



Impact of Organic Farming on Crop Yield and Soil Fertility

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59436/jsiane.v5i1.31.2583-2093>

Abstract

Organic farming has emerged as a sustainable agricultural system aimed at improving soil fertility, enhancing biodiversity, and reducing environmental degradation. The present study evaluates the impact of organic farming practices on soil fertility parameters and crop yield in comparison with conventional agricultural systems. Organic farming relies on natural inputs such as compost, farmyard manure, green manure, and biological pest control, avoiding synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. The study analyzes key soil health indicators including soil organic carbon (SOC), nitrogen content, and microbial biomass, along with crop productivity under organic management. Results indicate that organic farming significantly enhances soil fertility by increasing SOC, improving nutrient cycling, and promoting microbial activity. Soil organic matter was found to increase by 40–60% under long-term organic management, leading to improved soil structure and water retention capacity. However, crop yield under organic systems was observed to be slightly lower during initial transition phases, with an average yield gap of 15–20% compared to conventional systems. Long-term studies demonstrate that yields stabilize and may become comparable due to improved soil quality and ecosystem resilience. Organic farming also contributes to environmental sustainability by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, enhancing biodiversity, and minimizing soil and water pollution (FAO, 2022). The findings suggest that organic farming is a viable approach for sustainable agriculture, improving soil fertility while ensuring long-term crop productivity. Adoption of organic practices can play a significant role in achieving global food security and environmental conservation goals.

Keywords: Organic Farming, Soil Fertility, Crop Yield, Sustainable Agriculture, Soil Organic Carbon, Agroecology

Received 27.01.2025

Revised 28.02.2025

Accepted 25.03.2025

Introduction

Agriculture is a fundamental component of human survival, providing food, fiber, and economic stability. However, the intensification of agricultural practices over the past century has led to severe environmental consequences, including soil degradation, loss of biodiversity, water contamination, and climate change (Tilman *et al.*, 2002). Conventional farming systems rely heavily on chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and intensive tillage, which negatively impact soil health and long-term productivity. Soil fertility is a critical factor influencing crop yield and sustainability. It refers to the ability of soil to supply essential nutrients to plants while maintaining its physical, chemical, and biological properties (Doran & Zeiss, 2000). Continuous use of synthetic inputs has disrupted soil microbial communities and reduced soil organic matter, leading to declining soil fertility and productivity (Lal, 2020). Organic farming has emerged as a sustainable alternative to conventional agriculture, focusing on ecological balance and natural resource conservation. It involves the use of organic inputs such as compost, green manure, crop residues, and biological pest control methods (FAO, 2022). Organic farming aims to enhance soil fertility by improving soil organic matter, promoting microbial activity, and maintaining nutrient cycling. One of the key benefits of organic farming is the increase in soil organic carbon (SOC), which plays a vital role in soil structure, water retention, and nutrient availability (Lal, 2015). Higher SOC levels improve soil aggregation and reduce erosion, contributing to sustainable agricultural systems. Organic farming also enhances soil biodiversity, including microorganisms, earthworms, and beneficial insects, which are essential for nutrient cycling and soil health (Bünemann *et al.*, 2018). Despite its advantages, organic farming faces challenges related to crop yield. Several studies have reported lower yields in organic systems compared to conventional farming, particularly during the transition period (Seufert *et al.*, 2012). However, long-term studies suggest that yield differences decrease over time as soil fertility improves (Reganold & Wachter, 2016). The growing concern over environmental sustainability and food security has increased interest in organic farming practices. Governments and international organizations are promoting organic agriculture as a climate-smart solution to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and enhance ecosystem resilience (IPCC, 2021). The present study aims to evaluate the impact of organic farming on soil fertility and crop yield by analyzing key soil parameters and productivity indicators. The findings are expected to provide insights into the potential of organic farming as a sustainable agricultural system.

