

# AN INVESTIGATION ABOUT FACTORS AFFECTING CONSUMERS' BUYING HABITS OF ORGANIC PRODUCTS IN TURKEY<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Consumers who buy organic products not only consume them free from chemical residues, they also consume products with high nutritional value in contrast with conventional or genetically modified products. However, here and in other countries just as there are many factors to motivate purchasing of organic products, there are also factors that prevent purchasing them. Positive factors motivating the purchase of organic products have been identified as follows: environment friendly methods of production and consequent lack of chemical residues and hormones in products, higher nutritional value, and more delicious taste. On the other hand, negative factors affecting the purchase of organic products have been identified as follows: expensive, limited availability, relatively short shelf life, unappealing appearance, and the unfamiliarity of organic logos. But if organic foods are consumed more, organic agriculture will develop in parallel and it will be easier and cheaper for consumers to purchase them. In this way, the existing price difference between organic and conventional products will also decrease. Therefore the purpose of this study was to identify the factors affecting consumers' buying habits of organic products by examining the relevant studies in our country and abroad.

**Answer Key:** Organic food, organic agriculture, consumer, buying habits, organic logo

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## 1. Introduction

Synthetic agricultural chemicals which have been used to avoid famine and to increase the productivity have been harmful on people and environment. The damages inflicted by them cannot be undone. Therefore, in recent years, the alternative agricultural production systems have been considered. Organic production methods have been regarded essential in our effort to regain the environmental balance as well as to raise healthy individuals. In organic agricultural production, instead of using chemicals, organic and green fertilizers are used to increase both the productivity of soil and the resistance of plants. When chemical fertilizers are not used, underground water resources and soil are not polluted, and consequently there is no disruption of the ecological balance. (Köse & Odabaş, 2005: 98-99; Atasay, 2006: 2; Kavas & Kavas, 2009: 93, 94; İnan, 2009: 60; Ayaz, 2009: 109; Kökdemir, 2009: 59; Erdurmuş, 2009: 62).

For the above mentioned reasons, most consumers have doubts about non-organic products; they worry particularly about the presence of agricultural chemicals, hormones, etc., in products which are not produced at their natural production seasons. The demand for organic foods has been increasing since it is believed that the root causes of cancer and many other dire diseases are foods containing unhealthy chemicals. Particularly, as the level of income increases, the concerns about chemical use in the food products increases, often prompting these consumers to buy healthy and environment friendly products. (Akgüngör et.al., 1999: 58, 81; Bourn & Prescott, 2002: 22,23; Canavari et.al., 2002: 228; Kurt, 2006: 15; Sarıkaya, 2007: 122; Kacur, 2009: 254; Yanmaz, 2012: 10).

However, just as there are many reasons which prompt consumers to buy organic products, there are also reasons which negatively affect their purchase and consumption.

### 1.1. Positive Factors Affecting the Purchase of Organic Products

Organic products are preferred over conventional ones because not only they have more nutritional value and are tastier, but also, they are environment friendly; they do not contain traces of unhealthy hormones and chemicals like the genetically modified and conventional foods do. (Demiryürek, 2004: 63; Shepherd et. al., 2005: 354; Selimoğlu, 2009: 5). The reasons for this preference are further elaborated below.

### ***1.1.1. Organic Products are Healthy and Environment Friendly***

Organic, ecological, and biological products are presented as foods free from preservatives or polishing materials including materials used to package them. Additionally, organic products are under observation starting from the beginning of the production process until they are sold to consumers. The organic producers are people who have been licensed by authorities to produce and sell them. Therefore, products labeled 'natural', 'classical', or 'rural' should not be considered as organic without verifying if they are produced according to the rules of organic certification (Özkan, 2009: 5; İnan, 2009: 59; Bayaner, 2009: 5,6; Karaarslan & Özen, 2009: 17; Erol, 2009: 28,29).

