Manuscript ID:
IJEBAMPSR-2025-0202010

Volume: 2

Issue: 2

Month: April

Year: 2025

E-ISSN: 3065-9140

Submitted: 08-Jan-2025
Revised: 12-Feb-2025
Accepted: 20- Mar-2025
Published: 30-Apr-2025

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15828265

DOI Link:
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15828265

Sustainable Farming Practices: Enhancing Soil Health and Crop Yield

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Abstract

Sustainable farming practices play a crucial role in improving soil health, enhancing crop productivity, ensuring long-term agricultural sustainability and ensuring food availability for future generations. Intensive agricultural methods and chemical inputs have led to soil degradation, nutrient depletion, and reduced biodiversity, necessitating the adoption of eco-friendly farming techniques. This study aims to find out the impact of sustainable farming practices, such as crop rotation, organic fertilization, conservation tillage, and cover cropping, on soil health and crop yield. The research was conducted through field experiments and various data collection from multiple farms practicing sustainable agriculture. Soil samples were analysed for organic matter content, microbial activity, and nutrient availability from the study area, and also crop yield data was recorded over multiple growing seasons. In addition, farmer surveys were conducted to assess the economic viability of these practices.

This research findings indicate that sustainable farming techniques significantly enhance soil structure, increase microbial diversity, also improve water retention capacity and more productive agricultural systems. These improvements contribute to higher crop yields and long-term soil fertility of agricultural farm. Furthermore, organic amendments and reduced chemical inputs in the farm lead to lower environmental impact and increased resilience to climate change. In conclusion, sustainable farming practices not only improve soil health but also enhance crop productivity, enhance biodiversity, and also reduce environmental impact, making them a feasible alternative to conventional methods of agriculture. Government policy support and farmer education is essential for future agricultural sustainability.

Keywords*: Sustainable agriculture, soil health, crop yield, organic farming, cover cropping.*

Introduction

Background and Context of the Study

Agriculture is the backbone of global food security, yet modern farming practices have led to various environmental problems, including soil degradation, water pollution, loss of biodiversity, greenhouse gas emissions and also declining crop productivity. Excessive use of chemical fertilizers (three major nutrients N, P, and K.), monocropping, and intensive tillage have negatively impacted soil health, and reducing its fertility and sustainability over time. To overcome these issues, sustainable farming practices have gained increasing attention as an alternative approach that enhances soil health while maintaining or even improving crop yields or productivity. These practices include crop rotation, organic fertilization, agroforestry, intercropping, integrated pest management (IPM), livestock and crop integration, and also cover cropping, which collectively contribute to soil conservation, water retention, and increased microbial activity.

How to Cite this Article:
Shaikh, J. A. (2025). Sustainable Farming Practices: Enhancing Soil Health and Crop Yield. International Journal of Economics, Business, Accounting, Agriculture and Management Towards Paradigm Shift in Research (IJEBAMPSR), 2(2), 44–49. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15828265

Research Problem Statement

Despite the known benefits of sustainable farming, many of farmers still depends on conventional agricultural practices due to a lack of awareness, lack of capital, or uncertainty about their long-term benefits. There is less empirical evidence on how different sustainable farming methods influence soil health and crop yield across various agroecological zones overall world. This research seeks to assessing the effectiveness of sustainable agricultural practices in enhancing soil quality and improving crop productivity.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this study are:

- To evaluate the impact of sustainable farming practices on crop yield soil health indicators such as organic matter content, microbial diversity, and nutrient availability.
- To assess how these practices influence crop productivity over multiple growing various seasons.
- To compare the economic feasibility of sustainable farming and conventional agricultural methods.
- To provide some recommendations for promoting the adoption of sustainable farming practices among farmers.

Literature Review

Sustainable farming practices have been significantly studied for their impact on soil health and crop productivity. Several studies highlight the role of conservation tillage, organic fertilizer, crop rotation, and agroecological practices in enhancing soil structure, texture and increasing nutrient availability.

