What happens when a country forces farmers to go all-organic? Sri Lanka, India prove powerful examples

What happens when a state or country forces organic production on all of its farmers? There are a couple of examples.

In 2018 a small state in India, Sikkim, was recognized by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization as the world’s first 100 percent organic state, and awarded the UN Future Gold Policy Award, sometimes called the Oscar for best policies.

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The world press points to Sikkim’s transformation as a great success and an example of how the world can be fed with organics. But there are problems. Farmers are not prospering and a lot have given up and moved to the cities. The supply of organic fertilizers and pesticides is inadequate and expensive, and government subsidies are too low.

Sikkim’s farms can’t produce enough food to feed the state’s population, and though imports are supposed to be only organic, cheaper non-organic produce from bordering states finds a way in and compete with Sikkim’s farmers. And some Sikkim farmers along the border import synthetic supplies despite the threat of jail or fines.

The other example was a catastrophe. Sri Lanka, an island nation of 22 million people in the Indian Ocean, began an effort in April 2021, just before planting season, to force farmers to farm organically by banning the import of fertilizers and synthetic pesticides. (Some say that decision was motivated more by the need to conserve dollar reserves than concern over environmental effects of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers.) Ninety percent of Sri Lanka’s farmers grew crops using modern pesticides and fertilizers. They had no experience farming organically, and yields plummeted.

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