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UNLOCKING THE POWER OF ORGANIC:
Recommendations for U.S. and Global Resilience

UW Organic Collaborative
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

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Executive Summary

As the world faces escalating climate, economic, and food system challenges, organic agriculture is emerging as a key tool for resilience, regeneration, and equity. Drawing from expert panels convened at Harvest of Ideas 2.0 at University of Wisconsin-Madison on April 8-9, 2025, this paper synthesizes insights from U.S. and international organic leaders. The organic sector has demonstrated substantial growth in market value, infrastructure development, and policy impact—yet critical gaps remain in supply chains, access to land and capital, regulatory equity, and cultural recognition.

This paper offers a roadmap for strategic investment in organic agriculture as a cornerstone of environmental and rural economic policy. Recommendations focus on infrastructure development, enforcement integrity, equitable financing, cultural recognition, and long-term policy stability.

Introduction: Why Organic, Why Now

Organic agriculture is no longer a niche movement—it is a rapidly growing economic sector, a climate solution, and a vehicle for cultural and community resilience. U.S. organic sales reached $71.5 billion in 2024, growing at a 13.4% compound annual rate, more than quadruple the rate of conventional food. As this paper will demonstrate, this growth is underpinned by trust in the USDA Organic Seal, strategic policy successes, and a vibrant community of practitioners across the food chain.

At the same time, organic farming remains deeply rooted in traditional and Indigenous practices worldwide. Leaders from Asia, Europe, and Indigenous U.S. communities emphasized that “organic” is not a new innovation—it is a return to systems that center biodiversity, reciprocity, and long-term thinking.

However, systemic barriers remain: infrastructure deficits, financial exclusion, bureaucratic burdens, and underinvestment in community-scale systems. To scale organic solutions, federal and global policies must evolve.

Panel 1: U.S. Organic Policies That Are Working

Over three decades, U.S. organic agriculture has grown from a $1 billion niche market to a $71.5 billion sector in 2024. This growth has outpaced total food sales and reflects consumer trust in the USDA Organic Seal, the integrity of the National Organic Program (NOP), and the entrepreneurial investments of organic farmers and businesses. However, despite impressive gains, organic acreage lags behind other countries, infrastructure gaps persist, and federal policy does not yet reflect the sector's role in rural economic development.

Recommendations

1. **Protect & Promote the Organic Seal**
   - Ensure robust USDA NOP staffing and funding.
   - Fully enforce the Strengthening Organic Enforcement (SOE) rule to safeguard against fraudulent imports.
2. **Invest in Mid-Supply Chain Infrastructure**
   - Fund storage, processing, co-manufacturing, and logistics facilities.
   - Expand Organic Market Development Grants to address supply bottlenecks.
3. **Expand Domestic Production Capacity**
   - Incentivize organic production of grains, pulses, and livestock feed.
   - Support public–private breeding programs and regional supply networks.
4. **Reform Federal Milk Pricing**
   - Modernize outdated pricing mechanisms to sustain organic dairy viability.
5. **Support Farmers with Practical Policy Tools**
   - Streamline certification paperwork and reduce compliance costs. Expand cost-share programs and technical assistance for transitioning farms.
6. **Elevate Organic in Rural Policy**
   - Embed organic agriculture into USDA's rural development strategies.
   - Recognize organic's role in revitalizing rural economies.
7. **Prioritize Research & Innovation**
   - Increase funding for seed genetics, cropping systems, and climate resilience.
   - Encourage partnerships that connect universities, cooperatives, and businesses.

Panel 2: Organics as a Solution to Global Challenges

Panelists from Asia, Europe, and Indigenous nations highlighted how organic agriculture is deeply cultural, ancestral, and community-based. From Haudenosaunee "Three Sisters" systems in North America to 5,000-year-old organic traditions in India, organic is not new—it is rooted in lived experience. Yet across regions, farmers face systemic barriers: lack of land and credit access, weak infrastructure, undervalued organic products, and policy instability. These gaps undermine organic's potential to address climate, food sovereignty, and rural decline.

