



African Organic Agriculture Manual Booklet Series
No. 1 | Definition and Benefits

WHAT IS ORGANIC AGRICULTURE ?



A suitable way to improve farming

As a farmer in Africa you may be facing a number of challenges like loss of arable land, decreasing soil fertility, frequent drought and rising cost of seeds, fertilisers, pesticides and animal drugs. This commonly leads to recurrent difficulties to produce enough food to sustain the family and community. There is therefore need to establish low-cost farming methods that are environmentally friendly and allow you to address the pressing problems of food security.

Organic agriculture has a significant role to play in addressing these goals. It has proved considerable potential to improve household food security, access to high value markets and increased incomes. As result, the awareness of the potential of organic agriculture to improve farming and farmers' livelihoods is rapidly increasing, also in Africa.

Organic agriculture is concerned with the way you as a farmer manage soils, water, plants and animals in order to produce, process and distribute food and other goods. Organic farmers utilize natural resources in a way that they benefit while protecting these resources for future generations.

In a time of changing climate with uncertain rains securing harvests becomes a major challenge. Under these circumstances organic farmers have managed to improve their lives by relying on nature's potential using farm-own resources, low-cost methods and establishing a diverse and stable farm-ecosystem.

This booklet will give you a first insight into the basic approaches and practices of organic agriculture. It is an invitation to learn more about this approach in more specific booklets of this series and to evaluate it to make your way of farming more sustainable.

What is organic agriculture?

Organic agriculture is an improved and affordable way of producing good quality farm products in harmony with nature. It combines the best of traditional farming with modern sustainable agricultural methods.

We as organic farmers ...

- › Look at the farm as a big organism, which we have to look after very well in order to benefit from it.
- › Protect the soil, water and forest resources, as we and the future generations depend on them.
- › Use natural and renewable resources available on the farm such as manure, crop residues, tree leaves and dry grass to fertilize the soil.
- › Use natural and non-poisonous materials to control pests and diseases.
- › Select and use strong plant varieties and animal breeds that do well under local conditions.
- › Increase the organic matter of infertile soils and thus eventually bring dead land back into production.



How organic farmers feed the soil

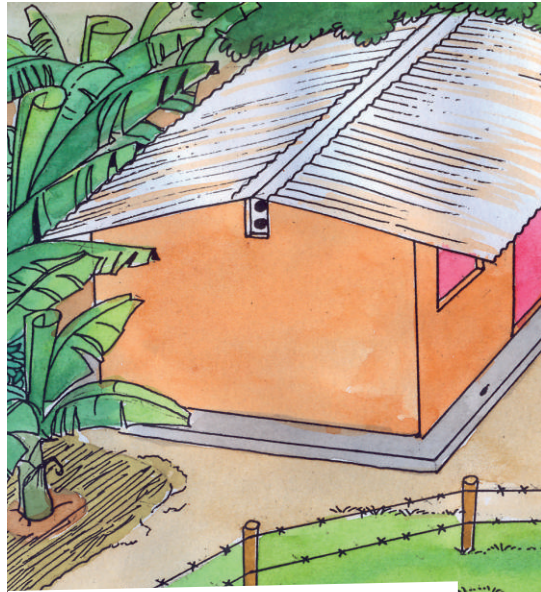
A fertile soil is the foundation of good crop and livestock production. It absorbs and holds enough water and nutrients, and provides the nutrients to the plants in a balanced way, when they need them.

In an organic farmer's perspective a fertile soil is a living soil containing insects, worms and smaller organisms. These organisms decompose green plant material and animal manure to make the nutrients available to the crops.

Organic farmers protect the soil from being carried away by water and wind. They also minimise its disturbance to prevent disruption of the activities of the soil organisms.

