



# Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture

## Volume 6

Background Papers of the  
International Task Force on  
Harmonization and Equivalence  
in Organic Agriculture





# Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture

## Volume 6

### Background Papers of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture

An initiative of the

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Geneva  
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Rome  
International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), Bonn

## NOTE

### Published by

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)  
Palais des Nations, 8-14, Av. de la Paix, 1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland  
Tel: +41-22-917-5809; Fax: +41-22-917-0051  
e-mail: [info@unctad.org](mailto:info@unctad.org)  
Web site: [www.unctad.org](http://www.unctad.org)

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)  
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla, 00100 Rome, Italy  
Tel: +39-06-570-51; Fax: +39-06-570-53152  
e-mail: [FAO-HQ@fao.org](mailto:FAO-HQ@fao.org)  
Web site: [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org)

International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM)  
Charles-de-Gaulle Str. 5, 53113 Bonn, Germany  
Tel: +49-228-92650-10; Fax: +49-228-92650-99  
e-mail: [headoffice@ifoam.org](mailto:headoffice@ifoam.org)  
Web site: [www.ifoam.org](http://www.ifoam.org)

The views in this publication are those of the authors and incorporate comments made by members of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in organic Agriculture (ITF). They do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) or the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM). The designations employed and the presentation of material in this information product do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNCTAD or FAO concerning the legal or development status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

All rights reserved. Reproduction and dissemination of material in this information product for educational or other non-commercial purposes are authorized without any prior written permission from the copyright holders provided the source is fully acknowledged. Reproduction of material in this information product for resale or other commercial purposes is prohibited without written permission of the copyright holders.

This manuscript has been issued without formal United Nations language editing.

UNCTAD/DITC/TED/2009/1 ISBN-13: 978-3-940946-13-3
--

## PREFACE

This sixth and last volume in our publication series features the final results of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF). The ITF worked from 2003 to 2008 in search of solutions to trade barriers created by world-wide proliferation of organic standards and technical regulations. This volume summarizes both the work of the ITF and results achieved. Notable in this volume are a Summary Report, which comprehensively reviews the ITF's work over six years, and two practical Tools, which were developed to improve the efficiency of trade flows through equivalence of organic standards and recognition of organic certification worldwide.

### **Background of the ITF**

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 many certification and accreditation systems. Mutual recognition and equivalency among the systems has been extremely limited. The multitude of standards, certification requirements and regulations are considered to be a major obstacle for continuous development of the organic sector, especially for producers in developing countries. IFOAM, FAO and UNCTAD joined forces to search for solutions to this problem and in 2003 they formed the ITF. The Task Force consisted of representatives of governments, intergovernmental agencies, and stakeholders from the private sector. The ITF was an open-ended platform for dialogue among private and public institutions involved in trade and regulatory activities in the organic agriculture sector. The objective was to facilitate international organic trade and access of developing countries to international organic markets.

### **Results of the ITF**

From 2003 to 2008 the International Task Force worked on a series of studies, proposals and tools aimed at its objective of helping to reduce organic trade barriers. Two practical Tools were 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 reference norm that can be used by governments and private accreditation and certification bodies as a means of accepting certification of organic products outside of their own system. The second tool, the Guide for Assessing Equivalence of Organic Standards and Technical Regulations (EquiTool) is a set of guidelines, which include both procedures and 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.

### **ITF publication series and this volume**

The publication series “Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture” chronicles the work and progress of the ITF over the course of its meetings. Studies, meeting reports and communiqués, and drafts of ITF tools under development are compiled into volumes corresponding to the annual meetings of the ITF.

This volume contains the papers presented in the eighth and final ITF meeting, which was held from 6 to 8 October 2008 in Geneva, Switzerland. This includes the final versions of the two Tools, which were approved by the ITF at the meeting, the Summary Report of the ITF, and a report and communiqué from the meeting. The Tools are also available as separate publications.

A comprehensive collection of studies and reports, including electronic version of the series of ITF publications, can be accessed through the ITF website at [www.itf-organic.org](http://www.itf-organic.org).

### **Outlook**

Many positive comments on the process and results of the ITF have motivated UNCTAD, FAO and IFOAM to continue the partnership to foster implementation of the Tools and other results of the ITF, monitor and assess their uptake and impact, and identify new developments in organic trade regulation that could challenge trade flows of organic goods. From 2009 to 2011 ITF will be working under a follow-up project entitled “Global Organic Market Access (GOMA)”, which has the objective of assisting stakeholders put in practice the ITF results.

### **Acknowledgements**

We again thank the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) and the Government of Switzerland for their generous financial support of the ITF.

### **ITF Steering Committee**

Ulrich Hoffmann, UNCTAD

Sophia Twarog, UNCTAD

Antonio Compagnoni, IFOAM

Gunnar Rundgren, IFOAM

Nadia El-Hage Scialabba, FAO

Selma Doyran, Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme

## ITF STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Nadia El-Hage Scialabba  
Inter-Departmental Working Group on  
Organic Agriculture  
Food and Agriculture Organization of the  
United Nations  
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla  
00100 Rome, Italy  
Tel: +39-06-5705-6729  
Fax: +39-06-5705-3064  
e-mail: [nadia.scialabba@fao.org](mailto:nadia.scialabba@fao.org)  
Web site: [www.fao.org/organicag](http://www.fao.org/organicag)

Selma Doyran  
Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme  
Nutrition and Consumer Protection Division  
Food and Agriculture Organization of the  
United Nations  
Via delle Terme di Caracalla  
00100 Rome, Italy  
Tel: +39-06-5705-5826  
Fax: +39-06-5705-4593  
e-mail: [Selma.Doyran@fao.org](mailto:Selma.Doyran@fao.org)  
Web site: [www.codexalimentarius.net](http://www.codexalimentarius.net)

Antonio Compagnoni  
International Federation of Organic Agriculture  
Movements  
Via Barozzi M3  
I-41058 Vignola (MO), Italy  
Tel: +39-059-763956  
Fax: +39-059-763056  
e-mail: [acompanoni@interfree.it](mailto:acompanoni@interfree.it)  
Web site: [www.ifoam.org](http://www.ifoam.org)

Gunnar Rundgren  
International Federation of Organic Agriculture  
Movements  
Torfolk, Östra Skymnäs  
684 95 Höje, Sweden  
Tel: +46-563-72345  
Fax: +46-563-72066  
e-mail: [gunnar@grolink.se](mailto:gunnar@grolink.se)  
Web site: [www.ifoam.org](http://www.ifoam.org)

Ulrich Hoffmann  
United Nations Conference on Trade and  
Development  
Trade and Sustainable Development Section  
E.8002, Palais des Nations  
CH-1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland  
Tel: +41-22-917-5780  
Fax: +41-22-917-0247  
e-mail: [ulrich.hoffmann@unctad.org](mailto:ulrich.hoffmann@unctad.org)  
Web site: [www.unctad.org/trade\\_env](http://www.unctad.org/trade_env)

Sophia Twarog  
United Nations Conference on Trade and  
Development  
Trade and Sustainable Development Section  
E.8015, Palais des Nations  
CH-1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland  
Tel: + 41-22-917-5082  
Fax: + 41-22-917-0247  
e-mail: [sophia.twarog@unctad.org](mailto:sophia.twarog@unctad.org)  
Web site: [www.unctad.org/trade\\_env](http://www.unctad.org/trade_env)

---

### Secretariat Support:

Diane Bowen  
ITF Secretary (IFOAM)  
9150 N. Santa Monica Blvd.  
Milwaukee, WI, 53217 USA  
Tel: +1-414-352-5789  
Fax: +1-253-669-7921  
e-mail: [d.bowen@ifoam.org](mailto:d.bowen@ifoam.org)

Anna Wissmann  
ITF Coordinator (IFOAM)  
Charles de Gaulle Str., 5,  
53113 Bonn, Germany  
Tel: +49-228-926-5010  
Fax: +49-228-926-5099  
e-mail: [a.wissmann@ifoam.org](mailto:a.wissmann@ifoam.org)





---

## CONTENTS

Preface.....	iii
ITF Steering Committee Members .....	v
Abbreviations.....	ix
Executive Summary .....	xi

### **Papers**

Summary Report of the ITF.....	1
International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies (IROCB) .....	21
EquiTool.....	43
Report of the Eight Meeting of the ITF (October 2008) .....	65
Communiqué from the Eight ITF meeting.....	79

<b>Annex 1:</b> Terms of Reference of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture .....	83
---	----

<b>Annex 2:</b> Definitions .....	85
-----------------------------------	----



---

## ABBREVIATIONS

- CAC:** Codex Alimentarius Commission of FAO and WHO
- CAC Guidelines on Equivalence:** Codex Alimentarius Commission Guidelines for the Development of Equivalence Agreements regarding Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems
- CAC/GL 20:** Principles for Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification
- CAC/GL 26:** Guidelines for the Design, Operation, Assessment and Accreditation of Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems
- CASCO:** ISO Committee on Conformity Assessment
- CB:** Certification body
- CBTF:** UNEP-UNCTAD Capacity Building Task Force on Trade, Environment and Development
- CODEX:** Codex Alimentarius Guidelines for the Production, Processing, Marketing and Labeling of Organically Produced Foods
- EEC 2992/91:** Council Regulation (EEC) No 2092/91 of 24 June 1991 on organic production of agricultural products and indications referring thereto on agricultural products and foodstuffs
- EU Regulation:** Term often used to refer to the Council Regulation (EEC) No 2092/91
- FAO:** Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
- GMO:** Genetically Modified Organisms
- Guide ISO61:** ISO/IEC Guide 61: 1996 “General requirements for assessment and accreditation of certification/registration bodies”
- Guide ISO65:** ISO/IEC Guide 65: 1996 “General requirements for bodies operating product certification systems”
- Guide ISO17011:** ISO/IEC Guide 17011: 2004 “General requirements for bodies providing assessment and accreditation of conformity assessment bodies”. An update of ISO61.
- IAC:** IFOAM Accreditation Criteria
- IAF:** International Accreditation Forum
- ICS:** Internal Control System
- IBS:** IFOAM Basic Standards
- IFOAM:** International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements
- IFOAM Norms:** IFOAM Norms for organic production and processing comprising IFOAM Basic Standards and IFOAM Accreditation Requirements – 2002
- IOAS:** International Organic Accreditation Service
- ISO:** International Standard Organisation
- ISO 65:** ISO/IEC Guide 65: 1996(E), General requirement for bodies operating product certification systems. In the European standardisation it is called EN 45011.
- ITF:** FAO/IFOAM/UNCTAD International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture
- JAS:** Japan Agricultural Standard
- MLA:** Multilateral Recognition Agreement

**NOP:** National Organic Program (USA)

**TBT:** Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade

**UNCTAD:** United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

**USDA:** United States Department of Agriculture

**WTO:** World Trade Organization

---

# Executive Summary

This volume presents the *Summary Report of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence* and final versions of the Tools developed by the International task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF), as well as the Report and Communiqué of the Eighth and final ITF meeting, held in Geneva, Switzerland in October 2008. At this meeting participants approved the *International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies* (IROCB) and the *Guide for Assessing Equivalence of Organic Standards and Technical Regulations* (EquiTool), collectively referenced as the ITF Tools.

The *International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies* (IROCB) is an international reference for determining the equivalence of requirements for organic certification bodies, which can serve both governments and private sector actors to recognize certification bodies, and therefore streamline trade flow.

The *Guide for Assessing Equivalence of Organic Standards and Technical Regulations* (EquiTool) is a set of procedures and criteria for determining equivalence of standards and technical requirements for organic production and processing. The purpose of EquiTool is to enable parties to judge the identified differences in the standards. EquiTool includes criteria for assessing variations in standards according to a set framework. The ITF Tools are in the public domain and available for use by any interested party. They are the main results of the work of the ITF over the course of six years from 2003 through 2008.

An account of the concept for and development of the Tools is presented in the *Summary Report of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence*. The Report reviews the formation and early work of the ITF to address the problem of trade barriers arising from the proliferation of organic standards and technical regulations and requirements for organic certification in both government and private sectors. It describes analyses of the situation conducted by the ITF, and the exploration of possible solutions, leading to the decision to prepare the ITF Tools. The report also documents a set of Recommendations that were formulated by the ITF during its meetings, which constitutes another result of the ITF's work. The Report concludes that the ITF Tools and Recommendations are giving all stakeholders, private and public, guidance in reducing barriers to organic trade in a concrete and practical manner. There will not be one solution, but many, and each actor (government or private organization) can choose the solutions that fit with their systems and are agreeable to its constituency.

The *Report of the Eighth ITF Meeting* documents the approval of the Tools and final Recommendations and also a Communiqué. It summarizes discussions in the meeting about communications resources and strategies for ITF members to promote the Tools and Recommendations in their regions. An annex to the report describes the remarks made by

officials from UNCTAD, FAO and IFOAM in a High Level Public Session, which was held immediately after the close of the Eighth ITF Meeting.

The Communiqué from the Eighth meeting states that the ITF worked in two phases, analysing the situation and potential ways forward, and then proposing concrete solutions. It lists the main ITF Recommendations and notes other achievements, which are:

- Increased understanding among all kinds of organic sector stakeholders of the technical situation and issues affecting the trade of organic products.
- Influence on new organic regulations and revision of existing ones.
- Shared experiences and establishment of networks among stakeholders in different regions working to develop organic market access.
- Regional cooperation to develop harmonized standards and technical regulations and other measures to reduce organic trade barriers.

**The Communiqué ends with a Call to Action:**

The ITF calls for governments, intergovernmental organizations and the private sector to support, promote and implement the ITF's recommendations and Tools. Specifically, governments and private sector standards setting and conformity assessment bodies should use the ITF Tools for assessing equivalence of standards and certification requirements and accepting organic products certified in different systems. The ITF also calls for other forms of cooperation within and between all levels: governments (with or without an organic regulation), accreditation bodies and certification bodies.