Recommendations

1. **Fund Right-Sized Rural Infrastructure**
    - Build mills, storage, and processing facilities that match the scale of smallholders and tribal cooperatives.
2. **Restore Food Sovereignty Programs**
    - Reinstate funding for the Local Food Purchase Assistance Program (LFPA).
    - Strengthen community-led andTribal food distribution initiatives.
3. **Create Land and Credit Pathways**
    - Expand land purchase credit programs for youth and Indigenous farmers.
    - Establish long-term financing instruments to incentivize soil health practices.
4. **Invest in Cultural Knowledge & Exchange**
    - Fund Indigenous-to-Indigenous learning networks.
    - Incorporate traditional knowledge into national and international organic policy frameworks.
5. **Reframe Organic Beyond Compliance**
    - Recognize organic as a cultural and ecological practice, not only a certification system.
    - Celebrate traditional systems of seed saving, biodiversity, and cooperative farming.
6. **Stabilize Long-Term Organic Policies**
    - Move beyond 5–7 year programs toward 10–20 year frameworks.
    - Provide continuity that allows farmers to invest in generational farming systems.

Panel 3: Organics as a Solution to Regenerative Livestock Production

Livestock is often viewed as a climate liability, but panelists emphasized its potential as a regenerative driver when integrated into diversified, organic systems. From models in Wisconsin to Australia's carbon-credit beef operations, evidence shows that well-managed organic livestock systems can improve soil health, biodiversity, and resilience while supplying markets with carbon-conscious products. However, tensions remain between organic principles and emerging technologies like methane-reducing feed additives.

Recommendations

1. **Promote Integrated Crop–Livestock Systems**
    - Incentivize silvopasture, rotational grazing, and closed-loop nutrient systems.
    - Support farms in adopting multi-layered, diversified production models.
2. **Support Climate-Friendly Practices Within Organic Standards**
    - Fund research into practices that reduce emissions without undermining organic principles.
    - Develop guidelines for evaluating new technologies (e.g., feed additives).
3. **Expand Carbon and Ecosystem Service Incentives**
    - Create carbon-credit frameworks aligned with organic standards.
    - Reward producers for measurable gains in soil health and biodiversity.
4. **Invest in Consumer Education**
    - Develop campaigns that highlight the role of organic livestock in climate resilience.
    - Counter misconceptions about livestock and sustainability.
5. **Close Infrastructure and Policy Gaps**
    - Invest in processing and distribution capacity for organic meat and dairy.
    - Provide transition support for farmers moving into regenerative organic systems.

Panel 4: Organics as a Solution to Health and Nutritional Security

Organic food is increasingly recognized as both preventative medicine and a public health tool. Research demonstrates that organic diets reduce pesticide exposure, particularly among vulnerable populations such as children and pregnant women. Organic farming also delivers nutritional benefits—higher levels of immune-boosting antioxidants, essential minerals, and bioavailable vitamins. Innovative technologies point to new ways of scaling organic production to meet rising global demand while addressing climate, nutrition, and employment challenges.

Recommendations

1. **Fund Research Linking Organics and Health Outcomes**
   - Prioritize long-term studies on maternal and child health impacts of organic diets.
   - Support interdisciplinary projects like Soil-to-Society that link soil health, plant breeding, and human nutrition.
2. **Strengthen Protections Against Pesticide Exposure**
   - Enact stricter buffer zones and notification systems around schools and communities.
   - Expand organic or less-toxic alternatives to protect farmworkers and families.
3. **Support Innovation in Production Systems**
   - Invest in new technologies which support biologically-based management approaches and community-based food production strategies.
   - Ensure new technologies remain aligned with organic principles.
4. **Build Regional Value Chains**
   - Fund infrastructure to connect breeders, farmers, bakers, and schools.
   - Support storytelling and consumer education campaigns that highlight health benefits of local organic food.
5. **Advance Food Justice & Equity**
   - Target organic food access programs toward children, low-income families, and marginalized communities.
   - Integrate public procurement (e.g., school meals) with organic sourcing.