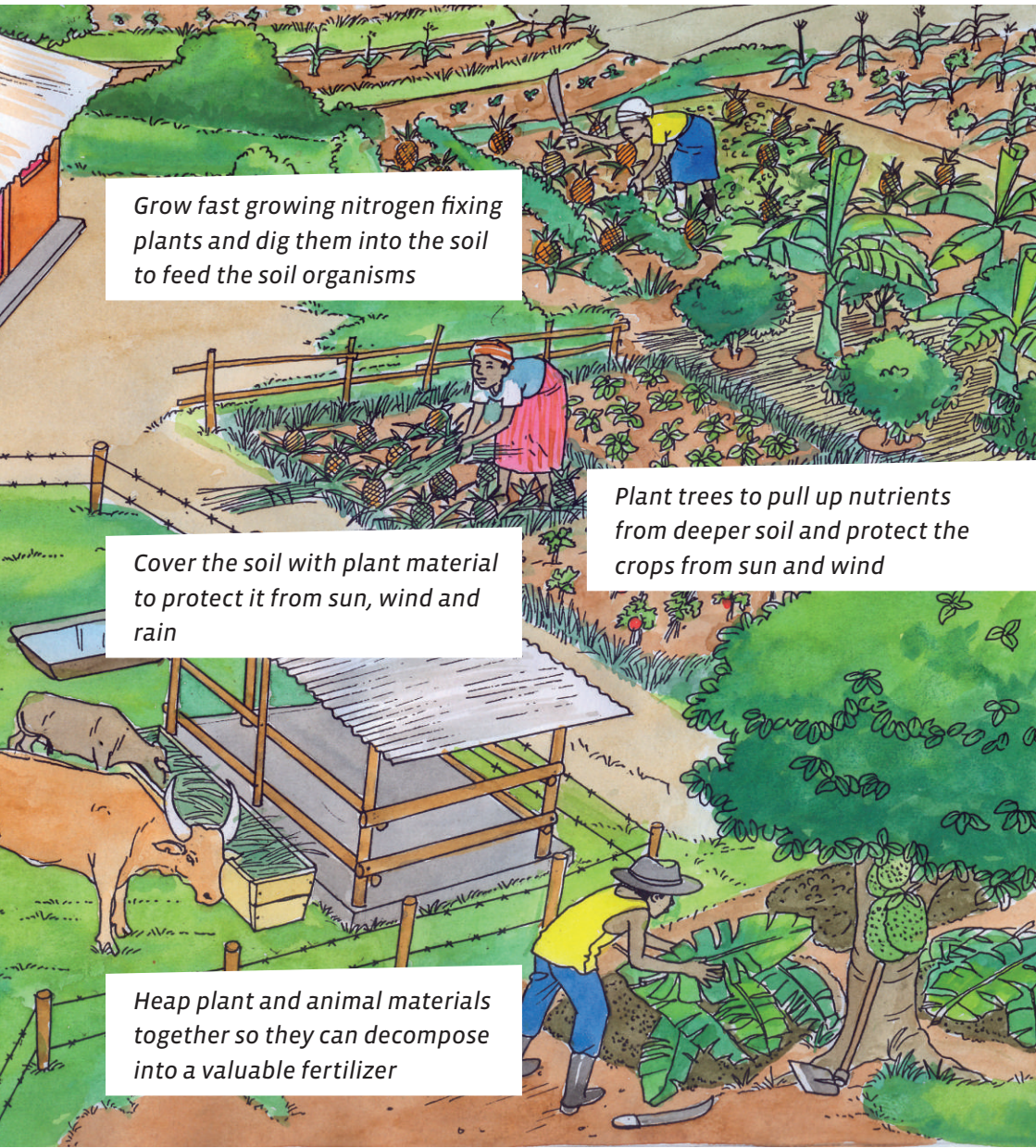
To improve soil fertility, organic farmers regularly feed the soil with animal manure and plant material. They mix them together and process them into a highly valuable fertilizer called compost. They also work crop residues and especially grown green plant material into the soil.

Soil is like an organism: To be healthy, it depends on an appropriate nutrition! What food do you give to your soil?



Cover the soil with plant material in permanent crops





Grow fast growing nitrogen fixing plants and dig them into the soil to feed the soil organisms

Plant trees to pull up nutrients from deeper soil and protect the crops from sun and wind

Cover the soil with plant material to protect it from sun, wind and rain

Heap plant and animal materials together so they can decompose into a valuable fertilizer

How organic farmers keep crops healthy

A healthy plant will grow to its full size within its natural time and will produce well-formed food materials. So organic farmers look at providing good growing conditions to the plants. They perform all field activities in time, plant early in the season, remove weeds before they damage the crop, and remove excess branches in tree crops before flowering to ensure good fruit size.

Organic farmers use strong plant varieties, which have been tested under local conditions to be fast growing, resistant to pests and diseases and good yielding.

Organic farmers carefully check pests and diseases before using them.

They grow crops in a planned sequence to starve and kill pests and diseases that live in the soil.

The better the farmers prevent pests and diseases from developing, the less efforts they have to control them.

Pests and diseases also have their natural enemies. Have you ever thought of creating favourable conditions to enhance development of these useful creatures?



