

A strong voice for small-scale farmers

The feedback from farmers shows that small-scale farmers are eager to learn new, sustainable methods of farming that improve their earnings.

The Organic Farmer | Newspapers and magazines hardly exist in a vacuum. They need continuous contact with their readers. We are all confronted with changes in the society and have to adapt our content to meet the changing needs. *The Organic Farmer* is not an exception. Of course, TOF has never lost sight of its main goal, which is to give small-scale farmers a voice and platform to articulate their needs, to support them with useful information on organic animal husbandry and crop production.

But the magazine has had to cope with upcoming development and realized with a lot of satisfaction the growing assertiveness in the small-scale farming community. TOF respects the small-scale farmers, not only because they work hard to earn a living in a very difficult production and market environment, but as well for their important role in ensuring the country has adequate food. TOF is not



alone in this endeavour. Indeed, the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) has declared that the small-scale farmers are the backbone for food security in Africa and started programmes to support them.

A reading through the 100 issues of TOF produced so far shows a deep and positive change in the adoption of organic farming

practices within the Kenyan society and especially among the small-scale farmers (*see text below*). Thousands of individual farmers and farmers' groups have adopted useful tips on sustainable agriculture in TOF magazine. They followed as well the slogan "Farming is a business" and started various agricultural enterprises such as poultry keeping, dairy farming; others earn an additional income through value addition such as in making sweet potato flour, sun-drying mangoes and bananas, selling herbal remedies for pest control and even setting up tree nurseries for sale of seedlings to fellow farmers and organisations.

Willing to change

Small-scale farmers, who were previously viewed as being too conservative, are willing to learn and eager to adopt new and sustainable farming methods. They have realised the financial benefits of new farming technologies. A good example is the link between feeding dairy cattle and milk production.

TOF has continuously the need for good and sufficient quality fodder for dairy cattle. "Grazing along the roads does not fill the milk cans", wrote TOF in a number of articles in 2006, 2007 and 2008, when the milk prices went up sharply. TOF at the time received hundreds of questions from farmers who wanted to know how they could improve fodder production through quality fodder grass and good concentrates for their dairy cows. Farmers have learnt that it requires the right inputs for one to get improved production from dairy cows.

Reawakening farmers

TOF has written about most of the challenges small-scale farmers are faced with, such as low prices for agricultural products, poor infrastructure, lack of electricity and of training facilities. Though we cannot do much we are pleased to note that, small-scale farmers are waking up and fighting for their rights. Farmers groups who read TOF magazine are now willing to handle the challenges to improve their lives. Some have come together and formed CBOs while others have set up marketing groups which

work very well – in this regard, the editors add here a word of apology: So many farmers' groups have invited them to visit their groups and *shamba* to see what they have achieved. As for farmers, and even for editors, the day has only 24 hours.

TOF's products

The Organic Farmer magazine is part of Biovision's Farmer Communication Program (FCP). In 2007, TOF launched a trial with a radio program for some weeks. The response on *TOF Radio* was huge. Within ten days after the first program went on air, 356 farmers' groups applied to receive TOF. In August 2008 *TOF Radio* started again. Today, the radio division led by John Cheburet, airs on KBC radio and Milele FM (*story page 8*).



After numerous requests from small scale farmers for practical trainings, TOF contracted field information officers (iTOFs) in 2009 to help train farmers on application of various technologies. They are Victoria Mutinda in Kangundo (Eastern), Peter Murage in Gatuto (Central) and Alfred Amusibwa in Buyangu (Western). The three iTOFs are now part of FCP's outreach programme.

TOF's youngest initiative was the launch of *Mkulima Mbunifu*, a magazine for Tanzanian farmers in July 2011.



The Kiswahili language magazine is run by Ayubu Nnko as editor and Gabriela John as the administrator.

The infonet-biovision hub is a source of knowledge for farmers, TOF, *TOF Radio*, the FCP outreach program and *Mkulima Mbunifu*. TOF



A shot in the arm for organic farming

To name a new magazine "*The Organic Farmer*", as we did in the year 2005, was an optimistic view of the future. Conventional farming was popular in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa. Organic farming however discouraged the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and even drugs used for disease control. This was a minority view that was opposed by many, including multinational companies that sell chemical inputs, the government and the scientific lobbies that supported conventional agriculture.

This attitude, however, has changed slowly, as the lively feedback from farmers in form of calls, SMS and emails has shown. A TOF special about plant extracts as remedies for pests and diseases, which was published with the additional 10,000 copies in 2006, was sold out within a few weeks.

