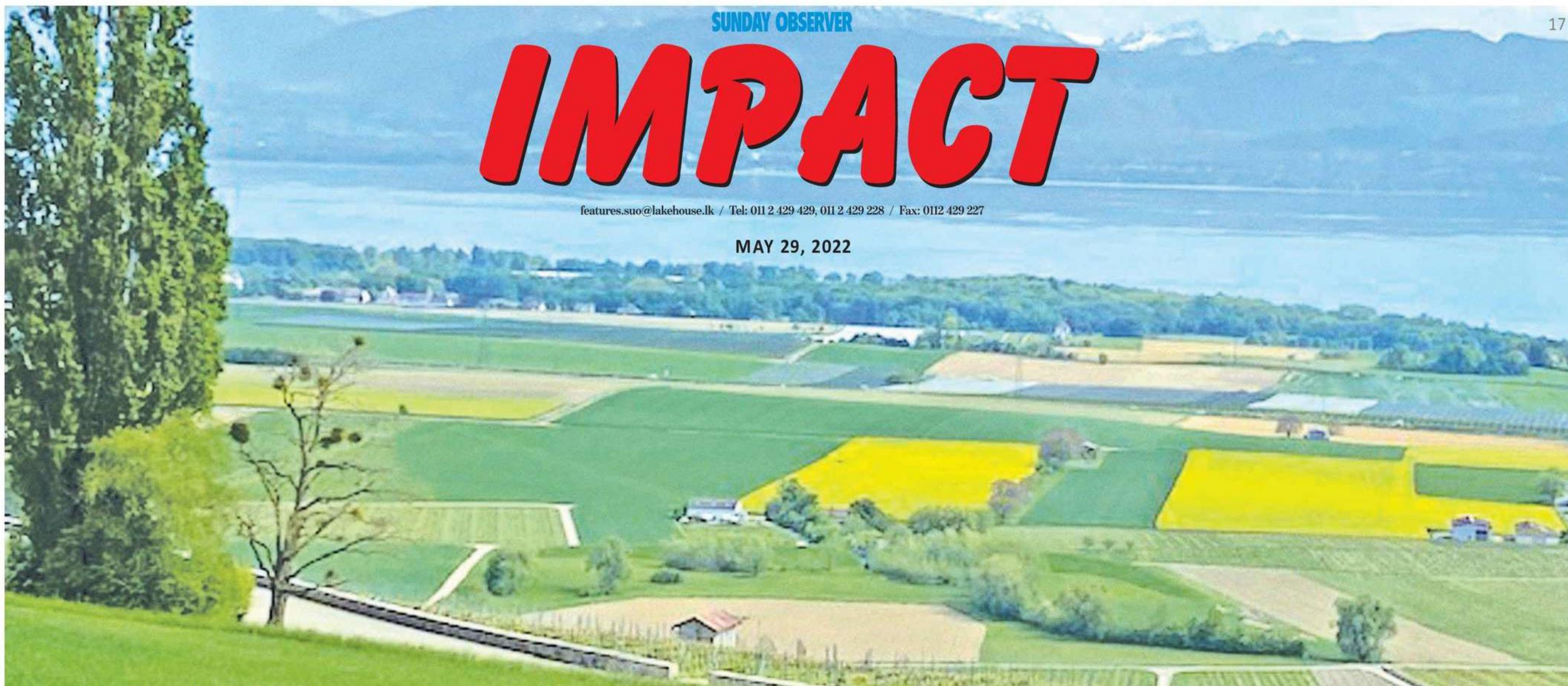


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Swiss organic farming lands, a feast for the eyes

Best from nature and best for nature

● LESSONS FROM SWISS ORGANIC FARMING

● HARMONISING ECONOMY WITH NATURE AND LIVELIHOODS

BY SARASI WETTIMUNY

Over the past few decades, the concept of organic farming has gained increasing popularity in the field of agriculture. Best from nature and best to nature is virtually the theory behind this method. No matter how advanced agriculture technology is, growing markets for organic food is a clear testimony to increasing consumer demands worldwide for organically produced food items. Global organic food consumption has increased rapidly, and people tend to spend more money on organic products to stay healthy.

As revealed by the latest report 'The World of Organic Agriculture: Statistics and Emerging Trends 2022', published early this year by the world's pioneering institutions on organic agriculture, FiBL in Switzerland and IFOAM in Germany, even when the Covid-19 pandemic was at its height, the organic farmland and organic retail sales worldwide had reached unprecedented growth in 2020 despite its adverse effects on global sales. 'Against the backdrop, the global market for organic food showed its highest growth ever in 2020, exceeding 120 billion euros – a total increase of 14 billion euros', FiBL revealed at the launch of this report.

