

ASSAM 'ORGANIC BY DEFAULT': PARADOX



"Organic by default" is often worn as a badge of honour in Assam's policy circles. To those unfamiliar with the region, the narrative of chemical-free soils, traditional farming systems and widespread agroforestry appears to offer a natural ecological advantage. But in the globalised agricultural economy of 2026, "default" is simply another word for "unplanned".



Assam possesses an immense amount of unrealised natural capital, yet it has failed strategically to convert its environmental stewardship into sustained economic returns. India produced more than 32 lakh metric tonnes of certified organic output in 2023–24, but only about 2.61 lakh tonnes, valued at roughly \$495 million, reached export markets. Although organic exports rose to approximately 3.68 lakh tonnes worth \$665 million the following year, this still represents a small fraction of total production and falls well short of what is required to meaningfully raise farmer incomes.



Within this national picture, Assam's contribution remains marginal. While the state has expanded organic acreage and production through clusters supported under national schemes, its share of organic exports is disproportionately low. Most organic produce continues to be sold domestically at conventional prices, erasing any potential premium associated with sustainable practices.

This glaring production-to-export gap points to a deeper problem. Ecological assets remain undervalued not because they are absent, but because institutional frameworks have failed to connect farmers to premium markets. The constraint is both economic and structural, rooted in the interaction of four distinct but interlinked forms of capital.

The first is natural capital. Assam's fertile soils, rich biodiversity and long history of low-input farming make it especially suited to organic agriculture. Yet without verified certification such as the National Programme for Organic Production (NPOP) the internationally recognised standard administered through APEDA this natural capital remains invisible to global buyers and therefore unpriced.

The second constraint lies in human capital. Farmers across Assam possess deep generational knowledge of sustainable cultivation, but many lack what might be called “certification literacy”. They know how to grow, but not how to document practices, comply with audit requirements or maintain quality management systems demanded under NPOP and other demand-driven standards.

Social capital, in the form of farmer producer organisations and community networks, shows promise but remains under-leveraged. Programmes under the Mission Organic Value Chain Development for the North Eastern Region (MOVCDNER) have encouraged cluster formation and aggregation. Yet many producer groups still operate primarily as channels for subsidies rather than as market-oriented enterprises. Institutions that could link these groups to certification support, credible buyers and branding opportunities remain weak or fragmented.

Finally, there is the persistent gap in produced and financial capital. The shift to certified organic farming typically involves a multi-year transition period, creating what analysts describe as a “conversion lag”. During this phase, smallholders often bear higher compliance costs without receiving any price premium. In the absence of transitional credit and risk-mitigation mechanisms, many farmers either abandon certification efforts or remain trapped in commodity markets that do not reward sustainability.

The limits and potential of current policy design are best illustrated by a partial success story.

Certification Turns Practice into Price

In Karbi Anglong, small farmers who once sold ginger and turmeric at distress prices had long practised low-chemical farming, yet their produce remained indistinguishable in local markets. Prices were volatile, payments uncertain, and middlemen-controlled access.

Under the Mission Organic Value Chain Development for the North Eastern Region, these farmers were organised into a producer company and supported through organic certification a process that demanded record-keeping, quality control and standardised post-harvest handling unfamiliar to most.



The change did not come from higher yields, but from recognition. Certification allowed collective aggregation and access to buyers beyond the district, leading to more stable prices and reduced dependence on intermediaries. Gains were modest but meaningful. Crucially, the experience shows that ecological practices generate income only when institutions translate them into market value a pathway still unavailable to most farmers in Assam.

Academic literature reinforces these insights. Research consistently shows that organic farming strengthens resilience and rural entrepreneurship, but its income benefits remain limited unless output is aligned with demand-driven standards and credible certification. Certification, in this context, is not paperwork; it is value recognition.

This makes the expansion of certification systems as critical a policy challenge as increasing organic acreage. India has set an ambitious target of \$2 billion in organic exports by 2030, and ongoing revisions to NPOP aim to align domestic standards more closely with global requirements. Yet state level facilitation in Assam remains uneven.

To move from aspiration to transformation, several strategic shifts are necessary. Certification must be treated as public infrastructure rather than an optional add-on, supported through subsidised accredited laboratories, district-level technical assistance and training in compliance documentation. Producer organisations must be incubated not only for organic production, but for market-oriented value capture, with clear linkages to buyers seeking certified goods. Investment in aggregation, processing and quality assurance — from post-harvest handling to traceability — must be prioritised so that ecological capital can be effectively monetised.

Agriculture that preserves nature but fails the farmer is not sustainable; it is an economic crisis unfolding slowly. The era of “organic by default” is over. If Assam is to convert its ecological strengths into economic prosperity, it must redesign the systems that recognise, verify and reward value — bridging natural wealth with market worth through deliberate policy, stronger institutions and sustained investment in the capitals that truly matter.