For instance, Lal (2015) emphasized that conservation tillage improves soil organic carbon sequestration, leading to better water retention and soil fertility. likewise, a study by Reganold & Wachter (2016) compared organic and conventional farming systems, at the time of concluding that organic farming significantly enhances microbial diversity and long-term soil sustainability.

Crop rotation has been widely accepted for reducing soil erosion and improving nutrient cycling. According to Smith et al. (2019), diversified cropping systems increase soil nitrogen availability and reduce dependency on chemical fertilizers. In addition to this, research by Pretty et al. (2018) found that cover cropping helps suppress weeds, enhance soil moisture retention, and also boost crop yields over period time.

Despite these findings, many farmers hesitate to adopt these sustainable practices due to economic concerns, less technical knowledge, and short-term yield fluctuations (FAO, 2020). This shows that the need for further research into the long-term economic feasibility and adaptability of these practices in different agroecological region

This study focuses to evaluating the impact of sustainable farming on soil health and crop yield while also considering economic feasibility and adoption of various challenges. The findings will provide a comprehensive understanding of the benefits and also limitations of sustainable agriculture method, aiding policymakers, farmers, and agricultural stakeholders in making informed decisions.

Methodology & Study Area

Indo-Gangetic Plains, India

In this article the Indo-Gangetic Plains (IGP) were chosen as the study area due to their agricultural significance, fertile alluvial soils, and intensive farming practices. The region covers states like Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal, which are crucial for wheat, rice, and sugarcane production area. In this region long-term use of conventional farming methods, including excessive tillage, chemical fertilizers, and monocropping, has led to soil degradation and reduced efficiency crop. That is why IGP an ideal location for evaluating the effectiveness of sustainable farming practices.

1. Study Area and Experimental Setup

The research was conducted on six experimental farms across Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, representing different various soil types and climatic conditions within the Indo-Gangetic Plains.

- Experimental plots (1 hectare each) were considered, with different sustainable farming practices applied:

Crop Rotation (CR): Rice-Wheat-Pulses rotation.

Organic Fertilization (OF): Use of compost, vermicompost, and farmyard manure

Conservation Tillage (CT): Minimal tillage with residue retention

Cover Cropping (CC): Leguminous cover crops (e.g., clover, mustard etc.)

- At the same time control plots with conventional farming practices were also maintained for comparison.

2. Data Collection Methods

A combination of various field experiments, soil sample, yield assessments method, and farmer surveys were used to collect data.

- **Soil health parameters**:

Organic Matter (%), pH, Microbial Biomass, Soil Moisture, and Nutrient Levels (NPK) were analysed for this task.

- **Crop yield measurement**:

Grain yield (kg/hectare) was recorded at the time of harvest for rice, wheat, and pulses.

- **Farmer surveys and interviews**:

Farmers were surveyed to assess economic feasibility, labour requirements, and also try to find out willingness to adopt sustainable practices.

- **Weather and environmental data**:

Rainfall, temperature, and soil erosion rates were monitored using meteorological data at the same time.

3. Sampling Techniques

- **Soil Sampling**: Collected from 0–15 cm and 15–30 cm depths at multiple points in each experimental plot from this region.
- **Crop Yield Sampling**: For crop yield randomly selected five sampling points per plot to estimate productivity per hectare.
- **Farmer Selection**: For selection of farmer stratified random sampling technique was used to select 60 farmers across different locations of the region.

4. Instruments, Tools, or Software Used

- **Soil Testing Kits & Laboratory Analysis**:

We used pH meter, Spectrophotometer (for nutrient analysis), and Microbial Biomass Analyzer.

- **Yield Measurement**:

For Measurement Yield used Crop weight scales, grain moisture meters.

- **GIS & Remote Sensing Tools**:

We also Used for mapping soil quality variations.

- **Data Analysis Software**:

For Data Analysis SPSS, R, and MS Excel for statistical analysis.

- **Survey Tools**:

Google Forms and questionnaires.

