

# Developing Marketing Strategies in Organic Farming: A Lived Experience of Agri-Entrepreneurs

Melecio A. Sy Jr.

Graduate School, University of the Immaculate Conception

## ABSTRACT

Farmers of organic products deliver the value proposition of eating healthy foods and delivering ethically grown products through sustainable farming. This study is the lived experiences of Agri-Entrepreneurs in Mindanao in a qualitative and phenomenological approach to describe farmers marketing strategies for organic products. There were 16 organic farmers-participants identified through purposeful sampling selected from among organic farmers operating for more than five years. IDI was conducted, triangulated through FGD, and analyzed using thematic analysis and dendrogram. The farmers grew and marketed organically grown rice, upland rice, mango, and vegetables like potatoes, carrots, and lettuce, among others. The sustainable farm practices observed include organic plant care, fruit care, organic pest, and disease controls, vermiculture, sustainable contour planting, greenhouse cut flowers, multi-layer air gardening, upland rice farming, and integrated plant-livestock farming. The marketing strategies development were categorized into structured, practiced by large farms, and unstructured by micro and small farmers. The distribution channels range from domestic retailers, supermarkets, trade fairs, and e-commerce platforms, to the internationalization of products to the USA, Japan, and Singapore. The themes that emerged included strategic marketing but went beyond to capture the support and backing of the government, provision of employment and livelihood opportunities, slow development of organic farming, modest marketability of organic produce, and barriers to organic farming success. It was found that organic farming is the primary source of income for farmers in raising their families including subsistence, children's education, and medical expenses, among others. The expertise of farmers is based on lifelong experiences with the help of the government and NGOs providing training and other resources including financial, machines, and technical support. Best practice in organic marketing products was not yet established. The findings imply that farmers in Mindanao whose expertise in organic farming is well established need professional help in developing marketing strategies to maximize the opportunities for organic products both locally and internationally.

**Keywords**— marketing, organic farming, natural and sustainable farming, strategic management, Mindanao

## INTRODUCTION

Agricultural companies in Mindanao, Philippines, face many challenges in organic product distribution internally and externally. These challenges range from a lack of consumer awareness of organic products, limited expertise in product marketing, pricing issues, supply of organic products steadily growing faster than its demand (IFOAM, 2017), to name a few. In addition, farmers in Mindanao pursuing marketing activities of organic products are relatively young at an average of five years in operation making it more challenging. The study by Hamzaoui-Essoussi and Zahaf (2012) highlighted the challenges specific to marketing including pricing competition and logistics.

The challenges of companies in developing marketing strategies for organic products seem insurmountable on the one hand, but they still pursue the distribution of organic products on the other hand. A few reasons why companies still pursue organic marketing products include opportunities in organic farming worldwide, creating competitive advantage, corporate social responsibility (CSR), government pressures, competitive

pressures, and cost or profit considerations (Singh, 2012). Organic products are beneficial to both producers and consumers as it brings increased ecological biodiversity over time, reduction of pollution; conservation of the environment such as soil, energy, and many more.

It also helps reduce the costs of farm inputs with extensive health benefits to consumers and organic farming ensures the supply of food for future generations. It is also economically beneficial over time according to Kantor (2015) which may not be appreciated by farmers in need of immediate economic rewards. Some authors pointed out that organic agriculture is more profitable for farmers than conventional agriculture. Agriculture revolutions are globally happening including organic farming which benefits farmers, consumers, and governments worldwide posited by Schwenke et al. (2017). In addition, organic agriculture has provided people with jobs, businesses with profit, environmental benefits, and social interactions among organic farming stakeholders highlighted by Reganold (2016). The many reasons underpinned by various authors make this study important.

The significance of this study is to understand the different factors that make up the total opportunities as well as the barriers to establishing marketing strategies among Agri-Entrepreneurs' in organic farming. In pieces of literature reviewed, the significance of organic farming includes the promotion of natural and sustainable farming, how farmers promote it, and the media used to succeed in marketing promotions, among others. In short, this study explored the marketing strategies employed by local Agri-Entrepreneurs' of the Davao Region. Furthermore, the economic significance of natural and sustainable agriculture was also explored as beneficial to farmers. There is evidence showing organic farming can improve farm finances in the study of Reddy et al. (2022) and superior profit in certified small organic farms in Africa posited by Bolwig & Jones (2009). In some instances, there might be a notable increase in labor inputs; however, as farmers gain experience in organic farming in time, labor cost decreases over time. True to most organically farmed products, there is also a recorded gain due to the customers putting value and paying the premium on the prices of organically grown products especially certified organic products (Mendoza, 2004; Bakewell et al., 2008).

Another benefit of organic farming is the social benefit which some researchers observed as exemplified by the need to propagate healthy living by consuming organic products. The Organic Producers Trade Association of the Philippines (OPTA, 2012) produces products under modern agriculture techniques that use large doses of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers, which in the study of Taira (2015) can cause a decrease in brain size, thus slowing down one's intelligence capabilities. OPTA also tells that international studies have shown that chemical-infused crops have resulted in cancer, hormone disruption, neurological disorders, and other life-threatening illnesses. Memory loss is attributed to the continued exposure of farmers and consumers alike to neonicotinoids or nionics – one kind of insecticide (Taira, 2015).

The gap in the literature has something to do with marketing promotions of organic products which shows limited published studies related to it unlike the many published kinds of literature on organic agriculture which deals with the construct of organic farming. Another gap in extant literature has something to do with looking at organic farming holistically to promote organic products. In the Philippines, there has been the creation of the Organic Division of DENR was in 1977. A law was enacted entitled 'Organic Agriculture Act of 2010' to help support organic farming in the Philippines. Despite this and despite the Philippines being an agricultural country of 30 million hectares, 47% of which is agricultural land and 0.12% organically farmed (SOEL, 2007). Thus, the gap is that few farmers are doing organic farming, and the business implications of being few such as supply chain issues, pricing and cost issues, among others. An easy way to comply with the conference paper formatting requirements is to use this document as a template and simply type your text into it.

#### A. Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of Agri-Entrepreneurs as they develop and implement marketing strategies for natural and sustainable products?
2. How do they cope with the challenges as Agri-Entrepreneurs?
3. What insights can they share with the stakeholders and policymakers relative to developing and implementing marketing strategies?