# Summary Report

of the

## International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture 2003-2008

This paper is a summary of the main issues and of all  
clear agreements reached by the ITF

*The Steering Committee, September 2008*

**Secretariat:**

Diane Bowen Secretary  
email: [d.bowen@ifoam.org](mailto:d.bowen@ifoam.org)  
Tel: +1-414-352-5789  
Fax: +1-253-669-7921

## CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Activities and Results of the ITF .....	3
3. Agreements and Recommendations .....	4
3.1 General strategy. ....	4
3.2 Production standards.....	5
3.3 Requirements for organic certification bodies .....	6
3.4 Procedures to improve market access.....	7
3.5 Developments in organic certification .....	12
3.6 Communication and influence.....	12
3.7 Assisting countries with emerging organic regulations.....	13
4. Summary .....	13
Annex 1: ITF meetings, Steering Committee and Secretariat .....	14
Annex 2: ITF participants .....	15
Annex 3: ITF publications .....	18



## 1. Introduction

The International Task Force (ITF) on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture, convened from 2003 to 2008 by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), served as an open-ended platform for dialogue between public and private institutions (inter-governmental, governmental, and civil society) involved in trade and regulatory activities in the organic agriculture sector. The objective was to facilitate international trade and the access of countries to international markets. The Terms of Reference for the ITF were to formulate proposals for the consideration of governments, the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC), relevant bodies of the FAO, IFOAM, and UNCTAD, and other appropriate organizations on:

- opportunities for harmonization of standards, regulations, and conformity assessment systems;
- mechanisms for the establishment of equivalence of standards, regulations, and conformity assessment systems;
- mechanisms for achieving mutual recognition among and between public and private systems;
- measures to facilitate access to organic markets, in particular by developing countries and smallholders.

## 2. Activities and Results of the ITF

Eight international meetings took place (see Annex 1), providing a discussion platform for government agencies, inter-governmental agencies, and civil society and other private sector organizations involved in organic agriculture. See Annex 2 for a complete list of participants.

In the first phase, the ITF reviewed and analysed the situation, including the impact of established 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.

In the second phase, the ITF developed solutions in three areas: standards for organic production and processing, conformity assessment, and new ways of public and private cooperation.

The ITF also studied established and potential forms of cooperation that can increase access to organic trade, e.g., expert private evaluation services for governments, services by certification bodies to provide inspections (and perhaps even make decisions) for another certification body, and participation and cooperation among more private-sector accreditation bodies in

---

<sup>1</sup> See the ITF paper “Strategy on Solutions for Harmonizing International Regulation of Organic Agriculture,” April 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Certification body is here used for a conformity assessment body involved in the organic sector.

organic accreditation. For this purpose, several **discussion and briefing papers** were developed. A list of all ITF papers and publications is in Annex 3.

The discussions and outcome of the ITF were **presented to several national and inter-governmental agencies**, e.g., the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), EU Commission, the IAF, the ISO, and the OECD. They have also been presented in regional events in Africa and Asia. A **communication strategy** for advising stakeholders and advocating for adoption of the ITF proposals and tools was developed and professional communication material was created. Apart from the studies, the tools and recommendations of the ITF have induced more cooperation, influencing both the public and private sector.

This paper summarizes the agreements and recommendations of the ITF.

### 3. Agreements and Recommendations

The essential ITF agreements and recommendations are described below with a shorter explanatory text. In order to understand the full background to an agreement and recommendation, the reader is advised to consult the related paper and the meeting report where that agreement or recommendation was made. For each agreement or recommendation it is indicated at which ITF meeting the agreement was made. ([ITF 5] means the 5th ITF meeting; see Annex 1 for a list of the meetings).

“ITF agreements” are either regarding the ITF itself or a policy statement. “ITF recommendations” are advisory statements and calls for action (or something like that) by other actors.

#### 3.1 General strategy

Initially, *the ITF agreed* on the following key components of a strategy to reach its objective<sup>1</sup>:

- production standards equivalent to a single international “reference” standard;
- mechanism for the judgment of equivalence to the above-mentioned reference standard;
- one international requirement for conformity assessment;
- cooperation, such as common international procedures for approval or accreditation of certification bodies, which reduces duplication of work and improves access to markets, including by countries in which the regulatory infrastructure is absent or less well developed<sup>2</sup>.

The first component in particular was modified during the course of the work.

*The ITF agreed* that solutions should provide for the continued growth of organic agriculture and maintenance of its principles and be based on the following criteria:

- benefit to producers and consumers and the organic market as a whole;
- recognition of national sovereignty;
- access to markets with minimal bureaucracy;
- fair competition among operators;

- adequate and consistent consumer protection and trust;
- sensitivity to different biophysical, socio-economic environments;
- stakeholder support and involvement;
- support for market choice;
- transparency of operation and decision-making.

*It was also agreed* that special consideration should be given to the situation of developing countries (ITF 3).

The ITF was not in favour of the creation of any new permanent structures to deal with the harmonization issues. Therefore, the solutions presented build on existing systems, programs, and organizations.

### **3.2 Production standards**

Initially, the ITF concluded that production standards used should be equivalent to a single international reference standard. There are currently two international standards for organic agriculture, the Codex Alimentarius Guidelines for the Production, Processing, Labelling and Marketing of Organically Produced Foods (GL 32–Rev. 2–2004) - CAC/ GL32 - and the IFOAM Basic Standards (published as part of the IFOAM Norms; latest revision: July 2005).

*The ITF agreed* 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 furthermore agreed* that having two international reference standards, from the public and private sector respectively, is valuable, provided that there is effective linkage between the sectors (ITF 6).

*The ITF recommends* that for import approvals, governments use Codex Alimentarius Guidelines and the IFOAM Basic Standards as the basis (ITF 6). This means that they should accept imports if they comply with any of the two international standards.

Apart from the structure, coverage, and content of the international standard, the governing structure and the process to revise them are also essential components. Not surprisingly, governments tend to feel more comfortable with the Codex Alimentarius Commission as a standard-setter while the private sector feels more comfortable with IFOAM. Both assert that they are open and transparent and that they allow for input and participation from stakeholders. *The ITF recommends* that public-private participation be improved in decision-making for both international organic standards (ITF 6).

The paper “Objectives of Organic Standards Programs” (October 2005) contains an overview of areas where standards diverge. There are also many side-by-side comparisons done by both public and private stakeholders. The opinion of most experts is that the differences between the various organic standards are not huge. The differences are rather in details, e.g., the allowance of a particular input as pest control or fertilizer.

In the ITF there were discussions about the establishment of a comprehensive database to study this. A database of standards and regulations may not be a pre-requisite for progress on equivalency, but it clearly can help the stakeholders gain a better understanding of the issues. Furthermore, it can be of use for countries planning to develop regulation. *The ITF recommends* that major stakeholders join forces to establish a common database of organic standards and regulations (ITF 5).

For production standards, *the ITF agreed* that equivalence is a more workable approach than harmonization. Production conditions simply vary too much to form the basis for a single, detailed international standard. Thus standards used in various countries will be different but should follow a basic framework that can be the basis for equivalence. The framework, therefore, needs to be based on principles and criteria. It should give guidance to the national/regional standards and be useful in making an equivalence assessment. The Codex Alimentarius Guidelines (CAC/GL32) are written in the style of a production standard to be directly applied and used as a minimum.<sup>3</sup> They should not, therefore, prevent governments from establishing more detailed and country-specific standards. The IFOAM Basic Standards (IBS) were initially written as a production standard, but seven years ago they started to be reshaped into a “standard for standards”, which is more in line with the ITF’s view. *The ITF recommends* that the ITF members recommend that Codex revise the organic guidelines so that they are based on principles and criteria (ITF 6).

### **3.3 Requirements for organic certification bodies**

With regard to requirements for third-party certification bodies, there is a realization that there are differences between countries. However, the differences tend to be small and are mainly related to questions of scale and stage of development and to legal and administrative traditions. In this case, harmonization seems to be a realistic option, i.e., one set of requirements could be applied universally, as long as there are sufficient provisions for sensitivity for scale and stage of development. The report “Requirements for certification bodies – situation and scope for harmonization” (October 2005) showed that the ISO 65 guide provides valuable guidance in this, while the requirements in some aspects are too demanding and miss other aspects. The IFOAM Accreditation Criteria are more specifically developed for the organic sector, building on the ISO 65 framework; they are also too demanding but cover all essential aspects of organic certification.

*The ITF developed and approved a set of International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies (IROCB), on the basis of ISO 65 and the IFOAM Accreditation Criteria. The document will serve as a benchmark for equivalence. It can furthermore be used for direct accreditation. Ultimately it can lead to convergence among the established requirements (ITF 6).*

---

<sup>3</sup> Note that the CAC/GL32 is not intended to be used by producers directly; the statement refers to how the standards are written.

*The ITF recommends that the International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies, developed by the ITF, be used when regulating imports and developing requirements for organic certification bodies (ITF 6).*

*The ITF recommends that the International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies be considered in the revision of the ISO 65 (ITF 7). ITF members should also consider proposing them as a work item to the Codex Alimentarius Commission (ITF 7).*

*The ITF agreed that IFOAM should be the short-term steward of the document, with support from FAO and UNCTAD, which should approve any changes to it. In the long term, IROCB should become either a Codex Alimentarius or ISO document (ITF 7).*

### **3.4 Procedures to improve market access**

With the agreement of using the two international standards as the reference for standards equivalency judgments and a single harmonized set of requirements for certification, there is still a need to make these norms operational in order to provide for the market access sought. The ITF discussed four options for how market access can be facilitated<sup>4</sup>:

- equivalence on the level of governments
- mutual recognition agreements, cooperation or acceptance between accrediting bodies
- mutual recognition agreements, cooperation or acceptance between certification bodies
- cooperation between various levels

The challenges and opportunities for the four options above are outlined below, keeping in mind that the task is to improve market access and that the possibility of that will increase with more options rather than one single option. Solutions should also work for trade between regulated and non-regulated markets; i.e., governments regulating the organic market should develop procedures that will allow imports from countries without regulations.

#### **Equivalence agreements**

As it is agreed that equivalency is the concept to use on the level of production standards, the question on how to make equivalence determinations also arises. The CAC has developed “Guidelines for the Development of Equivalence Agreements Regarding Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems” - CAC/GL34. Notably, it has not been the intention that CAC itself would also make the equivalence assessment. The CAC/GL34 is about equivalence of inspection and certification systems and not the underlying standards that are used.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A fifth option is de-regulation. There are proponents of a no-regulation scenario for organic products, and that option is still a reality in most countries in the world, but mainly countries with small organic sectors. It is not a realistic option that governments that have a comprehensive organic regulation in place will scrap it, and in most cases the organic sector in the countries supports the regulation. Therefore, the ITF has not elaborated on this further. A sixth option is unilateral acceptance of other systems, something exemplified by South Korea and the rules governing the East African Organic Mark.

<sup>5</sup> There is also another CAC Guideline for the “judgment of equivalence of sanitary measures” (CAC/GL 53). This applies to the Sanitary and Phyto-Sanitary (SPS) area and not to the Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) area where we find organic foods. There was also in development such a guideline (on standards) for the TBT area, but that work item has been cancelled.

In its “approval for standards system” (Policy 42), IFOAM developed both the framework and the criteria for assessment if a particular organic standard fulfils the international reference standard (the IBS). The use of the system has shown that it is a difficult exercise and that the system needs revision (as explained in “Experiences of equivalence and recognition in the regulation of organic agriculture” (October 2005). The IFOAM process can also be used for regulatory systems, as long as there is agreement that it is to the international reference that equivalence is established (and not to the national regulation). Governments might not, however, want to bind themselves to equivalence assessments by IFOAM or **any** other party. However, governments could be advised by the assessments made by IFOAM, or at least use the criteria as developed by IFOAM as guidance.

Neither IFOAM nor the CAC/GL34 has criteria to judge the equivalence between conformity assessment systems. However the ITF concluded that there could be one unified standard (the IROCB) for certification requirements, which would make such criteria redundant.

*The ITF agreed to develop a guidance document for determining equivalence of standards based on the IFOAM criteria for variations and within the framework of the WTO TBT principles and guidelines and CAC/GL34 Guidelines for development of equivalence agreements. This is the document “Tool for Equivalence of Organic Standards and Technical Regulations” (**EquiTool**), an international guideline for determining equivalence of organic standards, approved by the eighth meeting of the ITF in Geneva in October 2008.*

Another approach to facilitate equivalence agreements is to use the process of Common Regulatory Objectives (CRO), e.g., as defined in the UN/ECE Recommendation L (see “Objectives of organic standards programs” [October 2005]). Regardless of the process used, there is merit in that objectives are made clear as a basis for any equivalence agreements. The paper “Common Objectives of Organic Standard Systems” (September 2006) outlined key objectives, explicit or implicit, in a number of organic regulations. The paper can serve as a reference for parties wanting to embark on such a process and as guidance for governments wanting to develop regulations.

Organic equivalence negotiations could also be included in the many regional trade agreements that are under development. Some concern was expressed that “organic could be traded away” in bilateral or regional trade agreements. The ITF has reached no conclusion regarding this.

Resistance from operators or consumers can be a main stumbling block for equivalence agreements. The ITF discussed the possibility of studying in more depth consumer perceptions or expectations on standards to see whether this is a real problem. From literature reviews, the ITF concluded that it is not likely that consumers have knowledge so detailed about standards that they would be an obstacle to equivalence, unless their engagement was stirred from other groups.



Finally, the ITF noted that there are potential risks with equivalence agreements, mainly if some parties conclude an agreement based on “bad” regulations and these bad regulations are perpetuated. There is also a risk that equivalence between two countries may harm parties not part of the agreement. This was studied further in the paper “Potential Negative Impacts of Equivalency of Standards and Technical Regulations” (October 2007). The ITF concluded (ITF7) that while there may be some negative effects, they should not be seen as a general impediment for such agreements. Rather, parties should consider those in their negotiations for equivalency.

