Organic Farming for the Domestic Market: Exploring a Unique yet Challenging Food System in Turkey
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Organic food production and marketing is a growing business in Turkey. The organic food production in Turkey began with demand from the European Union countries in the mid 1980s. Initially, the production and exports were limited to traditional agricultural items such as raisins, dried figs, and apricots. Over the years, organic food exports have grown from only eight items to over 200 (ETO 2011). Today, more than 90% of the Turkish organic food production is being exported to about 40 countries in the world (MARA 2010). Domestic consumption of organic food products, on the other hand, is still at its early stages. However, over the last 10 years, paralleling the growing middle class and increased average income in the country, domestic organic food demand has also accelerated. In addition to large-scale export-oriented organic farming and processing facilities, Turkey has witnessed the establishment of organic farms that are particularly targeting the domestic market. The current study investigates this unique (domestic market-oriented) organic food system in Turkey.

Prior research has suggested that demand for organic food in Turkey has been low due to price premiums (i.e. organic food being 40%-450% more expensive than conventional ones), lack of consumer knowledge, ineffective distribution systems, and poorly devised and executed marketing practices (e.g. Mutlu 2007; Ozbilge 2007). For example, a recent qualitative study identified both production and consumption-related constraints that prevent the Turkish domestic organic market from flourishing (Ozbilge 2007). Among the most recognized production (supply) side constraints are unfavorable agricultural policy, inexistence of a national action plan for organic farming, too much red-tape, paperwork and bureaucracy involving starting organic farming activities, expensive cost of certification and inspection process, insufficient advisory support for organic farming entrepreneurs, and inadequate knowledge about organic farming practices. The consumption (demand) side constraints, on the other hand, include issues related to lack of consumer recognition and knowledge of organic products, high mark-ups, and a small number of sales channels.

Approximately around the same time period, survey research conducted in Turkey pointed out similar observations regarding the demand side constraints (Mutlu 2007). More specifically, the study indentified “price” as the most important factor affecting Turkish consumers’ reluctance to buy organic foods, followed by accessibility, assortment, and media information. The same study also suggested that the majority of Turkish consumers (78%) currently prefer to buy organic foods from supermarket. However, according to the study findings, in the future, Turkish consumers would like to buy their organic foods from (specialized) organic store and farms. In other words, these results suggest that even though
supermarkets are still the dominant places where the organic products will be made available, buying directly from the farms may also become an important trend in Turkey.

The above studies draw a rather pessimistic picture about the outlook of the domestic organic food market in Turkey. The solutions offered to improve current domestic market demand for organic foods largely involve state-based (governmental) efforts. For example, Ozbilge (2007) suggested a government-initiated nation-wide advertising campaign to improve Turkish consumers’ recognition and knowledge of organic foods. This campaign was recommended to target middle-aged people and families with small children who make their food preferences based on health, safety, and taste-related concerns. The author also suggested that the government should be watchful of any price-gauging intentions of organic food marketers, and have more (geographically) widespread control mechanisms to regulate organic food production and marketing.

Overall, the current state of the domestic organic food market appears not very encouraging. However, despite certain (supply and demand-side) structural challenges, over the last decade, many new organic farms have been established by young entrepreneurs in the western and southwestern regions of Turkey. These farms have aimed to cater particularly to the domestic market and have arguably demonstrated relative success in both serving the demand of urban consumers and, at the same time, contributing to the economic, financial and social well-being of the communities in which they are located. The objective of this research is to study this unique (domestic market-focused) organic food production and marketing system in Turkey. More specifically, this research aims to identify the profile of domestic market-focused Turkish organic farming/food entrepreneurs, their motivations, marketing strategies, and their contributions to individual and societal well-being.

The data come from a series of depth-interviews with organic farmers, as well as their customers and community members. Organic farms that particularly target domestic market (e.g. http://www.ipekhanim.com/ipiek_hanim_ciftlige_giris.html) will be visited for observations and depth-interviews with owners, farmers, and workers. In addition, members of the communities in which these farms are established will be interviewed to assess the farms’ contribution to the well-being of these communities. Customers (largely from the urban cities of Turkey) of the farms will also be interviewed to identify their motivations for participating in organic food markets and experiences with producers who cater particularly domestic markets. As a result, by studying the “best practices” of organic food production and marketing targeting domestic markets, this research aims to delineate the structure of this novel yet challenging food production and distribution system in Turkey.

References

MARA, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (2010), Yearly Agriculture Statistics