



Study of Perception and Demand of Organic Vegetables vs. Conventional Ones: Case of Organic and Conventional Lettuce in Cali (Colombia) in 2014-2015

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ABSTRACT

Conventional agriculture produces negative impacts on the environment and human health. To reduce such impacts, other forms of agriculture such as organic agriculture have emerged. One way to encourage this type of agriculture is to increase the consumption of organic products. This article presents the perception of consumers of organic and conventional vegetables. In addition, the estimated demand for organic and conventional lettuce in the city of Cali Colombia. The perception was obtained with an interview and focus groups of consumers of said products, and the demand through an econometric study carried out with information from two supermarkets in the city. The results revealed that the demand for organic vegetables is influenced by the little information that exists of this kind of products and also due to the high prices in the market. Consumers of organic vegetables express their preferences for these products based on considerations such as healthcare, sensitivity to the farmers, and protection to the land. In the demand behavior of organic lettuce, prices have an influence of 40% of the units demanded.

KEYWORDS

Consumer Perception, Demand, Organic Agriculture, Organic Vegetables

1. INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is a sector that generates negative impacts on the environment and human health as a consequence of bad agronomic practices and the use of pesticides. Therefore, farmers are required to improve agricultural practices and reduce the use of pesticides. To achieve this, it is important that consumers increase the consumption of organic products in order to encourage this type of production. This would benefit not only consumers, but the environment and farmers. Currently, the trend of food

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consumption is directed towards health care and the environment. One example is the reduction of animal protein consumption and the increase in vegetable consumption. Among these consumers sensitized to the care of nature, animal welfare and human health stand out vegans, vegetarians and redudetarians. On the other hand, consumers that are reducing the consumption of foods with a high volume of biochemicals, preservatives or genetically altered is growing. The production and consumption of organic foods is a worldwide trend. However, “The country is lagging behind the rest of the world, because while in Colombia there are 47,281 thousand hectares for organic farming, in Argentina there are 2 million” (Fedeorgánicos, 2018). According to Fedeorgánicos de Colombia, this is a great opportunity for producers to increase the number of cultivated hectares of this type of product.

And that is why it is relevant to know, what the world consumers think about this. When studying organic products in Europe, Hoefkens, Verbeke and Aertsens (2009) found that organic vegetables are perceived by consumers as less contaminant, more nutritious, healthier and safer compared to conventional vegetables. The gap between perception and evidence is greater among adult consumers with respect to children. The perception is stronger when the frequency of consumption is greater.

In the same way, Magnusson, Arvola, Hursti, Aberg (2001) found that the majority of Swedish consumers and in particular women and young respondents (18-25 years), report positive attitudes, but the frequency of purchase is low. A total of 13% stated that they regularly buy organic milk. The figures correspond to organic meat (13%), potatoes (16%) and bread (8%). The most important purchase criterion was the good taste and the least important the ecological production. Organic foods were perceived as more expensive and healthier than those produced conventionally. Higher prices are a major obstacle to buying organic food.

Likewise, Magnusson et al. (2001) found results that indicate that consumer attitudes “towards organic food, in Naples, Italy, particularly towards the attribute of health and the environment are the most important factors that consumers explained”, in the making of decisions in favor of organic products. Consumers who try to follow a healthy and balanced diet in life are likely to have more positive attitudes towards organic products and towards the environment, inducing a greater likelihood and intention to buy organic food. In the case of North and Central America, according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), information on the nutritional benefits of organic products and the ecological awareness of consumers is the main incentive that increases the demand for these products. The world demand for organic products grew between 20% and 30% per year. And in the case of Mexico, organic agriculture is an expensive but increasingly profitable business. In information found in the Blog of the Delegation of the Secretary of Agriculture and Rural Development (SADER), Coahuila states that “In 2016, 262.000 tons of organic products were produced in Mexico, which places us as the fourth producer of organic foods worldwide”. (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development - SADER, 2018) (Financial news, 2013)

Based on the above, the main objective of this article is the analysis of consumer perception regarding the purchase and consumption of organic vs. conventional vegetables, on the one hand; and on the other, estimating the demand behavior of organic lettuce in 2014, based on sales statistics from the La 14 and Carrefour stores in the city of Cali (Colombia). The article is structured in five parts: introduction, conceptual framework, methodology, results and conclusions.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In order to locate the subject under study from a perspective of theoretical guidelines, a conceptual framework was developed based on topics that are associated with organic agriculture and consumer behavior, considering structural models of their attitudes and microeconomic theory of demand.

2.1 Organic Agriculture

Organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 2016) affirms that organic agriculture is a production system that tries to make the most of the resources of

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