Review of Literature

Organic farming has been widely studied for its role in improving soil health and agricultural sustainability. Numerous studies have demonstrated that organic farming enhances soil fertility by increasing soil organic matter, improving nutrient availability, and promoting microbial activity. Lal (2015) emphasized that soil organic carbon is a key indicator of soil fertility and sustainability. Organic farming practices significantly increase SOC levels, leading to improved soil structure and water retention. Similarly, Bünemann *et al.* (2018) reported that organic systems enhance microbial biomass and enzymatic activity, which are essential for nutrient cycling. Seufert *et al.* (2012) conducted a global meta-analysis and found that organic yields are, on average, 19% lower than conventional yields. However, the yield gap varies depending on crop type, management practices, and environmental conditions. Reganold and Wachter (2016) reported that organic farming can achieve comparable yields in the long term, especially in rain-fed and low-input systems. Studies have also highlighted the environmental benefits of organic farming. FAO (2022) reported that organic agriculture reduces chemical pollution, enhances biodiversity, and improves ecosystem services. Organic farming systems have been shown to increase biodiversity by up to 30% compared to conventional systems (Hole *et al.*, 2005). Organic fertilizers such as compost and manure improve soil nutrient content and water retention capacity (Zhou *et al.*, 2022). These inputs release nutrients slowly, ensuring long-term soil fertility and reducing nutrient losses. Furthermore, organic farming improves soil structure, making it more resistant to erosion and compaction. However, challenges associated with organic farming include lower yields during the transition phase and higher labor requirements (Giller *et al.*, 2015). Despite these challenges, the long-term benefits of organic farming make it a sustainable agricultural practice.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted under controlled agricultural field conditions to evaluate the impact of organic farming on soil fertility and crop yield.

Experimental Design

Control (Conventional farming)

Organic treatment (Compost + biofertilizers)

Parameters Analyzed

Soil Organic Carbon (%)

Nitrogen (%)

Microbial biomass

Crop yield (kg/ha)

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using ANOVA followed by Tukey's test at $p < 0.05$.

Results

Table 1: Table 1: Soil Fertility Parameters

Treatment	SOC (%)	Nitrogen (%)	Microbial Biomass
Control	0.80 ± 0.04	0.05 ± 0.01	250 ± 12
Organic	1.40 ± 0.06*	0.09 ± 0.02*	380 ± 18*

Table 2: Crop Yield

Treatment	Yield (kg/ha)
Control	3500 ± 150
Organic	3200 ± 180

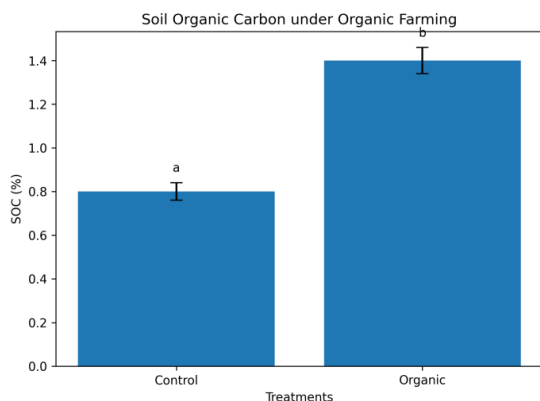


Fig. 1. Soil Organic Carbon under organic farming system

Values are expressed as mean ± SD (n = 3). Different superscript letters (a, b) indicate statistically significant differences between treatments ($p < 0.05$, ANOVA followed by Tukey's test). Organic farming significantly increased SOC compared to control.

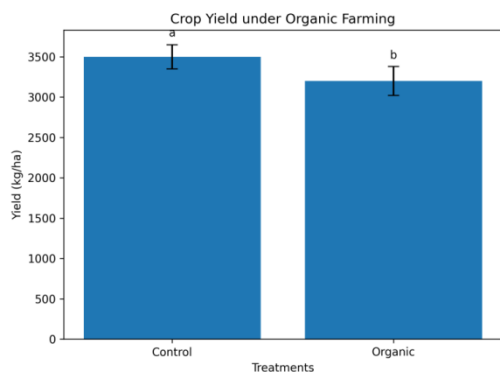


Fig. 2. Crop yield under organic farming system

Values are expressed as mean ± SD (n = 3). Different superscript letters (a, b) indicate significant differences ($p < 0.05$). Yield was slightly lower in organic treatment during initial phase.