### **Limits to equivalence agreements between governments as the main component for market access**

Using equivalence agreements as a main tool presupposes regulation in all participating countries. Therefore it provides no solution for the un-regulated markets. Also, equivalence agreements are demanding and therefore will normally only be prioritized if both parties have a substantial stake in the trade (see “Objectives of organic standards programs,” October 2005). Finally, it is clear that current systems do not have the capacity to deal with direct government equivalency as the sole or even main option for market access. This has been demonstrated by the experiences of the European Union, Japan, and the United States of America. For more details, see “Experiences of equivalence and recognition in the regulation of organic agriculture” (October 2005). Therefore, the efforts of the ITF cannot be limited to equivalency agreements.

*The ITF recommends* governments to utilize and encourage in their regulatory systems cooperation and mutual recognition on the level of conformity assessment (ITF 5). Outlined below are the various options for how such cooperation and mutual recognition can facilitate market access.

### **Mutual recognition agreements, cooperation or acceptance between accreditation bodies**

The paper “Experiences of equivalence and recognition in the regulation of organic agriculture” (October 2005) outlined the experience of cooperation among accreditation and approval bodies. It concluded that “recognition of conformity assessment systems at the level of accreditation has proved less problematic than equivalence assessments.” Within the IAF framework there is a multilateral agreement between national accreditation bodies. The main limitations for this in the context of the organic sector are that:

- most organic regulations do not have accreditation of an IAF member as a requirement.
- the ISO 65, which forms the basis of the IAF multilateral agreement (MLA), is not universally recognized, and even where it is recognized, such as in the European Union, there are additional requirements formulated.
- most accreditation bodies involved in the accreditation of organic certification bodies are not part of the IAF MLA (the International Organic Accreditation Service [IOAS], USDA, Hungary, Quebec, and some other governments).

However, the format for the IAF MLA could be used for a similar agreement special to organic certification. *The ITF agreed* that an organic MLA could be useful (ITF 6).

Outside an MLA there are also a number of examples of cooperation between accreditation bodies, most notably between the IOAS and the DAP (Germany), SINCERT (Italy), and UKAS (United Kingdom). Such practical cooperation, while not delivering grand solutions, is cost-saving and fosters converging applications, to the benefit of the certification body and ultimately of the market.

*The ITF agreed that:*

- one evaluation/assessment could form the basis for several accreditations (ITF 3)
- cooperation between accreditation bodies should be further developed and encouraged (ITF 5)

Further, *the ITF recommends* that a platform be created for cooperation between accreditation/ approval bodies for organic certification (ITF 6).

### **Mutual recognition agreements, cooperation or acceptance between certification bodies**

While accreditation is a common and powerful mechanism to facilitate trade, it has a number of limitations. To begin with, it is expensive, and in a situation in which there are also other mechanisms for supervision of certification bodies one can question the economy of that extra layer. Another limitation is that most countries do not have an accreditation body that is part of the IAF MLA. Accreditation normally (N.B. IFOAM Accreditation is an exception) deals only with the conformity assessment aspects and not with the production standards used, and is therefore not by itself sufficient for acceptance and thereby market access. Most countries still request a separate approval and registration by a competent authority over and above accreditation.

In a similar way that accreditation bodies can recognize each other, certification bodies can also do that. However, if this is not recognized by the authorities this has little value as it cannot be put into practice. The current situation and limitations are explained in “Cooperation between Conformity Assessment Bodies in Organic Certification (October 2005). Mutual recognition between certification bodies is often facilitated by accreditation but can also take place as a result of peer review (peer assessment) as defined in ISO 17040 and ISO Guide 68, or through bilateral agreements. It can be (legally) more acceptable for a government to accept a certification body within its own jurisdiction to be the one responsible for import approval than an accreditation body (whether national or international) in another country. Giving certification bodies a unique position in this respect can, however, be subject to criticism for protectionism and in the cases of monopolies also for market control.<sup>6</sup> The issue was further studied in “Cooperation in Conformity Assessment for Certification Decisions and Import Approvals” (October 2007). The paper concluded that as long as this option is not the only option for market access, it can provide considerable benefits.

---

<sup>6</sup> If a certification body is mandated to judge the reliability of other certification bodies as a basis for import approval, there is a risk that they would not approve in order to expand their own market in the country of operation of the other certification body.



---

*The ITF recommends* that governments extend their approval of certification bodies to include acceptance of their approval of imported organic products based on mutual recognition agreements, or bilateral agreements, based on set criteria (ITF 8).

From the exporter's perspective, it is not only the legal access<sup>7</sup> to a market that is a hurdle. The dominance of certain marks (certification labels) in certain markets is also a major obstacle. In some instances, the will of the mark owner might be to protect its own producers and therefore it is restrictive in giving access to its mark. More often, mark owners lack the procedures to easily extend their mark/certification to producers certified by somebody else. However, even if they want to, they have limits on their "right" to extend their certification to clients of other certification bodies without redoing the whole process, with costs and delays as a consequence. As explained in "Cooperation between Conformity Assessment Bodies in Organic Certification" (October 2005), the restrictions in ISO 65 and the IFOAM Norms on delegation of certification authority pose immediate problems and generate increased costs for operators seeking multiple certification and market access. It is not at all clear why these restrictions would have to apply between partners in a mutual recognition agreement (MRA) or in cases where the certification body delegating decision-making supervises the other body. "Cooperation in Conformity Assessment for Certification Decisions and Import Approvals" (October 2007) argued that delegation of certification should be acceptable if parties follow the requirements in ISO Guide 68.

In the IROCB, *the ITF included* opportunities for the delegation of certification decisions under set conditions (ITF 7).

IFOAM has taken the initiative to create a global forum for organic certification bodies. Such a forum can play a big role in working out practical cooperation between organic certification bodies. The ITF welcomes the initiative by IFOAM to convene an international certification forum (ITF 6).

### **Cooperation between the actors**

Governments and the private sector alike can seek to use expertise, work, and structures by others to lighten their workload. It does assume a certain level of trust and confidence, which often is a stumbling block. In addition, especially for governments, it can be difficult to delegate authority. The paper "Experiences of equivalence and recognition in the regulation of organic agriculture" (October 2005) gives examples of how governments have used the technical expertise of the IOAS (for example, the use of IOAS reports for import approval to some European Union member states and contracting the IOAS for oversight by Australia). The government of Canada has approved the IOAS as an accreditation body for their regulation, and the government of South Korea accepts imports based on IFOAM accreditation. The use of one inspection (audit) for several certifications is already standard practice in most cases.

---

<sup>7</sup> There are also technical obstacles in the form of special procedures, such as import certificates. These were not discussed to any major extent in the ITF, but can constitute a barrier or at least a major hurdle for trade.

*The ITF recommends* that actors on all levels cooperate, e.g., by the use of inspection (audit) and evaluation (assessments) for several purposes (ITF 5).

### **Acceptance of government systems by private sector bodies**

The work of the ITF and most of the recommendations above serve to break down the walls between governments and private sector and induce an atmosphere of cooperation. IFOAM's revision of the Organic Guarantee System goes in the direction of more inclusiveness and more cooperation with governments. *The ITF recommends* IFOAM to proactively seek to evaluate the equivalence of the organic regulations with the IFOAM Basic Standards (ITF 6), and the revision of the Organic Guarantee System provides for that opportunity.

## **3.5 Developments in organic certification**

### **Group certification**

The ITF looked into one issue of special concern for smallholders in developing countries: group certification. Certification based on individual farms doesn't work well and is simply too costly for poor farmers. Therefore, models for group certification have been developed. Richer countries, regulating their organic sector, have mostly not catered to group certification in their regulations, as it has not been practiced in their own territory. At times, both major import markets (the European Union and the United States) for organic products have sent signals that group certification was no longer to be accepted. The ITF repeatedly discussed group certification, and *it agreed* that the concept of group certification should be accepted, according to set criteria.<sup>8</sup> This has been reflected in the IROCB.

### **Innovative conformity assessment or quality assurance systems**

While third-party certification is a well-defined and trusted mechanism and is now embedded in organic regulations, other systems for quality assurance have been developed, such participatory guarantee systems. Participatory guarantee systems (PGS) are based on the direct and voluntary involvement of the producers, and often other stakeholders, in forming the organic guarantee, and they have developed in particular for local marketing initiatives. When they make the entry level to organic markets easier and can satisfy consumers' demand for assurance, they are useful tools. It remains to be seen whether and how the trade from actors in a PGS system can extend to the third-party certified trade<sup>9</sup>. *The ITF recommends* that consideration be given to emerging alternatives to third-party certification, such as participatory guarantee systems (ITF 6).

## **3.6 Communication and influence**

The ITF is a unique platform for dialogue between governments, the private sector, and international organizations. It is important that the ITF dialogue be brought out to more stakeholders, and that the solutions proposed by the ITF are actively promoted. The Web site and

---

<sup>8</sup> The ITF discussion on group certification was limited to its relevance to smallholders in developing countries.

<sup>9</sup> This would assume some kind of recognition of PGS by third-party systems.

the publications (some key ITF documents are also translated into Spanish) are contributing to this. Furthermore, ITF members are expected to report back and seek consultations among their own constituencies.

*The ITF has agreed that:*

- the ITF information, process, and results should be presented at relevant international and regional meetings (ITF 6);
- the conveners of the ITF will develop a follow-up project for assisting in the further promotion of ITF and the implementation of its recommendations (ITF 7).

### **3.7 Assisting countries with emerging organic regulations**

There is some 20 years of experience of organic market regulations and their effects on markets and trade. The ITF agreed (ITF 3) that it should guide countries in their regulatory efforts and to encourage trade-friendly regulations, based on the recommendations from the ITF. There is a wealth of information in the various ITF papers that can be used by countries considering developing regulations. An ITF paper has been produced with the specific aim of advising governments whether and how to develop organic market regulations. The paper is “Best practices for organic marketing regulation, standards and conformity assessment: Guidance for developing countries” (January 2007).

## **4. Summary**

The ITF process has largely increased the understanding of many stakeholders of the issues around organic regulations and market access. It has directly and indirectly influenced actors in a direction of more market access and in particular highlighted the need to take consideration of conditions in developing countries.

The main practical outcome of ITF is the development of two tools:

- EquiTool, an international guideline for determining equivalence of organic standards. The purpose of the tool is to enable the parties to judge the identified differences in the standards. EquiTool includes criteria for assessing variations in standards according to a set framework.
- The International Requirement for Organic Certification Bodies (IROCB), a reference for determining the equivalence of requirements for organic certification bodies that can serve certification bodies, accreditation bodies and governments to recognize certification bodies and thereby to streamline trade flow. These tools can be instrumental in facilitating equivalence and mutual recognition.

The ITF agreements and recommendations are giving all stakeholders, private and public, guidance in reducing barriers to organic trade in a concrete and practical manner. There will not be one solution, but many, and each actor (government or private organization) can choose the solutions that fit with their systems and are agreeable to its constituency.

## **Annex 1: ITF meetings, Steering Committee and Secretariat**

### **Meetings**

First:	18 February, 2003	Nuremberg, Germany
Second:	20-21 October 2003	Geneva, Switzerland
Third:	17-19 November, 2004	Rome, Italy
Fourth:	28 February, 2005	Nuremberg, Germany
Fifth:	5-7 December, 2005	Hammamet, Tunisia
Sixth:	9-13 October, 2006	Stockholm, Sweden
Seventh:	26-29 November, 2007	Bali, Indonesia
Eighth:	6-8 October, 2008	Geneva, Switzerland

### **Steering Committee**

Selma Doyran	United Nations Organization for Food and Agriculture (FAO)
Nadia Scialabba	United Nations Organization for Food and Agriculture (FAO)
Ulrich Hoffmann	United National Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)
Sophia Twarog	United National Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)
Antonio Compagnoni	International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM)
Gunnar Rundgren	International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM)

### **Secretariat**

Diane Bowen	Secretary to the ITF
Matthias Fecht	ITF Coordinator (2003-2007)
Katharina Pfundt	ITF Coordinator (2007-2008)
Anna Wissman	ITF Coordinator (2008-2009)

## Annex 2: ITF participants

Argentina	Juan Batista	Government
Argentina	Laura Montenegro	Certification body
Australia	Jenny Barnes	Government
Brazil	Maria Fernanda Fonseca	NGO
Brazil	Sergio Perdino	NGO
Brazil	Maria Cristina Prata Neves	Government
Brazil	Christiane Mascarhenas Sampaio	Government
Brazil	Claudio Martins de la Souze	Government
Canada	Roxann Hooshangi	Government
Canada	Jodi Robinson	Government
China	Lake Mu Ba	Government
China	Yunhua Chen	Government
China	Zhenhui Lu	Certification body
China	Xiaowei Shi	Government
China	Mao Hua Wang	Government
China	Xu Na	Government
China	Xingji Xiao	Certification body
Costa Rica	Felicia Echeverria	Certification body
Costa Rica	Miguel Castro	Government
Cuba	Natacha Guma	Government
Denmark	Per Ahle	Government
Dominican Republic	Jose Gomez Zapata	Government
Fiji	Stephen Hazelman	Government
Germany	Klaus Budde	Government
Germany	Ulrich Hamm	Academic
Germany	Jochen Neuendorff	Accreditation body
Germany	Michel Reynaud	Certification body
Germany	Sibylle Stahr-Sedaghat	Government
Germany	Uwe Slomke	Government
Germany	Mildred Steidle	Certification body
Greece	Katerina Giannoulia	Government
Guatemala	E. Manolo de la Cruz	Government
India	P.V.S.M. Gouri	Government
India	Anup Thakur	Government
Indonesia	Ananto Seta	Government
Italy	Michela Coli	Certification body
Italy	Alessandro Pulga	Government
Japan	Kiyofumi Ishikawa	Government
Japan	Kenji Masumoto	Certification body
Japan	Yasuko Tanaguchi	Government