Impressive story

Switzerland records the highest per capita consumption of organic food worldwide in 2020. The Swiss people have spent 418 euros per capita on organic food, according to this report. Given that, Switzerland's impressive story about the early origins of their organic farming and unifying efforts to further promote this farming method will be of great use to the local reader. The beautiful arrays of Swiss agricultural lands bordering Alpine mountains which have adhered to nature-friendly policies are truly a feast for the eyes.

It is very important to study in detail how a landlocked country in Europe, even smaller than the geographical land area of Sri Lanka, has achieved successful agricultural outcomes through its uniform efforts to harmonise agriculture with nature.

Ideal location

The fascinating Swiss countryside is the ideal location to enjoy an authentic farm experience. A visit to an organic farm is truly worthwhile to understand the efforts made by the farmers to harmonize their agriculture with nature by protecting soil, water resources, animal habitats, and plant varieties which are basically neglected in standard farming. One such inspiring organic farmer explained to me the farming strategies during my visit to her small, yet appealing organic farm in Longirod situated in the foothills of the Jura Mountains in the canton of Vaud, Switzerland. Everything involved in the farm is absolutely natural.

Karin Hagemann, the owner of the farm said "any synthetic fertiliser or pesticides are completely avoided in the production of fruits and vegetables. The only fertiliser being used is compost which is made from the manure and other organic leftovers that come from the farm itself. This will bring back energy, vitality, and health to the soil which feeds the plants and animals."

She added that even in the early days, she didn't believe in adding poison to the ground or the plants be-

cause they are going to be detrimental to the environment and to human health'.

Deep-rooted

It is evident that the very concept of organic farming is firmly rooted in farmers' minds. Hagemann added that they manage their farm according to ancient methods which consist of 'working with nature, not against it'. The idea of not harming the environment is embedded in the whole concept. There are fertilisers that are non-synthetic and admissible in organic farming according to Swiss rules.

Hagemann, who is also a passionate expert on sustainability emphasized that conventional farming too often ruins the soil, and earth whereas the philosophy behind organic farming preserves them. Through organic farming, the soil becomes one of the biggest carbon sinks whereas many big agrobusiness farms turn the soil from a carbon absorber to a carbon producer.

An organic farmer whom I met in his organic sales outlet in Meinier, close to Geneva, explained to me how they rotate crops in each growing season to build healthy soil, preserve nutrients in the soil, and as a solution to pest and weed problems. He added that this technique has helped them tremendously to control certain weeds and pest problems.

The demand for organic products is growing in Switzerland. Swiss supermarkets have special mega sections for organic products. The largest Swiss organic sales segments are vegetables, fruits, eggs, fresh bread, milk, cereals, and grains. Even meat products are in high demand despite higher prices than their conventional products.

However, the high price ranges of these products are still observed as an obstacle to the speedy growth of the organic sector. Nevertheless, Swiss consumers have spent the most on organic food in 2020, 418 euros per capita. Also, in the same year, the highest organic market shares were reached in Den-



An organic sales centre in a farm

IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO STUDY IN DETAIL HOW A LANDLOCKED COUNTRY IN EUROPE, EVEN SMALLER THAN THE GEOGRAPHICAL LAND AREA OF SRI LANKA, HAS ACHIEVED SUCCESSFUL AGRICULTURAL OUTCOMES THROUGH ITS UNIFORM EFFORTS TO HARMONISE CULTIVATION PRACTICES WITH NATURE.

mark (13.0 percent) followed by Austria (11.3 percent) and Switzerland became third (10.8 percent), according to the latest organic statistics.

Apart from the bioproducts available in the supermarkets, there are small outlets run by Swiss organic farmers on their farms and also self-service small organic sales centres in the countryside where one can buy organic products directly from the farm.

History of Swiss organic farming

The story behind the origin of Swiss organic agriculture is as inspiring as organic farming itself. Organic farming in Switzerland is a concept that is initiated by the farmers themselves. It is a voluntary process adopted by the Association of Swiss Organic Agriculture Organisa-

tions (currently known as Bio-Suisse) in 1981, representing more than 95 percent of organic farmers which includes 32 Swiss organic farming associations and research institute FiBL. Bio-Suisse has strong representation of the organic sector and its main income is earned through fees received from the farmers. Currently, nearly 7,500 certified Swiss organic farms are registered under the Bio-Suisse.

Global inspiration for organic farming has Swiss roots, as people like Hans Müller from the Swiss Capital Bern is known as the spiritual father of organic farming. In the 40s, Dr. Müller developed the organic-biological method and established the concept of sustainable organic agriculture with closed cycles in crop production. Prior to that, in 1924, Rudolf Steiner, a pioneering figure in this farming method, founded the bio-dynamic agriculture method and Swiss farms took this up, later on, spreading this new concept of organic biological farming globally. The formation of the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL) located in Frick, Switzerland is also a landmark turning point in research developments in organic farming in the global context.

