It can be a frustrating journey through all the standards and regulations of the global organic marketplace. Now there’s an opportunity to create a clearer path. The ITF and its work on harmonization and equivalence

The organic market is confronted with hundreds of private sector standards and governmental regulations, two international standards for organic agriculture (Codex Alimentarius and IFOAM) and a host of conformity assessment and accreditation systems. Mutual recognition and equivalency among the systems is extremely limited. The multitude of certification requirements and regulations are considered to be a major obstacle for continuous and rapid development of the organic sector, especially for producers in developing countries.

IFOAM, FAO and UNCTAD decided to join forces to search for solutions to this problem. Together they organized the Conference on International Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture, in Nuremberg, Germany in February 2002. One of the key recommendations of the Conference was that a multi-stakeholder task force should be established in order to produce practical proposals and solutions.

Following up on this proposal, IFOAM, FAO and UNCTAD formed the International Task Force on Harmonization (ITF) in 2003. The Task Force consists of representatives of governments, intergovernmental agencies, and key stakeholders from the private sector. The ITF serves as an open-ended platform for dialogue between private and public institutions involved in trade and regulatory activities in the organic agriculture sector. The objective is to facilitate international organic trade and access of developing countries to international organic markets.

Over the last five years the International Task Force has worked together to complete a series of studies and proposals for its objective of helping to reduce organic trade barriers and to communicate these results to as many stakeholders as possible. Two main tools have been developed to streamline acceptance of products that are traded internationally. One tool is for recognizing organic certification bodies and the other is for determining the equivalency of production and processing standards.

The first tool, International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies (IROCB), is an international norm based on ISO65, but with language and additional requirements that make it suitable for the organic sector. The IROCB is offered to governments and private accreditation bodies as a means for accepting certification of products outside of their own system. IROCB can be used as an international reference point and “equivalence” benchmark for the requirements for certification of the product. If the product is certified to be compliant with or equivalent to production and processing standards by a certification body that meets the IROCB, then the product can be approved for import.

The second tool, the EquiTool is a set of guidelines, which include criteria that can be applied for deciding when a standard applicable in one region of the world is equivalent to a standard applicable in another region. This tool provides steps to ensure fairness, transparency and uniformity in developing equivalence agreements.

Now that these tools are available to navigate the maze of the Global Organic Marketplace, are you ready to choose the clearer path?

www.unctad.org/trade_env/itf-organic
The world is embracing organic trade

Organic farmers
Charles Kimani, Kenya

“I could sell my organic products in more countries without having to get different certifications for each of those countries. If I have more market opportunity, I can truly support my family and feel more secure in life.”

Organic traders
Norihisa Senda, Japan

“Having one tool that can be used as an equivalency standard for many different markets would greatly simplify the process and lower my costs significantly in both sourcing and selling organic ingredients and products.”

Organic certifiers
Felicia Echeverria, Costa Rica

“We can lower costs and increase direct client services instead of spending time and money to get multiple accreditations for various international markets.”

Governments: exporting countries
Ananto Seta, Indonesia

“These tools would improve the access of my country’s organic agricultural products to the world market, bringing us the opportunity for many new trading partners. It would reduce costs and provide economic opportunities for our citizens.”

Governments: importing countries
Klaus Budde, Germany

“This would streamline our process and allow us to increase our efficiency in regulating organic imports. It would bring a greater availability of products and improve our service to our constituents.”

Intergovernmental organizations
Asad Naqvi, Switzerland

“By increasing the worldwide organic marketplace, we improve the environment and contribute to alleviating poverty. These tools contribute to sustainable development.”

Organic retailers
Pam Mehnert, USA

“I am able to provide a far greater selection of products for my customers. And in the process, I can support a greater number of farmers in developing countries around the world who have joined the organic marketplace. ”

Organic consumers
Marla Rose, USA

“More availability and choices in organic products make it easier for me to provide my family with meals that have been grown without the use of dangerous pesticides. Doing so makes me feel like a better mom, and I know that at the same time, I am helping to support another family who has made the commitment to grow food sustainably.”

Harmonization and equivalence can help connect everyone involved in organic trade.