Beside pesticides and other chemicals, one issue which undermines the confidence of consumers is the presence of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in foods. Agricultural products or foods of animal origin with GMO, as it is true for conventional foods, pose much danger to public health. These organisms inserted into plants can result in allergic reactions to consumers. GMOs which are resistant to anti-biotics interfere with anti-biotic treatments by affecting the bacterial balance of the human body. In addition, there are reasons to believe that GMOs negatively affect human health (Dinçel, 2004: 23; Yimsel, 2009: 9).

In contrast, the process of 'production, processing, distribution and marketing' of organic products are carried out in environment friendly ways. In this process, genetically modified seeds are not used. The animal feeds too are produced in ecologically responsible manner in contrast to modified and chemically processed feeds. Likewise, no hormones and anti-biotics are used to speed up the growth of the animals. For instance, no synthetic substances are used to increase the egg production and to regulate the quality (Ak, 2004: 26).

In surveys regarding the attitudes of consumers, the respondents were found to believe that organic products, unlike products grown by other methods, are healthier and are more environment friendly, (Connor and Douglas, 2001; Chinnici et.al., 2002; Canavari et.al., 2002; Padel & Foster, 2005; Sarıkaya, 2007; Altuğ et.al., 2008; Tsakiridou et.al., 2008; Kacur, 2009; Saritaş, 2012).

### ***1.1.2. Organic Products are More Tasteful***

Beside the effects of the use of chemical fertilizers and hormones on human health and environment already discussed, these unwanted chemicals also cause the foods to lose their natural tastes. Organic products are perceived to be tastier, better coloured, and to have better

aroma. In fact, when the products are grown in the organic agricultural conditions varieties of products adapt quickly in different locations, the tastes remain unchanged. This is not surprising because the lands where synthetic chemicals are used are found to contain 85 % less of micro-organisms than organic agriculture lands do. Consequently, where chemical fertilizers are used, plants get their nutrition through the diffusion method and not by living bacterial activities. Due to the chemical salts added to the soil, the plants which grow rapidly are also much heavier. Taking in much water through the diffusion method, non-organic products grow relatively scentless and tasteless. Thus, the quality of tastes is an important criterion for the preference of organic products. (Shepherd et.al., 2005: 352; Peker & Çelik, 2005: 3; Tolay & Sönmez, 2006: 80; Yimsel, 2009).

In fact, in the sensuous tests for agricultural products, usually the foods grown by organic methods have been identified as more tasteful (Connor & Douglas, 2001; Türk & Karabayır, 2001; Mercan & Çopur, 2006; Altuğ et.al., 2008; Alapala & Ünal, 2009).

### **1.2. Negative Factors Affecting Consumers' Purchase of Organic Products**

There are also negative factors affecting the consumers' buying habits. These are high price levels, low availability, low sale points, negative opinions (Bourn & Prescott, 2002: 3; Demiryürek, 2004: 68), and unfamiliarity of organic logos. The reasons for organic products not being preferred are further elaborated below.

#### ***1.2.1. Insufficient Distribution Channels and the Unavailability of Sufficient Organic Products***

Organic products are generally marketed through onsite sales, specific sale points, at separate shelves in big stores, online and by delivery to home. However, the extent of these marketing channels are not known with certainty. In addition, organic products are sold in specific stores which look like boutiques in areas where people have higher income, in organic public markets, and in chain-stores like Tansaş, Carrefour, Migros, Kipa (Kayahan, 2001: 26; Soler et.al., 2002: 670; Kurt, 2006: 27). Hence, for those who are not living in big cities or in high income districts, it is difficult to access organic. Naturally, these people look for rural products which contain relatively less chemicals and fertilizers than conventional products. (Yanmaz, 2012: 10).

