

**First IFOAM Conference on Organic Certification  
Rome, 17 November 2006**

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Organic agriculture has been the fastest growing food sector for almost two decades and this trend continues. With the growth of the organic sector, and with more volumes in the market place and more distance between producers and consumers, a guarantee on the nature of products becomes more and more important. What distinguishes an organic product, thus guiding consumers' choices and market trends, is precisely the organic label. Thus, organic certification is an essential step for the differentiation needed for the growth of organic agriculture. And trust in the organic label is key to success.

Putting a label on a product is not an easy task. Guidelines and requirements for food certification and labelling abound - and the organic community has added its own systems to the existing jungle.

Everywhere, including in industrialized nations, the complexity of entering an organic certification system, let alone its associated costs, are increasingly marginalizing small producers from reaping market benefits. Different countries' regulations and requirements for organic certification bodies are creating trade barriers, especially for developing nations. Furthermore, the certification conditionality on the organic claim is hindering mass farm conversion into more sustainable systems.

One may legitimately ask whether it is fair to impose the certification burden on scrupulous, or responsible to become, producers. Does organic agriculture need to be necessarily "certified" to be called "organic"? These questions may appear challenging for such a Conference, but it is important to consider a certification system more adapted to an equitable growth of organic agriculture.

A "certification flexibility" is needed to enhance development of short supply chains as well as an expanded participation of small holders in the organic sector. Some examples deserving consideration for replication include: the USDA/NOP certification' exemption for producers selling organic commodities for less than US\$ 5 000/year; access of Swedish organic farmers to public support without necessarily being under a certification scheme; the Government of India's promotion of participatory guarantee systems for the development of organic domestic markets. What should be central to the debate is the viability

of organic agriculture at a larger scale, both in terms of land surfaces and market share; and second, identification of the most suitable organic guarantee system to enhance that primary objective.

Of course, it cannot be denied that certification of organic products ensures fair competition in the market place: steward farmers are rewarded and consumers make informed choices. It is clear that the objective of all of us, organic and non organic community, is to ensure the integrity of the organic claim.

The certification system is a tool that informs on the organic integrity but it is not a subject for bedtime readings to decipher what is behind a label. As a consumer, I want to be assured that what I am purchasing is actually “organic”, that is, a product produced in an environmentally friendly manner. That’s all. The understanding of organic reference standards, certification and/or accreditation systems is the realm of this field’s practitioners. What consumers seek is confidence in certification labels (whether regulated by governments or private) and building this trust is the challenge of any guarantee system, especially for products coming from distant origins. In fact, the organic market seems to develop better in places (Scandinavian countries, for example) where consumers recognize a seal or a brand that has proven to indicate authenticity.

It is with these issues in mind that FAO got involved in organic guarantee systems. What we bring on the discussion table are the interests of the weakest (developing nations and more generally, smallholders) and the normative role of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, especially with regards systems of inspection and certification of food imports and exports.

As you may know, FAO started its Organic Agriculture Programme in 1999, the same year of the endorsement of Codex Alimentarius Commission Guidelines for Organically Produced Foods. In those years, developing countries were mostly interested in opportunities offered by emerging lucrative markets and access to the EU market was the subject of many requests for assistance made to the Organization. In 2000, the Commission on Sustainable Development expressed “concern on the use of organic agriculture as a basis for setting standards that could lead to trade barriers”. In 2001, FAO formulated a project proposal calling for support to investigate ways for establishing equivalence between different national organic standards, with a view to preventing trade barriers in organic agriculture.

This project document marked the beginning of an FAO, IFOAM and UNCTAD partnership on the subject. Starting in 2003, these organizations have been convening the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture, called in short ITF.

The ITF is a unique forum that brings together representatives from the public and private sectors, all seeking to find solutions to the complex organic guarantee system. The ITF “dream” is a world where the diversity of guarantee systems would be maintained, according to different cultures and preferences, but where there would be one single international baseline for establishing equivalency at all levels: production standards, certification requirements and approval of certification bodies. I understand that an ITF Communiqué is being distributed to you for more information on the ITF composition, goals and work progress.

FAO believes that the application of the principle of equivalence in organic agriculture has benefits for both exporting and importing countries as it ensures flexibility to exporters and conformity with requirements of importers. Recently, the Codex Alimentarius Commission developed Guidelines on the Judgement of Equivalence of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures Associated with Foods Inspection and Certification Systems. However, determining equivalence of organic control systems should cover not only safety but also quality and conformity. Therefore, the determination of equivalence of technical regulations associated with inspection and certification systems are a need which the ITF seeks to address in its work – and which FAO will bring to the attention of its’ governing bodies, including the Codex Alimentarius Commission.

I trust that solutions can be found when FAO brings its knowledge of inter-governmental norms and governmental constituency together with IFOAM’s grassroots’ experience in organic criteria. Adherence to procedures that will result from the ITF public-private efforts (and negotiations) has more chances to see the light than any fierce competition through a multitude of different certification requirements.

