

In response to the article:

Local farming in UAE is 'stupid' says organics CEO



By Tabitha Barda

But local ORGANIC farming in the UAE is much smarter! By Antonio Compagnoni ICEA (Institute for Ethical and Environmental Certification) international relations manager and board member of IFOAM EU

I've been visiting the UAE since some years, starting with an FAO mission back in 2006 to advise on possible local organic farming development.

At that time I couldn't see much organic farming, but I met in Abu Dhabi a surely organic man: Khalid Al Shamsi. Highly motivated by and sincerely committed to the principles of organic farming: Health, Ecology, Fairness and Care.

He was farming organically a small plot of land in the desert, with his passion he was able to grow some vegetables and fruits – I remember I was surprised by its tasty strawberries and tomatoes- . He also succeeded to spring out some interest by some government officials. I met also them and heard about their very ambitious plans and large scale projects to get organic in Abu Dhabi, but maybe they missed some of the organic spirit that Khalid really had. So my advice was to start in a much smaller size, step by step. Khalid followed it and I'm proud to be, over the years, a direct testimony of his steady progresses. Very humbly he started to study, visiting organic farms and people around the world, gathering organic experiences and seeds .. always keeping on learning by doing.. experimenting in its new farm most of the crops that you need to have for an healthy diet – some never done before in the region – for sure not in an organic way!

Today most of the steps have been done: over 50 hectares of desert land are grown organically certified by Icea under both EU organic regulation and IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture) standard. Abu Dhabi Organic Farms (ADOF) produces a wide variety of vegetables and fruits that are all marketed locally, mostly directly in Mazaraa shop (Abu Dhabi) and at the Dubai Farmers Market.

ADOF is also breeding organically a wide range animals, from camels to chickens; this well contributes to close the farm fertility cycle: with their manure integrated by the farm vegetables waste plus some organic matter coming from city parks, a good compost for the crops fertilization is produced. Also bees are kept in an organic way, foraging in natural reserves producing high quality Zizifas and Arabian Acacia honey (third absolute prize in the last BioMiel international organic honey competition), and also performing pollination in the farm open fields.

Producing local, fresh and organic products is not only a sound environmental and healthy practice, but it can also has a strong social value. Today's generations of young people all over the world - and especially in UAE, are

missing too much the connection with nature and food. They see the products all year round in the supermarkets - also in the local organic ones you cannot tell the seasons since they are supplied from all over the world (South Africa, Egypt, Europe, US...). They come to think that milk comes from factories not from animals... that chickens have no feathers.. they never get the chance to harvest and eat fruits from the trees...

Finally with the farm project almost completed, Khalid is starting realizing one of his goals: be and *educational* organic farm. So ADOF recently started to open literally its gates to school visits. Now floods of young kids are happily running on the farm, caressing animals, listening to the incredible and real - as the delicious strawberries they are picking and eating - story of organic agriculture. Organic can feed them and the generations to come, without polluting - their bodies and the environment - with harmful pesticides and synthetic fertilizers, treating animals humanly, reducing emissions that are dramatically changing the climate.

On the issue of water, that is of course a very critical factor in the region, in the case of ADOF is coming from local desalinating plants that are also producing electricity. Water has to be used with care and parsimony, but people needs to drink and eat, surely other water consumptions should have much less priority than those!

Growing food in the desert is surely a great challenge, but doing it following organic principles and standards - that still need lots more of studying and learning best practices to operate in this extreme environment- doesn't need to be a scientist to say that is certainly a positive action and a also a very smart one..

Thanks to Khalid and few other organic pioneers in the region, the experiences they are getting and growing , can surely lead many more farmers to follow them, leaving behind the poisons they are using - and attracting more and more citizens to appreciate and buy organic products from the region and - why not, also from abroad.