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E-Paper

Organic food regulation should protect interests of consumers, farmers

FSSAI does not realise that organic farming will go a long way in fulfilling the regulators' primary mandate of securing food safety. A nascent industry like organic farming needs as much facilitation and promotion as possible

OPINION Updated: Jun 06, 2018 16:07 IST Kavitha Kuruganti



Farmers vegetables grown without using any chemical fertilizer or pesticide

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Sceptics often raise the Malthusian argument that organic farming has lower food production. But it is a sector that is posting impressive growth all over the world. The US is its largest market, and India has the highest number of organic farmers. For the farmer, it presents a low-external-input, low-debt approach, with farm-level resilience improved through diversity-based cropping. And we are yet to come across an organic farmer who has committed suicide in this country due to agrarian distress. In the era of climate change, organic farming's approaches are suitable for both mitigation and adaptation. For the consumer, organic food production, especially accompanied by traditional seed varieties, means safer and nutritious food. Organic farming enterprises also take up eco-friendly food processing, while retaining the nutritional qualities of the produce.

The government had recently brought in large flagship programmes to promote organic farming. The recent growth in "formally-counted" organic farming areas and the number of farmers is reflective of the investments being made. As per reports, the year-on-year growth rate of the organic sector is anywhere between 20% and 25%.

While this is encouraging, organic farming accounts for just 1.7% of India's cultivated area, and the organic food is not even 0.1% of India's \$300 billion annual food consumption.

That's why the recent regulations around organic farming brought by The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) raise many questions. They will come into effect next month.

The regulation requires organic food sold in the market to have a certification – either from a third party or Participatory Guarantee System (PGS). It exempts only small producers or the producer organisations who sell directly to consumers.

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It's ironical that in spite of using toxic chemicals, producers in the conventional non-organic sector do not have to spend to guarantee compliance with food safety regulatory requirements. Additionally, the country's Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006, doesn't apply to farming operations, farmers or their crop products at the farm level.

FSSAI does not seem to realise that organic farming, by its nature, will go a long way in fulfilling the regulators' primary mandate of securing food safety. A nascent industry like organic farming needs as much facilitation and promotion as possible. The haste with which the FSSAI moved forward to regulate the country's 0.1% food production is very uncharacteristic and inexplicable compared to the speed with which it sought to regulate actually-unsafe food.

To ensure that fake organic items are not sold is indeed a noble objective and prevents misbranding. But misbranding of organic food is no more unsafe than the food citizens access routinely.

To equate quality assurance with certification is faulty. Certificates can be purchased. How do you explain reports of chemical residues in certified organic food or rejection of certified export consignments? It should be noted that certifiers have an inherent conflict of interest in wanting to expand their business by certifying more farms as organic. Increase in fake organic produce is a matter of concern not just for consumers but for organic farmers too. Food regulators should focus on stopping really unsafe foods rather than go after organic ones.

The regulatory guidelines raise many other questions. For selling to consumers directly, why is exemption provided for only small organic producers whereas all organic farmers

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should be exempt? The consumer has a right to know the producer in all cases, anyway. Besides, it's not clear what defines a 'small organic producers organisation'.

Organic farming will need proper marketing opportunities. Bringing in onerous regulations for individual farmers instead of providing free and timebound certification to farmers is unwarranted. Most organic farmers do not have the ability to sell their products to consumers directly. They need alternative supply chains which are mainly in the form of producer-to-retailer-to-consumer. Therefore, without exempting one-step-away-from-consumers retail sales, exempting only direct sales, that too only for 'small' producers is a meaningless proposition.

It's not an argument against regulation of organic farming but an advocacy for a win-win situation for both organic producers as well as consumers.