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INTERVIEW

January 2021

Shaping Transformation. Stronger. Together.: “My Ecological Superpower”

- **An interview with Karen Mapusua, Vice-President, IFOAM – Organics International**

BIOFACH / VIVANESS 2021 eSPECIAL will be held from 17 – 19 February. In addition to exhibitor presentations and diverse opportunities for networking and virtual meet-ups, the eSPECIAL will offer all participants the comprehensive, deeply knowledgeable programme of the BIOFACH and VIVANESS Conference. The main theme for BIOFACH 2021: Shaping Transformation. Stronger. Together. The main focus: how diverse social movements – and the organic food industry – can achieve their goals better by acting together.

In the third of a series of interviews that will appear regularly in the BIOFACH Newsroom (www.biofach.de/en/news) until February, we spoke with IFOAM Vice-President Karen Mapusua about transformational developments in some of the world’s remote locations, like the Fiji Islands where she lives. Ms Mapusua has been focusing for nearly 20 years on supporting organic farming as a way towards socially aware and economically fair development. She is a co-founder of the Pacific Organic & Ethical Trade Community (POETCom), and played a major role in developing the Pacific Organic Guarantee Scheme.

The interviewer was Karin Heinze, BIO Reporter International

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Ms Mapusua, you have been active in a variety of roles in the organic movement for many years – now on the other side of the world, in Fiji, known in this country only as a holiday paradise. Are organics even a concept there?

Karen Mapusua: Yes, they are a matter of growing interest – both in the expansion of organically farmed areas and among consumers. Interestingly, many farmers throughout the Pacific region are still largely farming for their own use or as semi-subsistence farmers, using traditional methods and few chemicals. Around 15 years ago, when the Pacific islands began talking about organic farming, many farmers' response was, "Oh, we're organic!" And to a certain degree they're right. But the fact is that it's not quite as true as people think, because pesticide use has grown over time, especially for commercial crops. That's why organisations like IFOAM, which work with local NGOs, had to help farmers develop an understanding of what organic farming really means, and how it works. What we've seen over the past 10 years is a serious desire among many of them to learn how to do business in an ecologically sound way. That means there's a steadily growing recognition of the differences between natural, traditional production systems and fully organic ones that can meet certification requirements. Governments as well have taken a growing interest in transitioning to organic agriculture. For instance, every other year there's a meeting of the region's ministers of agriculture and forestry. In 2006 I had the privilege of attending that meeting. At that point only one of the 22 Pacific countries even mentioned organic farming. But in 2018, three-quarters of the countries were prioritising organic farming in their agricultural strategies. That's an immense step. We have organic regulations that are already in force or under development, with more to come. On top of that, the public sector has a lot of interest in supporting organics.

What are the reasons for the change?

Karen Mapusua: On the consumer end, there's a growing awareness and understanding of what "organic" really means, and what its advantages are. The changeover is also related to the massive health problems we have throughout the Pacific region. We have terrible health problems like heart disease, obesity and diabetes. Samoa has a diabetes rate of 40%; here in



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Fiji we have a diabetes-related amputation every 11 hours, the statistics say. And that's for a population of only 800,000! People and governments are realising more and more that eating good, healthy, clean, local foods makes a big difference. An unhealthy lifestyle, with the rising consumption of the "Big 3" – wheat, corn and sugar – came about with colonialisation. It led people to turn away from their traditional diet, which is much healthier, based on root plants like manioc, taro and sweet potatoes, in combination with coconut products and fish. There's now also a discussion of the adverse impact of pesticides. This slowly growing awareness is also rising in parallel with a demand for locally grown organic foods. The local NGO sector is very active in these matters. But the ministries as well are hard at work on getting the health crisis in hand. Most of them view healthy organic foods as part of the solution. We're approaching the topic from all sides. As I see it, we need to make the connection between agricultural practices and health even clearer, along with the opportunities to create new markets for local organic foods, and to advance both of these further. In that connection, we can really be glad that our traditions are a very good match with the principles of the organic movement. Thanks to the special situation in the Pacific, the standards also inherently reflect our culture and traditions, along with IFOAM's four principles – health, ecology, fairness and care.

You've already mentioned that organic farming offers important solutions for many of our era's urgent problems. What are the specific ways in which your work and your network can contribute?

Karen Mapusua: Much of our work is about establishing access not just to markets, but to social institutions and services for farming families. We have large parts of the whole region where electric power is limited or the infrastructure is poor, and even access to education is hampered by distance, poor transportation connections, and so on. Fiji has 300 islands, about 100 of which are populated – how can we offer services for everyone there? The key term that applies here is "Poverty of Opportunities". That's related to our remote location, but also to our very limited options for generating cash income. You know, nobody needs to starve here, but some of our island nations are categorised as "underdeveloped" by the United Nations. We have our challenges. But we're looking for ways in which the

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opportunities offered by organic farming can help overcome these problems. That includes finding ways – through policies, initiatives, personal responsibility and commitment – to support and encourage agricultural traditions and to develop them further for the health of everyone. The current challenges may remind people of how important good food and food security are.

Just as the COVID pandemic was starting, a cyclone caused severe damage to Vanuatu Island. Interestingly, the lockdown because of COVID forced Vanuatu to rely on its internal resources, and in rebuilding it applied the traditional systems of food production, most of which are organic. The Vanuatu government and the community did an amazing thing – they used local practices to ensure an emergency food supply, and they did it partly by rebuilding the supply of the most important traditional crops. To me, that shows what we can do, and that we have a high level of resilience based on local solutions. We don't always need to wait for help from outside. I hope this new self-confidence will also help crank up organic food production. Sometimes solutions can be very simple.