The variation in items and quantities of organic products due to seasonality also make it harder for consumers and marketers to access these products. However, healthy eating would

require consuming mostly organic foods in wide varieties and in sufficient quantities all year round. However, in our country, a great diversity of organic products is not available; we cannot find many food products whenever we want and in whatever quantity we want. This situation is the result of the introduction in our country of the organic production methods from European firms during 1984-1985 due to demands from these countries for organic products. Indeed, up until 2000s Turkey's organic production capacity focused on foreign markets. These products, generally produced raw, are then processed in limited portions. In our country, the processed organic products are produced in several varieties: dried (grape, fig, apricot), concentrated (apple, pear, pomegranate juice), canned (cherry, pepper, tomatoes, apricot) and frozen (strawberry, cherry, apricot, pepper). Beside these fruits, vegetables, organic meat, milk, yoghurt, and cheese, also are available. However, there are other products people consume which are not yet available in our markets in their organic kind. Low organic product diversity result in difficulties both for the farmers at the production stage and for the sellers at the marketing stage partly due to irregular supply and demand. Consumers who are not able to find a specific organic product, switch to the products which are grown by alternative methods (Peker & Çelik, 2005: 6; Kurt, 2006: 20; Ataseven & Güneş, 2008: 28, 31; Yanmaz, 2012: 10).

### ***1.2.2. High Price Levels***

It is known that prices vary by the kinds of products and by the countries where they are sold. The marketing researches conducted in Canada and the USA revealed that organic products are 24-65 % more expensive than the products grown by conventional methods; in some cases the organic products are even 100 % more expensive (Yanmaz, 2012: 9; ORGÜDER, 2012). But the difference between the prices in our country is much higher. According to the market research in İstanbul and İzmir conducted by Altuğ and others (2008), organic products are between 2 and 10 times more expensive than conventionally produced products. For instance, for rice that rate is 239 %, for beans it is between 388 and 411%, for dried apricots 170-176 %, for hazelnuts it is 211%. These are extremely high numbers when GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per person is taken into account. (Ziraatçiyiz.Biz, 2010)

In fact, as suggested in the researches, prices determine the affordability and affect the purchasing preferences negatively (Shepherd et. al., 2005; Padel & Foster, 2005; Tsakiridou et.al., 2008; Kacur, 2009; Sarıtaş, 2012). Additionally, researches also suggest that only consumers with high income levels are willing to pay more for the certified products (Akgüngör

et.al., 1999; Connor & Douglas, 2001; Soler et.al., 2002; Chinnici et.al., 2002; Tsakiridou et.al., 2008). Nevertheless, the goal should be to make every necessary food in their organic kind available and affordable for all people.

### ***1.2.3. Short Shelf Lives and Unappealing Appearance***

Since consumers pay more organic products, they expect these products to have longer shelf life than the conventional products do ( Shepherd et.al., 2005: 352). However, it is not possible to use artificial additives in shelving and preserving the organic foods, resulting in their relatively short shelf life. For example, the products which are most in demand, such as meat, milk, fresh vegetables and fruits, have short shelf lives and are not demanded by the marketing people. Moreover, the appearance of the organic products is not as appealing as the products which contain additives (Canavari et.al., 2002: 228; Yanmaz, 2012: 11).

### ***1.2.4. Unfamiliarity of the Logos for Organic Products***

Researchers conducted suggest that consumers have doubts about organic products. This demonstrates that the awareness for the certified organic foods is not developed completely. For instance, more than 30 % of the respondents of research by Canavari and others (2002), more than 77.8 % of the respondents of Tsakiridou and his frineds' research (2008) and more than 61.3 % respondents of research by Sarıtaş (2012) have stated that they doubt if organic products are grown in ecologically healthy conditions as the producers claim.

## **2. Material and Method**

This investigation is based on Turkish and foreign books and essays, data from the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Livestock, and on regulations and notices about the issue available online.