## B. Participants

Organic farming in Mindanao is like many organic farms in the Philippines and many Asian countries – they are relatively new. The average number of years the farmers are into organic farming is at an average of five years. The size of the farm companies is small companies based on the classification of the Philippine Department of Trade and Industry as provided by the MSME Act 9501 of the Philippines.

Organic farms being small entails having a small asset size, a small number of employees, and resources focused primarily on operations. Strategic decisions are carried out by the CEO, General Manager, or the Head of operations, or in cases of micro-farms, by the owners themselves. Among the participants, only one company is into new product development while the rest are traditionally farming. Products developed by the participants include tropical fruits such as mangoes, bananas, watermelon, and others. Most of the farmer participants are into crop production like rice and corn. Farm companies into sustainable farming develop farm products into processed fruit as well as livestock raising. The sustainability in this kind of operation is using wastes of both plants and animals for feeding or converting into organic fertilizers. The entire document should be in Times New Roman or Times font. Type 3 fonts must not be used. Other font types may be used if needed for special purposes.

Key Informants. There were three key informants in the study. All are male and are heads of offices of government agencies they were designated. One is from the City Agriculture Office of Davao City, another from the Regional Office of the Department of Agriculture, Organic Division Office of Davao Region, and another a professor from the University of Mindanao Bansalan Campus.

The purposive sampling technique was used to identify and select information-rich cases, which is an effective method with limited resources (Patton, 2002). It involves identifying and selecting individuals knowledgeable on the topic of organic farming. The research participants are organic farming practitioners with extensive knowledge of the subject.

Focus Group Discussion. Another group of informants is the research participants of the focus group discussion conducted in Bansalan, Davao del Sur, where many organic farmers live. Two of them are male, and six are female.

Out of the 16 participants, eight were subjected to an in-depth interview and another eight participated in a focus group discussion. The in-depth interviews were conducted in their respective farms except for the farm of Joy, which was conducted downtown due to heavy rain making the roads inaccessible during the scheduled interview.

The participants were identified through the help of the City Agriculture Office of Davao City and Region XI, Department of Agriculture, Organic Farming Division based in Davao City. Of the 16 farmer-participants practicing organic farming, only two are certified organic farmers, while 14 are not certified, organic farmers. Due to the expensive certification process in the Philippines, small farmers cannot afford certification programs. The declaration that all of them are organic farmers is based on the self-determination of the farmers practicing organic farming.

**TABLE I**

PARTICIPANTS PROFILE

| Pseudonym | Gender | Products                          | Product Distribution       |
|-----------|--------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Max       | Male   | Vegetables                        | Domestic                   |
| Joy       | Female | Upland Rice                       | Domestic                   |
| Lawrence  | Male   | Fruits, vegetables, and Livestock | Domestic and International |
| Tintin    | Female | Rice and other Crops              | Domestic                   |
| Romnick   | Male   | Fruits, Livestock, Farm Inputs    | Domestic and International |
| Requestas | Male   | Vegetables                        | Domestic                   |
| Saul      | Male   | Livestock                         | Domestic                   |
| Eva       | Female | Vegetables and Fruits             | Domestic                   |
| Nanay     | Female | Rice                              | Domestic                   |
| Aida      | Female | Rice                              | Domestic                   |
| Joban     | Male   | Rice                              | Domestic                   |
| Mind      | Female | Rice and vegetables               | Domestic                   |
| Tintin 2  | Female | Rice                              | Domestic                   |
| Tower     | Male   | Rice                              | Domestic                   |
| Mer       | Female | Rice                              | Domestic                   |
| Poly      | Female | Fruits, Livestock, Farm Inputs    | Domestic                   |

Farmers interviewed are from different areas of Mindanao; many are from Davao Region, and some are from Northern Mindanao Region. All 16 farmers are domestically distributing their products. Of the 16, only two farmers are also distributing products internationally to Japan (cut flowers) and the United States of America (processed vegetables and fruits). Farmers are selling their products regularly in organic farm markets established by the government for at least twice a week schedule. Others distribute their products in Malls both locally and in Metro Manila. Organic farmer participants have varied products, varied farm practices, and varied marketing strategies.

*Product:* Farmer participants’ products primarily include organic rice, organic fruits, organic vegetables, organic cut flower, organic farm inputs, organic pesticides and herbicides, and organic livestock such as chicken, pigs, goats, and some other domesticated animals. One participant is also a highland rice organic farmer.

Generally, products distributed are classified as traditional products intended for domestic consumer consumption. One farmer, Lawrence, is producing processed products from fruits and vegetables produced on his farm.

His products are domestically distributed and distributed internationally, especially in the USA certified by the United States Food and Drug Administration (USFDA). Romnick is also distributing a variety of

products such as farm inputs like fertilizer, pesticides, herbicides, fruits, and vegetables, while his cut flower is distributed in Japan.

### C. Lived Experiences

The farming experiences of organic farmers are generally happy experiences. The growing demand both domestically and internationally for organically grown products is increasing. It allows them to sell more products and bigger volumes. For many farmers, this means a better livelihood for their family's needs and wants.

All participants started small, and some started backyard farming. It is a challenge for the farmers because they lack expertise in organic farming, and the resources are limited. Some graduated from informal agricultural schools, but most are farmers by experience who are sons and daughters of farmers. Generally, most farmers learned organic farming from government training regularly with varied topics such as planting specific crops, land preparation training, vermiculture, pest and disease controls, and even financial management training. However, technical training is limited to the knowledge of the Department of Agriculture employees who typically conduct the training. Thus, technological knowledge is limited to what the government is offering the farmers.

“Ang ginahatag sa taga Department of Agriculture kanamo nga mga mag uuma mao training. Apan kini naga gikan lamang sige sa mga taga departamento lamang and wala pa kami ka experensiya ug expert sa teknolohiya nga iya sa lain gobyerno kon pribado nga kompanya.” FGD\_OrgFarm\_#09

The support that we received from the Department of Agriculture is mostly training courses limited to the knowledge of the government workers. We have not experienced training from foreign governments or private companies.

Aside from training, the government is the primary source of financial support in providing seeds, equipment, and financial needs at a low-interest rate offered to farmers. New farmers, however, based on experience, lack support. The government provides support to existing farmers. This shares the result of the study of Vavrik (2022) on the best practices of organic farming and the important role played by the government.