What other impact is the COVID-19 pandemic having?

Karen Mapusua: The health problems on one hand and the shutdown owing to COVID-19 on the other have had an immense impact on the islands. The collapse of the tourist sector has left even fewer ways of earning an income. Most of the island nations have no official social security systems. Traditionally, extended family structures take care of family members. But if a lot of family members with no resources move back to the villages from the cities, that can lead to problems. That's why it's so important to set up appropriate structures for producing organic food, and also for access to markets. It's quite a challenge to organise the value chain from rural areas to cities, where there's more demand for organic food. On top of that there's a lot of uncertainty, because nobody knows how the post-pandemic "new normal" will look. But one positive certainty is that almost every resident has access to the family's own land. Yet just like everywhere in the world, here too we have an aging farming population, and people are moving out of rural areas to urban centres. The farming life has to get more attractive.



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The global organic movement has long been working on transforming the existing agricultural system and changing diets. What can we in the western economies learn from models in your latitudes?

Karen Mapusua: I think we have a lot of knowledge to share. Our traditional farming system is based on agroforestry. It's very resilient, very diverse, and a real treasury of profound knowledge about the value and even the healing powers of plants and various traditional foods. Part of that has been lost, but I'm sure there's a real chance to revive some of it. There's one more thing I think is wonderful – our concept of land access. There's no ownership in the European sense, instead it's more of a guardianship or trusteeship for the land. A large family is the guardian of a plot of land, and in traditional ownership situations land can't be bought or sold. That brings about a recognition of the significance and value of land, because we're responsible for the land for generation after generation. Another traditional aspect is the general sense of the great value of forests. When we talk about sustainable or climate-intelligent agriculture, we can find it here in our traditional agroforestry systems. Another very interesting aspect is the system of "taboo" areas that must be left untouched for a certain amount of time so they can regenerate – and that applies to both the land and the sea. Over the past 15 years, the organisations I've worked with have put a very strong emphasis on communally managed areas, and I'm very pleased that we have these structures in parallel with democratic policies.

But unfortunately we also have big problems with plastic on our coasts, and also of course with climate change. Even though we're the smallest CO₂ emitters in the world, we'll be the first to go under as sea level rises – but we're working hard to make our food and agricultural systems resilient, so we can stay on our islands. There's a slogan: "We're not drowning – we're fighting!"

Our governments are working successfully on solving the plastics problem by banning the importation and use of plastic bags, drinking straws and Styrofoam containers on some islands, but our beaches still have a lot of plastic waste from all over the world. And we have the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, and microplastics are turning up in our fish, which is a matter of great concern.



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Transparency is more and more important to many consumers. Organic farmers have been working with processors and retailers for a long time on the “farm to table” value chain. Have there been effects in this regard on Fiji?

Karen Mapusua: Yes, in the pre-COVID times, tourism was immensely influential. Tourists set trends, and of course the islands have an interest in giving guests what they want in all matters of organic and local foods. At hotels and restaurants, we're seeing local and organic products being labelled and promoted. Apart from some coconut products, the islands don't produce a lot of organic foods, most organic products are imported. But crops from the islands are sold fresh in the markets, or delivered direct. If you know your farmer, you trust him or her. There are some restaurants and stores that offer organic foods and work with the “farm to table” concept, and they're doing really well. Of course some producers take advantage of the “organic” label for their own purposes, because they've noticed a rising demand for healthy, transparent, clean food. Our job is to educate the consumer to ask the right questions, look for certification labels, and not fall for every marketing slogan.

As a worldwide umbrella organisation, IFOAM lights the way for many farmers all around the world. Since you operate internationally, you can compare conditions in the Pacific region with other, larger countries. How can we achieve a global transformation towards a more sustainable, more ecologically viable world?

Karen Mapusua: At IFOAM – Organics International, with our members on every continent, we really do play an important role in setting basic global standards for organic farming, developing them further to fit local needs, and establishing contacts with other like-minded organisations. I'm thinking of organisations with similar goals in the NGO sector, but also in scientific and technical fields. Together we can establish ecologically sound practices as part of the solution for future organic agricultural development. The Pacific region has a very strong message to convey in this regard: organic agriculture is an instrument that can aid our environment, our economies, our employment and our health. It presents organic farming really as a solution for many of the challenges we face. That way, all representatives



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of interests within the worldwide sustainability network can work towards a multi-track approach to these major topics, and achieve major progress.

About Karen Mapusua

Karen Mapusua is the Vice-President of IFOAM – Organics International, and Director of the Department of Land Resources of the Pacific Community, which offers scientific and technical support in agriculture and forestry for 22 Pacific island nations. She has a background in organisational capacity build-up and management and has worked for nearly 20 years in rural development in the Pacific islands region, with an emphasis on organic agriculture as a way towards social and economic development.

Ms Mapusua is a co-founder of the Pacific Organic & Ethical Trade Community (POETCom) and played a major role in developing the Pacific Organic Guarantee Scheme, as well as alternative forms of certification. She was also a member of the Board of Fairtrade Australia & New Zealand, currently lives in the Fiji Islands, and is a citizen of Samoa and Australia.

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