Standards and certification: means, not ends

Organic is not just about standards and certification. Organic is a holistic concept for sustainable development. To be properly understood, organic standards and certification should be viewed in the broader context of the objectives of the organic movement.

When most people think about organic products in the marketplace, they think in terms of certified products, and with good reason: Worldwide, there are over 70 countries with governmental organic regulations (plus over two dozen that are drafting regulations), plus dozens of privately-owned certification standards. More than 500 organic certification bodies (CBs) are active in the world, each serving one or more of these government regulations and/or private standards. With so many different programmes, you might think there is a lot of difference among them. Some are stricter than others, but overall the bulk of the content of these standards is quite similar. The minor differences, though, have made complications for those who want to trade their products across countries and markets. Is my standard "better" than yours? How do we know you really checked your producers against your standard? How can we trust that you are "really" organic?

Standards vs. certification

Unpacking these issues a bit further, we see there are two main aspects to consider: standards and certification. While many people think the two are either synonymous or that they must necessarily go together, this is not true. Organic standards are about practices; most of these practices relate to environmental facets of farming, or to materials that can or cannot be used when a product is called (or labelled) "organic" in the marketplace. Standards can exist without ever being linked to certification.

Certification is a formalised way to confirm that the requirements described by the standard were adequately done. Certification is valuable and needed in certain circumstances – mainly when there is a lack of familiarity or trust between producer and consumer. The more the consumer knows about the producer and the way the product was made, the less need for some external confirmation. Certification is thus a substitute for confidence that comes from first-hand knowledge.

It thus becomes easy to see why governments have come to rely on certification for organic products: Goods are being traded all around the world, bought by people who want to believe they are getting what they think they are paying for. Meeting such expectations in a consistent way from one product to another serves the public interest, and also helps to protect the integrity of the organic label. Assuring that the certification is credible is a major concern of governments as well as the private sector.

When governments or any private organic standard owner thinks about whether or not an organic product should be accepted in their market, they are looking at how good the standard stacks up against their own organic standard, and how good the verification of the product against the standard is. One without the other is not enough; no matter good a standard might read, if you can't trust that the producer of the product actually followed it, what good is it really? On the other hand, if you think the checking is very good, but the standard is too weak or not meaningful, then what's the point?

Solutions going forward

Standards: equivalence, not compliance. For many years, requiring absolute *compliance* of one standard to another, to be *the same* in all the many detailed requirements, was the norm. Basing trade negotiations around these minor differences created barriers to trade. As the market has matured, the understanding that standards are a *norm of practices*, a *baseline* of expectations from operators, is becoming the new approach. This newer approach is based on the concept of *equivalence*, which acknowledges that different organic standards are written by people living in different regions under different cultural and agronomic conditions. This diversity logically gives rise to a certain tolerance for "regional variation" among different standards, which can be tolerated as long as the

David Gould
Value Chain Facilitator
International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM)
IFOAM USA Office
Portland, Oregon, USA
d.gould@ifoam.org

standard as a whole agrees with the Principles of Organic Agriculture (see www.ifoam.org/about_ifoam/principles/index.html) and contain certain critical elements deemed necessary for a standard to be adequately robust.

Granting of equivalence by one country to another facilitates trade. Recognising another standard can be unilateral (one programme recognises one or more others), bilateral (two programmes agree they are equivalent to each other), or multilateral (many recognise many). And while all of these types of agreements may be seen as positive, there remains a question of efficiency: for example, do the math for how many bilateral agreements would be necessary for all of the different organic standards in the world today to recognise each other one at a time – that is a LOT of bilateral agreements – and a LOT of redundant work!

IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements), in partnership with UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) and FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), developed a solution: Have a common reference point for all standards to compare themselves to. The COROS – Common Objectives and Requirements of Organic Standards – is an organic standard developed through a multi-stakeholder consultation, which reflects the core content and objectives of all organic standards. The COROS is organised two ways: (i) the way requirements are typically laid out in organic standards documents; and (ii) in terms of the manifest objectives of organic standards intended by these requirements. Standards owners (governmental or private) can each compare their standard to the COROS, and the results of this comparison then be shared with all (see www.ifoam.org/about_ifoam/standards/norms.html). Standards deemed equivalent to the COROS – meaning that they substantially meet the objectives – can be included in the IFOAM Family of Standards (see Figure on page 21), a visualisation of a goal of organic certification – to draw a line between what is organic and what is not.

Certification: Confidence via accreditation. Who decides if a certification body (CB) is credible? The main answer is through the process of accreditation – essentially the certification of CBs. In order for an accreditation body to be able to make such a determination, they have to evaluate the CB's ability to apply the standards in a way that is consistent, impartial, and transparent, for all operators. In short, the accreditor checks the CB for being procedurally competent and technically knowledgeable. That means the accreditors themselves have to also have these same competencies. Governments rely heavily on accreditation as a measure of CB credibility; the organic sector is no exception.