No one TOF issue was more demanded by farmers than the one on compost making. After the election unrest in early 2008, when the prices for chemical fertilizers went up to Ksh 4,500 per bag, more than 100 farmers called every week wanting information on how to make compost and how to improve soil fertility naturally.

The fact that District Agricultural Officers all over Kenya use TOF for educating the farmers is another sign that the prejudices against organic farming are disappearing, even in the government.

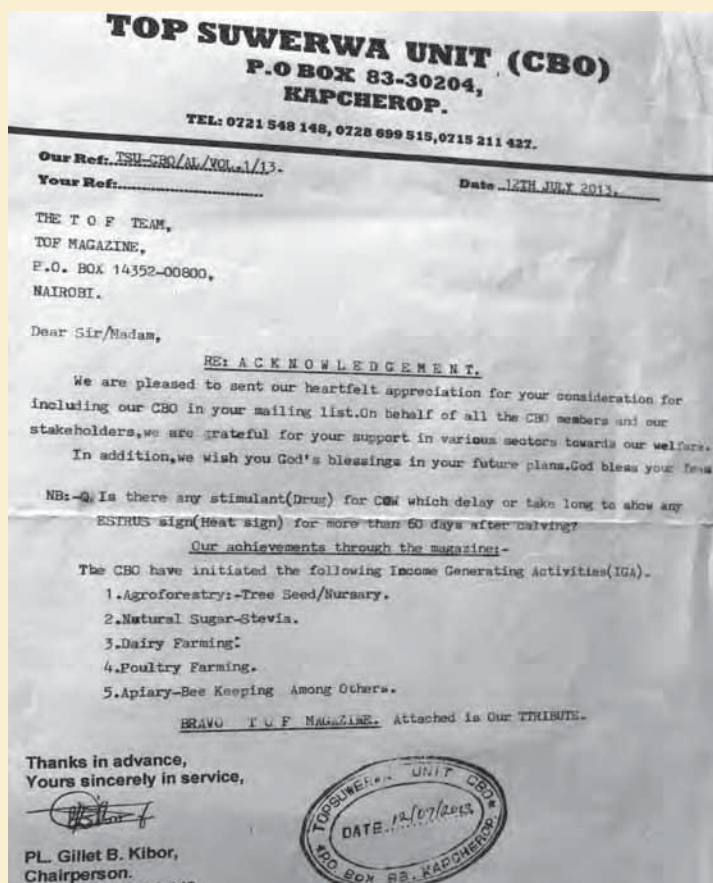
Today, thousands of small-scale farmers in Kenya practise sustainable agriculture. They know that it needs more labour, but they save money that would have been spent buying chemicals. They also have the added benefit of healthy food and environment.

"Visit us, you will see TOF's work"



We have achieved alot by reading the TOF magazine. The work the magazine has done speaks v o l u m e s about itself. All you need to do is visit our group and see what we have done using the information from the maga- zine and our good teacher Peter Murage, who was sent to us by TOF to educate us on organic farming. I am not literate, I can't read the language used however simple it is, but I am able to understand all topics through the help of my group members. I have learnt and put into practice all information in the magazine.

Teresa Muthoni, Kangumo



"We need a strong lo

As The Organic Farmer celebrates 100 issues since its launch in April 2005. Philomena Nyagilo talked to the two pioneer editors of the magazine, Peter Kamau (pk) and Peter Baumgartner (bgt).

What made you think of starting a farmers magazine in Kenya?

bgt: Small-scale farmers are a neglected lot, not only in Kenya but also across Africa. They have limited sources of information to improve their farming methods ...

pk: ... the lack of information is a major cause of food insecurity and poverty for millions of farmers in rural areas.

bgt: This is why we thought of starting a farmers magazine to address these issues and ensure farmers are empowered to produce more food and do it more sustainably to protect the environ- ment.

What sort of a publication did you envisage and whom did you partner with?

pk: We wanted a magazine that would be simple in language - more like a practical instruction manual providing information such as how to improve soil fertility using compost, green manures and crop rotation. This has reduced the need for use of chemical inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides that harm our fragile environment and ecosystems.

bgt: Biovision, the Swiss Founda- tion for Ecological Development, especially its CEO Andi Schriber, were very much interested in pub- lishing and financing such a maga- zine. *icipe* and its then director- general Hans Herren were willing to be the publisher. This saved us from going through a lengthy registration process.

