

Consumer perceptions of organic foods in Bangkok, Thailand

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Abstract

In response to food scares related to high levels of pesticide residues sometimes found on vegetables and fruits, consumers in Thailand increasingly demand ‘safe’ foods. This has resulted in a number of initiatives and labels indicating ‘pesticide safe’ vegetables. However, the pesticide-residue problem has proved enduring. This opens a market opportunity for organic foods, which are produced entirely without using synthetic chemicals. As little is known on consumer perception of organic foods in Thailand, a survey was conducted in Bangkok. More than a third of the 848 respondents reported having purchased organic vegetables or fruits in the past. The main reasons for purchasing organic products are that consumers expect them to be healthier, that organic products are environmentally friendly. The respondents who have bought organic vegetables tend to be older, have a higher education level and a higher family income than those who have not bought them. The main barrier to increasing the market share of organic vegetables is that consumers do not clearly differentiate between the various ‘pesticide safe’ labels and the organic labels. Informing consumers about unique characteristics of organic production methods, the strict inspection and required third party certification might be a promising strategy to develop the market for organic vegetables in Thailand’s urban centers.

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Introduction

Interest in organically produced food is increasing throughout the world in response to concerns about intensive agricultural practices and their potential effect on human health as well as on the environment. In Thailand, as in many Asian countries, the rapid socio-economic development was accompanied by a modernization and industrialization of the agri-food production. The Thai government has promoted an industrial, export-oriented agriculture, characterized by a heavy reliance on synthetic chemicals to protect crops against weeds, pests and diseases

and thus leading to improved productivity (UNDP, 2007). However, insufficient farmer training has led to the inadequate use of pesticides, i.e. the recommended application levels and application frequency are not always followed, nor is the pre-harvest interval strictly observed (Chunyanuwat, 2005). Also, farmers use synthetic chemicals that are classified as ‘extremely hazardous’¹ and even pesticides that are banned in Thailand (IPM-DANIDA, 2004; Posri et al.,

¹ The World Health Organization (WHO) classifies pesticides by hazard based on their lethal dose. Each pesticide is put into one of four classes, from Ia ‘extremely hazardous’ (i.e. very toxic) to III ‘slightly hazardous’ (i.e. caution) (WHO, 2006). Because farmers in developing countries often do not have the training or the equipment to handle pesticides safely, FAO recommends that pesticides classified as ‘extremely hazardous’ should not be used in developing countries (Eddleston et al., 2002).

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