## **3. Conclusions and Proposals**

Consumers who buy organic foods prefer products which are free from hormones and chemicals, have higher nutritional value and more taste than conventionally produced products do. However, unfortunately, organic products are not consumed by us much. In our country out of the available 385 raw and processed products, as much as 247 are raw; 95 % of these products are exported and only 5 % of them are consumed in domestic markets. Therefore, much of our people cannot benefit from these products. However, in European countires such as UK(53%),

Germany(43 %), France(48 %), organic products are consumed at much higher rates. Even in the countries such as Argentina (15 %) and Italy (57 %) which are competitors of Turkey in exporting organic products, the consumption of organic products in domestic markets is much higher than in Turkey (Ataseven & Güneş, 2008: 28; Bayaner, 2009: 6; 2010 Yılı Organik Tarım Geçiş Süreci Üretim Verileri, 2012).

One of the reasons for this situation is that the difference between the organic products and the other natural products are not clearly known in our country. Another reason is that the organic agricultural methods and the process of control and certification are expensive. As a result, organic products are more expensive and less preferred than those grown by conventional methods. Additionally, lack of sufficient markets, availability of only a few stores, inadequate availability, and other such problems, keep organic products from being popular among consumers.

What could be done that would encourage consumers to prefer organic over non-organic products? We may consider the following steps.

### ***3.1. Consumer awareness could be increased.***

Consumers are often unaware of the different ways organic products and their production methods benefit people's health and the ecology. Indeed, based on the research conducted in İstanbul, Izmir and Ankara, by Akgüngör and others (1999), 91.3 % of the sample group responded that they had not heard about organic/ecological products. For this reason, in addition to the publications to increase the awareness of producers, Organic Agriculture Publications Campaign was taken up by the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Livestock to increase the awareness of the consumers.

The government has campaigned with visual broadcasting and radio programs on topics like 'What is Organic Agriculture', 'Why Organic Agriculture', Organic Agriculture with regard to Food Safety', 'Organic Bread', 'Organic Dishes', Organic Agriculture on the Perspectives of Consumers', and on consumer warnings. Government efforts to educate the public continues. The state has also made it mandatory for the radio and TV channels to broadcast educational programs for at least 30 minutes (ORGÜDER, 2012).

Consumers cannot understand that not all the products sold with 'natural' or 'organic' labels are certified organic products. Indeed, our consumers are not sufficiently aware of the whole notion of certified organic products. For instance, when rurally grown products are labeled

'natural', it introduces doubts about products labeled 'organic'. (Özkan, 2009: 5; Demiryürek, 2004: 69; Atay & Sarı, 2007).

However, products without organic product certification cannot be labeled as 'organic'. Only certified producers are eligible to check and record implementation of required steps in every phase of organic agriculture until the products reach their consumers (Bayaner, 2009: 5). Thus certification logos inform consumers about the production process. For instance; 'organic product logo' (Figure 1) which can be attached to a product package with the permission Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Livestock informs not only that the product is organic, but also the name of the control and certification agency, the certification number, and the code given to the certification agency. It is required for an organic product to be in sealed package. As the consumers pay attention to these issues, the likelihood of the misapprehension would not persist (Özkan, 2009: 5; Gök, 2008: 19-20; Türemiş, 2009).



**Figure 1: National Organic Product Logos (Organik Tarım, 2012).**

Thus, it is necessary to explain to the consumers how organic products can be clearly distinguished from other products. The benefits of organic agriculture to the soil should be emphasized; it should be explained how organic agriculture prevents soil erosion and leaves the soil unpolluted by chemicals for the future generations. Moreover, as we will see, opting for organic agriculture need not be financially risky if sellers can guarantee monetary compensations in advance. It is reasonable to suggest that if such financial guarantees are secured, it is possible to prevent some of the migration from rural areas to the urban areas and rural development can be achieved regionally. Social issues like this also should be highlighted in any campaign to promote organic products. In fact, a small booklet with brief explanations of these issues could be attached to organic products. Better informed, consumers are likely to be pleased to know



how their additional expenses for organic products would have many important beneficial implications (ORGÜDER, 2012).