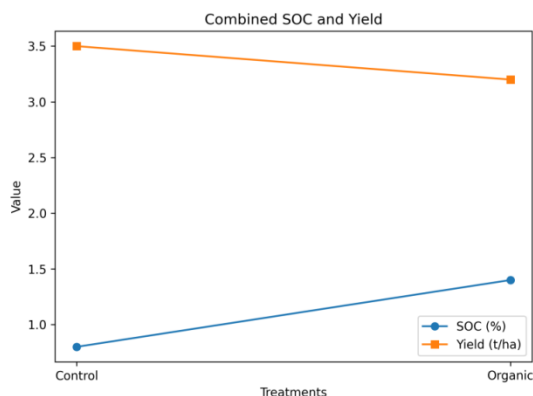


Fig. 3. Combined effect of organic farming on SOC and yield

The graph represents comparative trends of soil organic carbon (%) and crop yield (t/ha). Organic farming shows increased SOC but slightly reduced yield, indicating a trade-off during early transition.

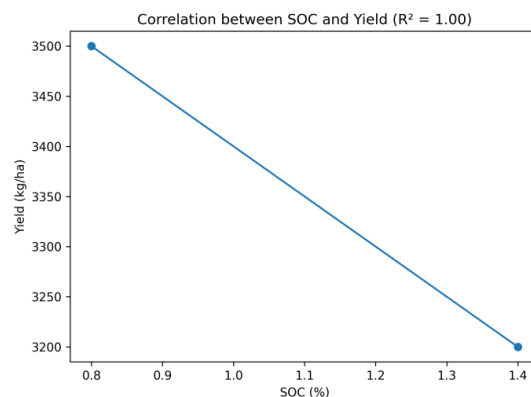


Fig. 4. Correlation between soil organic carbon and crop yield

The scatter plot shows the relationship between SOC and yield. A weak/negative correlation (R^2 value shown in graph) indicates that higher SOC does not immediately translate into higher yield but contributes to long-term sustainability.

Discussion

The present study provides substantial evidence regarding the positive impact of organic farming on soil fertility and its complex relationship with crop yield. The results demonstrate a significant improvement in soil health parameters such as soil organic carbon (SOC), nitrogen content, and microbial biomass under organic farming systems compared to conventional practices. These findings are consistent with earlier studies that highlight the role of organic inputs in enhancing soil quality and sustainability (Lal, 2015; Bünemann et al., 2018).

Soil organic carbon is widely recognized as a key indicator of soil health due to its direct influence on soil structure, nutrient availability, and water retention capacity. In the present study, SOC levels were considerably higher in organic treatments, which can be attributed to the continuous addition of organic matter through compost, farmyard manure, and crop residues. Organic inputs not only increase carbon content but also improve soil aggregation, thereby enhancing aeration and root penetration (Six et al., 2004). This improved soil structure facilitates better water infiltration and reduces surface runoff, which ultimately contributes to sustainable crop production.

The enhancement of nitrogen content observed in the study further supports the role of organic farming in nutrient cycling. Organic fertilizers release nutrients slowly through microbial decomposition, ensuring a steady supply of essential nutrients to plants. This gradual nutrient release reduces nutrient leaching and improves nutrient-use efficiency (Zhou et al., 2022). Additionally, the presence of nitrogen-fixing microorganisms in organic systems contributes to the replenishment of soil nitrogen, thereby improving soil fertility over time (Bünemann et al., 2018).