Most accreditation bodies are national bodies that accredit all kinds of certification activities in their native country. If a CB is active in more than one country, this means that they must, therefore, either attain multiple accreditations for the same scope (i.e. organic), or benefit from some kind of recognition of their activities by the government and/or national accreditation body of another country. Sometimes this works smoothly, and sometimes it doesn't; when it doesn't, the usual result is that trade barriers, bureaucracy, and costs rise.

In contrast to national accreditation, international accreditation can be a better model for organic certification. International accreditation bodies operate internationally in a particular sector, rather than nationally in a wide variety of sectors. This creates certain advantages including the ability to build greater expertise in evaluating the specific sector – organic in this case. Additionally, international accreditation bodies accredit certifiers worldwide, thus establishing a basis for equivalence and recognition of certificates issued by different CBs around the world. Currently there is only one international organic accreditation body, the IOAS – the International Organic Accreditation Service (see www.ioas.org/).

In the European Union, legislation is afoot to only permit national accreditation bodies to accredit CBs' activities in the EU. The law does not yet strictly apply to the organic sector, but revi-

Photo: IFOAM

IFOAM Africa Office Coordinator Hervé Bougnimbeck exchanges experiences with Andean farmers during an IFOAM training.

Limitations of the certification paradigm

Certification is the main way to gain entry to the organic market, but limiting market access to *only* certified products may not be the best long term strategy.

- **It can be costly.** Producers in developing countries – where there is generally lower certified organic market activity – sometimes pay even more for certification than in developed countries. Travel costs of inspectors and distances between farmers make for less efficient work. For countries where there is no active locally based certification body (CB), the costs for foreign inspectors and for the administrative services by CBs based in countries with higher costs of living can make certification financially unfeasible – more costly than the actual benefits.

  Furthermore, setting up a local or national CB in a developing country (or anywhere else) is a major undertaking. Aside from the actual legal establishment, recruitment and training of staff, and gaining enough clients to have a viable business, there are hurdles of achieving recognition by importing markets such as the EU, US, Japanese, or other active markets. This involves costly accreditation and lengthy review procedures, which can take years to complete. If there is no local market or other sooner benefit to getting certified by these CBs, there is low incentive to use their services.
- **It suffers from increasing bureaucracy.** Certified producers everywhere complain about ever-increasing amounts of paperwork, which drains time and energy from "real" work in the field. (Some farmers in developing countries do not read or write, making paperwork something of low value to them and a barrier to certification.)
- **THE RESULT:** Costs and trouble can outweigh the benefits of certification, chasing farmers out of the certified market and making them look for other outlets.

sions in the near future may make it so. In contrast, EU organic regulations now are moving toward greater use of equivalence as a strategy to expand the sector. A recent landmark bilateral equivalence agreement with the US National Organic Program has removed decades-old trade barriers. In terms of certification, individual CBs have been able to apply for acceptance of their certificates by the EU import authorities, making another way in which products can enter the EU market with less bureaucracy. In these cases, an evaluation of each CB's standard and competence was done by the EU; in many cases, the IOAS wrote the report on which these decisions were based, with a disproportionately high success rate among those applying certification bodies who used the IOAS for this purpose.

Where we came from

As the title of this article states, standards and certification are a means, not an end in themselves. While the organic movement sees itself as a key piece in solving the puzzle of global sustainability, it also knows that organic standards still have a ways to go to fully encompass what sustainability means. In addition to the environmental aspects covered by organic standards, the organic concept of sustainability is concerned with right livelihoods for farmers and farming communities, and to a clearer public understanding of the interconnectedness of agriculture, health, economic wellbeing, and social justice. So how does the organic movement get from where it is now to these broader goals?

The floor and the ceiling. Organic standards describe practices that serve as a core around which truly sustainable development can occur. It might be more ideal, though, if existing organic standards encompassed a fuller spectrum of sustainability, e.g. socio-economic criteria. In fact, organic standards are always improving over time, as knowledge and experience grows. While the commonality among organic standards – such as exists in the COROS – reflects a "middle ground," there are also certain organic standards that describe additional practices and requirements in a more leading edge way. These leading standards are of inestimable value to the organic community and its vision, seeking to broaden and deepen the impact of certified organic production. But adding too many extra requirements into all standards all at once could be too much burden on organic farmers, and could be either an unrealistic expectation and/or backfire by chasing producers out of the *certified* market – which, as we have said, is still the *main* market. Standards and certification will remain an important market for organic goods for the foreseeable future. Standards that reach for the "ceiling," that try to raise the bar of performance, have an influential role to play.

Where we are going

We need to keep innovating ways organic production and products can be made accessible to more farmers and consumers. One way this currently happens in developing countries is through group certification, whereby cooperatives of similar farmers market their pooled crops through common channels. They are certified – and sometimes de-certified – as one entity. While it should be seen as no small effort for a certification body (CB) to certify hundreds or even thousands of farmers at once, it is possible to do this credibly as long as there is strong internal management of the group, to show that only produce compliant with the standard reaches the market. It can be a highly efficient and cost-effective way for farmers to enter certified organic markets. Usually these are export market streams, but not always.