Kenya	Eustace Kiarii Gacanja	NGO
Netherlands	Wilma Reerink	Government
Philippines	Teresita Oyson	Government
Philippines	Dobrina Reyes	Government
-Philippines	Girlie Sarmiento	Government
Philippines	Lara Vivas	Government
Russia	Andrey Khodus	Academic
Samoa	Adimaimalaga Tafuna'i	NGO
Sweden	Christer Arvius	Government
Sweden	Marianne Joensson	Government
Switzerland	Patrik Aebi	Government
Switzerland	Elisabeth Rugg	Certification body
Switzerland	Stefan Shönenberger	Government
Switzerland	Johan Züblin	Trader
Tanzania	Mwatima Juma	Government
Thailand	Indramangala Jintana	Government
Thailand	Montri Klitsaneephaiboon	Government
Thailand	Vitoon Panyakul	Certification body
Thailand	Sanchai Tontyaporn	Government
Thailand	Wibulwan Wannamolee	Government
Tunisia	Samia Maamer Belkheria	Government
Uganda	David Eboku	Government
Uganda	Roy Lugone	Trader
United States	Mark Bradley	Government
United States	Don Gaidano	Trader
United States	Keith Jones	Government
United States	Thierry Pomerleau	Certification body
United States	Christine Strossman	Government

### **International – Intergovernmental**

Dale Andrew	OECD
Charles Arden-Clarke	UNEP
Karim Dahou	OECD
Abaza Hussein	UNEP
Rudy Kortbech-Oleson	ITC
Serguei Kouzmine	UNECE
Vivien Liu	WTO
Asad Naqvi	UNEP
Benjamin Simmons	UNEP
Ronald Steenblik	OECD
Herman Van Boxem	EU Commission
Erik Wijkstrom	WTO
Els Wynen	UNCTAD

**International – Civil Society**

Ken Commins	Accreditation body
Sasha Courville	NGO (ISEAL)
Katherine DiMatteo	NGO (OTA)
Paddy Doherty	NGO (IFOAM)
Boudewijn van Elzakker	Accreditation body
Reinaldo Figuerido	NGO (IAF)
Prabha Mahale	NGO (IFOAM)
Patrick Mallet	NGO (ISEAL)
Eva Mattsson	NGO (IFOAM)
Bjarne Pedersen	NGO (Consumers International)

## **Annex 3: ITF publications**

### **2008**

- *International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies (IROCB)*
- *Guide for Assessing Equivalence of Organic Standards and Technical Regulations (EquiTool)*
- *Background papers of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture, Volume 6: Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture*  
**Contents:**
  - EquiTool: Guide for Assessing Equivalence of Organic Standards and Technical Regulations
  - International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies (IROCB)
  - ITF Summary Report and Recommendations
  - Report of the Eighth Meeting of the ITF (October 2008)
  - Communiqué of the Eighth Meeting of the ITF (October 2008)
- *Background papers of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture, Volume 5: Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture*  
**Contents:**
  - Guide for Assessing Equivalence in Organic Standards and Technical Regulations (EquiTool), 3rd Draft
  - Potential Negative Effects of Equivalence Agreements (Potential Negative Impacts of Equivalency of Standards and Technical Regulations)
  - Cooperation in Conformity Assessment for Certification Decisions and Import Approvals
  - Overview of Group Certification
  - International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies (IROCB), 4th Draft
  - Report of the Seventh Meeting of the ITF (December 2007)
  - Terms of Reference of the ITF
- *Background papers of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture, Volume 4: Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture*  
**Contents:**
  - Study and Recommendations for International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies
  - Common Objectives of Organic Standards Systems
  - Review of the ITF Consumer Research Question
  - Best Practices for Organic Marketing Regulation, Standards and Conformity Assessment: Guidance for Developing Countries
  - Report of the ITF Workshop on International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies
  - Report of the Sixth Meeting of the ITF (October 2006)
  - Communiqué of the Sixth ITF meeting (October 2006)



## 2007

- *Background papers of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture, Volume 3: Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture*  
**Contents:**
  - Experiences of Equivalence and Recognition Mechanisms in the Regulation of Organic Agriculture
  - Objectives of Organic Standards Programmes: Exploring Approaches to Common Regulatory Objectives
  - Requirements for Certification Bodies – Situation and Scope for Harmonization
  - Cooperation Between Conformity Assessment Bodies in Organic Certification
  - Report of the fifth Meeting of the ITF (December 2005)
  - Terms of Reference of the ITF

## 2006

- *Strategy on Solutions for Harmonizing International Regulation of Organic Agriculture. Volume 2: Background papers of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture*  
**Contents:**
  - Cooperation in Conformity Assessment for Certification Decisions and Import Approvals
  - Report of the Third Meeting of the ITF (November 2004)
  - Report of the Fourth Meeting of the ITF (February 2005)
  - Terms of Reference of the ITF

## 2004

- *Background papers of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture, Volume 1: Overview of Current Status of Standards and Conformity Assessment Systems*  
**Contents:**
  - Overview of Current Status of Standards and Conformity Assessment Systems
  - Current Mechanisms that Enable International Trade in Organic Products
  - Existing and Potential Models and Mechanisms for Harmonization, Equivalency and Mutual Recognition
  - Impact of Organic Guarantee Systems on Production and Trade in Organic Products
  - Report of the First ITF Meeting, (February, 2003)
  - Report of the Second ITF Meeting (October, 2003)
  - Terms of Reference of the ITF



# **International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies**

**(IROCB)**

## PREFACE

The International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF) was convened from 2003 to 2008 by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). It served as an open-ended platform for dialogue between private and public institutions involved in trade and regulatory activities in the organic agriculture sector. The overall objective of the ITF was to facilitate trade in organic products as a response to difficulties faced by organic producers and exporters due to the hundreds of different organic regulations, standards and labels worldwide. Not only do organic production standards vary, but requirements for organic certification bodies to conduct third party conformity assessment also vary. This causes difficulties for governments and certification bodies to recognize and accept organic products certified in other systems or programs, and therefore also for organic producers to get certified organic products accepted in different markets. The ITF developed a normative document, “International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies” (IROCB) as a tool to enable governments and organic certification and accreditation bodies to recognize certification bodies outside of their own system, and thus facilitate the acceptance of organic products certified by these bodies. IROCB can also be used directly for accreditation of organic certification bodies.

This document was developed, with financial support from donors, in an extensive consultative process with stakeholders in the private and government sectors worldwide.

IROCB is a public document that can be adopted by governments and private sector organizations at their convenience, without need to request permission for use. Governments and private stakeholders may use all or portions of these requirements as they see fit for non-commercial publication as a separate document.

Financial support for the development of IROCB came from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) and the Government of Switzerland.

Further information on IROCB, including contact information, is available on the ITF website, [www.itf-organic.org](http://www.itf-organic.org).

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

ITF:	International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture
IROCB:	International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies
IAC:	IFOAM Accreditation Criteria for Bodies Certifying Organic Production and Processing
ISO:	International Organization for Standardization
IAF:	International Accreditation Forum
IEC:	International Electrotechnical Commission

## CONTENTS

Preface .....	22
Abbreviations .....	23
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>26</b>
1.1. Foreword.....	26
1.2. Scope .....	27
1.2.1 Evaluation methods.....	27
1.2.2. Chain of custody.....	27
<b>2. General Requirements.....</b>	<b>27</b>
2.1. Responsibility .....	27
2.1.1. Legal structure.....	27
2.1.2. Certification agreement .....	27
2.1.3. Responsibility for certification decisions .....	28
2.1.4. Acceptance of prior certification .....	28
2.2. Personnel .....	28
2.2.1. General .....	28
2.2.2. Qualification criteria and documentation .....	28
2.2.3. Capacity building .....	29
2.2.4. Assignment of personnel.....	29
2.2.5. Assignment of committees .....	29
2.2.6. Subcontracting (outsourcing) .....	29
2.3. Impartiality and objectivity .....	30
2.3.1. Organizational structure and stakeholder involvement.....	30
2.3.2. Management of impartiality .....	30
2.3.3. Division of functions.....	30
2.3.4. Accessibility .....	31
2.4. Access to information.....	31
2.4.1. Publicly accessible information .....	31
2.4.2. Confidentiality.....	31
2.4.3. Reference to certification and use of certification logo (mark).....	32
2.5. Quality Management System (QMS) .....	32
2.5.1. General .....	32
2.5.2. Management system manual .....	32
2.5.3. Control of documents.....	32
2.5.4. Maintaining and managing systems .....	33
2.5.5. Internal audit and management review .....	33
2.5.6. Appeals and complaints .....	33

---

<b>3. Process Requirements to Conduct Organic Certification</b> .....	34
3.1. Application procedures .....	34
3.1.1. Information for operators .....	34
3.1.2. Application form and operator obligations .....	34
3.2. Evaluation .....	34
3.2.1. Scope .....	34
3.2.2. Review of application and preparation of inspection .....	34
3.2.3. Inspection protocol .....	35
3.2.4. Particular requirements to address high risk situations .....	35
3.2.5. Requirements for group certification systems .....	36
3.2.6. Reporting .....	36
3.3. Decision on certification .....	36
3.3.1. Division of functions .....	36
3.3.2. Decision basis .....	36
3.3.3. Documentation .....	36
3.3.4. Dealing with non-conformities .....	37
3.3.5. Exceptions on certification requirements .....	37
3.3.6. Issuing of certification documents .....	37
3.4. Extension and renewal of certification .....	37
3.4.1. Re-evaluation .....	37
3.4.2. Inspection frequency .....	37
3.4.3. Notification of changes made by the operator .....	38
3.4.4. Changes in the certification requirements .....	38
<b>Annex 1 Definitions</b> .....	39

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Foreword

This document sets out international requirements for organic certification bodies (IROCB). These requirements are intended to represent a consensus on good practices in organic conformity assessment among private and public institutions. They aim to provide a baseline for assessing the equivalence of services performed by various certification bodies outside a specific organic system. The IROCB would thus serve as a tool for enabling recognition of those certification bodies' services in international trade by other certification bodies and systems, so that governments or accreditation/approval bodies could approve each other's requirements as equivalent in order to allow products certified to enter the system.

Application of these requirements is intended to ensure that certification bodies provide third party certification of organic operators in a consistent and reliable manner. If an evaluation reveals that a certification body is performing organic certification in line with these requirements it should be considered competent to conduct organic certification.

IROCB is based upon the requirements in ISO/IEC Guide 65: 1996 (E) "General requirements for bodies operating product certification systems." However, given that organic certification has certain features that differ from certification of products and services covered by ISO/IEC Guide 65, IROCB also takes into account the IFOAM Accreditation Criteria for Bodies Certifying Organic Production and Processing (IAC)<sup>1</sup> and includes sector-specific requirements<sup>2</sup>. It also includes reformulated and amended ISO paragraphs and additional requirements to cover issues confronting a certification body when undertaking organic certification.

In general, existing regulations must be applied and laws respected. Moreover, it must be noted that a certification body's authority often is restricted under regulatory systems compared to the requirements outlined in ISO/IEC Guide 65 and IAC. Certification bodies are mandated to perform functions on behalf of authorities, which reserve the right to take final decisions or exercise control (e.g. complaints resolutions, withdrawal of certification, ownership of logo). The document does not cover organic production standards. It is recommended that equivalence of organic production standards be judged according to internationally recognized standards or guidelines such as IFOAM Basic Standards and the Codex Guidelines CAC/GL 32: Guidelines for the Production, Processing, Labelling and Marketing of Organically Produced Foods.

For the purpose of this document the definitions presented in annex 1 apply.

---

<sup>1</sup> Version 2005, published by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM).

<sup>2</sup> Additional or divergent requirements to ISO/IEC Guide 65 can also be found in organic regulatory systems such as the National Organic Program (United States of America), and the European Union Regulation EEC 834/2007 and its implementing rules. It is industry practice to conduct performance reviews of personnel responsible for evaluation, inspection and certification on an annual basis.



## 1.2. Scope

IROCB specifies baseline requirements that a certification body conducting organic certification shall meet if it is to be recognized as competent.

### 1.2.1. Evaluation methods

Evaluation methods shall consist of document review, appraisal of quality management systems and on-site inspection visits. Sample analyses and testing should serve as supporting tools to verify information.

Evaluation methods shall be applied systematically according to defined procedures. Procedures shall address initial and ongoing evaluation in order to assess whether a production process continues to meet the applicable organic standard.

### 1.2.2. Chain of custody

The certification body shall assure that any product used by an operator in a product subject to its certification is duly certified (see section 2.1.4 regarding the acceptance of prior certification).\*

*\* Explanatory note: for example, when a certified operation purchases raw material certified by another program for being processed in multi-ingredient product for which the respective operator seeks certification.*

## 2. General Requirements

### 2.1. Responsibility

#### 2.1.1. Legal structure

The structure of the certification body shall foster confidence in its certification operations. In particular, the certification body shall

- a. Have documents attesting to its status as a legal entity;
- b. Have documented the rights and responsibilities relevant to its certification activities; and
- c. Identify the management (body, group or person) that has overall responsibility for the functioning of the certification body, including its finances.

#### 2.1.2. Certification agreement

The certification body shall provide its certification service based on an agreement signed by the applicants and operators. In particular, the agreement shall

- a. Include a description of the rights and duties of the applicants and operators offering certified products, including a commitment to comply with the relevant provisions of the certification programme;

- b. Specify requirements, restrictions or limitations on the use of the designated certification logo and on the ways of referring to the certification granted in order to prevent misleading use or claims;
- c. Contain provisions to allow the certification body to exchange information with other certification bodies and authorities (approval bodies or accreditation bodies) to verify information, especially the certification status of certified products, as part of its ongoing evaluation;
- d. Provide to both the certification body and the responsible authorities the right of access to all appropriate facilities, including to non-organic production in the unit or related units, and all relevant documentation and records, including financial records.

### **2.1.3. Responsibility for certification decisions**

- a. The certification body shall have final responsibility for granting, maintaining, extending, suspending and withdrawing certification.

### **2.1.4. Acceptance of prior certification**

Where products in the production chain have been certified by other certification bodies, the certification body may accept prior certification according to defined procedures. Acceptance\* may be granted when equivalent certification procedures have been applied.