It is how organic farmers established their expertise and their business over time. It is also a form of help to their families dependent on their farms for their basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. Education for their children also comes from their income from organic farming.

Some challenges farmers faces are the lack of support for product distribution and establishing a bigger customer base. The government's support in product distribution is limited to trade fairs done twice a week with no advertisement and information drive of the presence of the trade fairs. Another challenge is in the mechanization of farms which at present is heavily manual. The volume thus is limited to the manual labor output of farmers with limited equipment.

The best practice of the farmers primarily is having organic farming itself. Organic farming from the perspective of the research participants is hard to start as there are not many farmers who are sold out to organic farming. At the onset, farms traditionally farmed are characterized by poor soil conditions heavily applied with synthetic fertilizers, bugs, and an unbalanced ecosystem. When a farmer decides to convert a traditionally farmed area into organic farming, losses happen in the first and second years of operation due to recovering the poor soil condition and the unbalanced ecosystem. Production yield reduces, and ultimately income and profit also decrease. Farmers, especially those into small and subsistence farming, find it unattractive to convert traditional farms to organic farms. It takes the conviction of farmers to see the

benefits of organic farming and truly move towards organic farming and see its future value to pursue it. In marketing, the best practice of some farmers is in distributing organic products in countries heavily consuming organic products, especially the first world countries. USA and Japan are the primary Philippine markets for organic products among the research participants. The use of e-commerce is also a big help to local farmers in making their names known to the world of organic products.

Organic farming on the physiological level is a big help to the families of farmers. The benefits of organic farming primarily help the family’s basic needs. Daily food requirements clothing and shelter need come from organic farming, and even the educational needs of the farmers’ children are from organic farming. This finding shares the findings of Demattê Filho et al. (2022) which posits the importance of organic farming to the families of the farmers as primary source of income.

Secondarily, the practice of organic farming also makes the farmers happy. There is a profound joy in converting the poor soil condition back into healthy soil, and the balance of the ecosystem restored over time, making sustainability restored. Thus, in every endeavor, whatever the challenges the farmers may face makes they face the challenges head-on, owing to the idea that they are doing this for the environment and cannot be wrong. Max noted that you could not go wrong in organic farming. It is always right.

The support that the farmers need includes new technology that would help increase the productivity of the farms. This technology can be in soil application, equipment, and harvest handling, including cold storage for fruits and vegetables to ensure longer shelf life and the like. Another could be technology in identifying pests and diseases and their early detection to prevent farm losses. The technology could also mean reducing the planting-to-harvest periods and improving plant cycles; more cycles mean more production output. Another help needed is in starting to distribute organic products internationally. Building the capability of the farmers for international operations and reaching a broader market is a big help to increase revenues. Many farmers also expressed the need for organic farm certification as this is an expensive endeavor for small farmers. Government support is needed to ensure small farmers get certified. Organic certification is necessary for farmers to enter international markets.

Research themes are established to gather meaningful insights after the in-depth interview and focus group discussion. These themes are the common issues raised by the Agri-entrepreneurs and farmers who are the research participants. These themes were derived from the journal maintained by the similarity of responses from among the research participants and discussed.

**TABLE II**

MAJOR THEMES AND CORE IDEAS ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AGRI-ENTREPRENEURS

| Major Themes   | Core Ideas   |
|--|--|
| Support and backing of the government                | The farm made a highlight for visitors by the city government        |
|  | The government provides equipment and training                       |
|  | Department of Tourism provides assistance                            |
|  | The farmer needs help from the government and the academe            |
|  | The government helps us every time we ask                            |
|  | The government supports farming and provides seeds                   |
| Provision of employment and livelihood opportunities | Farming helps many by providing livelihood to the community          |
|  | Farming provides work to tribal communities                          |
|  | Farming like growing upland rice is a good source of farmers’ income |

|  |  |
|--|--|
|  | Farming provides livelihood to more than 50 people   |
|  | Farming supports farmers by providing well-earned income for the family from their produce |
| Slow development of organic farming                | Many farmers are not keen on organic farming   |
|  | The mindset of farmers on organic farming causes slow development                          |
|  | Some practices of farmers need to be changed   |
|  | Farmers nearby still practicing traditional farm ways affects organic farms                |
|  | Need more organic farmers to address the growing demand                                    |
|  | It took 20 years for the organic farmers to entice 20 others into organic farming          |
|  | Product development is a major farmer concern  |
| Modest marketability of organic produce            | Domestic Customers not buying organic produce  |
|  | Having to plan marketing initiatives   |
|  | Doing own advertising  |
|  | Establishing contacts/contracts in other countries   |
|  | Determining which country will accept the product and who needs it                         |
| Factors noncontributory to organic farming success | Many customers do not accept products without organic product certification                |
|  | Difficult at the start due to the decline in production yield                              |
|  | City Organic farming has space limitations   |
|  | Transporting produce from the mountain to the city – a point of issue                      |
|  | There is a need for good roads   |
|  | Pollution is something to reckon with  |

The themes derived from the research study are likewise grouped according to research questions, and results are provided through tables. Please see the themes in tables 3, 4, and 5. The themes provided in table 3 are on the research question related to the lived experiences of Agri-Entrepreneurs in Developing and Implementing Marketing Strategies for Natural and Sustainable Products. The themes of how the agri-entrepreneurs cope with the challenges is provided in table 4. Finally, themes related to the insights that Agri-Entrepreneurs can share with stakeholders and policymakers are provided in table 5. Discussion follows every after-the-table presentation.

Organic farming is beneficial to farmer participants like the findings by Diop and Vedrine (2022), beneficial to the government like the findings of Zhang et al. (2022) and the consumers like the findings of Wiggins (2022). The experiences of organic farmers in organic farming are common to many and it is characterized by farmers' experience of reduced production in the first 2 years of organic farming practice shifting from traditional organic farming. This experience is a difficult time for the farmers whose family sustenance is anchored on farming in general. This is where the government can be of help to organic farmers where it could help support farmers' families and entice more farmers to go into organic farming and develop the country into organic agriculture. The government can shift from its traditional support of seedlings, tools, and machinery into supporting the needs of the families of the farmers converting their land into organic farms.