9 readers for 1 copy

TOF mainly targets farmers' groups. Why is this?

bgt: The reason for this was very simple. We decided the best way for farmers to use TOF was for them to share the copies - to encourage discussion on the information carried in each issue of TOF. The sharing of the maga- zine also had a social effect. After launching the magazine, we did a short survey and discovered that each copy was shared by 7 to 9 farmers. We found that in most cases, the magazine was also

circulated to farmers outside the groups.

pk: Sending the magazine to farmers groups also helped to save on postage costs. It would have been too expensive to send TOF to individual farmers.

bgt: Farmers come together to discuss articles and assist each other. If one does not understand an issue, or if they have additional questions. Many groups now file each issue of the magazine where members can make reference whenever they need particular information.

pk: In 2010, when we had a farmers' competition to mark 5 years since we launched the maga- zine. We asked farmers to write down any idea or technology they had acquired from the magazine and further put it into practice. From the 180 participants, at least 25 "engaged" their children to write to TOF about what they had gained from the magazine.

A flood of feedback

You mentioned something to do with the "social effect". What do you mean?

pk: Before we started the maga- zine, most farmers we targeted worked individually. Within two years, more than 400 groups had been formed solely for the purpose of getting TOF. To date they still work together as groups.

bgt: We embraced the slogan "Unity is strength". The idea was to encourage farmers to work together. TOF-sharing had a cohe- sive effect, which forced the small- scale farmers to discuss common problems and look for solutions in order to cope with the many chal- lenges they face in farming, such as selling their produce directly to the market as a group instead of involving middlemen.

After the first issue, how was the feedback from the small- scale farmers?

pk: Over-whelming. We had so many new groups that wanted to receive copies. Many farmers sent us questions and contribu- tions, thanking us as well for the information we carried in the magazine.

bgt: At this time, mobile phones, SMS and e-mails were not common among farmers. So they sent us letters at an average of 60 letters every week. It was quite challenging to cope with this flood of correspondence since we were only the two of us. But we relied on Lucy Macharia, the TOF administrator, who did a great job



"Compost for the school's garden"

The compost heaps, covered with dry eucalyptus leaves, are nearly as high as the students of the Karaini Secondary School in Kirinyaga District. Their agricultural club likes reading *The Organic Farmer* magazine, to share ideas they got from it and to prepare compost for the school garden. Our photo shows the students getting training from i-TOF field officer Peter

Murage. Joseph Mugo Muriithi, a teacher who has a passion for organic farming, appreciates the double effect of the agricultural education: "Organic farming is not only assisting our schools. Pupils have transferred the knowledge gained from TOF and at school to their homes, and some of them have established kitchen gardens at home and of course put up compost heaps."

Lobby for farmers"

in serialising and organising the mountain of correspondence.

The two of you are journalists and not specialists in agriculture. How do you manage to answer all the questions from farmers?

bgt: A few months after launching TOF, we visited Su Kahumbu, a pioneer in organic farming at her farm near Limuru. We had with us a few questions, which we requested her to answer on our behalf.

Su answered the farmers' questions very well and instantly became a celebrity. Whenever we visited farmers' groups, the first question was: "Where is Su Kahumbu? Why didn't you come with her?"

pk: At the beginning most of the farmers questions were answered by Su Kahumbu and by the two of us. To date we have answered more than 600 questions in the 100 TOF issues. Of course, we have to consult specialists from every agricultural field as well as books, research papers and online sources to give the best answers to the questions.

Farmers lack credit

Apart from the distribution, which you feature on page IV of this special issue, what other challenges have you encountered?

bgt: There are many challenges. After writing many articles especially on agribusiness, a good number of farmers believed that we could assist them with loans to enable them start various agricultural enterprises. Unfortunately, we were not able to do this; however we assisted them with important contacts and tips on how to apply for loans from banks and even writing proposals for funding by donors. It is a pity that, despite agriculture supporting 80 per cent of the country's population, credit schemes are unaffordable for small-scale farmers.

pk: Organically produced food is healthier and has a higher value to the consumer. There was great expectation among farmers that they would get good prices for their organic produce. But unfortunately, there was no market for organic produce. Initially, organic farmers were disappointed but luckily, organic markets are now being established.

bgt: From this experience, we have learnt a lot. We now advice

farmers to do a market survey before starting any agricultural enterprise, be it rabbit keeping, fish farming, mushroom production or even poultry keeping.

pk: Another challenge is that we have new readers every month who ask the same questions answered before. So we have to repeat the same information over and over. But I think this is a challenge for every magazine or newspaper.