\* *Explanatory note: there could be varying acceptance situations to be covered by appropriate acceptance procedures. For example,*

- *Acceptance of certificates issued by another certification body under the same certification program and authority;*
- *Acceptance of certificates issued by another certification body working under a different certification program and authority;*
- *Certification bodies collaborating based on a defined agreement.*

## **2.2. Personnel**

### **2.2.1. General**

- a. The certification body shall employ sufficient personnel competent to perform certification functions and operate its system.
- b. The certification body shall ensure that personnel have knowledge relevant to the scope of certification issued (farming operations, processing facilities, geographic areas, group certification).
- c. The certification body shall maintain up-to-date records on personnel.

### **2.2.2. Qualification criteria and documentation**

- a. The certification body shall define minimum criteria for the competence of personnel. Criteria should specify minimum education, training, technical knowledge and work experience relevant to the scope of certification issued.
- b. The certification body shall maintain up-to-date documents describing the respective responsibilities of assigned personnel.

### **2.2.3. Capacity building**

The certification body shall ensure that personnel involved in certification (i.e. inspectors and other certification personnel, including members of technical committees) have and continue to have up-to-date technical knowledge in their respective fields of activity to enable them to conduct evaluation and certification effectively and uniformly.

In particular, the certification body shall

- a. Review the competence of its personnel in light of their performance in order to identify training needs; and
- b. Ensure that new personnel have sufficient competence.\*

\* *Explanatory note: for example, new personnel could be required to complete a training course in conducting organic inspection and evaluation and/or undergo a defined on-site apprenticeship period.*

### **2.2.4. Assignment of personnel**

The certification body shall require personnel, including committee members, involved in the certification process to:

- a. Commit themselves to observing the policies and procedures of the certification body;
- b. Declare any prior or present association on their own part, or on the part of their employer, with an operator seeking certification to which they are to be assigned to perform certification procedures.

### **2.2.5. Assignment of committees**

The certification body shall have formal rules and structures for the appointment and operation of any committees that are involved in the certification process, reflecting requirements of 2.2.1 and 2.2.2.

### **2.2.6. Subcontracting (outsourcing)**

When a certification body decides to subcontract work (outsourcing) related to certification (e.g. inspection) to an external body or person, an agreement covering the arrangements, including confidentiality and conflict of interest, shall be drawn up. The certification body shall

- a. Take responsibility for such subcontracted work.
- b. Keep final responsibility for the granting, maintaining, renewing, extending, suspending or withdrawing of certification. Delegation of certification decisions may only take place based on the requirements in accordance with the provisions of the ISO/IEC GUIDE 68:2002(E).
- c. Ensure that the subcontracted body or person is:
  - Competent to perform the subcontracted work,
  - Not involved, either directly or through the body/person's employer, with the operation, process or product that is subject to certification in any way that may compromise impartiality, and
  - Committed to the policies and procedures as defined by the certification body.
- d. Monitor the performance of the persons or bodies subcontracted for the work.

## **2.3. Impartiality and objectivity**

### **2.3.1. Organizational structure and stakeholder involvement**

The certification body shall be impartial; it shall not be financially dependent on single operations that are subject to its certification in any way that compromises its impartiality.

Specifically, the certification body shall have a documented structure which safeguards impartiality by:

- a. Including provisions to ensure the impartiality of the operations of the certification body; and
- b. Providing for the participation of all parties concerned in a way that balances interests and prevents commercial or other interests from unduly influencing decisions.\*

\* *Explanatory note: a committee representing key interests such as those of clients, other industry representatives, representatives of government services, or representatives of non-governmental organizations, including consumer organizations could be established to consider whether the certification body management meets the structural requirements.*

### **2.3.2. Management of impartiality**

The certification body shall identify, analyse and document the possibilities for conflicts of interest arising from its provision of certification, including any conflicts arising from its relationships. Rules and procedures shall be established to prevent or minimize threat of conflicts of interest. In particular, the certification body shall

- a. Require personnel, committee and board members to declare existing or prior association with an operation subject to certification. Where such an association threatens impartiality, the certification body shall exclude the person concerned from work, discussion and decisions at all stages of the certification process related to the potential conflict of interest;
- b. Follow defined rules for appointing and operating committees involved in certification activities to ensure that decisions taken are not influenced by any commercial, financial and/or other interest.

### **2.3.3. Division of functions**

The certification body shall not provide any other products or services which could compromise the confidentiality, objectivity or impartiality of its certification process and decisions. In case the certification body also performs other activities in addition to certification, it shall apply additional measures to ensure that the confidentiality, objectivity and impartiality of its certifications are not affected by these other activities. In particular the certification body shall not

- a. Produce or supply products of the type it certifies;
- b. Give advice or provide consultancy services to the applicant/operator as to methods of dealing with matters which are barriers\* to the certification requested.\*\*

\* *Explanatory note: barriers can be, for example, non-conformities identified in the course of the certification process.*

*\*\*Explanatory note: explanations regarding the standard production standard are not considered to be advice or consultancy. General information or training may be given as long as this service is offered to all applicants/operators in a non-discriminatory manner.*

#### **2.3.4. Accessibility**

The certification body shall make its services equally accessible to all applicants whose activities fall within its declared field of operation.

It shall work according to non-discriminatory policies and procedures, ensuring that no undue financial (e.g. with regard to the fee structure) or other conditions\* are applied.

*\*Explanatory note: access shall not be conditional upon, for example, the size of the supplier, or membership of any association or group, or number of certificates already issued.*

## **2.4. Access to information**

### **2.4.1. Publicly accessible information**

The certification body shall provide access to information to ensure confidence in the integrity and credibility of its certification.

The certification body shall make available (through publications, electronic media or other means) on request:

- a. The standard to be met by operators in order to obtain/maintain certification;
- b. Information about procedures applied for evaluating whether operators meet the applicable standard;
- c. Information about procedures applied to cases where certification is extended;
- d. Information about procedures and sanctions applied where non-conformities with standards are detected;
- e. The fee structure for its services;
- f. A description of the rights and duties of operators, including requirements, restrictions or limitations on the use of any certification logo and on ways of referring to the certification granted;
- g. Information about procedures for handling general complaints and appeals against its certification decisions; and
- h. A list of certified operations and the scope of their certification.

### **2.4.2. Confidentiality**

In order to gain privileged access to information, the certification body shall make adequate arrangements to safeguard the confidentiality of the information obtained in the course of its certification activities at all levels of its organization, including committees and external bodies or individuals acting on its behalf. Arrangements shall

- a. Protect proprietary information of a client against misuse and unauthorized disclosure; and
- b. Grant the certification body the right to exchange information with other certification bodies and/or authorities to verify the authenticity of the information.

### **2.4.3. Reference to certification and use of certification logo (mark)**

The certification body shall

- a. Exercise control over ownership, use and display of licenses, certificates and logos that it can authorize certified operators to use.
- b. Be able to request an operator to discontinue use of certificates and logos that it authorizes certified operators to use.
- c. Apply suitable actions to deal with incorrect references to the certification system or misleading use of licenses, certificates or logos that it authorizes certified operators to use.

## **2.5. Quality Management System (QMS)**

### **2.5.1. General**

- a. The certification body shall define, document and implement a quality management system in accordance with the relevant elements of these requirements so as to impart confidence in its ability to perform organic certification. The quality management system shall be effective and appropriate for the type, range and volume of work performed.
- b. The management shall ensure that the quality management system is understood, implemented and maintained at all levels of the organization.

### **2.5.2. Management system manual**

- a. The certification body shall address and document all applicable procedures, either in a manual or in associated documents, in order to ensure uniform and consistent application.
- b. The manual and associated documents, as appropriate for the type, range and volume of work performed, and considering the number of personnel involved in the process, shall contain:
  - An organizational chart showing lines of authority, responsibilities and allocation of functions;
  - A description of procedures applied by the certification body in the course of performing certification, including granting, maintaining, renewing, extending, suspending and withdrawing of certification;
  - Procedures for the recruitment, selection, training and assignment of the certification body's personnel (as outlined under 2.2.);
  - Policy and procedures for appeal against certification decisions and other complaints; and
  - Policy and procedures for reviewing quality (e.g. internal audits, management review).
- c. The certification body shall ensure that the manual and relevant associated documents are accessible to all relevant personnel.

### **2.5.3. Document control**

The certification body shall establish and maintain procedures to control its documents that relate to its certification functions. In particular, the certification body

- a. Shall, through authorized and competent personnel, review and approve documents for adequacy prior to their original issue or any subsequent amendment;
- b. Maintain a list of all appropriate documents with the respective issue dates and duly identify their amendment status; and

- c. Control the distribution of all such documents to ensure that the appropriate documentation is provided to personnel of the certification body or its subcontractors when they are required to perform any function relating to the certification body's activities, and prevent the unintended use of obsolete documents.

#### **2.5.4. Maintaining and managing records**

- a. The certification body shall maintain a system of records (either electronic or paper documents) to demonstrate that the certification procedures have been effectively fulfilled, particularly with respect to application forms, evaluation or re-evaluation reports, and other documents relating to granting, maintaining, renewing, extending, suspending or withdrawing certification.
- b. The records shall be identified, managed and disposed of in such a way as to ensure the integrity of the process and the confidentiality of the information.
- c. Operator records shall be up to date and contain all relevant information, including inspection reports and certification history.
- d. Records shall also be kept on exceptions granted, appeals and subsequent actions.
- e. Records shall be kept for at least five years, or as required by law, in order to be able to demonstrate how certification procedures have been applied.

#### **2.5.5. Internal audit and management review**

The certification body shall demonstrate that it seeks and achieves continuous quality improvement. It shall perform management reviews and internal audits according to the type, range and volume of certification performed.

- a. In particular, it shall periodically review all procedures in a planned and systematic manner, to verify that the quality system and its procedures are implemented and effective. Performance reviews conducted periodically<sup>3</sup> shall be part of the review
- b. Review intervals shall be sufficiently short to ensure that the objective of quality improvement is fulfilled. Records of quality reviews shall be maintained.

#### **2.5.6. Appeals and complaints**

The certification body shall have in place policies and procedures for the resolution of complaints and appeals received from operators or other parties about the handling of certification or any other related matters. In particular, the certification body shall

- a. Take appropriate subsequent action to resolve complaints and appeals; and
- b. Document the action taken and its effect.

---

<sup>3</sup>. It is industry practice to conduct performance reviews of personnel responsible for evaluation, inspection and certification on an annual basis.



### **3. Process Requirements to Conduct Organic Certification**

#### **3.1. Application procedures**

##### **3.1.1. Information for operators**

The certification body shall provide to operators an up-to-date description of the procedures to be applied for conducting certification. The certification body shall inform operators about

- a. Contractual conditions, including fees and possible contractual penalties;
- b. The operator's rights and duties, including the appeals procedure;
- c. The applicable standards;
- d. Program changes, including regular updates of procedures and standards;
- e. The evaluation and inspection procedures applied by the certification body in the course of certification; and
- f. Documentation to be maintained by the operator to enable verification of compliance with applicable standards by the certification body.

##### **3.1.2. Application form and operator obligations**

The certification body shall require completion of an application form, signed by a duly authorized representative of the operator. To enable evaluation and assignment of qualified personnel, the certification body shall require operators to:

- a. Provide information about the scope of the desired certification, including a description, as specified by the certification body, of the production, products and area to be certified; and
- b. Provide information as to whether another certification body has denied certification.

#### **3.2. Evaluation**

##### **3.2.1. Scope**

- a. The certification body shall evaluate operators against all certification requirements specified. The evaluation shall consist of a review of documents and an on-site inspection visit.
- b. When the scope of certification is for labeling of conversion to organic, verification of compliance with these requirements shall take place during the conversion period.

##### **3.2.2. Review of application and preparation of inspection**

- a. Prior to the inspection, the certification body shall review the application documents to ensure that certification can be carried out and that application of certification procedures is possible. In particular, the certification body shall review whether
  - Documents submitted by the operator are complete;
  - The operator appears to be able to comply with all certification requirements (applicable procedures and standards);
  - The scope of the certification sought is within the scope of the certification services provided. (New scope could also be a new geographical area where the certification body is not yet active.)



- b. The certification body shall assign qualified personnel to the evaluation in line with the requirements of 2.2 and 2.3 above, and provide them with appropriate work-related documents.
- c. The certification body shall inform inspectors about any non-conformities and the associated requests for corrective action issued previously, to enable the inspectors to verify whether the non-conformities have been resolved.

### **3.2.3. Inspection protocol**

Inspection is carried out in order to verify information and compliance with certification requirements applicable to the operator. It shall follow a set protocol to facilitate non-discriminatory and objective inspection.

The inspection protocol shall at the very minimum undertake the following:

- a. Assessment of the production or processing system by means of visits to facilities, fields and storage units (which may also include visits to non-organic areas if there is reason for doing so);
- b. Review of records and accounts in order to verify flow of goods (production/sales reconciliation on farms, input/output reconciliation and the tracing back of audits in processing and handling facilities);
- c. Identification of areas of risk to organic integrity;
- d. Verification that changes to the standards and to requirements of the certification body have been effectively implemented; and
- e. Verification that corrective actions have been taken.

### **3.2.4. Particular requirements to address high risk situations**

The certification body shall amend and adapt its certification procedures to address higher risks found in certain situations specific to organic certification.

Potential high-risk situations and related measures include:

- a. Partial conversion and parallel production. In order to prevent co-mingling or contamination of organic products with other products that do not meet the standards, the certification body should verify whether handling and documentation regarding production or processing, storage and sales is well managed and makes clear distinctions between certified and non-certified products. In cases where products are not visibly distinguishable, specified measures should be applied during harvest and post-harvest handling to reduce the risk.
- b. Intensive production and high dependence of external inputs, short production cycles. Depending on the risk identified, the certification body should decide whether it is appropriate to increase the frequency of inspections.
- c. Where an operator is certified also by other certification bodies within the same organic scope, the certification body should seek information exchange with the other certification bodies involved to prevent misuse of certificates.