5. Data Analysis Techniques

- **Descriptive Statistics**: Mean, standard deviation, and variance analysis of soil and yield data used for descriptive statistics.
- **Comparative Analysis (ANOVA, t-tests)**: To compare soil health and yield across different farming practices we used ANOVA, t-tests.
- **Regression Analysis**: To assess the correlation between soil health improvements and crop yield we used Regression.
- **Thematic Analysis**: Used for qualitative data from farmer surveys.

6. Ethical Considerations

- **Informed Consent**: Farmers participated voluntarily, with full transparency about research objectives for this task.
- **Data Privacy**: Personal information of all farmers remained confidential.
- **Environmental Compliance**: There were no any harmful chemicals used and also try to sustainable practices were maintained.

This methodological framework ensures that a comprehensive assessment of how sustainable farming practices impact on soil health and crop yield in the Indo-Gangetic Plains, with findings also applicable to other intensive agricultural regions over a global level.

Results

The findings of the study on the impact of sustainable farming practices on soil health and crop yield in the Indo-Gangetic Plains (IGP). The results of this study are organized into soil health parameters, crop yield comparison, and economic feasibility. Data is displayed using various tables, graphs, and figures for clarity.

1. Soil Health Parameters

Soil Organic Matter (%)

Sustainable farming practices led to an increase in soil organic matter compared to conventional farming methods.

Farming Practice	Initial Organic Matter (%)	Final Organic Matter (%)	% Change
Conventional Farming	0.85 ± 0.05	0.88 ± 0.06	+3.5%
Crop Rotation (CR)	0.86 ± 0.06	1.15 ± 0.04	+33.7%
Organic Fertilization (OF)	0.85 ± 0.05	1.28 ± 0.07	+50.6%
Conservation Tillage (CT)	0.87 ± 0.04	1.12 ± 0.05	+28.7%
Cover Cropping (CC)	0.86 ± 0.05	1.19 ± 0.06	+38.3%

Soil pH and Microbial Biomass

- **Soil pH** remained stable in conventional farming (6.8 ± 0.1) but slightly increased in organic fertilization (7.2 ± 0.1) and cover cropping (7.1 ± 0.1).
- **Microbial biomass (mg C/kg soil)** significantly increased in organic fertilization and conservation tillage plots.

Farming Practice	Initial Microbial Biomass (mg C/kg)	Final Microbial Biomass (mg C/kg)	% Change
Conventional Farming	180 ± 12	190 ± 15	+5.5%
Crop Rotation (CR)	175 ± 14	240 ± 12	+37.1%
Organic Fertilization (OF)	185 ± 10	310 ± 16	+67.6%
Conservation Tillage (CT)	180 ± 11	275 ± 14	+52.8%
Cover Cropping (CC)	178 ± 13	265 ± 15	+48.9%

2. Crop Yield Comparison

Yield Improvement over Two Growing Seasons

Crop yield significantly improved with sustainable farming techniques compared to conventional farming.

Farming Practice	Rice Yield (t/ha)	Wheat Yield (t/ha)	Pulses Yield (t/ha)
Conventional Farming	4.2 ± 0.3	3.8 ± 0.2	1.5 ± 0.1
Crop Rotation (CR)	4.8 ± 0.2	4.5 ± 0.2	1.9 ± 0.1
Organic Fertilization (OF)	5.0 ± 0.3	4.7 ± 0.3	2.1 ± 0.2
Conservation Tillage (CT)	4.7 ± 0.2	4.4 ± 0.2	1.8 ± 0.1
Cover Cropping (CC)	4.9 ± 0.2	4.6 ± 0.3	2.0 ± 0.1

3. Economic Feasibility of Sustainable Farming

- Production costs production cost in this task were initially higher in organic fertilization (+15%) due to composting needs but decreased over time due to reduced fertilizer dependency.
- Net profit increased because of sustainable farming plots due to better soil fertility and yield stability.
- Break-even period for adopting sustainable methods was 2–3 years based on input savings.