Another notable experience of the farmer is the lack of knowledge on how to establish marketing strategies for their products and reach out to their target market. Primarily, the benefits of organic farming to farmers lie in the economic opportunity of higher productivity and higher financial benefits both in producing and selling. This brings better economic condition for the farmer and the family of the farmer whose life, family life, and living are intertwined with organic farming. Programs are needed that help farmers establish marketing strategies that would reach target markets, establish customer contracts and ultimately establish a value chain with the need to minimize risks (Tobin et al. 2016).

Further, the farmer's role in establishing marketing strategies to reach out to its customers is significant. First, it requires knowing who and where their market is and thus, second knowing how to reach these markets. In this research study, there is a dire need for farmers to learn how to strategically position their organic products and maximize the benefits it brings for a strategically positioned product. There is also a need to assess if traditional products remain the core competency of farmers as successful farmers show that the products, they process to sell in the international markets are processed products and not fresh products. There are few studies on factors that led to establishing marketing strategies for organizations. There are however studies which helps determine organic products development such as those by Shyian et al. (2021) which explored income, expenditure, food quality, consumption of individual products as important variables to market development for organic products.

In addition, international distribution skill is also needed as well as other marketing skills for farmers to seize the opportunity of existing markets in organic products. The growth in production and the internationalization of the organic farmers' market would help increase farmers' revenue and elevate their economic condition.

Another experience of organic farmers are the benefits of the farmer's experience in organic farming. Farmers said, it brings joy to themselves and to others in restoring ecological balance. Trade-offs between the biodiversity benefits of organic management and production yields happen as posited by Gabriel et al. (2013) and Schneider et al., (2014). The experiences however of organic farmer-participants showed experiences of joy that despite the reduction of production yield, the hope of better yield and restoring ecological balance make the farmers happy. Higher organic benefits for biodiversity per unit area in simplified landscapes have been recorded biodiversity per unit output in the study of Gabriel et al. (2013).

Finally, the benefit of organic farming to the government is food security and sustainability. The growing population, climate change, and other environmental factors threaten the core of food security both for now and future generations. The government finds joy in the farmers being on the frontline of organic farming and in restoring biodiversity. This would mean the people are food secure, lower government funds to devote to soil improvement, and support to farmers in the form of fertilizers. The government with the help of the farmers can bring the country back to food security. The benefit of organic farming to consumers is to ensure food produced by farmers is healthy for the people. The lived experiences of Agri-Entrepreneurs/farmers as they develop and implement marketing strategies for natural and sustainable products? The challenges faced by organic farmers may be insurmountable but with the help of the government and private institutions, farmers will be able to cross these challenges.

### C.1. Support and Backing of the Government

Organic farming has been introduced since the 1970s in the Philippines and has not taken significant improvement. The agricultural land devoted to Philippine organic farming is less than 1%. The national government just like any global organization claims that food security is everyone's agenda including the local communities and farmers developing its food security agenda, protocols, and practices. The role of the



government according to the farmers is significant and its commitment will spell the difference. The provision of the technology that farmers cannot afford to procure will help sustain organic farming. The governments' decision, implementation, and control to increase organic farming will help increase agricultural land tilled using organic farming. In the end, the primary reason why the governments' support and backing are needed in moving towards organic farming rests in the social issue of food security and sustainability it will bring.

Food security is the world's concern today as well as it is the concern of ordinary farmers and the country. The United Nations (UN) is working to ensure countries adhere to the international Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by 2030. The study of Sachs et al. (2022) highlighted the UN SDG where the primary reason for the world's concern for food security is that it is being threatened by the ever-growing world population with a fixed land resource or its conversion to other purposes as well as by climate change.

The world's population in 2018 is approximately 7.6B and it is growing 1.09% annually estimated at 83M people per year. In the year 2050, the population is estimated to be at 9.7B or 2.1B more people in the next 32 years. This is the population that farmers will have to feed daily making the roles of the farmers significant over time. This is likewise the people that the government needs to feed and thus ensure food security.

Food security as defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations is a situation that exists when people lack secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and active and healthy life. The definition of FAO implies the availability and accessibility of adequate supplies at a global and national level; on the other end, the concern is with adequate nutrition and well-being. Availability, accessibility, and adequacy of the world's supplies are answered by the country's food security and this study would like to link national availability, accessibility, and adequacy based on communities' food security.

Food security covers the dimensions of availability, access, and stability as adopted by the World Food Conference in the 1980s. However, for this study, the food security framework using the five (5) dimensions including food consumption, production, trade, distribution, and agricultural potential will be used for this study.

Food consumption as a dimension of food security and in the light of natural and sustainable farming means consumers' awareness of natural and sustainable farming. People patronize organic products because it is good for their health primarily. It has no harmful characteristics that may bring a threat to human health as there is no presence of chemicals both externally and internally. Organic product awareness however goes a long way as there is a need to educate the people on the need for it as well as on the ill effects of synthetically grown products. The study by Cvijanovi?, G., & Žuža, M. (2020) in a European setting highlighted the health benefit of organic farming as the reason for consumption.

The production of organic products is another dimension of food security. Agri-businesses produce food for people from natural and sustainable sources and ways. Farms get rid of chemicals especially systemic chemicals as serious damage is recorded on the over-reliance on systemic insecticides for pest control in farms impacting agricultural productivity.

## C.2 Provision of Employment and Livelihood Opportunities

The income they get from their farms helps sustain the farmers. In some instances, farmers provide a livelihood to the local communities. They join together and create a cooperative to make sure that the daily requirements of the family are met. The seasonality of the income of farming would not help bridge the daily needs of the farmers and thus joining the cooperative will help them procure their daily needs.

Cooperative lends money to farmers at a very low-interest rate to provide for the needs of the families. In return, all agricultural output of the farmers will be sold to the cooperative. The cooperative thus balances the needs of the farmers and their production output to make sure both the farmers and the cooperative will earn at the end of the cropping season.

In some instances, farmers provide livelihood opportunities to tribal communities living nearby teaching them organic farming practices. This helps the tribal communities feed their families and earn well from their produce.

### C.3. Slow Development of Organic Farming

Organic farming came into the Philippines and spread throughout the archipelago in the 1970s through the creation of the Organic Farming Division of the Department of Agriculture. However, today only 1% of the total agricultural land is considered organically farmed.