### **3.2.5. Requirements for group certification systems**

- a. If the certification body conducts group certification based on an internal quality management system, it should apply a specific group certification program.
- b. The group certification program should specify the scope for group certification and requirements applicable to the group, including those for an internal quality management system, to ensure conformity by all group members to the applicable standards. These should follow an agreed code of good practices.
- c. When assessing the effective application of the internal quality management system to address the particular situation of group certification, the certification body should apply adapted measures to the regular on-site inspection protocol according to an agreed code of good practices.

### **3.2.6. Reporting**

The certification body shall report evaluation findings according to documented reporting procedures.

- a. Inspection reports shall follow a format appropriate to the type of operation inspected, and facilitate a non-discriminatory, objective and comprehensive analysis of the respective production system.
- b. The inspection report shall cover all relevant aspects of the standards, and adequately validate the information provided by the operator. It shall include
  - A statement of any observations relating to conformity with the certification requirements;
  - Date and duration of the inspection, persons interviewed, fields and facilities visited; and
  - Type of documents reviewed.
- c. The certification body shall promptly notify the operator of any non-conformity to be resolved in order to comply with applicable certification requirements.
- d. The certification body shall document and apply measures to verify effectiveness of corrective actions taken by operators to meet the requirements.

## **3.3. Decision on certification**

### **3.3.1. Division of functions**

The certification body shall ensure that each decision on certification is taken by a person(s) or committee different from the one(s) that carried out the inspection.

### **3.3.2. Decision basis**

The decision shall be based solely on the conformity of the operation with the certification requirements specified, using information gathered during the evaluation process.

### **3.3.3. Documentation**

Documentation of certification decisions shall include the basis for the decisions.

**3.3.4. Dealing with non-conformities**

- a. Certification decisions may include requests for the correction of minor non-conformities within a specified time period. In case of major non-conformities, a certificate shall be withheld or suspended until implementation of corrective actions can be demonstrated. In serious cases, certification shall be denied or withdrawn.
- b. Reasons for denial, withdrawal or suspension of certification shall be stated with clear reference to the applicable standard or certification requirement violated.

**3.3.5. Exceptions to certification requirements**

- a. The certification body shall have clear criteria and procedures for granting exceptions to requirements for certification.
- b. Exceptions shall be of limited duration, and not be granted permanently.
- c. The documentation of any exception shall include the basis on which the exception is granted.

**3.3.6. Issuing of certification documents**

The certification body shall issue official certification documents to each operator. Documents shall contain the following information:

- a. The name and address of the operator whose products are the subject of certification;
- b. Name and address of the certification body that issued the certification documents;
- c. The scope of the certification granted, including
  - The products certified, which may be identified by type or range of products,
  - The production standard that is the basis for the certification, and
  - The effective date and term of certification.

**3.4. Extension and renewal of certification****3.4.1. Re-evaluation**

- a. The certification body shall regularly re-evaluate operators in order to verify whether they continue to comply with the applicable standard. Mechanisms shall be in place to effectively monitor whether corrective actions have been implemented.
- b. The certification body shall report and document its re-evaluation activities, and shall keep operators informed about their certification status.
- c. Re-evaluation generally follows procedures outlined in 3.2. (i.e. Evaluation). However evaluation for the purpose of renewal may focus on certain measures related to risk, and might not repeat all procedures listed in 3.2.

**3.4.2. Frequency of inspection**

- a. The certification body shall decide on the frequency for regular inspections.<sup>4</sup>
- b. In addition to the regular inspection visit, the certification body shall conduct unannounced

---

<sup>4</sup> Currently, it is common practice for operators to be inspected at least annually independent of any risk determination.

on-site inspections of certified operators, chosen randomly and/or chosen taking into account the risk or threat to the organic integrity of the production or products.

### **3.4.3. Notification of changes made by the operator**

- a. The certification body shall require operators to inform the certification body about changes cited in 3.1.2.
- b. The certification body shall determine whether the announced changes require further investigations. If such is the case, the operator shall not be allowed to release certified products produced under the changed conditions until the certification body has notified the operator accordingly.
- c. In response to an application for amendment to the scope of a certificate already granted, the certification body shall decide what evaluation procedure, if any, is appropriate, in order to determine whether or not the amendment should be made, and shall act accordingly.

### **3.4.4. Changes in the certification requirements**

- a. The certification body shall ensure that each operator is notified of any changes in the certification requirements without unnecessary delay.
- b. The certification body shall verify the operator's implementation of such changes in a timely manner, within the given implementation periods.

## Annex: Definitions

**Term:** Accreditation

**Definition:** Procedure by which an authoritative body or accreditor gives a formal recognition that a certification body is competent to carry out certification according to organic standards.

**Reference:** IAC

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:** ISO/IEC 17011/2004

Third-party attestation related to conformity assessment body conveying formal demonstration of its competence to carry out specific conformity assessment tasks.

---

**Term:** Appeal

**Definition:** Request by an operator for reconsideration of any adverse\* decisions made by the certification body related to its desired certification status.

\* *Explanatory note: Adverse decisions include e.g.*

- *refusal to accept an application,*
- *refusal to proceed with an inspection/audit,*
- *corrective action requests,*
- *changes in certification scope,*
- *decisions to deny, suspend or withdraw certification, and*
- *any other action that impedes the attainment of certification*

**Reference:** IAC

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:** ISO/IEC 17011/2004

Request by a CAB for reconsideration of any adverse decision made by the accreditation body related to its desired accreditation status.

---

**Term:** Certification

**Definition:** The procedure by which a third party (certification body) gives written assurance that a clearly identified process has been methodically assessed in a way that provides adequate confidence that specified products conform to specified standards.

**Reference:** IAC

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:** ISO/IEC 17000/2004

Third-party attestation related to products, processes, systems or persons.

(An attestation is the issue of a statement based on a decision following review that fulfillment of specified requirements has been demonstrated.)

---

**Term:** Certification Body

**Definition:** The body that conducts organic certification.

**Reference:** IAC

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:** ISO/IEC 17011:2004

Conformity assessment body (CAB): Body that performs conformity assessment services and that can be object of accreditation.

---

**Term:** Certification Program

**Definition:** System operated by a certification body with defined requirements procedures and management for carrying out certification of conformity.

**Reference:** IAC

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:**

---

**Term:** Complaint

**Definition:** Expression of dissatisfaction, other than appeal, by any person or organization, to a certification body relating to activities of that certification body or of a certified operator, where a response is expected.

**Reference:** IAC

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:**

---

**Term:** Conformity

**Definition:** Fulfillment of a requirement.

**Reference:** ISO 9000:2000

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:**

---

**Term:** Conformity assessment

**Definition:** Any activity concerned with determining directly or indirectly that relevant requirements are fulfilled

**Reference:** ISO

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:** According to ISO three types of conformity assessment are distinguished:

*First-party assessment:* This is the technical term used when conformity assessment to a standard, specification or regulation is carried out by the supplier organization itself. In other words, it is a self-assessment. This is known as a supplier's declaration of conformity.

*Second-party assessment:* This indicates that the conformity assessment is carried out by a customer of the supplier organization. For example, the supplier invites a potential customer to verify that the products it is offering conform to relevant product standards.

*Third-party assessment:* In this case conformity assessment is performed by a body that is independent of both supplier and customer organizations.

*See definition of certification.*

---

**Term:** Corrective action

**Definition:** Action to eliminate the cause of a potential nonconformity or other undesirable situation.

**Reference:** ISO 9000:2000

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:**

---

**Term:** Evaluation

**Definition:** Systematic assessment based on all relevant information obtained in order to make a certification decision. With reference to a certification decision this includes, but is not limited to the inspection.

**Reference:** IAC

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:**

---

**Term:** Exception

**Definition:** Permission granted to an operator by a certification body to be excluded from the need to comply with requirements of the standards.

**Reference:** IAC

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:**

---

**Term:** Group Certification

**Definition:** Certification of an organized group of producers with a central office, similar farming and production system, working according to a common internal quality management system, which is established and subject to continued surveillance by the central office. Group certification applies to the group as a whole. Certificate is issued to the central office of the group and shall not be used by single group members.

**Reference:** According to IAF Guidance on the application of ISO/IEC Guide 62:1962 Annex 3 Multi-side Certification

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:**

---

**Term:** Inspection

**Definition:** Visit on site to verify that the performance of an operation is in accordance with the applicable certification requirements and standards.

**Reference:** IAC

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:** ISO/IEC Guide 2, ISO 9000:2000:

Conformity evaluation by observation and judgment accompanied as appropriate by measurements, testing or gauging.

---

**Term:** (Internal) Quality management system

**Definition:** Management system to direct and control an organization with regard to quality.

**Reference:** ISO 9000:2000

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:** Management system is a system to establish policy and objectives, as well as measures to achieve those objectives.

---

**Term:** Non-conformity

**Definition:** An instance where a particular standard or certification requirement is not being met.

- Major non-conformity: breach of applicable standard
- Minor non-conformity (violation): breach of certification requirements other than standard (organic integrity of the products remains unaffected.)

**Reference:** IAC (modified)

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:** ISO 9000:2000: Nonconformity: non-fulfillment of a requirement

---

**Term:** Operator

**Definition:** An individual or business enterprise, responsible for ensuring that production meets, and continues to meet, the organic standard on which certification is based.

**Reference:** IAC

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:** Note: ISO/IEC Guide Terminology:

Supplier: The party that is responsible for ensuring that products meet and, if applicable, continue to meet, the requirements on which certification is based.

---

**Term:** Requirement

**Definition:** Need or expectation that is stated, generally implied or obligatory.

Note 1: Generally, implied means that it is custom or common practice that the need or expectation under consideration is implied for the organization, its customers and other interested parties.

Note 2: A qualifier can be used to denote a specific type of requirement (e.g. product requirement, quality management requirement or customer requirement).

Note 3: Requirements can be generated by different interested parties.

**Reference:** ISO 9000:2000

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:**

---

**Term:** Standards

**Definition:** Document approved by a recognized body, that provides for common and repeated use, rules, guidelines or characteristics for products or related processes and production methods with which compliance is not mandatory. It may also include or deal exclusively with terminology, symbols, and packaging, marking or labeling requirements as they apply to a product, process or production method.

**Reference:** ITF Glossary (World Trade Organization/ Technical Barriers to Trade)

**Comment/applicable ISO definition:** Note: The recognized body can be any constituency.

---



# **EquiTool**

## **Guide for Assessing Equivalence of Organic Standards and Technical Regulations**

## PREFACE

The International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF) was convened from 2003 to 2008 by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). It served as an open-ended platform for dialogue between private and public institutions involved in trade and regulatory activities in the organic agriculture sector. The overall objective of the ITF was to facilitate trade in organic products as a response to difficulties faced by organic producers and exporters due to the hundreds of different organic regulations, standards and labels worldwide.

Regional differences in standards and technical regulations for organic production and processing are often justifiable and even desirable due to diverse geographic and agronomic conditions, culture and stage of development for organic agriculture throughout the world. But on the other hand, variations in standards cause difficulties for governments and certification bodies to recognize and accept organic products certified in other systems or programs, and therefore also for organic producers to get certified organic products accepted in different markets.

To promote equivalence as a solution to this problem, the ITF developed a guidance document, “Tool for Equivalence of Organic Standards and Technical Regulations” (EquiTool). This guideline aims to facilitate and harmonize assessments of equivalence of organic production and processing standards and technical regulations. The scope of this guideline is limited to the equivalence assessment process. It does not include guidance for preparing and maintaining an equivalence agreement. Such agreements often cover both equivalence of conformity assessment and standards and technical regulations for organic production and processing. Equivalence may also be established in practice without the framework of a formal equivalence agreement.

EquiTool is a public document that can be adopted by governments and private sector organizations at their convenience, without the need to request permission for its use. Governments and private stakeholders may use all or portions of these guidelines as they see fit for non-commercial publication as a separate document. Reference to the EquiTool is expected for such uses.

This document was developed in a consultative process with stakeholders in the private and government sectors worldwide. Financial support for the development of EquiTool came from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) and the Government of Switzerland.

Further information on EquiTool, including contact information, is available on the ITF Web site, [www.itf-organic.org](http://www.itf-organic.org).

## CONTENTS

Preface .....	44
Introduction.....	46
<b>1. Scope and Use .....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>2. Definitions.....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>3. Elements of Equivalence Assessment.....</b>	<b>50</b>
3.1. Choice of base standard.....	50
3.2. Role and appointment of expert assessment panel .....	50
3.3. Identification of reference objectives .....	50
3.4. Specification of the scope and legal context of the standard.....	51
3.5. Methodology of assessment.....	51
3.6. Equivalence assessment based on set criteria.....	52
3.7. Acceptance of expert panel assessment and resolution of outstanding issues .....	53
3.8. Transparency.....	53
<b>4. Procedures for Equivalence Assessment .....</b>	<b>54</b>
4.1. Initiation.....	54
4.2. Clarification of objectives.....	54
4.3. Comparison and equivalence assessment of requirements.....	54
4.4. Resolution of outstanding issues .....	55
<b>Annex 1: Flow Chart of Procedure .....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Annex 2: Examples of Common Objectives for Organic Standards Systems .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Annex 3: Criteria for Variations in Standards.....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Annex 4: Template for a Comparison, including Equivalency Assessment and Conclusion.....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Annex 5: Framework References for the ITF Equivalence Guide.....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>64</b>

## INTRODUCTION

### **The concept of equivalence**

Organic agriculture is a systems-based approach that accounts for specific local agro-ecological conditions. Organic norms are generally set with respect to the local, national or regional environment, including the state of sector development and market conditions.

The acceptance that different standards or technical regulations on organic agriculture fulfil common objectives, otherwise known as equivalence, is a pathway to reduce rising trade barriers caused by the emergence of many organic standards and technical regulations worldwide. The concept of equivalence is common in international trade policy where several models of application exist. Application of the equivalence concept in organic agriculture provides an opportunity to improve trade in organic products and spread the benefits of organic agriculture globally.

The use of common procedures and assessment tools by governments and private sector parties to establish and recognize equivalent standards will enhance access to markets for all legitimate parties operating in countries with, as well as without, regulations of organic production, processing and labelling.