4. Statistical Analysis (ANOVA & Regression Results)

- ANOVA test showed significant differences in soil health parameters ($p < 0.05$) across different practices.
- Regression analysis indicated a strong positive correlation ($R^2 = 0.82$) between soil organic matter and crop yield improvements.

Discussion

Soil Health Improvements

The findings indicate that sustainable farming practices significantly improved soil health, particularly organic matter content and microbial biomass. Organic fertilization and cover cropping showed the highest increases in soil organic matter (50.6% and 38.3%, respectively), which is critical for nutrient retention and long-term soil fertility. These results align with expectations, as organic inputs promote soil microbial activity, enhance carbon sequestration, and reduce nutrient leaching.

Additionally, microbial biomass increased considerably in all sustainable farming methods, particularly in organic fertilization (+67.6%) and

conservation tillage (+52.8%). This suggests that reduced tillage and organic inputs create a more favorable environment for microbial activity, which is essential for nutrient cycling and plant growth.

Crop Yield Enhancement

Sustainable farming techniques led to a 10–25% increase in crop yield compared to conventional methods.

- Organic fertilization had the highest yield improvement, with rice (5.0 t/ha), wheat (4.7 t/ha), and pulses (2.1 t/ha) outperforming conventional plots.
- Crop rotation and cover cropping also contributed to improved productivity by enhancing soil fertility and reducing pest pressure.
- Conservation tillage, while beneficial for soil health, showed a moderate increase in yield compared to other sustainable methods, possibly due to slower nutrient mineralization.

These findings confirm that sustainable farming methods not only maintain but enhance productivity, challenging the common misconception that such practices reduce short-term yields.

Economic Feasibility

The study found that while initial adoption costs were higher (especially for organic fertilization and conservation tillage), the long-term benefits included:

- Lower input costs due to reduced fertilizer dependency.
- Higher profits due to increased yield stability.
- A break-even period of 2–3 years, making sustainable farming a viable long-term strategy.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The study's findings are consistent with previous research on sustainable agriculture:

- **Soil Organic Matter & Microbial Biomass**

Our results align with Lal (2015), who found that conservation tillage and organic inputs enhance soil organic carbon sequestration.

Similar trends were observed in Reganold & Wachter (2016), where organic farming increased microbial diversity and soil structure stability.

- **Crop Yield Improvements**

Smith et al. (2019) reported that diversified cropping systems improve nitrogen cycling, leading to yield increases similar to those observed in our study.

Pretty et al. (2018) found that cover cropping reduced soil erosion and improved moisture retention, supporting our findings of improved soil fertility and crop yields.

- **Economic Viability**

FAO (2020) emphasized that long-term cost savings in organic and conservation farming make them financially sustainable despite higher initial investments.

Our results align with their conclusion that economic barriers can be overcome with proper support and awareness programs.

Key Findings:

1. Soil organic matter increased, significantly under sustainable practices, especially in organic Fertilization and cover cropping.
2. Microbial biomass improved, enhancing soil fertility and nutrient availability.
3. Crop yield increased by 10–25% in sustainable farms compared to conventional methods.
4. Economic feasibility was positive in the long term, with better cost efficiency after 2–3 years.

Conclusion

The present study confirms that sustainable farming practices enhance soil health, increase crop yield, and provide long-term economic benefits. These findings support policy shifts toward sustainable agricultural development, with a focus on agriculture education, financial encouragement, and climate-smart farming. In addition to this continued research is needed to further clarify and optimize these type practices for broader adoption.

By integrating sustainable farming practices into mainstream agriculture, farmers can also enhance soil health, increase productivity of crop, and contribute to long-term food security and environmental sustainability in future.

Acknowledgment

I am Mr. Shaikh Jakariya Abdulhamid, Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, S.S.G.M. College, Kopargaon thankful to Prof. Dr. Chandrabhan Chaudhari sir and Our College Principal Dr. Madhav Sarode Saheb for granting permission to carry the work.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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