Organic farming is currently a niche market in Bolivia. But the introduction of a national eco label and expected rise in demand is about to change all that.

Text: Knut Henkel
nearest sizeable town. 'Although demand is rising, we currently get only the same price for our produce as for conventional products,' he explains.

Conditions for selling organic products in Bolivia remain difficult at present, even though the government is introducing specific measures to promote sustainable agriculture. These measures are a direct response to climate change, as water resources in the country's dry rural areas are steadily diminishing. The situation is now being addressed by a programme geared to sustainable agricultural development in Bolivia, jointly financed by the governments of Sweden and Germany, and implemented in Bolivia with the assistance of GIZ, on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The programme's objective is to improve the management of water catchment areas, make water available for agriculture and increase agricultural production and the sale of produce. Advisory services are provided not only to national ministries and associations, but also to public and private institutions across the country's nine departamentos, as well as to local administrations and non-governmental organisations at the municipal level. Where possible, activities are coordinated with those of other national and international organisations working on related topics, and the programme also seeks opportunities for direct cooperation.

For example, it supports the Bolivian Government's Consejo Nacional de Producción Ecológica (CNAPE), the National Council for Ecological Production, which enables indigenous agricultural producers in the country's Andean regions to exploit national and international value chains. In particular, CNAPE promotes the farming, processing and sale of ecological agricultural produce, as well as the establishment of producer committees and needs-oriented financial products for small farmers.

Many farmers are cautious about switching over

By way of support, GIZ has seconded the German development advisor and agricultural expert Helmut Jacob to advise CNAPE. Today, Helmut Jacob and his colleague Ricardo Torres have arrived in Sipe Sipe. The two are keen to learn from Carlos Rainaga Vargas how organic farming is progressing in the region. 'All my neighbours farm conventionally. They don’t want to take the

Helmut Jacob and Verena Batlogg are GIZ development advisors. These are experienced and highly committed experts who spend between two and five years supporting projects in developing countries and emerging economies. They are drawn from a variety of sectors and provide advisory services to state and civil society organisations. Areas of intervention may include economic and rural development, the promotion of employment and democracy, and support for efficient health systems and conflict resolution.

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risk of converting to organic farming,’ explains Rainaga Vargas, a note of disappointment clearly audible in his voice. A few years ago he passed his knowledge on to a group of young farmers, but one by one they all gave up the organic approach, for a variety of reasons. ‘There was a lack of know-how, seed and market access,’ explains Ricardo Torres. Rosmeri Albali Holguín, who also owns plots of land in Sipe Sipe district, was more successful in winning over enthusiasts to the cause. A sturdy figure in her early 50s, Albali Holguín lives in the small village of Itapaya and works with ten other women, organically farming vegetables and corn and rearing a few cattle. She farms 4.5 hectares with her family and would love to be able to increase her yields and sell produce directly and under more acceptable conditions. ‘I often sell to middlemen, who don’t pay any supplement for organic products,’ she complains.

Torres gives the farmer tips on how to increase soil fertility, diversify production, improve crop protection and use fertilisers. ‘A classic problem is that soils don’t get sufficient nutrients and organic materials to replace what is used in the growing process or to improve yields,’ explains Jacob, who has had success in converting farmers to the organic approach in other parts of Bolivia, particularly in the coffee sector. Now his task is to translate these successes to the small farm holdings that predominate in the Bolivian uplands.

The government in La Paz took a first step towards this objective in November 2006 with the adoption of a law to promote organic farming, which simultaneously resulted in the establishment of CNAPE, the body which Jacob is advising. CNAPE brings together public and private organisations and institutions with the aim of developing strategies and new standards to promote organic farming. ‘These range from the marketing of organic produce for school meals to the introduction of a national standard for certification systems as both a complement and alternative to the international eco standards applied to the export of goods such as coffee, cocoa, quinoa and Brazil nuts,’ explains Ricardo Torres. It is hoped this national eco label will boost acceptance among domestic consumers for organically produced goods and at the same time remove a key obstacle to conversion to organic farming – the cost of certification in line with international criteria. ‘For many farmers, these costs are simply unaffordable,’ says Rosmeri Albali Holguín. ‘I would have to pay over 3,000 bolivianos for my 4.5 hectares.’ That is equivalent to around €340, or three minimum wages in Bolivia. Too much for the country’s small farmers, most of whom have only little land for crops and produce food under difficult circumstances. The national certification

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**VITAL STATISTICS**

- **Capital:** Sucre
- **Population:** 10.3 million
- **GDP per capita 2011:** US$4,800
- **Percentage of population living below national poverty line:** 64%
- **Jobs in agriculture/percentage of GDP:** 32%/10%
- **Human Development Index ranking:** 108 (out of 187)

Sources: Human Development Index, CIA – The World Factbook

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**Sustainable support for organic farming**

**Programme:** Agricultural development programme

**Commissioned by:** German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ); Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA)

**Lead executing agency:** Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo, Viceministerio de Inversión Pública y Financiamiento Externo

**Overall term:** 2005 to 2017

Promoting the farming and sale of organically produced food is just one of many objectives of the programme to promote sustainable agricultural development, financed jointly by the Governments of Germany and Sweden. Work in the three priority areas – watershed management, availability of water for use in agriculture and the production and sale of agricultural produce – ranges from providing the national government with advisory services on policy-making and the legal framework to advising small farmers in the villages.

The objectives are to boost the resilience of small-scale farming production to threats posed by climate change, to increase the degree to which watershed management focuses on securing the availability and more equitable distribution of water resources, and to increase the yields of agricultural production in the long term.

[www.proagro-bolivia.org](http://www.proagro-bolivia.org)
system is based in part on the concept of reciprocal checks and balances carried out by farmers instead of on expensive laboratory testing and inspections by international experts.

First wave of organic supermarkets

Helmut Jacob and Ricardo Torres have also come to Sipe Sipe to run a workshop for over 70 organic farmers, farm technicians and local leaders from the region. The purpose of the workshop is to explain the opportunities offered by the new eco label and the standards that need to be met. But it also addresses a second key topic: improved marketing of produce. ‘Selling directly to an organic supermarket is the ideal scenario,’ says Vicente Velasco, who grows peaches and vegetables and would prefer to be able to sell his produce directly in Cochabamba. This is already possible in La Paz, where several small supermarkets are run by the Asociación de Organizaciones de Productores Ecológicos de Bolivia, the umbrella organisation for organic producers. Verena Batlogg is a GIZ development advisor who works closely with the organisation. ‘Organically produced fruit and vegetables, chocolate, tea and coffee are proving very successful in the markets,’ she says. Carmen Sotomayor, the association’s managing director, has been a long-time campaigner for a national eco label and for the purchase of organic produce for school meals. She is also campaigning for a change in consumer habits in Bolivia. The market for the many traditional food products derived from tuber crops and Andean cereals such as quinoa and amaranth is diminishing, notably as a result of the growth in consumption of chicken, rice and noodles in urban areas.

Experts warn that this trend is set to have a negative impact on farming practices and biodiversity. They advocate more effective marketing of traditional products instead, as well as a public awareness campaign to help bring about a change in consumer habits. They also see partnerships with restaurants in La Paz as a means of reintroducing traditional foods into upmarket hotels and restaurants. It is a recipe that might also work in Cochabamba. Farmers like Carlos Rainaga Vargas would be delighted to supply restaurants directly and even grow produce to meet their specific requirements.

The idea may well bear fruit in the years ahead. But for GIZ development advisor Verena Batlogg, it is one of the longer-term goals. ‘We first have to bring farmers up to speed with the exact requirements of the eco label. That is our current priority.’