Panel 5: Organics as a Solution to Climate Change

Climate change poses existential risks to agriculture, with extreme weather events increasing in frequency and severity. Research from Rodale Institute, FiBL, and The Organic Center demonstrates that organic practices—cover cropping, composting, biodiversity, and manure-based fertility—enhance resilience, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and build long-term soil health. Organic systems consistently outperform conventional agriculture under stress conditions like drought, while offering measurable climate mitigation benefits. However, nitrogen loss and nitrous oxide emissions remain persistent challenges requiring innovation.

Recommendations

1. **Scale Long-Term Research & Monitoring**
    - Expand multi-decade trials across diverse climates.
    - Invest in in-field tools to measure greenhouse gas emissions and soil carbon.
2. **Support Farmer Transitions to Organic**
    - Provide financial incentives during the 3-year conversion period.
    - Pair transitioning farmers with organic mentors and research-extension hubs.
3. **Advance Nitrogen Management Solutions**
    - Fund research into dual-purpose livestock breeds, biodigested inputs, and cover crop innovations.
    - Close nutrient cycles with composting and circular waste-to-fertilizer systems.
4. **Mainstream Organic-Resilience Communication**
    - Translate organic climate science into toolkits for policymakers and consumers.
    - Frame organic as a climate resilience strategy for national food security.
5. **Build Coalitions for Systemic Change**
    - Foster cross-sector collaborations among NGOs, universities, and producers.
    - Leverage organic as a foundation for national and international climate adaptation plans.

Panel 6: Organics as a Solution for Rural Development and the Next Generation of Farmers

Organic farming offers a pathway to rural revitalization and youth engagement. Farmers' stories highlighted the importance of land access, farmer dignity, and policy systems that center equity. Bio-districts in Europe provide a replicable model for participatory governance, short supply chains, and community-based economic renewal. These approaches can stabilize rural economies, preserve farmland, and support intergenerational farming.

Recommendations

1. **Protect Land for Young and Beginning Farmers**
   - Expand federal and state land access programs and community land trusts.
   - Ensure equitable distribution of farmland as 40% transitions in the coming decades.
2. **Fund Farmer-Led Research & Innovation**
   - Prioritize on-farm trials that reflect real-world challenges.
   - Bridge academic research with farmer knowledge through participatory methods.
3. **Expand Peer-to-Peer and Intergenerational Networks**
   - Create mentorship and exchange programs connecting farmers who may face additional barriers to entry.
   - Build cooperative training and support hubs for new organic farmers.
4. **Replicate Bio-District and Food Hub Models**
   - Adapt European bio-district approaches to North America, emphasizing multi-actor governance.
   - Support regional food hubs that link small-scale organic farmers with institutional buyers.
5. **Integrate Food Education and Cultural Regeneration**
   - Fund early food literacy programs in schools.
   - Elevate regional food culture through storytelling, farmer–chef collaborations, and ecotourism.
6. **Center Climate and Equity in Policy**
   - Position young and organic farmers as leaders in climate resilience strategies.
   - Reform USDA programs to prioritize equity, accountability, and organic inclusion.

Panel 7: Organics as a Solution to Enhance Biodiversity

Biodiversity is both the foundation of resilient farming systems and one of the most threatened global commons. Panelists highlighted how organic and regenerative systems—through habitat diversification, participatory breeding, and systems-level research—can restore biodiversity while supporting farm viability and food culture. Early evidence from on-farm research demonstrates that regenerative organic farms sustain more biodiversity, store deeper soil carbon, and match or exceed conventional yields without heavy input costs. Participatory plant breeding projects, such as the new Bickford winter wheat, illustrate how genetic diversity, ecological diversity, and cultural diversity reinforce each other in resilient systems.

Recommendations

1. **Redefine Success Metrics in Agriculture**
   - Move beyond yield to include biodiversity, soil health, nutrition, rural vitality, and artisanal quality.
   - Embed ecosystem service metrics into national agricultural reporting.
2. **Fund Interdisciplinary, Systems-Based Research**
   - Expand multi-site, on-farm trials integrating biodiversity, economics, nutrition, and community impact.
   - Increase public investment in long-term biodiversity monitoring across organic systems.
3. **Strengthen Habitat Diversification Policies**
   - Incentivize semi-natural habitats (hedgerows, pollinator strips, riparian buffers) in organic landscapes.
   - Support crop–livestock integration and agroforestry models that enhance multifunctionality.
4. **Support Regionally Adapted Seed Systems**
   - Fund participatory plant breeding programs that involve farmers, bakers, and consumers.
   - Build decentralized, farmer-led seed networks for organic and climate-adapted varieties.
5. **Build Collaborative Research & Training Models**
   - Prioritize partnerships among farmers, scientists, and end-users to co-create knowledge.
   - Train the next generation of scientists and practitioners in ecological systems thinking.
6. **Promote Diversity as a Resilience Strategy**
   - Recognize genetic, ecological, and stakeholder diversity as essential to food system adaptability.
   - Embed these principles into farm bill programs and national biodiversity strategies.

