

Nürnberg, Germany 12.– 15.2.2020

BIOFACH2020

into organic



“Organic delivers!”...health in a holistic sense

„Organic food is a source of health“

Interview with Sylvia Kuria, Kenya

Under the banner “Organic delivers!” the main congress theme of BIOFACH 2020 will highlight the positive impacts of organic production methods. The fourth conversation in the BIOFACH interview series on this topic explores the positive effects of organic on health in a holistic sense.

Kenya is a densely populated country with over 50 mn inhabitants. Growing very fast it can reach more than 100 mn people in 2055 (source 1*). Over 50 % of the population are farmers. But only one fifth of the land can be used for agriculture. How do you feel about food security in your country?

We experienced some heavy crisis in the past – the last big hunger crisis was in 2011. Today the national status of nutrition is becoming better. But now, Kenya as many other countries around the world, has got another problem linked with food. On the one hand part of our people still suffer from undernourishment on the other hand we can find many people in big cities overweight and diabetic. This is due to the fact that citizens are eating too much unhealthy food and fast food. It is highly processed with too much added sugar, salt and fats. Even worse, as experts say, allergies, asthma and cancer are linked to malnutrition for example. Studies confirm that highly processed food is not the appropriate way to live healthy.

Are people more aware of a healthy diet today? Is there a difference between urban and rural areas?

It is true that some people have learned more about healthy food in recent years, thanks to information from the internet and media. Education plays an important role too. In the last ten years since I engaged myself with growing vegetables I learned a lot, including many facts about bad impacts

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of chemicals and pesticides on our soil and our food. This has strongly convinced me of the benefits of organic agriculture and it made me believe that this is the best and only way to nourish my family. It is not easy to work as an organic farmer woman, but I was lucky to get some help from the Kenyan Organic Agriculture Network KOAN at the beginning. Later I was able to share my knowledge, conduct trainings and to convince some other small scale farmers. Also I've had the opportunity to give some interviews to spread the word about organic agriculture and a healthy diet.

You have started many activities to convince other farmers to produce organically and to feed their families organically. How do you explain the benefits of organic farming and organic food?

Slowly but surely more and more people are aware that their diet is unhealthy and also bad for the environment. To grow only monocultures of corn and beans cannot be good for soil and the farm because you are dependent on the big seed companies, you treat your soil badly and we will lose our biodiversity. It is so much more sustainable to grow a good mix of veggies like carrots, kale, spinach, herbs and others. These arguments together with the experience of more tasty produce can convince people. My clients buying vegetables from me often ask why the veggies are so sweet and aromatic and I can say: "... because I have cultivated them in harmony with nature and organically." There is still a lot to do and to explain to the people. In the beginning of November we opened a shop in Nairobi city. "Sylvia's Basket" will bring our organic veggies and other organic products into the city where there is a growing awareness and demand for organic food.

What was your motivation and mission to become an organic farmer and the founder of "Sylvia's Basket"?

When I was a child I spent a lot of time at my grandparents' farm and I always loved to be there during my school holidays. To be honest it was a dream to become a farmer. So when our young family was growing, we moved from Nairobi to Limuru in the countryside. A little kitchen garden was one of the first things I started there. It was very hard in the beginning but I was persistent and with growing experience, the support of an organic association and the conversion to completely organic methods I was

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successful and could produce plenty of healthy food. Harvesting organic veggies and fruits for my family – my children are 10, 8 and 7 now – but also sharing it with friends and neighbors was a confirmation and encouraged me to go on and expand. On my mission to make healthy food available to more people and affordable, I established “Sylvia’s Basket”, where you can order organic veggies and fruits online. It became a success.

Do you think organic food can increase the level of health and food security in Kenya and around the world?

I am sure that good healthy food and the health of people is strongly connected. Organic agriculture has proven the best and most sustainable way. The more farmers start to work in organic agriculture, don't spray pesticides but heal the soil, the more good food will be available and can promote people's health. Especially parents must start to feed their children healthy. If we avoid highly processed and refined food we can improve our diets and re-balance our bodies. From healthy soils we cannot only get better veggies but healthy soils rich of humus are also more resistant to drought and can contribute to reducing CO2 and thus climate change. That means that more organic agriculture around the world is a huge benefit for mankind and our planet. My advice is: start small and local, convince your neighbors. Small clusters of 200 to 300 organic kitchen gardens in the countryside could change so much. In Kenya we have started shifting, there is quite a good organic movement, but more education and training is necessary to attract many more small scale farmers to the organic movement. There is a lot of potential, the farmers are open. I am deeply convinced organic can help to change the world into a better place.

The Interview was conducted by Karin Heinze, BiO Reporter International



Background information

After times of hunger and undernourishing caused by drought and other reasons, Kenyas fast growing population in our days fights many health problems caused by wrong nutrition. In the big cities for example more and more people are overweight caused by highly refined foods. Added sugars, salts and fats have a negative impact, too. Malnutrition is a public health problem in Kenya – this is a conclusion of a 2017 study of the Kenya Pediatric Organization.

The young Kenyan organic entrepreneur Sylvia Kuria is a pioneer in healthy nutrition. She was born and raised in Nairobi. After her studies and several years as Capacity Development Officer she moved with her young family from the capital to the countryside. Near the city of Limuru in central Kenya, only 50 km northwest of Nairobi, she started a kitchen garden to always have fresh and healthy food for her family. In the early stages, pests caused her grief. She was advised to spray pesticides. But Sylvia didn't have a good feeling and wasn't comfortable with this advice. She started looking for a healthier, more sustainable and more environmentally friendly method. During her research, she came into contact with the ideas of organic farming. Fortunately, she received support from KOAN, the Kenyan Organic Farming Network. Sylvia works hard to produce healthy food for her family and to deliver as much organic food as possible to others. First, she shared her harvest with friends and in the neighborhood. Later she developed "Sylvia's Basket", her own company with organic subscription boxes. Unlike many others, she chose organic farming because she believes that organic farming is the only way to feed the world sustainably and healthily.

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Vita

Sylvia Kuria was born in January 1981 in Nairobi and raised in Kenyas capitol.

She studied and has a bachelor degree in Capacity Development and worked at Christoffel Blindenmission.

With her husband she moved to Limuru 50 km north west of Nairobi and started her first kitchen garden there in 2009.

She did an extended research to deal with plant diseases and pests in an organic way and improved her garden.

She learned organic agriculture with the help of KOAN, Kenyan Organic Agriculture Network.

In the year 2013 she founded “Sylvia’s Basket”.

“Sylvia’s Basket” harvests from a farm of 15 acres. She cultivates a diversity of plants, around 20 varieties of vegetables and herbs.

Her idea was to make fresh organic produce accessible and affordable.

She established an organic shop in Nairobi on November the 4th in 2019.

She is member of IFOAM Organics International.

More information on “Sylvia’s Basket”: <http://sylviasbasket.co.ke>

1*: <https://countrymeters.info/de/Kenya>