When I started reading about organic farming and its benefits, the choice of adopting these practices or continuing with ‘conventional’ ways seemed like a no-brainer. There were numerous reports about organic inputs leading to better productivity (10 ~ 30% improvement) and lower input costs, while also being environment and climate friendly. Additionally, there was a steady growth in demand for organic products, from niche urban markets as well as for exports, where buyers were ready to pay a premium for the ‘healthier and tastier’ produce. So why weren’t more people adopting it? Why do agriculture experts and environmentally conscious organisations need to ‘hard sell’ this approach? The devil, like in most cases, lies in the details. And in the classic chicken-and-egg situation.

The real insights begin to emerge during longer conversations with the various stakeholders involved – farmers, big buyers in local markets, relevant people in the agriculture departments, popular organic brands and of course consumers – like you and me. The barriers to switch to organic farming are several. First, is the reality that organic farming isn’t a simple one-size-fits-all solution and doesn’t necessarily change the game overnight. Farmers must learn to manage soil nutrients without fertilizer and tackle weeds and pests without chemicals. Growing different crops in consecutive seasons helps to break up the pest and disease cycles; however this might not be in tune with market demands.

Then, is the issue of yield falling initially during the transition to 100% organic farming. According to an ICAR study, productivity dips by 6.7 per cent in the first year. Additional labour requirements and risks at several stages from cultivation to transportation and sales is also a reality. And finally, the transition comes with the burden of farmers not getting premium prices until organic certification is complete, which requires a period of 3 years at least. There is a lot in terms of regulatory support and financial incentives needed to encourage the transition away from conventional practices.

A number of countries have carefully designed subsidies to compensate the initial losses during the conversion period, which India could learn from. Promoting organic clusters, smart transport and dedicated supply channels are urgently required as highlighted in a recent ICRIER study. Also, there could be proactive steps taken with regard to state procurement by having a separate MSP for organic certified products. While there are subsidies for fertilisers and pesticides, such support for organic inputs are amongst the most common demands of organic growers. Those that do receive some subsidies under the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) provision of the Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (PKVY) scheme face restrictions on exports.

So in the absence of such regulatory support or other incentives and the risks involved, it is a wonder that small and marginal farmers across the country still feel motivated to go organic. There are incredible stories of change and success amidst very challenging conditions that you will find in this Ecologic issue. Whether such initiatives were encouraged and supported by organisations like WOTR, or picked up from observing their peers, these proactive efforts of small and marginal farmers are primarily down to the connection they instinctively feel with the soil, ‘mother earth’ and the ecosystem around. They can sense what isn't sustainable and are willing to change even while other aspects of supply-chain, markets, and government support sorts itself out. These farmers are not stuck in the chicken-and-egg problem and are brave pioneers of the agriculture sector’s transition towards a more sustainable, climate resilient form.