The procedure and tools outlined in this document and corresponding annexes, is a proposed guide for determining equivalence between standards for organic production and processing. It is developed in line with the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) and Codex Alimentarius frameworks for equivalence (see annex 5) as well as in consideration of experience in equivalence assessment in the organic sector worldwide, in particular by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM). It is applicable for government to government as well as private sector equivalence determinations, both multilateral and unilateral. It is recognized that this guide is not the only way equivalence can be established. For example, it is possible to establish equivalence through regional or bilateral trade agreements (using procedures established for their negotiation) or through a unilateral determination by one party without participation of other parties.

### **Use or reference to international standards**

It is recommended that an international standard serves as the reference for determination of equivalence.

There are currently two international reference standards for organic agriculture, i.e. CAC/GL 32, Guidelines for the Production, Processing Labeling and Marketing of Organically Produced Food and the IFOAM Basic Standards (IBS).

### **Determination of equivalence based on common objectives.**

Both WTO and Codex mention that determination of equivalence should be based on objectives. But many regulations and standards – organic or otherwise – do not state specific objectives for the range of requirements set. However, implied objectives of organic standards and even “common” objectives can be deciphered from such standards or regulations.

### **Clear process including criteria for differences and verification**

Key elements of an equivalence determination process include provision of relevant texts, comprehensive comparisons, criteria and processes for considering differences in measures/requirements.

This document includes criteria for evaluating variations in specific requirements in organic standards or regulations. These can be individual requirements or sets of related requirements. Finally, it offers provisions for exclusion where problematic requirements may be excluded from the scope of equivalency, to isolate or mitigate their effect.

### **Provision for exclusions**

Full equivalence may not always be achievable. When consensus on certain elements proves elusive and is blocking progress, a possibility to specify exclusions should be allowed. For example, inputs for organic agriculture accepted in one regulation may not wholly be accepted in another. Such inputs may be treated as exclusions while establishing equivalence<sup>1</sup>. It is also possible that parties may later review the merits of such provisions and may amend or revise such provisions.

### **Provision for transparency**

Trust building in the market place is essential for market acceptance of an equivalence agreement. Transparency is a key component for trust and should be maintained throughout the equivalence assessment process.

---

<sup>1</sup>. The exclusion of a certain input, category or technology from equivalence does not necessarily mean that the affected products cannot be traded. They might be granted market access in other ways, e.g. by complementary labelling.

## 1. Scope and Use

This guide provides common procedures and assessment tools to establish and recognize equivalence among standards for organic production, processing and labelling.

This guide can be used for government-to-government or private sector purposes. It is designed for use in bilateral or multilateral negotiations and can be adapted to be employed in a unilateral equivalence assessment of one standard to another.

This guide is also a resource for further development of regulations and procedures to foster equivalence.

## 2. Definitions

<b>Base standard</b> .....	The standard or regulation that constitutes the basis of the equivalence assessment.
<b>Base standard party</b> .....	The principal party representing the standard or technical regulation that constitutes the basis of the equivalence assessment.
<b>Evaluated standard</b> .....	The standard or regulation for which a determination of equivalence with the base standard is sought.
<b>Evaluated standard party</b> .....	The party representing the standard or technical regulation for which a determination of equivalence with the base standard is sought.
<b>Principal parties</b> .....	The parties seeking an equivalence agreement with each other.
<b>Standards</b> .....	Document approved by a recognized body that provides for common and repeated use, rules, guidelines or characteristics for products or related processes and production methods, with which compliance is not mandatory. It may also include or deal exclusively with terminology, symbols, packaging, marking or labelling requirements as they apply to a product, process or production method.

- 
- Technical regulation** ..... Document that lays down product characteristics or their related processes and production methods, including the applicable administrative provisions, with which compliance is mandatory. It may also include or deal exclusively with terminology, symbols, packaging, marking or labelling requirements as they apply to a product, process or production method.
- Conformity assessment** ..... Any activity concerned with determining directly or indirectly that relevant requirements are fulfilled
- Harmonization** ..... The process by which standards, technical regulations and conformity assessment on the same subject approved by different bodies establishes inter-changeability of products and processes. The process aims at the establishment of identical standards, technical regulations and conformity assessment requirements.
- Equivalence** ..... The acceptance that different standards or technical regulations on the same subject fulfil common objectives.
- Recognition** ..... Arrangement (either unilateral, bilateral or multilateral) for the use or acceptance of results of conformity assessments.

### **3 Elements of Equivalence Assessment**

#### **3.1 Choice of base standard**

Principal parties involved should identify the choice of a base standard, where equivalence of other standards/regulations to the base standard forms the basis of the equivalence assessment. The following scenarios may be considered in choosing a base standard.

*a. Multilateral equivalence assessment scenario*

Choice of base standard may be an international standard or one of the many participating standards/regulations. Equivalence assessment is done for each of participating standards against the base standard. Equivalence to the selected base standard constitutes equivalence to all other participating standards/regulations.

*b. Bilateral equivalence assessment scenario*

Choice of base standard may be an international standard, or one of the two participating standards/regulations. In case of the latter, equivalence assessment will be conducted twice with one of the applicable standards against the other in turn.

*c. Unilateral equivalence agreement scenario*

Choice of base standard may be an international standard (preferable), or the standard/regulation against which equivalence is sought.

#### **3.2 Role and appointment of expert assessment panel**

An impartial assessment of equivalence increases the credibility of the process and acceptance of results by principal parties and other sector stakeholders. Besides appointment of their respective negotiating representatives, principal parties should consider a joint appointment of an independent expert assessment panel to offer expert opinion to support their respective decision on equivalence.

The members of such a panel should be agreed upon by the principal parties.

If principal parties prefer not to appoint an independent expert assessment panel, the panel can be composed of representatives of the principal parties to the equivalence negotiation.

#### **3.3 Identification of reference objectives**

Clarification and agreement on a common set of specific reference objectives should be established before proceeding with the assessment of specific requirements. Objectives of the base standard, including specific objectives for different aspects of organic production and process-



ing covered, should be specified at the onset of the process by the base standard party and agreed to by the evaluated standard party.

Where specific objectives are elaborated in the base standard, they should take preference as reference objectives. Where no specific objectives are elaborated in the base standard or if they are unclear, the principal parties should come to agreement on a common set of specific reference objectives. If an expert panel is appointed, it should facilitate clarification and agreement between the principal parties. The “common objectives” for production and processing in Annex 2 may be used for such purposes (also see bibliography).

This guide is developed for determining if requirements in one set of standards/regulations meet the objectives of organic production and processing in another set of standards/regulations. Some organic standards and regulations include or are accompanied by stated objectives for having the standard/regulation in the first place (for example, to protect consumers). Before commencing with the equivalence assessment, principal parties should decide whether objectives relevant to the assessment also include objectives of having the applicable base standard/regulation.

### **3.4 Specification of the scope and legal context of the standard**

The scope of the equivalence assessment should be established by the principal parties at the onset of the process. The scope should include geographical area of application, and the range of products and processes covered.

Other legal texts relevant to the implementation of the base and evaluated standards should be disclosed by the respective principal parties e.g. applicable phytosanitary requirements that are not described in the standards and their relationship to the application of the base and evaluated standards.

### **3.5 Methodology of assessment**

The equivalence assessment of the expert panel should form the basis for decision by the principal parties for the purpose of concluding an equivalence determination.

The expert panel may request clarification and interpretation of specific requirements from one or more of the principal parties as necessary for its assessment.

The expert panel should consider inviting public comment on their assessment. Assessment by the expert panel should be made by consensus, or if consensus cannot be reached by noting the different opinions.

### 3.6 Equivalence assessment based on set criteria

The primary focus of an equivalence assessment is to determine whether or not the evaluated standard meets the agreed reference objectives. The process and basis for equivalence should include consideration of the following:

*a. Equivalence or compliance to an international standard as basis of equivalence to the base standard, i.e.*

Accept equivalence or compliance of the evaluated standard to one or both international standards, i.e. Codex Alimentarius and IBS, as basis for equivalence to the base standard as a whole.

*b. Equivalence of individual and/or sets of related requirements*

If the above is considered insufficient, principal parties involved can resort to assessing equivalence of requirements within the relevant standards. These can be individual requirements or sets of related requirements.

A comparison of specified requirements will be necessary. If agreed by the principal parties, the comparison may be based on concise and/or paraphrased versions of the relevant standards/regulations and related legal texts, not the actual full texts. Consolidated/paraphrased versions that emphasize outcomes rather than prescriptive details of the standards/regulations can greatly facilitate the assessment process.

Where the evaluated standard requirements differ, they should be accepted as equivalent based on a similar level of fulfilment of the relevant objectives of the base standard.

Where an individual requirement in the evaluated standard is assessed as not equivalent or where there is no requirement in an evaluated standard corresponding to one in the base standard (omission), equivalence may be determined on the basis that a set of related requirements in the evaluated standard (including related legal texts) fulfil the relevant objectives of the base standard, e.g. for soil fertility management.

*c. Criteria for variations of requirements*

Equivalence assessment of requirements (either individual requirements or sets thereof) should include acceptance of variations in requirements of the evaluated standard based on the following criteria:

- *Legitimate reasons, including conditions such as climate, geography and technical problems as well as economic, regulatory or cultural factors, that rationalize the difference as an equivalent variation from the base standard.*
- *Evidence that the evaluated standard reflects the consensus of the organic sector on the issue, where it is applicable.*
- *Variant standards maintain practices that distinguish organic from non-organic practices.*

See Criteria for variations [annex 3] for further elaboration.

### **3.7 Acceptance of expert panel assessment and resolution of outstanding issues**

The expert panel assessment provides the basis for decision by the principal parties. Principal parties should accept the equivalence assessment of the expert panel and focus on resolving outstanding issues to conclude their equivalence agreement.

Outstanding issues may be resolved through the following means:

*a. Revision of specific requirement(s) and/or addition of other provisions by the evaluated standard party(ies) to address outstanding issue(s).*

Proposals of revision or additional provisions may be accepted by base standard party without involving additional assessment by the expert panel.

*b. A waiver or amendment of requirement(s) related to outstanding issue(s) by the base standard party.*

On the appeal of the evaluated standard party(ies), the base standard party may waive or amend specific requirement(s) related to outstanding issue(s) in consideration of conditions where the evaluated standard applies.

*c. Exclusion or reduction of scope*

Where resolution and agreement on full equivalence is not possible the option of specifying exclusions such as exclusion of certain requirements or production inputs or product categories from the equivalence agreement or reducing the scope (such as limiting the equivalence to only crop production) should be considered.

### **3.8 Transparency**

Principal parties should ensure that the process for determining equivalence is as transparent as possible, while reflecting legitimate constraints of diplomacy and commercial confidentiality where appropriate. Public notification of key events, including at least a description of the process at the beginning and the rationale of the outcome of the final agreement at the end, should be made public. Public notifications should be issued in at least all the official language(s) of the principal parties, and it is recommended to include other languages (such as English) that would enhance transparency for non-principal parties.

Where possible, opportunity for stakeholder input in the equivalence assessment should be facilitated.

Government principal parties may need to issue notifications of resolution prior to final agreement in line with WTO TBT requirements (see bibliography).

## **4. Procedures for Equivalence Assessment**

### **4.1 Initiation**

The initiation phase includes the following steps to be taken by the principal parties:

- a) Make known to each other their interest in seeking equivalence determination.
- b) Specify and agree on whether a multilateral, bilateral or unilateral equivalence determination is desired.
- c) Specify and agree on the use of this guide and/or other protocol(s) as a means of reaching equivalence determination.
- d) Specify whether additional consideration besides meeting objectives of organic production and processing standards is necessary for an equivalence determination.
- e) Review this guide and agree to amendments or alternative procedure and tools, including
  - choice of base standard (section 3.1)
  - applicable scope of equivalence assessment (section 3.4)
  - basis for equivalence including criteria for variation (section 3.6 and annex 3)
  - specific amendments to procedure and guides (section 4) or alternatives
  - projected dates of commencement and completion
  - how cost of process will be covered
  - responsible representative(s) of each party
- f) Specify and agree on the degree of transparency including which steps and information in the equivalence assessment will be made public and which will not.
- g) Appoint an expert assessment panel (section 3.4). The panel could be composed of independent experts or representatives of the principal parties.

### **4.2 Clarification of objectives**

On concluding the above, principal parties, with or without the support of an expert panel, should then:

- a) Specify objectives of the base standard (see 3.3), including specific objectives for the different aspects of organic production and processing covered in the standard.
- b) Disclose all related legal texts and documents (see 3.4).
- c) Clarify and agree on a common set of specific reference objectives before proceeding with the assessment of specific requirements.

### **4.3 Comparison and equivalence assessment of requirements**

Equivalence assessment between individual and/or sets of requirements should be conducted on an agreed basis for equivalence and criteria for variations.

---

After establishing a common set of specific reference objectives, principal parties should either prepare, or delegate to the expert panel to prepare, a comprehensive standards comparison (including related legal texts) which identifies requirements of the evaluated standard that are different, omitted or additional to the requirements of the base standard.

*Note: See Annex 4 for a template for preparing a comparison.*

The expert panel should then:

- a) Assess the equivalence of the evaluated standard with the base standard (see 3.6).
- b) Issue a preliminary equivalence recommendation.
- c) Invite comments, including supplemental information, from the evaluated standard party(ies) and the base standard party.  
*Note: At this point consideration should be given to making the preliminary assessment available for public comment.*
- d) Revise the equivalence assessment and equivalence recommendation as appropriate relative to the comments received.
- e) Submit revised assessment and recommendation to the principal parties.

A submission from a principal party should be copied to all other principal parties.