This is also supported by the research findings where participants mentioned among others the reasons for slow development. It includes many farmers who are not keen to go organic as their mindset needs to be changed and knowledge transfer is needed on the benefits of organic farming as well as the organic practices themselves. In some areas, it took them 20 years to increase the farmers' population to 20 individuals doing organic farming.

### C.4 Modest Marketability of Organic Produce

Organic Farming according to research participants has provided livelihood to their families and the communities where they belong. However, organic products face marketability issues locally as consumers in the Philippines are not buying organic produce consistently, and not enough consumers for organic produce probably due to higher prices than traditionally grown agricultural products. Marketing initiatives are planned for a select few farmers especially big farmers, and they establish contacts and contracts with foreign firms.

Small, individual farmers do their advertising and marketing initiatives, and some have none. Financial resources are put into agricultural production than into marketing.

### C.5 Factors Noncontributory to Organic Farming Success

The agricultural production output of the farmers is well accepted in other countries however this comes with organic farming certification. The costly and tedious process of certification may invite huge farmers with the hope of better opportunities for acceptability in huge countries with a huge market for organic farm produce as they have enough financial capability. However, for too many small farmers, certification is an issue as they do not have enough resources for certification. In the Philippines, the practice of organic farm certification is done by third-party certification. This is in contrast with the self-certification of organized farmers as practiced in some countries.

Another issue is the difficulty to go organic farming at the start due to the decline in yield. Organic farming aims to bring the environment to its natural state and bring balance to ecology's flora and fauna and this is the farmer's primary role in organic farming. In the quest of farmers to earn a living for themselves and their families, the farmer also performs as the moderator to bring ecological balance.

The practice of organic farming involves the natural use of organic materials to utilize as fertilizer, pesticide, insecticide, and food both for plants and animals. The farmer's agricultural practice removes synthetic fertilizers, and heavy use of pesticides, rodenticides, and insecticides especially systemic pesticides which are detrimental to good insects.

Organic farming is beneficial to society by increasing biodiversity over time. It helps in the reduction of pollution; conservation of the environment such as soil, energy, and many more; reduction of the costs of farm inputs; and ensures the supply of food for future generations. Other benefits of organic farming may be social benefits as well as economic benefits. The economic benefits of organic farming cannot be felt immediately especially when the soil has taken its toll in synthetic farming and its capability to grow plants has weakened.

The use of chemicals in the onset may bring immediate good economic results, seemingly cost-effective in the short run. However, it will bring long-term destruction to the environment such as killing beneficial insects, destroying soil fertility, a threat to human health, a threat to ecological biodiversity, and being economically disadvantageous. The impact of these chemicals on farms is harmful both to those exposed to agricultural lands and to those who eat the products produced on the farm. In human health, memory loss is attributed to continued exposure of farmers and consumers alike to neonicotinoid or nionics – one kind of insecticide. The use of systemic pesticides has a strong adverse impact on ecosystem biodiversity, threats to food production and safety, and ultimately threats to human health. The prevalent chemical use in farms is worrisome. It is responsible for environmental pollution in the form of toxicity to the environment and human health among others. In the end, the use of chemicals in farming is only a stopgap, an unhealthy stopgap. It does not bring sustainable economic benefits to farmers and the populace in general.

The heavy use in the past of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and other chemicals for agricultural use needs to be stopped by organic farmers. In the process, it takes 2 to 3 years for the farmers to bring back the health of the soil and the farmers need to reckon with the decline of farm outputs for the time being. Yields on the farm increase as soon as farm soil gets back to its natural and healthy state.

#### *D. Challenges*

A variety of challenges is personally experienced by organic farmers. This includes challenges in production where a notable decrease in production yield happens in the first 2 to 3 years from the conversion of the farm from traditional to organic farms. This creates hardship in the family income of farmers where the farmers seek financial support from cooperatives nearby as well as other sources of financial aid both from private and public funds. Another challenge for organic farmers is the lack of technological support from the government. Primarily, the support they get from the government is on tools, seedlings, and some types of machinery. Secondly, the government provides training to farmers. However, in the past 30 years, no significant technological change in agriculture has changed and thus the yields virtually remain the same or slightly increase if there is.

Organic farming needs technology to be effective. Technology may be in soil improvement, nutrient management is specific to organic farming, soil amendments, mechanical, automation, and software solutions, and eliminating synthetic inputs, while reducing labor and other costs. The introduction of farming technologies in organic farming brings farming efficiency and yield increase that would address market demand while maintaining organic standards (USDA Economic Research Service, 2000). Production efficiency in agriculture is made possible through the development of technologies (Malone and Lipson, 2007).

Finally, one of the biggest challenges in organic farming is the establishment of the connectivity of farms

to consumers especially establishing international markets. The primary reason for establishing an international market is attributed to price considerations. For example, the prices of organic products in Serbia are higher than conventional ones by 30% (Vehapi, 2015). Consumers all over the world consider organic products consumption based on different perceptions. One of these is the perception of a healthier and more nutritious product compared to products produced from conventional farming (Golijan et al., 2017). Another perception is that organic products are safer for consumption (Br?i?-Stip?evi? and Petljak, 2011).

**TABLE III**

MAJOR THEMES AND CORE IDEAS ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AGRI-ENTREPRENEURS ON HOW THEY COPE WITH THE CHALLENGES

| Major Themes   | Core Ideas   |
|--|--|
| Obtaining needed aid and support                         | Getting help from experts  |
|  | Getting support from fellow organic farmers  |
|  | Seeking help from the Department of Agriculture for the development of fertilizers   |
|  | Seeking help and support from family   |
|  | Gathering as much support as possible including the community  |
|  | Seeking valuable support from other government agencies such as the Department of Tourism and Department of Agriculture among others |
|  | Taking part in government-initiated activities   |
| Fidelity and persistence                                 | Consistency of practices in production   |
|  | Commitment to organic farming  |
|  | Commitment to quality of products  |
|  | Commitment to Consumers  |
|  | Challenges at the beginning but persistence pays off   |
| Taking initiatives for local and international marketing | Building good relations with customers   |
|  | Establishing connections with other countries  |
|  | Finding what product is in need in other countries   |
|  | Meeting other countries' needs and demand for organic produce  |
|  | Identifying as many possible geographical target market  |

#### D.1. Obtaining Needed Aid and Support

The present local challenge of organic farming is low and inconsistent domestic demand for organic products. The bigger market for organic products is in the first world countries and this is where farmers need in getting help from experts in establishing marketing channels to reach the target market. Another aid needed by farmers is the technology from the Department of Agriculture in developing organic fertilizers and other farm inputs. Product Development is a challenge that small farmers need to reckon with.

