggling farmers

When the government gave rice farmers 13,000 baht per tonne to shore up the all-time-low paddy prices, Boonsong Martthong and hundreds of organic rice farmers in Yasothon province just could not care less.

Why should they? Why kowtow to the rice millers who give farmers only 7,000 baht per tonne of paddy or rejoice at the state subsidy scheme at 13,000 baht when they can already get 20,000 baht without a fuss. What's more, their polished organic rice easily gets 45,000 baht per tonne from health-conscious buyers.

'If rice farmers go organic as we have, they, too, won't have to worry about plunging rice prices,' said the veteran rice farmer from Yasothon's Kut Chum district.

According to Greennet, a non-profit organisation, the organic rice market has increased by 28% this year.

Rising health concerns among consumers and their willingness to pay more than market prices has saved organic rice farmers such as Mr Boonsong from uncontrollable prices and perpetual debt. 'It has also saved us from illnesses from heavy use of toxic pesticides and herbicides,' he added.

With a rising global rice glut and the steady decline of paddy prices, there is no future for rice farmers when investment costs -- mostly for chemical fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides -- are higher than market rice prices.

'We should turn this crisis into an opportunity,' urged the leader of Kut Chum organic rice network. 'Going organic means we can cut farming costs significantly. It also creates a new market with more value.'

Easier said than done, many farmers may argue. Yields normally drop during the first few years after weaning from farm chemicals, but farmers have debts to pay and families to feed. And what about landless farmers who cannot gamble with uncertainty?

Indeed. If the path out of poverty is as easy as Mr Boonsong put it, why are the majority of rice farmers still trapped in money-losing chemical farming which also affects both their health and the environment?

Mr Boonsong is no stranger to such scepticism. Although hundreds of farmers in Kut Chum have proved successful with organic rice farming, they are still the minority in their own district.

The problems in organic rice farming are real, he said. 'The yields do drop during the transitional period but this is offset by cutting farm chemical costs,' he said.

'Farmers also need to find pest-resistant varieties that grow well in their own localities. Those who go it alone without support easily lose heart.'

What's more, organic farming is much more time-consuming. Farmers need to closely take care of the paddy with natural pest control instead of resorting to old routines of immediately spraying the fields with pesticides and herbicides.

'Unless farmers really see the harm of farm chemicals, they easily quit organic farming half-way,' he said. 'In short, change is only possible when they change their mindset first.'

That is also true with the government.

The passing of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej has intensified all the more the state's display of commitment to his development vision -- the sufficiency economy philosophy -- which puts the poor and the environment before short-term economic gains. But there is a big gap between words and actions.

Despite state eulogies for the King, an advocate of organic farming, successive governments all strongly support chemical farming. The Agriculture Ministry has practically become the mouthpiece for agro giants -- and agricultural officials their salesmen.

It comes as no surprise then that Thailand is among the world's top users of farm chemicals.

According to the Agriculture Ministry, Thailand is importing an average of 160,000 tonnes of farm chemicals a year, costing the country about 22 billion baht. In the past five years, the import of toxic farm substances has increased by 50%

That makes Thailand the world's 5th biggest user of farm chemicals, according to the World Bank. The country's agricultural land area, however, ranks 48th in the world only. What's more, about 70 chemical pesticides used in Thailand are highly hazardous and not allowed in the West.

The results? Most rivers and reservoirs in the country have become severely contaminated with toxic substances, which go directly to us consumers through the food chain.

The farmers themselves are most affected. Due to high levels of pesticides in their bloodstream, farmers get cancer more than other people in occupations. Mothers' exposure to toxic chemicals also leads to childhood diseases and disorders -- not only in Thailand but also globally.

Environmental and consumer groups have been calling for a ban on highly toxic farm chemicals. Despite substantive studies and bans in other countries, the calls have fallen on deaf ears.

Meanwhile, the state-corporate alliance has become ever stronger. Now big businesses have become part of state committees to form not only policies on agriculture in support of chemical farming, but also investment, infrastructure and even education.

'In my parents' days, they didn't use any farm chemicals,' recalled Mr Boonsong. 'But then the government started telling us to use chemical fertilisers and pesticides to increase yields.'

That was in the 60s. Thailand had just adopted the so-called 'Green Revolution' which encouraged farmers to grow newly developed high-yield rice varieties that respond to farm chemicals. Before long, indigenous rice varieties started to disappear. Pestilence became widespread and frequent due to large-scale mono-culture.

Meanwhile, farmers face lower rice prices amid rising farm chemicals costs. Yet, the government insists chemicals are good. If farmers complain about low paddy prices, then it tells the farmers to grow something else to feed the agro industry -- and keep buying farm chemicals from them.

The government is also pushing for farm zoning. 'But this top-down policy won't work,' Mr Boonsong insisted. 'Farm officials don't know our localities. They don't have field experience. They don't have a support system either. What they can do expertly is telling us what farm chemicals to buy.'

But even if the government changes tack and wants farmers to turn organic, telling them to do so without providing necessary support is bound to fail; too many farmers have gone bankrupt by following state promotions without know-how and marketing support.

That is where local organic groups can help. 'Each locality needs to dig up old knowledge, revive, and develop the rice varieties that fit their environs,' he said. 'Different groups can also share knowledge and experiences among themselves.'

Group support is very crucial, especially when yield drops in the first few years or when pests begin to appear.

‘According to our experience, however, the yields will drop only temporarily, and this is offset by much lower investment costs using farm chemicals is stopped. Then the soil fertility improves and the yields rise again,’ explained Mr Boonsong.

‘As for the pests, we can use inexpensive herbal pesticide we make ourselves, which is safer for our health, nature and consumers.’

Experiences in cooperatives and direct marketing also go a long way to help new start-ups to overcome business problems.

This is why the veteran farmer disagrees with state subsidies.

During the Yingluck administration, organic rice farming networks almost went bankrupt because the rice-pledging scheme offered higher paddy prices.

Meanwhile, this government’s current rice subsidy scheme offers only a brief relief to the farmers’ dead end.

‘Instead of wasting money on subsidies, help farmers to shift to farming with a future,’ Mr Boonsong said.

‘Since many farmers really panic when yields drop during the first few years, the government should financially support them to revitalise their dead soil from prolonged use of chemical fertilisers.’

Systematic support for farmers’ own research on local pest-resistant varieties will also help free them from being dependent on seed companies.

Seed breeding and patents can also bring them new sources of income.

The problem, as always, is the gap between state’s rhetoric for environmentally friendly agriculture and its actions, the farmer said wearily.

‘Change won’t happen unless officials start practising what they preach.’

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