Farmers are sidelined

What issues would you like featured in the magazine in future?

pk: The policies and programmes promoted by the government and donors have no direct benefits for small-scale farmers. Millions of dollars are spent every year on programmes that are supposed to help these farmers, but the money is used for buying expensive vehicles and paying allowances for government officials; there is very little on the ground to write home about.

We need a strong lobby for farmers to help reverse this situation. We have to write more on these issues in future.

bgt: Small-scale farming is still defined by low productivity, food insecurity and increasing poverty. Farmers need simple solutions such as the right environment where they can access markets, value addition, promotion of small-scale technologies, credit and insurance for crops and animals.

Unless all stakeholders get their priorities right, they will never transform agriculture and the lives of millions of people who rely on it. We also need better prices for agricultural products. This would give the small-scale farmers a higher income and attract the youth into farming.

When you look back, what can you say has been your greatest achievement?

pk: TOF is now the only agricultural magazine that reaches farmers in every corne of the country. It provides regular regular information to farmers in Kenya and even in East Africa.

On average, 10 farmers' groups per week apply for *The Organic Farmer* magazine. Any issues raised gets the attention of people even at the highest level of government. This is an achievement anyone can be proud of.

"TOF is the corner stone of my work"



Since 2005 when the magazine was launched, it has been like a corner stone in my field of work as an agriculturalist. I work with the Ministry of Agriculture in Kangundo-Matuu. TOF magazine and infonet CD has been comprehensive in terms of information. Personally, the magazine has been a reference tool of work while educating the

farmers. Much content is available online, but the TOF magazine delivers updated information with good photos and incredibly helpful information. The articles have plenty of personal experience peppered in. The tone has the feel of getting information in a conversation with another farmer. There's a focus on self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Any small-scale farmer will find this magazine practical and useful for their everyday work. I am glad to be associated with the TOF magazine and to make a living out of farming.

*William Mwangi
(DAO, Kangundo-Matuu)*

"From poverty to prosperity"



"Through TOF I have learnt how to make compost fertilizers and plant extracts, to improve crops and yields. I have also developed the interest in keeping dairy animals. It can get us out of poverty. The language used is simple and understandable. It brings group members together to share and to educate each other. Whoever initiated this magazine should live longer and God bless him very much".

*James Otaye, farmer
(WI-DERO CBO), Jera Ugunja*

"Kick-start to organic farming"

TOF magazine has been the only magazine in Kenya that has catered for the welfare and interest of farmers. The launch of TOF boosted organic farming among farmers in Kenya. Since 2006 when we received the first edition, our group has benefited a lot. We were honoured by the gesture of TOF sending a field officer Victoria Mutinda to train us for free. However, the negative part is that now Victoria went to a different region hence we have no one to consult.

*Gideon Mitaa
(Kangundo-Sakyantwasi)*

100 issues of TOF together



Since 2005, Lucy Macharia, the administrator, and editors Peter Kamau and Peter Baumgartner have worked together to produce 100 editions of TOF. TOF also relied on contributions from William Ayako, Anja Bengelstorff, John Cheburet, Teresa

Székely and of course on our field staff Alfred Amusibwa, Victoria Mutinda and Peter Murage, not to forget our proof-reader Michael Mwendwa. With great respect we fondly remember the late Annalee Mengech who was our technical editor.

TOF 100: A milestone

Su Kahumbu

Writing for the 100th edition of TOF is a great honour that takes me back to 2005 and the first time I met Peter Baumgartner.

It was a cold drizzly morning, when he ventured up to my farm in Tigon. We walked through my organic *shamba*, through rows of lettuce and herbs, discussing the trials and tribulations of organic production. Stopping at the "earthworm hotel" we marveled at how useful these little creatures were in the realm of organic production, yet how little they were understood. In fact, how often they were misunderstood.

TOF gave me a platform

An hour later we were seated in the warm kitchen sipping coffee, as we discussed about ideas and plans to produce a newspaper that would help to bring organic knowledge to farmers across the country. The newspaper was to be called *The Organic Farmer* (TOF). As an ardent organic farmer myself who had battled to get information on organic production, this was music to my ears. A magazine in Kenya for the organic producers? It sounded magical. With the invitation from the editors, I wrote my first story, which was featured in the second edition of the magazine that was published on the May 2 2005.

I answered farmers' questions

The Editors' drive, dedication and vision gave birth to a newspaper that became an instant hit. By the 4th Edition in July 2005, they were overwhelmed with farmers sending in questions about their problems and seeking advice. I was honoured with the task of sharing my solutions with the readers through what then became the help page.