**3.2. *The prices of organic products should be reduced and availability of them increased.***

There is no doubt that one of the factors contributing to organic products not being preferred by the consumers is that they are more expensive. Reasons for this might be labour intensive process preferred by any given culture, the expenditures incurred during the control and certification process, and low productivity, loss of product, and additional expenses during the first years of production. Low productivity is natural in first few years because of the lack of sufficient organic fertilizers accumulated in the soil after the organic production method is embarked on. In addition, during the early period, since the products cannot be labeled 'organic' and sold accordingly, there is necessarily a loss of income. (Atlı, 2006: 87; Atay & Sarı, 2007; Ataseven & Güneş, 2008: 29; Yanmaz, 2012: 9).

Due to the additional processes, this high production costs indeed do not result in higher profit for the farmers. Many of the organic producers proceed only after agreement with the firms which market the organic products. In such cases, the producers' main objective is not to make profits but to get the products sold. In fact, the cost of organic products is due more to the marketing strategies of the firms who make farmers produce and then market them than merely the high production costs. Packaging costs, high level rents of the stores in which organic products are sold, and high level of value added tax in domestic markets due to the ambitions of the marketing people to earn more have been increasing the marketing margin (the difference between the price given to the first seller and the price paid by the end of the chain) (ORGÜDER, 2012). For example the level of value added tax is around 18 % in our domestic market. To facilitate the consumption of these products and to help develop domestic markets, that rate should be reduced to 8 % (Kurt, 2006: 115; Türemiş, 2009).

A wide variety of organic products is also necessary in order to offer them to domestic consumers at reasonable prices. In other words, there needs to be organic counterparts of whatever non-organic products are available in the markets. For instance, to increase the preference of organic products in the domestic markets, frequently consumed products such as milk and dairy products, fresh fruits and vegetables, meat and flour kinds should be available in

their organic varieties. Therefore, organic product variety should be increased to meet the diverse food needs of people (ORGÜDER, 2012). This increase in variety of organic products would help decrease the prices.

We should note that the last change in Legislation Regarding the Basics of Organic Agriculture and Its Implementation was a positive development. The notice with the date of 10.06.2005 and code of 25841 which was published on the official gazette stating that 'organic products are to be sold in separate shelves from those of the conventional products with a clear notice that they are organic' has been changed to 'the entrepreneur who is in charge of selling the organic product is responsible for the organic products to be distinguished from the conventional products and to protect its features' in the 32 items with the date of 18.08. 2010 and code of 27676 (Organik Tarımın Esasları ve Uygulanmasına İlişkin Yönetmelik, 2005, 2010). According to the old legislation, the requirement that organic products should be exhibited in a different shelf had made its share of shelf limited. However, in countries like USA and European Union countries this requirement does not exist. One of the problems arising from the separate shelf policy is that the consumer would not be able to make ready comparison between the organic product and its non-organic counterpart since they are not exhibited on the same shelf; moreover, most of the time this arrangement may even make a consumer unaware that there are organic varieties of whatever he/she is buying (ORGÜDER, 2012). The change in the legislation is likely to make the product more identifiable and preferable.

One way to make organic products more affordable for all is to reduce the difference between the producers' price and the markets' price for any given product by increasing direct sale points ( Ağı, 2006: 4). Indeed, according to the law, organic products can be directly sold to the consumers without having to be transferred to the bulk storages. For this reason, for all the organic producers, direct sale points should be provided in all cities and towns (Türemiş, 2009; Ağı,2006: 4). In Japan, for instance, 50% of organic products are sold directly (Tei-kei system) to the consumers (Organik Tarım, 2012: 29).

One of the important improvements regarding the marketing aspect of the organic products is the fact that 100 % public markets have been opened for their sale. According to the

latest available data, there are now a total number of 15 ecological markets operating in some districts of İstanbul, Adana, Konya, İzmir, Ankara, Eskişehir, Antalya, Samsun and Bursa pioneered by the Wheat Association (Ataseven & Güneş, 2008: 28; % 100 Ekolojik Pazar, 2011). It is expected that through these measures organic products' prices will be reduced to more reasonable levels and will make them more affordable for the public at large.

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