Use healthy seeds, seedlings and cuttings only



Remove competing plants and infected plant material





Feed the soil with sufficient manure and keep it moist



Protect natural grass boundaries and bushes around the fields to encourage development of natural enemies of pests

Trap, repel or kill pests and diseases with natural substances

How they keep animals healthy

Organic farmers keep farm animals to get eggs, milk and meat. Farm animals also provide valuable manure for improving soil fertility.

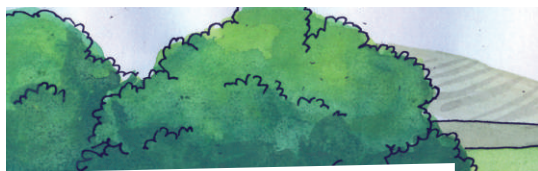
Organic farmers handle their animals with care and respect. They feed and house them well, and keep them free of parasites and diseases. This allows the animals to behave naturally, grow and reproduce well.

Organic farmers choose strong breeds that grow and produce well with locally available feeds. They also keep their animals in natural shape and do not shorten beaks, nor remove horns or shorten the tails.

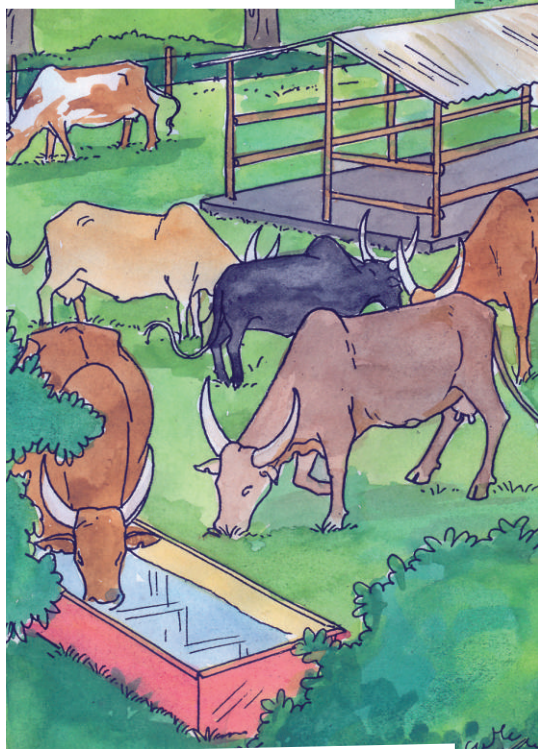
Organic farmers provide safe housing to protect the farm animals from bad weather and wild animals. Housing makes it easy to check and treat the animals for infections and to collect eggs, milk and manure.

To treat their animals organic farmers first use natural substances. In case of dangerous diseases they also use synthetic medicines to protect the lives of the animals.

Animals love nature! Do you let your farm animals experience nature as much as possible?