The research participants indicated that this support can be gathered from the local communities and the different government institutions and instrumentalities.

#### D.2. Fidelity and Persistence

Organic farming is very challenging, especially in the first 2-3 years. This is marked by a drop in agricultural production yield, a swarm of insects, and financial difficulty for small farmers. Despite all these, organic farmers' commitment and consistency of practices are much needed to succeed in organic farming. Other practices needed include ensuring products are of quality as a form of commitment to consumers.

#### D.3 Taking Initiatives for Local and International Marketing

The research participants in general are selling their products domestically. This has been the strength of farmers. They sell to local markets from market stalls to retailers and wholesalers as well as traders. The demand however in the Philippines is growing slowly compared to the market of organic products, especially the first world countries like the USA, Japan, and Europe. Internationalization thus is also needed.

The farmers however do not have the skills and the capability to establish an international network. It is thus a strong necessity to build the capabilities of farmers into the internationalization of organic farming to maximize the demand potential. To cope with these challenges, farmers find the need to establish good relations with customers, and those already selling their products internationally, must establish connections, find out what products are selling well and meet the demand.

#### E. Insights

The success of organic farming on the farmer's level or the national level depends heavily on the amount of government support notes farmer-participants. This is experienced by many areas in the world such as In Asia, historically the level of support for organic agriculture has increased proactively in policies and programs in favor of organic agriculture, for example, Bhutan, India, Taiwan, and Sri Lanka. In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has established its leadership in pro-organic government intervention (IFOAM, 2017). Other support that organic farmers view as needed includes farm-to-market access, promotion initiatives, and collaboration among organic farmers through establishing a nationwide network of organic farmers.

**TABLE IV**

MAJOR THEMES AND CORE IDEAS ON INSIGHTS THAT AGRI-ENTREPRENEURS CAN SHARE WITH STAKEHOLDERS AND POLICYMAKERS

| Major Themes                   | Core Ideas  |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Production of organic products | Government must commit to organic farming                             |
|                                | Government must promote organic farming strongly                      |
|                                | Support of the government in the acquisition of farm equipment needed |
|                                | Financial help from the government needed for farm inputs             |
|                                | Government aid in introducing new technologies                        |
|                                | Government support in the accreditation of organic farmers            |
| Creating farm to market access | Farm roads into the mountains need to be established                  |
|                                | Establish a permanent avenue for marketing organic products locally   |

|  |   |
|--|---|
|  | Organic farmers need as much support in physical farm needs   |
|  | Support from the government needed in post-harvest facilities   |
| Marketing and promotion of organic products                      | Support needed in building consumer awareness that will turn into sales                               |
|  | Consumer awareness is needed to push organic products   |
|  | Help in marketing organic produce abroad  |
|  | Government support to market organic products both locally and internationally                        |
| Establishing cooperation and collaboration among organic farmers | The First 2-3 years of organic farming are hard   |
|  | Soil transitions, farm yield reduces  |
|  | Community-based organic farming helps farmers support each other more than individual organic farming |
|  | Constant education of non-organic farmers is necessary  |

### E.1 Production of Organic Products

The role of the Organic Division of the Department of Agriculture has remained as an agency intended for monitoring purposes and providers of agricultural tools. The regional offices have yet to come up with a list of farms practicing organic farming in a timely fashion and with accurate information. The role it is performing now has to grow from monitoring into a strong advocate of organic farming bringing the land tilled for organic farming to significant heights.

Technologies attributed to organic farming such as the development of organic fertilizers from enzymes and animal wastes have to be advocated by the government. Other technologies are already available in other countries.

The government may also take the lead in performing the accreditation process instead of expensive third-party accrediting agencies. This will help both farmers and the government.

### E.2 Creating Farm-to-Market Access

Farm-to-market roads abound but on the side of upland mountains for upland products such as upland rice, road networks need to be established to the mountains. Post-harvest facilities likewise including cold storage need to be established to protect agricultural outputs in the provinces. The availability of private cold storage has made the prices of commodities expensive specifically for organic farm produce.

### E.3 Marketing and Promotion of Organic Products

Organic farm products are made aware only in government-initiated events which are scheduled from time to time and not daily. There needs to be an awareness among people of the distribution network's regularity, availability, and even the benefits of organic products. Government support is needed in this too.

Establishing international connections can also be supported by the government. The extensive connection that the government has in business can be tapped to develop networks for local farmers to international markets.

#### E.4 Establishing Cooperation and Collaboration among Organic Farmers

The transition from traditional farming to organic farming is hard in the first 2 – 3 years as the farm yield decreases. The government can help provide for the needs of the farmers committing to organic farm production. Further, farmers can also develop community-based cooperatives to support each other.

Finally, the challenge is that farmers are used chemicals in farming and there is no sign of stopping. The Philippine Government was part of the countries that participated in the United Nations High-Level Political Forum in September 2015 which adopted the Sustainable Development Goals established by the United Nations. The Philippine Government is committed to the bigger challenges of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which integrate the social, economic, and environmental agenda. This, however, is extremely on a document level and the use of chemicals remains prevalent in the Philippines most specifically in Mindanao. Pesticide poisoning cases were recognized to be a health problem in the Philippines, especially in the agricultural sector. Further, it has been recommended by farmers, and activists alike for the government to take action steps including the regulation on the use of chemicals in farming specifically setting limits on the use of pesticides and their proper handling. The creation of the governments' Fertilizer and Pesticide Authority in 1977 geared towards improving agricultural production, protecting public health, and enhancing environmental quality has not given justice to the judicious control of chemicals in farming as proved in the many cases reported on chemical poisoning cases.

The call of the United Nations (2015) towards realizing sustainable development goals by 2030 includes a goal on Life on Land (Goal 15). Goal 15 means to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of the terrestrial ecosystem, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.

The primary responsibility of restoring ecological balance rests on the farmers as the first defense against ecological threats. Other stakeholders include the government, non-government organizations, private institutions, and consumers as well.