FiBL Research Institute

FiBL is one of the world's renowned research and advisory institutes in the field of organic agriculture. It was founded in 1973 and has been headquartered in Frick, Switzerland since 1997. FiBL's contribution to organic agricultural research is immense. Although being a private institute, FiBL benefits from public funding by the Swiss Federal Office for Agriculture. FiBL is also active in organic advisory services, in education and contributes to sustainable development in the countries of the global South.

In Switzerland, organic farming receives Government protection and financial support. The Federal Government of Switzerland continues to attach great importance to make agriculture more ecological. After the inception of the Organic Movement in the country by the Bio-Suisse, the Federal Government and the cantons officially recognised organic farming as a form of production eligible for funding in the Agriculture Act in 1992. The Swiss Organic Farming Ordinance which came into force in 1998 started to support the organic sector by law and is a major step towards the progress of organic farming from the State level.

The Ordinance includes the state regulations on the production and processing of organic products and sets out the minimum standards in organic farming in the processing, storage, import, and export of organic products.



An organic farmer plucking salad leaves

The Swiss Confederation supports organic research projects and promotes further development of this farming method by research on the agro-ecological mechanisms and by making practical recommendations to organic farmers. The Government supports the long-term development of the organic sector by funding research in the field to go forward in line with the challenging aspects of climate and sustainability.

Not only the Federal Government, interestingly, a leading retailer in Switzerland, Coop supports the development of sustainable agriculture in partnership with Bio-Suisse and FiBL. Coop has made a strong commitment to organic farming by financing various organic-related initiatives through its Coop Sustainability Fund in the country and even in other countries. In addition, they promote the conversion of farms to organic farming by purchasing products under organic conditions during the two-year conversion phase. Together with Bio Suisse and FiBL, Coop has helped organic farming to achieve a breakthrough in Switzerland, making Switzerland a leading country with the highest per capita consumption of organic products in 2020.

A farmer from Meinier who wished to remain anonymous elaborated on Swiss rules that have to be followed when becoming an organic cultivator. According to him, any farmer who wishes to convert his farm to organic has to undergo a two-year period of inspection. If you pass the strict Swiss rules you can become a certified organic farmer by the Bio-Suisse.

Hagemann added that even after becoming a certified organic farm, he/she is very tightly supervised in Switzerland with frequent, unannounced visits by the Government representatives to check the veracity of the farming methods. Also, an inspector visits the farm at least once a year to make sure that only organic seeds are used and that plants and animals are treated according to Swiss organic rules.

Dedication and interest

As revealed by many organic farmers, dedication and interest are crucial. Farmers are keen to protect land, water resources, bees, insects, and the diversity of wild plants and animal breeding habitats. Some organic farmers expressed their dislike over being surrounded by conventional farming lands.

Organic farmers are happy that their cultivating practices are in harmony with nature.

Organic farming is a lot of hard work and requires more human labour than standard farming. When

THERE ARE UNIQUE REQUIREMENTS THAT ARE VALID IN ORGANIC FARMING WORLDWIDE: SUCH AS NO USE OF PESTICIDES OR SYNTHETIC FERTILISER, NO USE OF GENETICALLY MODIFIED PLANTS, ANIMALS, OR MICROORGANISMS, PRESERVATION OF SOIL FERTILITY AND NATURAL DIVERSITY, ANIMAL-FRIENDLY ANIMAL PRODUCTION, AND ENCOURAGEMENT OF BIODIVERSITY

asked whether the organic harvest is low compared to that of conventional, Hagemann replied in the negative. "It is a myth. What is different compared to conventional is that there is a lot more work involved in everything. For weeding, you can easily apply some pesticide to the land in conventional farming whereas in organic farming you have to do it manually or use special machines to pull out weeds which would consume more time, expensive due to machines and labour cost". Organic farming is usually a lot more work -work means labour and labour means money," she said.

Prices of organically grown fruits and vegetables are higher than those of conventional products. This is possible because the whole production process is time-consuming and involves a lot of hard work. The Swiss Confederation also grants financial aid to organic farms that are entirely cultivated according to organic farming criteria. This aid amounts to 1,600 Swiss francs per hectare for fruit and vegetables. Agroscope, the Swiss Confederation's agricultural research wing performs various important research initiatives to further develop the sustainable agriculture and food sector. The key goals are achieving a competitive and multifunctional agricultural sector, high-quality food for a healthy diet, and an intact environment.

As an environmentally-sustainable agricultural process, organic farming will thrive even more in the future than today. Under prudent guidance and support, Sri Lanka too will be able to reap the benefits of organic farming if a genuine effort is put into force.



Karin Hagemann

Organic vegetable cultivation