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Water in the Desert

Saturday, 31 October 2009 00:00 by Lisa Reinisch

Farmers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are going organic thanks to generous government handouts, air-conditioned glasshouses and the miraculous properties of chicken manure. But tough questions remain about the economic and environmental feasibility of agriculture in an arid country troubled by water shortages, polluted ground water and the global food crisis



All seems well in

Shahama, an Emirati-only enclave near Abu Dhabi, where verdant plantations stand in contrast to the barren dunes surrounding the settlement. Here, Saif Al Muhaury and other farmers are conjuring cucumbers, tomatoes and aubergines to sprout from the desert sands. But only Al Muhaury comes by without the staples of desert farming: chemical fertilisers, antibiotics, genetically modified seeds, hormones and pesticides.

Al Muhaury runs one of the first organic farms in the UAE. Sporting a crisp white dishdasha (traditional Arab floorlength kaftan) and designer sunglasses, he is one of a growing number of young, entrepreneurial Emiratis going into organic farming. "I also used to think it wouldn't work without chemicals, because that's what everybody said," he explains. "But then we tried and it just worked." The secret? Chicken manure, produced domestically in a government-sponsored factory and available at a 50 percent discount for all organic farmers.

Like most farmers in the UAE, Muhaury turns a healthy profit. Though he prefers to keep silent about the exact numbers, it is obvious that he makes a comfortable living. The nephew of a wealthy businessman, he frequently entertains VIP guests in a compact but luxuriant farmhouse, complete with flat-screen television, plush furniture and customised quad bikes parked out front.

The Middle East is the world's fastest growing market for organic foods, according to the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM). Even though there are no reliable figures about potential earnings, Emirati farmers are sure to increase their margins and subsidies by going organic. A dozen farms have already been accredited according to international standards and 14 more are currently undergoing conversion.

That farms, let alone organic ones, can even exist in an arid place like the

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His vision of greening the desert has seen more than a hundred million trees planted and thousands of greenhouses built since the 1970s.</p> <p>Government support quickly turned farming into a lucrative business and large amounts of chemical fertilisers and water were made available to farmers for free. Today, farmers have to pay for fertilisers and water. Nevertheless, 80 percent of the UAE's water goes into irrigation. In many places, nitrate levels in the ground water and pesticide residues in vegetables are several times the amount deemed acceptable by the World Health Organisation. Only the oil industry is more harmful to the nation's water reserves.</p> <p>The federal Ministry of Environment and Water (MOEW) describes these issues as teething problems. But after decades of investment in domestic agriculture, water shortages are more frequent than ever and the country still relies on imports for at least 85 percent of its food.</p> <p>Unless the population stops growing here at the rate that it is now, animals and plants will be competing with people for available water resources," says Scott Smith, a researcher at the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR).</p> <p>Despite the sector's questionable track record and miniscule contribution to GDP, agriculture remains one of the cornerstones of regional and national identity, especially in rural areas.</p> <p>Dr Christopher Davidson, author of the recently published book <i>Abu Dhabi: Oil and Beyond</i>, thinks there is more to the government's agricultural strategy than food security. "This is a way for the government to indirectly distribute wealth to the nationals and keep them happy. The farming communities in the rural areas are closely involved in their tribal organisations. All of the Gulf monarchies make allowances, both to islamists and tribal power. It is a way of extending government and ruling family control into rural areas."</p> <p>But despite the government's generosity towards farmers, complaints are common. An organic farmer from Dubai is not impressed: "The ministry is not moving fast enough on organic farming, they are so slow. And they should be much stricter. They don't actually do anything, they just fill out forms."</p> <p>He is anxious to get a business plan approved by the ministry, but there have been many delays. "By autumn I want to launch VeggieBox, an organic home delivery business for fresh, healthy food. I think now is a good time to do it, the market for homegrown produce is increasing."</p> <p>Whether that is good news, is debatable. Further growth of the UAE's agricultural sector could lead to more frequent water shortages and grave environmental consequences unless more efficient methods come into use. For the moment, the federal government has stopped supporting farming in the most prosperous as well as the most arid Emirates "due to a lack of resources".</p> <p>The government is more directed towards importing and less towards domestic farming now," says Mona Bkheet of the Gulf Research Centre. "This is a trend all across the Middle East. Let's import things, because in our land we cannot be extensive and it will consume too much of our water. Eventually farming will finish here."</p> <p>But letting go of agricultural ambitions could be difficult, even traumatic, for the UAE. After all, it would mean to give up on part of Sheikh Zayed's legacy.</p> <p>Far from winding down its farming programme, the UAE appear to be going for a two-pronged approach to food security: promoting eco-friendly farming methods at home and, more controversially, buying up farmland abroad to secure stable imports. Last year, the UAE spent several billion AED (several hundred million USD) on international land deals, according to the non-profit organisation GRAIN.</p> <p>Ultimately, the UAE's move towards organic agriculture seeks not only to unite Sheikh Zayed's seemingly incompatible visions of environmental protection and food security, but also to improve the country's international reputation. "The UAE, and especially Abu Dhabi, really want respect from the rest of the world," explains Scott Smith of the ECSSR. "And they are not going to get that unless they can demonstrate that they are moving in a sustainable direction."</p> <p>The expense of such sustainable moves would be prohibitive for most countries. But cost is often the last thing on the minds of policy makers in</p>
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the UAE. Al Muhairy went into organic farming in a similar spirit: "We didn't ever think about profit. We wanted to do organic farming to do something different, something good for society. Everybody can grow cucumbers, but we wanted to raise the level of agriculture in the UAE."

*Lisa Reinisch is a London-based freelance journalist, copywriter and translator who has worked for Wanderlust magazine, Monocle and the Sunday Times Travel section. In 2009 she visited the United Arab Emirates. She lives online (and blogs) at lisareinisch.com.*

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