I am confident that commonly agreed tools and mechanisms on international harmonization and equivalence of organic guarantee systems, using related Codex Guidelines as the foundation and existing criteria and mechanisms, such as those of IFOAM, will assist decreasing government administration, strengthening public-private cooperation, decreasing costs and preventing redundant certification and ultimately, boosting organic agriculture.



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations



International Federation  
of Organic Agriculture  
Movements



United Nations Conference

## INTERNATIONAL TASK FORCE ON HARMONIZATION AND EQUIVALENCE IN ORGANIC AGRICULTURE

### Communiqué

The International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF), composed of individuals working in government agencies, inter-governmental agencies, civil society organizations and private sector<sup>1</sup> involved in organic agriculture regulation, standardization, accreditation, certification and trade joined forces in 2003 in an open-ended platform for dialogue between public and private stakeholders to seek solutions to facilitate international trade in organic products and access of developing countries to international organic markets.

The ITF focuses on opportunities for harmonization, recognition, equivalence and other forms of cooperation within and between government and private sector organic guarantee systems. It commissions technical studies to fill information gaps and meets at least once a year to discuss and agree on next steps. It publishes the results of its work in books and on a dedicated website<sup>2</sup>.

The Review Phase of the ITF work (2003-05) analyzed the impact of existing government organic regulations on trade, current models and mechanisms that enable organic trade, experiences of cooperation, recognition and equivalence in the organic sector, and potential models and mechanisms for harmonization, equivalence and mutual recognition.

The current Solutions Phase of the ITF agreed to pursue a strategy comprised of the following elements:

- A single international reference standard for organic production, as a basis for regional and national standards;
- A mechanism for the judgment of equivalence, based on the reference standard;
- One international requirement for organic certification bodies;
- Common international approaches for recognition or approval of certification bodies.

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<sup>1</sup>ITF participants have so far come from government agencies of twenty-one countries (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Costa Rica, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Germany, Greece, India, Indonesia, Netherlands, Philippines, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, Thailand, Tunisia, Uganda and USA), seven inter-governmental agencies (EU, OECD, FAO, UNCTAD, UNECE, UNEP and WTO) and fifteen civil society organizations and businesses (IFOAM, IAF, IOAS, Argencert, Ecocert, Ecologica, Green Net, KRAV, , Rachel's Organic Dairy, ISEAL Alliance, ICEA, JONA, Kawacom Unganda Ltd., Migros and Oregon Tilth)

<sup>2</sup> See: [www.unctad.org/trade\\_env/itf-organic](http://www.unctad.org/trade_env/itf-organic)

The ITF also agreed to:

- use or adapt existing structures and mechanisms of regulation, rather than establishing new entities;
- give special consideration to the situation of developing countries;
- gear actions towards cooperation at and between all levels: among and between governments (with or without an organic regulation), accreditation bodies and certification bodies.

The ITF agrees that solutions should provide for the continued growth of organic agriculture and the maintenance of its principles. They should fulfill the additional criteria of: benefits to both producers and consumers; respect for national sovereignty; access to all markets with minimal bureaucracy; fair competition; adherence to trade principles; consumer protection; context-sensitivity; stakeholder support and participation; market choice; transparency.

The ITF is currently developing the following tools:

- a set of essential international requirements for organic certification bodies, as a basis for equivalence;
- a guidance document for judging equivalency of organic standards.

In light of the progress achieved so far, the ITF recognizes that a single reference for organic standards is not yet a feasible proposition; although the guidelines of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) and IFOAM Basic Standards (IBS) are very similar in content, their scope and governance are too distinct to be merged. The ITF however realizes that having two international reference standards, from the public and private sector respectively, is valuable, provided that there is effective linkage between the sectors.

The ITF recommends that:

1. Countries make every effort to utilize the ITF results in order to facilitate trade, and in their efforts to build or enhance the organic sector;
2. Public-private participation be improved in decision-making for both international organic standards (i.e. CAC and IBS);
3. Governments commit to using international standards as the reference point for import approvals;
4. The International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies, being developed by the ITF on the basis of ISO65 and the IFOAM Accreditation Criteria, be used when regulating imports and developing requirements for organic certification bodies;
5. Governments and private accreditation systems develop mutual recognition, which will be based on the International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies;
6. Equivalence of organic standards and technical regulations will be based on one set of criteria, which is being developed by the ITF;
7. Consideration is given to emerging alternatives to third party certification, such as Participatory Guarantee Systems.

With this Communiqué, the ITF commences the Communications Phase of its work in order to mobilize political support. ITF members commit to bring this Communiqué to the attention of their respective constituencies, with a view to seeking participation - and engagement - in the ITF process of development and use of the above-mentioned tools.

Stockholm, 13 October 2006