Peter Baumgartner inspired me and gave me the opportunity through TOF, to contribute to the successes of organic producers across the country. By doing so, he gave wings to my dormant talent of teaching and learning. This has also given birth to the creation of i-Cow, (*285#) a mobile phone education tool for farmers, availing yet another medium for access to information to increase knowledge and productivity among farmers, the safe and sustainable way.

Phenomenal growth in readership

Eight successful years and four months later brings us to today, 100 editions of TOF, 800 pages of valuable content available to farmers across not only Kenya, but now Tanzania too, which has *Mkulima Mbunifu* magazine for Tanzanian farmers. A magazine that has grown to be not only for farmers, but by farmers too, enabling inspirational stories to spread like seed in the wind. From farmer to farmer, field to field.

Our shared passion for organic agriculture and vision for the future of safe food production in Kenya continues to drive us today and we look forward to the next 100 editions of TOF.

Congratulations to a great visionary editors of TOF magazine Peter Baumgartner and his counterpart Peter Kamau, and their dedicated team, Lucy Macharia, the administrator and John Cheburet the TOF *Radio* Manager. Many thanks to the Biovision Foundation for making this possible.



TOF distribution is an immense task

TOF – A magazine or a newspaper which does not reach the readers is not worth the paper it is written on. The editors of *The Organic Farmer* have been spared this fate, because they could rely on Lucy Macharia, the TOF administrator since the launch of the magazine.

Many farmers do not write their address properly or shift to other places without informing our office - the envelopes are then sent back to Nairobi with the remark "Address unknown." Others fail to pay for the post office rental boxes - the Postal Corporation of Kenya has always dutifully returned all such parcels to us with a note "box closed." Since January this year, 102 addresses have been cancelled from our mailing list because of this problem. More than 333 new farmers' groups have applied for TOF since January 2013. This means that the mailing list with thousands addresses needs to be updated daily.

When TOF started in April 2005 with 10'000 copies, our database had 300 addresses of farmers' groups, which TOF obtained from



The Kenya Organic Agriculture Network (KOAN). Today, our mailing list contains 2,355 farmers' groups. 18,180 copies are sent directly to farmers' groups, individuals, companies, NGO's and agricultural institutions. Additionally, around 700 groups (Church groups, CBO's and cooperative societies) get 13,220 copies of the magazine through big distributors, for instance the Dioceses of Catholic Church, Baraka Agricultural College, Vi Agroforestry Organisation and several others. TOF is sent to 52 District Agricultural Officers (DAOs), and to 226 schools and institutions.

facts & figures

- When TOF started in 2005 with 10,000 copies, the distribution cost was Ksh 43,000, today it is Ksh 225,000.
- 31,400 issues of TOF are sent out monthly, 18'180 copies through postal corporation through letters and small parcels. 13,220 copies in 91 big parcels to big distributors.
- TOF has so far published 2,300 long and short articles, illustrated them with more than 2,700 pictures and sketches.



Our designer James Wathuge at work.

The battles for quality

Peter Kamau | It was while working as a News Correspondent for the *Daily Nation* in my remote outpost of Lodwar, Turkana district in mid 90s that I met Peter Baumgartner, who was then the Africa Correspondent for a Swiss newspaper, *Tages Anzeiger*.

I was therefore delighted when Baumgartner sought me out in 2005 and informed me he wanted us to start a farmer's magazine. By the time I arrived in Nairobi for the first planning meeting, Baumgartner had already prepared a dummy (example of magazine). We fine-tuned the beat plan (content). What followed three weeks later was grueling work that forced us to work late into the night.

We did not have an office, Peter would work from his house and me from a friends house in Ruaraka. We would then meet on the verandah of Narap Refugee Centre where we would review the material we had gathered.

Peter took me through every step of magazine production in what I would call a baptism of fire. After three weeks of research, writing, re-writing, editing, revising, proof-reading and finally going to press, Baumgartner called me one morning, "Peter, our magazine is ready," he said. I imme-



diately changed and went to join him at Colourprint company where we went through the new magazine with great joy.

The production of a specialized magazine such as *The Organic Farmer* requires meticulous planning, exchange of ideas, seeking out specialized scientists in research institutions and universities, agricultural institutions, government departments, relevant books, online research and farmers.

Sometimes, my differences with Peter over the content degenerated into heated arguments in the office that left the rest of the staff wondering if I would have a job the next day. But we had such deep respect for each other that what came out of our deliberations was one of the best content a farmer can get.

It is therefore with great sadness that I will have to work without Baumgartner as he has retired.