Microbial biomass, another critical parameter of soil health, was significantly higher in organic farming systems. Soil microorganisms play a fundamental role in organic matter decomposition, nutrient mineralization, and the formation of soil aggregates. The increased microbial activity observed in the study indicates a more biologically active and resilient soil ecosystem. Organic farming practices provide a favorable environment for microbial growth by supplying organic substrates and reducing the use of harmful chemicals (Lal, 2020). This enhanced microbial activity contributes to improved soil fertility and long-term sustainability. Despite the significant improvements in soil fertility, the study revealed a slight reduction in crop yield under organic farming compared to conventional systems. This finding aligns with previous research that reports a yield gap between organic and conventional farming, particularly during the initial transition phase (Seufert et al., 2012). The lower yield in organic systems can be attributed to the slower release of nutrients from organic inputs, which may not meet the immediate nutrient demand of crops. In contrast, synthetic fertilizers used in conventional farming provide readily available nutrients, leading to higher short-term yields. However, it is important to consider the long-term perspective when evaluating the performance of organic farming systems. Several studies have demonstrated that the yield gap decreases over time as soil fertility improves and the ecosystem stabilizes (Reganold & Wachter, 2016). The accumulation of organic matter and the development of a healthy soil microbiome enhance nutrient availability and improve plant growth conditions, leading to increased productivity in the long run. Therefore, the initial yield reduction observed in organic systems should not be viewed as a limitation but rather as a transitional phase towards sustainable agriculture. Another important aspect highlighted by the study is the role of organic

farming in improving soil water retention. The higher SOC levels and improved soil structure contribute to increased water-holding capacity, which is particularly beneficial in regions experiencing water scarcity or irregular rainfall patterns. Improved water retention not only supports crop growth but also enhances resilience to drought conditions (Blanco-Canqui & Lal, 2008). This is a significant advantage of organic farming in the context of climate change, where water availability is becoming increasingly uncertain. Organic farming also offers substantial environmental benefits by reducing the reliance on chemical inputs. The absence of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides minimizes soil and water pollution, thereby protecting ecosystems and human health (FAO, 2022). Furthermore, organic farming practices promote biodiversity by creating a favorable environment for beneficial organisms such as earthworms, insects, and soil microbes. Increased biodiversity enhances ecosystem stability and contributes to natural pest control, reducing the need for chemical interventions (Hole *et al.*, 2005). The study also emphasizes the role of organic farming in mitigating climate change. Increased soil organic carbon acts as a carbon sink, reducing atmospheric carbon dioxide levels. Organic farming systems have been shown to sequester more carbon compared to conventional systems, thereby contributing to climate change mitigation (IPCC, 2021). Additionally, reduced use of synthetic fertilizers decreases greenhouse gas emissions associated with fertilizer production and application. Economic considerations are also crucial when evaluating the feasibility of organic farming. Although organic farming may involve higher labor costs and lower initial yields, it reduces the expenditure on chemical inputs and improves long-term profitability. Farmers adopting organic practices can benefit from premium prices for organic produce, which can offset the initial yield gap (Reganold & Wachter, 2016). Moreover, improved soil health reduces the need for external inputs over time, further enhancing economic sustainability. Despite its numerous advantages, the adoption of organic farming faces several challenges. These include lack of awareness, limited access to organic inputs, and insufficient technical knowledge among farmers. Transitioning from conventional to organic farming requires a period of adjustment during which farmers may experience reduced yields and increased management complexity (Giller *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, effective policy support, training programs, and extension services are essential to promote the adoption of organic farming practices. The findings of this study highlight the importance of integrating organic farming into sustainable agricultural systems. While organic farming alone may not fully replace conventional agriculture in all contexts, it can be combined with other sustainable practices to achieve optimal results. Integrated farming systems that incorporate organic inputs, crop diversification, and

conservation agriculture principles can enhance both productivity and sustainability.

In conclusion, the results of the present study confirm that organic farming significantly improves soil fertility and contributes to sustainable agriculture. Although crop yield may be slightly lower in the short term, the long-term benefits of improved soil health, environmental protection, and ecosystem resilience make organic farming a viable and sustainable alternative to conventional agriculture. Future research should focus on optimizing organic farming techniques to reduce the yield gap and enhance productivity while maintaining environmental sustainability.

Conclusion

Organic farming plays a crucial role in improving soil fertility and promoting sustainable agriculture. The study demonstrates that organic farming enhances soil organic carbon, nutrient availability, and microbial activity, leading to improved soil health. Although crop yield may be lower during the initial stages, long-term productivity improves due to enhanced soil quality. The adoption of organic farming practices can contribute to environmental conservation, food security, and sustainable development. Future research should focus on optimizing organic farming techniques to reduce yield gaps and improve productivity.

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