But in order to really bring the organic sector to the mainstream, the development of local demand and

markets for organic products needs to happen in every country. Raising awareness of the benefits of organic practices for both farmers and consumers through research and gathering of tangible evidence is justification and promotion for more to occur. The learning gained from these experiences can further improve standards.

Shorter supply chains from farmer to consumer allow for innovations in how customers believe claims about the "organic-ness" of products. One avenue with great potential is through **Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS)**, whereby groups of farmers and consumers agree to a common set of requirements (such as could be included in the IFOAM Family of Standards), and they do the checking of the producers instead of a certification body. This close familiarity saves money, affords learning, and can be just as credible if not more so than certain kinds of more distant certification scenarios. In Brazil and India, PGS have gained governmental endorsement as a form of assurance that is equivalent to more typical third-party certification, enabling thousands of smallholders to enter the organic market locally and nationally. Similar efforts are underway in other countries. While PGS markets tend to focus on markets closer to home, it is not illogical to imagine a next step whereby such recognition also extends to international trade. PGS are active in at least 20 different countries, on all continents (see: www.ifoam.org/about_ifoam/standards/pgs_projects/pgs_projects/index.php).

Someday, when the longer-term vision of the organic movement is realised and the majority of farmers and agricultural products on the market are organic, maybe certification won't be as crucial – it will just be the way people do it because it has been widely accepted as the best way. But the standards still will be just as important – the guide for what people should do.

IFOAM Family of Standards

The Familiy of Standards contains all standards officially endorsed as organic by the Organic Movement, based on their equivalence with the Common Objectives and Requirements of Organic Standards. Both private standards and government regulations are admissible.

GLOBAL
- IFOAM Standard
- International Standard for Forest Garden Products (FGP)

AFRICA
- *Tunisia Organic Regulation*
- *East African Organic Products Standard*
- EnCert Organic Standards, Kenya
- Basic Norms of Organic Agriculture in Senegal, Senegal
- Afrisco Standards for Organic Production, South Africa
- Green Growers Association Standard, South Africa
- Kumnandi Standard, South Africa
- Organic Standards for Tancert, Tanzania
- Uganda Organic Standard, Uganda

ASIA
- Saudi Arabia Organic Regulation
- *China Organic Regulation*
- *India Organic Regulation*
- *Israel Organic Regulation*
- *Japan Organic Regulation*
- OFDC Organic Certification Standard, China
- Hong Kong Organic Resource Center Standard, Hong Kong
- IBOAA Organic Agriculture Standard, Israel
- Japan Organic & Natural Foods Association Organic Standard, Japan
- MASIPAG Organic Standards, The Philippines
- CONU Organic Standard, South Korea
- DCOK, IIC International Standards, South Korea
- GOAA International Standards, South Korea
- ACT Basic Standard, Thailand
- Vietnam PGS Standards, Vietnam

OCEANIA
- *National Standard for Organic and Bio-Dynamic Produce, Australia*
- *New Zealand Organic Export Regulation*
- *Pacific Organic Standard, Pacific Community*
- Australian Certified Organic Standard, Australia
- NASAA Organic Standard, Australia
- AsureQuality Organic Standard, New Zealand
- BioGro Organic Standards, New Zealand

EUROPE
- *EU Organic Regulation*
- *Switzerland Organic Regulation*
- *Turkey Organic Regulation*
- Bio Suisse Standards, Switzerland
- Organska Kontrola Standards for production and processing, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Biocyclic Standards, Cyprus
- Nature & Progrès Standards, France
- BioPark Guidelines for Organic Production and Processing, Germany
- Ecoland Standards for Organic Agriculture and Food Production, Germany
- Gäa Private Standards, Germany
- Naturland Standards, Germany
- CCPB Global Standard, Italy
- Italian Organic Standard, Italy
- Krav Standard, Sweden

SOUTH AMERICA
- *Argentina Organic Regulation*
- *Costa Rica Organic Regulation*
- Argencert Organic Standard, Argentina
- LETIS IFOAM Standard, Argentina
- OIA Organic Standards, Argentina
- Bolicert Organic Standard for Production and Handling, Bolivia
- Guidelines for the IBD Quality Organic Standard, Brazil

NORTH AMERICA
- *Canada Organic Regulation*
- *USA Organic Regulation*
- DOAM Organic Standards, Dominica
- Red Mexicana de Tianguis y Mercados Orgánicos' Standard, Mexico
- CCOF Global Market Access Standard, USA
- Farm Verified Organic Requirements Manual, USA
- NOFA Standards for Organic Land Care, USA
- QCS Int. Program Standard Manual, USA

Note: Applicant standards are marked in grey.