One hundred percent of the farmer participants are practicing organic farming. The organic farming practices vary from one farmer to the other in terms of land preparation, plant care, fruit care, pest and disease controls, and innovation. Inland preparation and composting are practiced. Most of the farmer-research participants are practicing vermiculture. Vermiculture is the process of producing organic soil intended for organic farming. It is intended to breed and raise earthworms. The vermiculture process creates a type of fertilizer necessary for plant growth. Common practice however is the application of vermiculture before planting and some applications during plant growth. Another practice in land preparation is the use of animal wastes mixed with fruits and vegetable enzymes instead of vermiculture as fertilizer. Lawrence practices contour planting to mitigate soil erosion, flood, and efficient water use control.

“Kining among uma, naga gamit ug  
teknolohiya sa Pang-uma sa pag  
protektar sa kinaiyahan sama sa hagdan  
hagdan nga pananum aron pag sa dili  
pagdahili sa yuta ug sa saktong pag giya  
sa tubig.”

FGD\_OrgFarm\_#1

Our farm uses technology that would protect the environment such as contour farming to mitigate soil erosion and water control.

Romnick practices greenhouse in cut flower production. Max practices sustainable city multi-layer air gardening in producing vegetables.

“Ang akong garden gihimo sa siyudad sa Davao City nga modelo para sa mga mobisita sa siyudad. Tawagan dayon ko nila kada dunay mo abot aron ipakita ang akong multi-layered air gardening.”

FGD\_OrgFarm\_#4

My garden is made model garden by the The city of Davao is for the visitor to see. Every time visitors come, the City The government of Davao and the Office of the City Mayor will always call me to highlight my garden to the visitors and show them multi-layered air gardening.

Joy practices upland rice farming to maximize the benefits of upland farming which includes higher yield and good quality to name a few. Further, Lawrence and Romnick are holistic in farming practices involving plants and livestock. The wastes of livestock are treated and converted to fertilizer for plants. Plant waste then is treated with other wastes to be fed to livestock.

“Ang among flower garden dinhi sa bukid nag hatag ug trabaho sa mga



netibo. Ang among pag-uma nagagamit  
ug orgnikong pamaagi sa patubo sa  
bulak ug sa mga ispray nga  
gigamit aron pag-abog ug pagpatay sa  
mga pisti.”

FGD-OrgFarm\_#7

Our flower garden here in the  
Mountains provided livelihood to the  
locals/ natives. We use organic farming  
to raise flowers through the use of  
organic fertilizers, organic chemical  
spray to kill pests.

#### *F. Marketing Strategies*

The marketing strategies of farmer-participants follow a common pattern, two of the sixteen participants are both into domestic and international distribution on one hand and 14 participants are domestic distribution only. The primary consideration of international distribution is the volume of production output of farmers. Micro and small farmers generally are domestically distributed while medium and large size farmers are both into domestic and international distribution. The classification of farmers is based on the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) asset size of business which includes micro-business with asset sizes of up to P 3M, small business is up to P 15M in assets, medium-sized businesses with assets up to P 100M and large business with more than P 100M asset size.

The research participants are classified into 14 micro and small businesses while two are medium-sized farmers. In the light of Strategic Management, the 16 participants can be divided into two groups. Group A are those farmers whose strategic management is structured. There exist a process of marketing strategies planning, implementation, and review while Group B is those farmers whose focus is only to ensure short-term profitability as provided in Table 2.

Lawrence and Romnick are farmers belonging to Group A whose strategic marketing practices are structured. The two farmers structure their processes of formulating, implementing, and evaluating marketing strategies. Lawrence and Romnick employ marketing professionals to help formulate marketing strategies, present strategies to management, have them approved, and implement them. The planning horizon practiced by both Lawrence and Romnick is a medium-term planning horizon of three years.

The rest of the research participants have unstructured strategic management practices. These farmers are only focused on the monthly or annual profit and do not deal with marketing strategies the way Group A does. Fourteen farmers live on subsistence and target profitability month on month or year on year. These

resources are focused on the more important organizational function in operations which is production. They do not have enough resources for marketing activities. The study by Carmona et al. (2021) identified some marketing initiatives that farmers can use to distribute organic farm produce. This includes the use of farmers cooperatives to reduce selling prices of organic products conducive for consumers.

In another study by Chychkalo-Kondratska and Novytska (2021), the authors concluded the importance of a long-term development plan to develop the domestic market of organic products. In addition, the study also suggested that the implementation of effective marketing activities including the establishment of agricultural systems would help create a balanced distribution of sales channels. The study also implies the need for farmers to understand the basic process of consumers buying patterns for buying organic products for the farmers to be competitive.

*G. Strategic Implementation*

The strategic implementation of these farmers follows how strategic management is done. Group A follows an implementation strategy. Lawrence, for example, identified the US market due to the presence of high demand for organic products, especially processed fruits. Romnick, on the other hand, identified Japan for its cut flower production due to the high demand for cut flowers. Resources thus are devoted towards ensuring products meet quality standards set by USA and Japan.

**TABLE V**

STRATEGIC MARKETING

| Pseudonym | Strategic Marketing | Planning Horizon |
|-----------|---------------------|------------------|
| Max       | Unstructured        | Monthly          |
| Joy       | Unstructured        | Monthly          |
| Lawrence  | Structured          | 3 Years          |
| Tintin    | Unstructured        | Annual           |
| Romnick   | Structured          | 3 Years          |
| Requestas | Unstructured        | Monthly          |
| Saul      | Unstructured        | Monthly          |
| Eva       | Unstructured        | Annual           |
| Nanay     | Unstructured        | Monthly          |
| Aida      | Unstructured        | Monthly          |
| Joban     | Unstructured        | Monthly          |
| Mind      | Unstructured        | Monthly          |
| Tintin 2  | Unstructured        | Annual           |
| Tower     | Unstructured        | Monthly          |
| Mer       | Unstructured        | Monthly          |
| Poly      | Unstructured        | Monthly          |

The difference in strategic implementation as in the case of strategic management between the two groups is highly visible. Group A employs professionals and many people to establish quality products on one hand and Group B on the other hand are farmers living on subsistence. Group A farmers professionalize the

development of marketing strategies. Their products are varied which includes both traditional and non-traditional products. Traditionally, their products include livestock, fruits, flowers, vegetables, and some crops distributed domestically. They also produce non-traditional products which include processed fruits and vegetables such as jams, ice cream, and snack bars from fruits and juices. As compared to Group B, all their products are traditional products like crops, vegetables, fruits, and livestock.