Panel 8: Global Policies to Support Organic Solutions

Speakers from Tanzania, Brazil, and the EU showcased how organic agriculture advances when embedded into national and regional policies. Tanzania's National Ecological Organic Agriculture Strategy, Brazil's school feeding and food acquisition programs, and Europe's Farm to Fork Strategy all illustrate the power of institutional innovation. Yet, panelists also warned of persistent barriers—bureaucracy, certification costs, and weak metrics that misrepresent organic's value. In response, global collaboration, farmer-centered support, and better sustainability indicators are essential for scaling organic solutions worldwide.

Recommendations

1. **Institutionalize Organic Strategies**
   - Develop and implement national organic and agroecology strategies, modeled after Tanzania's framework.
   - Secure long-term funding and political support beyond short-term projects.
2. **Reform Certification and Input Systems**
   - Support Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) for smallholders.
     Reduce certification costs through public subsidies or cooperative systems.
   - Legalize and promote safe, farmer-led production of bio-inputs.
3. **Leverage Public Procurement**
   - Set national or regional organic targets for schools, hospitals, and public institutions.
   - Expand programs like Brazil's 30% family farm requirement for school meals.
4. **Fix Sustainability Metrics**
   - Move away from flawed methodologies like the Product Environmental Footprint (PEF).
   - Adopt multi-criteria indicators that reflect biodiversity, soil health, pesticide use, and animal welfare.
5. **Support Farmer-Centered Finance and Training**
   - Expand credit, crop insurance, and cooperative support for organic producers.
   - Train public service providers and bank officials in agroecology and organic systems.
6. **Foster Global & South–South Exchange**
   - Expand networks for knowledge exchange between Africa, Latin America, and Asia.
   - Promote organic as a public good in international forums (FAO, UNFCCC, WTO).

Conclusion

The discussions across all eight panels reinforced a simple but urgent truth: organic and agroecological systems are not niche alternatives—they are proven, scalable solutions for addressing biodiversity loss, soil degradation, climate instability, and the health of communities worldwide. From innovations in soil health and plant breeding to global strategies for procurement, certification, and metrics, the evidence presented shows that organics offer resilience where conventional approaches fall short.

A recurring theme was the need to shift how success is defined. Yield alone can no longer serve as the primary measure of agricultural progress. Instead, policymakers, researchers, and farmers must recognize and reward outcomes that reflect the true value of farming: restored biodiversity, improved human nutrition, climate resilience, rural vitality, and food sovereignty.

Equally clear is that transformation will not come from farmers alone. Change must be systemic—supported by coherent policies, long-term funding, equitable certification and market access, and inclusive participation that bridges science, practice, and community. The panels demonstrated that such approaches are not aspirational but already underway: from participatory breeding in the U.S. Midwest, to Tanzania's National Ecological Organic Strategy, to France's Planet-Score labeling system. These efforts show the power of aligning research, practice, and policy around shared ecological and social goals.

The path forward requires courage, collaboration, and investment. Governments must integrate organic systems into national and regional strategies, support local and regional markets, and adopt metrics that capture their multidimensional benefits. Researchers and educators must train the next generation in systems thinking and participatory science. Farmers, entrepreneurs, and communities must continue co-creating resilient food systems rooted in diversity.

The Harvest of Ideas 2.0 demonstrated that organic agriculture is more than a production method—it is a policy framework, a science agenda, and a social movement capable of guiding global agriculture toward sustainability and justice. If embraced with vision and commitment, it can serve as a cornerstone for regenerative economies and healthier societies.