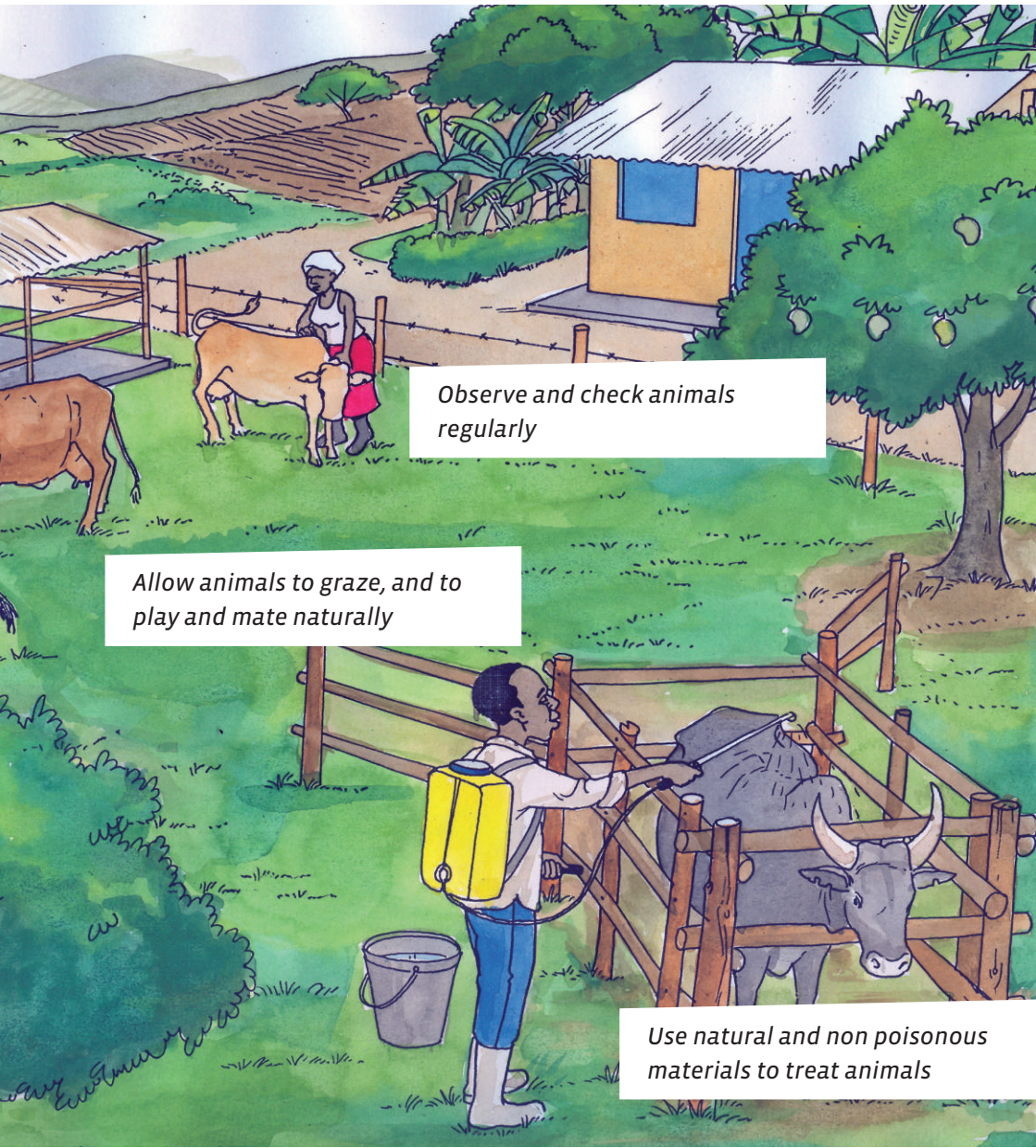


Provide animal friendly housing



Provide good quality feed and drinking water all the time





Observe and check animals regularly

Allow animals to graze, and to play and mate naturally

Use natural and non poisonous materials to treat animals

How do organic farmers benefit?

By growing different crops and keeping different animals organic farmers are sure to harvest, even if a crop fails. By using own seeds and making their own fertilizers and pesticides, and avoiding costly inputs, they save on money in production. Products from a certified organic farm can in most cases be sold at higher prices. Lower costs, safer harvests and higher prices improve their incomes.

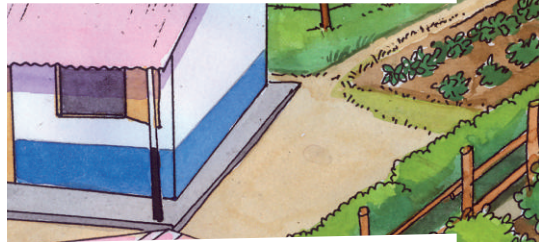
Additionally health of farmer families benefits from organic farming through healthy foods free from pesticides and a diverse diet.

Organic farmers continuously try out new, appropriate methods on their farms and gain experiences by discussing with other farmers. This way they learn to solve most of the problems related to soil, crops and animal production on their own. Together they often pick up special projects to improve their lives, for example selling farm products, having trainings and buying equipment together.

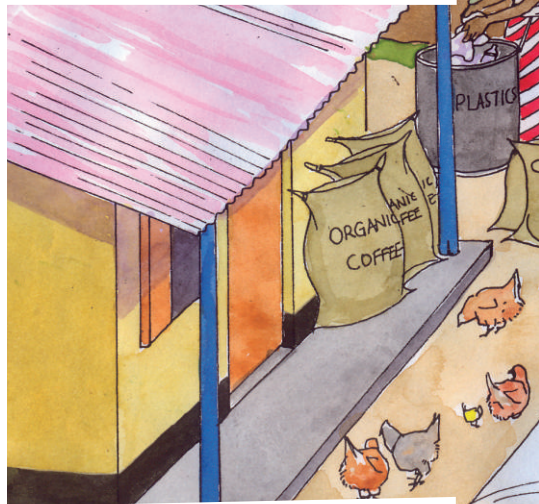
What else would you expect from a farming method, which claims to be sustainable, healthy and fair?



Use materials available on the farms and thus spend less money on farming



Produce a diversity of foods to ensure a balanced diet and a secure food supply



Improve the harvests and income



Sell to better markets and get higher prices

Share knowledge and equipment, and organize marketing together

This booklet is an outcome of the African Organic Agriculture Training Manual project and was conceived as a handout for farmers.

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