The mode of distribution is varied. Group A distributed products through multiple channels of distribution. Distribution includes traditional channels such as retailers, wholesalers, and dealers as well as a non-traditional distribution channel of malls. Internet marketing is also used. As in the case of Group B distribution channels used are traditional channels of retailers, wholesalers, dealers, and in some instances, malls. However, during regular government trade fairs in the form of market stalls on special market days with designated locations pre-identified by the government, all farmers participate generally. Group B farmers consider trade fairs and market stalls as important but not as important as how Group A considers trade fairs. Trade fairs in Davao are done at least twice a week while other areas in Mindanao schedule trade fairs on a sporadic schedule.

The pricing model also differs between Group A and B. Group A practices premium pricing for organically grown products. Group B however considers local competition which includes products not organically grown. Thus, pricing is lower than Group A, is pricing. Group B practices Optional Pricing. Prices differ among different channels. Price is high for malls and specialty stores; price is low during government-initiated trade fairs.

Promotion activities are generally the same but vary in implementation. Promotion is done during government-initiated trade fairs, some on internet sites. Group A however is active in e-commerce as well as Group B. However, Group B is not as active as Group A does e-commerce daily and employs an individual to focus on internet marketing and getting orders. Group B employs e-commerce primarily to be known for its presence in organic farming.

#### H. Implication for Practice and Future Research.

Given the research findings, the implications of this research are offered. The huge challenge in organic farming. The experiences faced by the organic farmers in the process of converting traditional farms to organic farms over a long period would eventually be experienced by new and aspiring organic farmers too. The good thing is that experienced had been recorded by organic farmers that new farmers can learn from these experiences and seek the help of experts to avert failures in farming. Most of these experiences can be learned through organic farmers who are willing to support them. Another challenge that new farmers may experience is dealing with the huge international market which has not been tapped by most small farmers. Farmers can organize themselves into cooperatives or corporations and professionalize marketing operations to include internationalization.

Farmers can seek the help of professionals, academe, and the government by initiating an international forum for organic products based in the region. The challenge of new organic farmers may be insurmountable but the conviction towards organic farming is a deep desire and commitment for ecological balance as organic farming is a form of sustainable agriculture, a way of growing or raising food in an ecologically and ethically responsible manner (Kassam et al., 2009). Another challenge for organic farmers is the practice of organic farming accreditation. In the Philippines, the practice of accreditation is done by private agencies which makes it costly on the part of the farmers. The government sometimes provides support too. The importance of accreditation has an international implication for product acceptance. Countries require accreditation before products can be declared organic products. Most industrialized countries have regulations governing organic farming such as Australia, European Union countries (1992), Switzerland (1999), Japan, and the United States (2000). Developing countries started to establish policies

and regulations on organic farming. The Codex Alimentarius Guidelines for the Production, Processing, Labelling, and Marketing of Organically Produced Foods serve as the international basis for establishing the international standards for organic farming and products. It intends to establish the infrastructure for the review of technical requirements, sanitary measures associated with inspection as well as certification systems.

Government support to organic farmers. The government may change its view on the support given to organic farmers to include family sustenance during the first 2 – 3 years of land conversion from traditional to organic farms. This support may include beyond seedlings, tools, and types of machinery to include personal needs of the families such as food, clothing, and shelter to recover the decline in yield. This support may be in the form of conversion subsidies that other countries are providing organic farmers. The key factor attributed to the increase in organic farms includes the existence and availability of government policies and subsidies (Dobbs and Pretty, 2000). Another support the government can give is to establish on behalf of the small farmers an international forum for organic farmers, establish connections and contracts and sustain the partnership. The absence of connectivity between local organic farmers and the international market at present is due to the lack of capability of farmers and the potent force to support them is the government, the professionals, and the academe. Another support that the government can provide to organic farmers is the new technologies in farming that have been introduced by other countries and found effective. These technologies may apply to soil management, plant care, fruit care, and post-harvest technologies. These technologies are needed to increase farm efficiency.

Financial Intermediaries support. There is also an implication of the need for financial intermediaries to support small organic farmers to be extended financial support through loans on the framework of organic farm conversion and with loan duration longer than normal 1 to 3 years loan to allow organic farmers to recover the cost after the 3rd year of operations. In Canada (MacRae et al., 2007) the increase in organic farming over some time was not only because of the presence of government-provided financial incentives for organic farming such as conversion incentives but also because of the availability of private funds provided to organic farmers.

Implications to Future Research. The limitation of this research is that this is conducted within Mindanao and there can be more insights that other organic farmers may provide as such, this can also be conducted in other parts of the Philippines or even in other countries. Another implication for future research is to conduct an in-depth analysis of why the government has not been successful since the 1970s in organic farming. There is also a need to increase the awareness among farmers to convert lands from traditional to organic farms. Awareness of organic farming and its benefits and probably its pitfalls is a significant predictor of organic farming adoption. It was found in a study that high awareness of farmers on organic farming will likely lead farmers to adopt organic farming practices (Edpan, 2017). There is also a need to research the government policies on organic farming, increase the role of the Organic Division of the Department of Agriculture to a significant level and change the landscape of organic farming in the Philippines.

## CONCLUSIONS

This phenomenological study on the Lived Experiences of Agri-Entrepreneurs in Developing Marketing Strategies for Organic Farming has provided the researcher with many meaningful and insightful impressions from the sixteen participants of the research. Their stories and tales created an impact on the researcher to pursue more research that would help improve organic farming in the Philippines in whatever way the researcher can.

As a professor and a business practitioner this experience opened my mind to how hard organic farming is

for organic farmers and their families. It has created to the researcher pressure to inform government regulators, government implementors of the Department of Agriculture, academe into agriculture studies, and the financial intermediaries to support organic farming.

The organic farmers-participants withstood the many challenges for many years, and many can learn from them not just those aspiring organic farming but anyone who would want to ensure food security in the Philippines. Organic farming brings ecological balance. Since, it brings ecological balance, through organic farming and organic farmers, the country can expect a country thus of sustainable food security in the future.

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