#### **4.4 Resolution of outstanding issues**

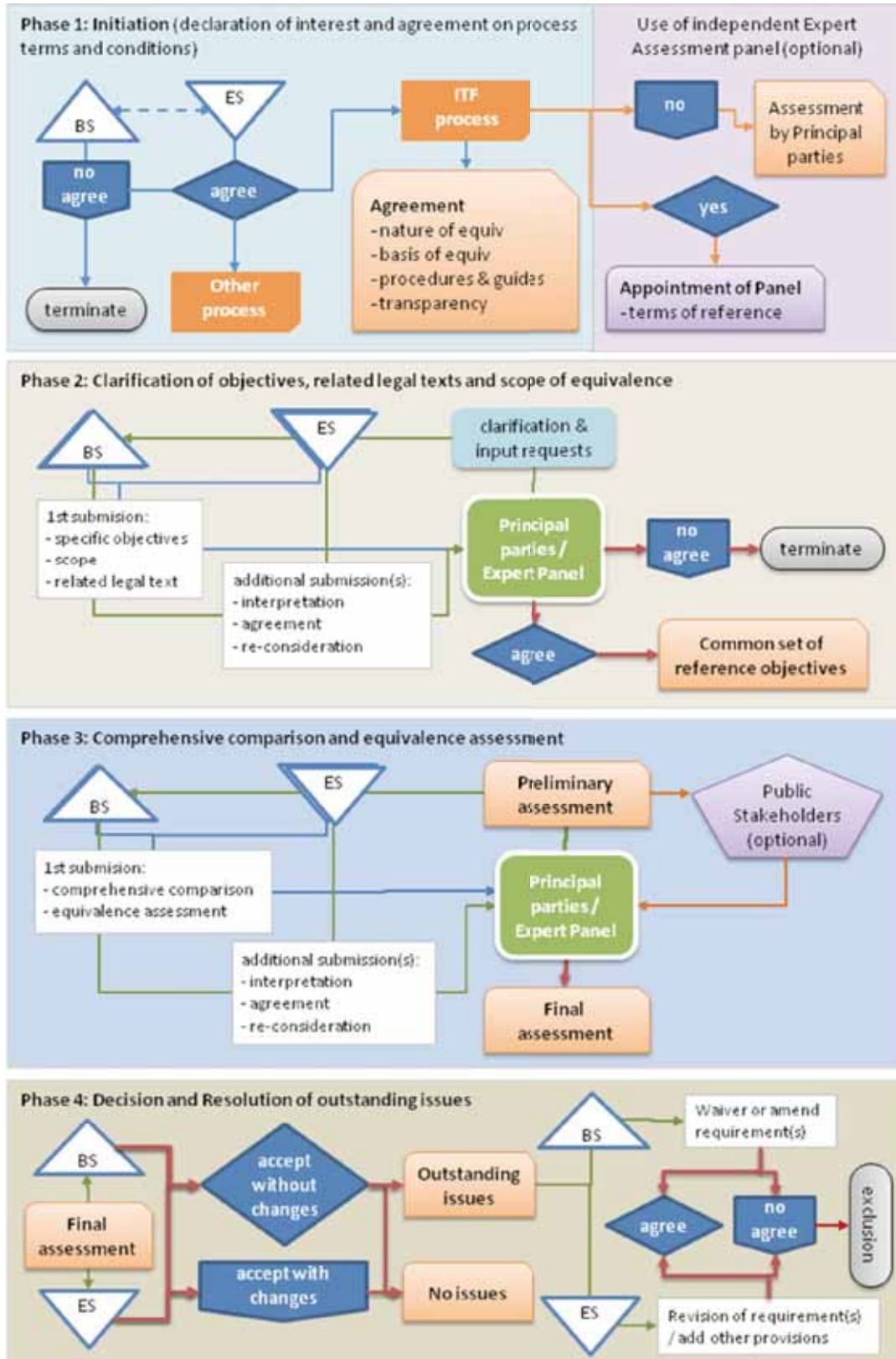
Based on the expert panel's final assessment, the evaluated standard party(ies) may choose to resolve outstanding issues, if any, by one or more ways below (see 3.7):

- a) *Revision of specific requirement(s) and/or addition of other provisions by the evaluated standard party(ies) to address outstanding issue(s).*
- b) *A waiver or amendment of requirement(s) related to outstanding issue(s) by the base standard party.*
- c) *Exclusion or reduction of scope.*

Resolution discussions, including face-to-face meetings between parties, may continue for as long as necessary until an agreement or decision to terminate process is reached.

The final decision on equivalence or decision to terminate process should be notified to the public, including a summary of the process and rationale for the final outcome of the process.

## Annex 1: Flow chart of Procedure



---

## **Annex 2: Examples of Common Objectives for Organic Standards Systems**

- Protecting and enhancing soil quality
- Avoiding use of synthetic chemical fertilizers, pesticides and fungicides
- Protecting and enhancing biodiversity
- Avoiding pollution
- Responsible use of resources (e.g., soil, water and air)
- Responsible treatment of farm animals
- Prohibiting use of certain technologies (genetic engineering/modification and ionizing radiation)
- Planning for (management plan) organic production
- Verifying (certifying to) all of the above (this includes use of organic seeds, auditing, traceability of products and labelling for the market), and
- Maintaining organic integrity in the processing systems used for organically produced products

Adapted from: “Common Objectives of Organic Standards Systems” (ITF 6th meeting). This is an example derived from research, but not formally established through a stakeholder consultation process.



### **Annex 3: Criteria for Variations in Standards**

*There may be conditions where climate, geographical or technical problems, as well as economic, regulatory or cultural factors rationalize a variation from the base standard.*

*The need and necessity for a variation should be established on at least one of the following:*

- a. Climatic, geographical and/or structural conditions, where the evaluated standard applies, prevent effective application of the base standard requirement;
- b. Compliant methods to the expectation of the base standard requirement are not achievable or feasible for operators where the evaluated standard applies;
- c. Application of the base standard requirement would prevent further development of organic agriculture where the evaluated standard applies;
- d. Application of the base standard requirement seriously contradicts generally accepted religious or cultural beliefs as opposed to the evaluated standard where applicable;
- e. Application of the base standard requirement would prohibit compliance with prevailing legal requirements or legitimate sector regulations where the evaluated standard applies;
- f. Application of the base standard requirement does not meet established consensus or “state of the art” understanding of the organic sector due to a different historical development of organic practices where the evaluated standard applies.

***Further considerations for acceptance***

*The evaluated standard should be set through a documented standard setting process that includes open stakeholder consultation. Compliance to WTO TBT agreement or ISEAL<sup>2</sup> code for standard setting should be favourably considered.*

*The evaluated standard can demonstrate equivalence to international standards and/or acceptance by other private standard setters or government authorities.*

*The evaluated standard including variations maintain practices that clearly distinguish organic from non-organic production and processing practices.*

*The evaluated standard including variations does not contradict specified objectives of the Base standard.*

*Acceptance of variation does not unduly prejudice fair competition, consumer trust in organic and international harmonization necessary for international trade.*

Adapted from IFOAM policy 42: “IFOAM Policy for Recognition of Certification Standards Based on the IFOAM Basic Standards”.

<sup>2</sup> International Social and Environmental Labelling Alliance



## **Annex 4: Template for a Comparison, including Equivalency Assessment and Conclusion (ref. Section 3.6)**

The template opposite is based on the matrix tool for IFOAM recognition of other standards. The actual template is an excel file. The objective is to provide an overview of how the evaluated standard compares to the Base standard.

*(Note: The standard example is from IFOAM Basic Standards.)*

Although this example is for comparison of individual requirements, the template can be adapted for comparison of concise and/or paraphrased requirements.

## Columns

- 1 Reference number of Base Standard content
- 2 Base Standard content according to published format or concise version in hierarchical order of
  - section heading
  - specific objectives
  - sub-heading
  - requirements
  - further explanation, interpretation or additional legal text (where applicable)
- 3 Matching Evaluated Standard content according to published format or concise version to Base Standard for comparison
- 4 Reference number of Evaluated Standard content
- 5 Status of equivalence assessment of Evaluated Standard against Base Standard. Each status is marked with a different colour for easy identification.
  - E: **Equivalent** – including equivalence based on criteria for variation
  - N: **Not equivalent** requirements that are judged not to be equivalent
  - A: **Additional** – for Evaluated Standard requirements that are not addressed in the Base Standard. The corresponding Base standard slot will be empty
  - O: **Omission** – for Base Standard requirements that are not addressed in the Evaluated Standard. The corresponding evaluated standard slot will be empty.
  - U: **Undecided** – indicating inability of the assessment party to decide equivalence at the timeEach status is in a separate column for easier sorting and counting of numbers.
- 6 Assessment party's comment related to assessment made  
The columns presented in the sample template represent the basic set. More columns can be added as need arises to track additional comments, proposed revisions of objectives and/or requirements as well as change in assessment or standards/regulations over time.

## Rows

Each component of the Base Standard should occupy separate rows, i.e. separate rows for each heading, objective, sub-heading and requirement. Interpretations, explanations and legal text related to a particular requirement should occupy the row just below the requirement or the bottom rows within the related sub-heading if not related to any requirement.

At the bottom of each section or sub-section is the conclusion row where equivalence of the section or sub-section is noted.

Different row colours are used for headings, objectives, requirements and additional explanation and legal text for easy identification.

1	2	3	4	5					6
BS ref.	<b>Base Standard (BS) content</b> according to published format or concise version in order of - section heading - specific objectives - sub-heading - requirements - additional legal text	<b>Evaluated Standard (ES) or related legal text content</b> In order of matching content to Base Standard	ES ref.	Assessment					Assessment party's comment
				E: Equivalent	N: Not Equivalent	A: Additional	O: Omission	U: Undecided	
				E	N	A	O	U	
	<b>Objectives specified</b> <i>Protecting and enhancing biodiversity</i>								
2.	<b>Section heading: Organic Ecosystems</b>	matching Evaluated Standard content							
2.1	<b>Sub-heading Ecosystem management (2)</b> <i>figure in brackets indicates the number of requirements in the sub section</i>	matching Evaluated Standard content							
2.1.1	<b>Specific requirement</b> Operators shall take measures to maintain and improve landscape and enhance biodiversity	matching Evaluated Standard content							Rationale for assessment of specific requirement
	Further explanation, interpretation or <b>additional legal text</b> <i>None</i>	matching Evaluated Standard content							
2.1.2	<b>Clearing of primary ecosystem is prohibited</b>	matching Evaluated Standard content							Rationale for specific assessment
	<i>Further explanation, interpretation or legal text</i> <i>None</i>	Additional explanation, interpretation or legal text if any							
		Additional Evaluated Standard requirements if any							
Do the Evaluated Standard requirements and related legal text in this section as a whole provide equivalent fulfilment of the applicable specified objectives of the Base standard?									Rationale for equivalence assessment of set of requirements

## Annex 5: Framework References for the ITF Equivalence Guide

### WTO TBT agreement

The Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade states in Article 2.4 that “*Where technical regulations are required and relevant international standards exist or their completion is imminent, Members shall use them, or the relevant parts of them, as a basis for their technical regulations except when such international standards or relevant parts would be an ineffective or inappropriate means for the fulfillment of the legitimate objectives pursued, for instance because of fundamental climatic or geographical factors or fundamental technological problems.*”

Where it is not appropriate for a country to adopt an international standard, or base their technical regulations on an international standard, Article 2.7 of the WTO-TBT agreement states that “*Members shall give positive consideration to accepting as equivalent technical regulations of other Members, even if these regulations differ from their own, provided they are satisfied that these regulations adequately fulfill the objectives of their own regulations.*”

### Codex Alimentarius

Although the CAC/GL 34 *Guidelines for the Development of Equivalence Agreements Regarding Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems* refers to conformity assessment and agreements between governments, many of its provisions offer applicable guidance for judging equivalence of standards and making agreements within the private sector as well.

The CAC/GL 34 foreword mentions that “*Import requirements should be based on the principles of equivalence and transparency as set out in ‘Principles for Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification’.*”

Sections of CAC/GL 34 include the following applicable provisions:

Section	Provision
---------	-----------

- |      |  |
|------|--|
| 5.7  | The importing country considers and determines whether the country’s measures meet the importing country’s requirements. Any decision must, however, be made on the basis of objective criteria. |
| 5.10 | A country entering into discussion towards an equivalence agreement should be prepared to facilitate assessment and verification activity both before and after conclusion of the agreement.     |
| 7.16 | As a first step in the consultative process, the importing country should make readily available the text of its relevant control measures and identify the objectives of these measures.        |

- 
- 7.17 The exporting country should provide information that demonstrates that its own safety control system achieves the importing country's objectives and/or level of protection as appropriate.
18. The development of equivalence agreements is facilitated by the use of Codex standards, recommendations and guidelines by both parties.
19. To facilitate the consultative process, information should be exchanged as appropriate, on (a) legislative framework, including the texts of all relevant legislation, which provides the legal basis for the uniform and consistent application of the food control system that is the subject of the agreement.
20. Countries may wish to compare side-by-side tables to organize the above mentioned information and identify differences in measures/requirements.
21. The importing and exporting countries should identify a process for jointly considering differences in measures/requirements.
22. Participants in the agreements should be able to a) satisfy themselves and verify that equivalence continues to exist after conclusion of an equivalence agreement, and b) resolve any problems identified during audit and verification.
28. Participants in the agreement should agree to procedures for terminating the agreement, in case either party is not satisfied that the terms of the agreement are being met.

# Bibliography

## **Codex**

- CAC/GL 32: Guidelines for the Production, Processing, Labeling and Marketing of Organically produced foods.
- CAC/GL 34: Guidelines for the Development of Equivalence Agreements Regarding Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems.

## **IFOAM**

- IFOAM Basic Standards.
- IFOAM policy 42: IFOAM Policy for Recognition of Certification Standards Based on the IFOAM Basic Standards.

## **ITF**

- Experiences of Equivalence and Recognition Mechanisms in the Regulation of Organic Agriculture (5th ITF meeting).
- Common Objectives of Organic Standards Systems (6th meeting).  
*This is an example derived from research, but not formally established through a stakeholder consultation process.*
- International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies.

## **WTO**

- WTO TBT agreement.

## **Others**

- Letter from Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Japan, to the US Department of Agriculture, 6 February 2001.

**Report of the Eighth Meeting  
of the  
International Task Force on  
Harmonization and Equivalence  
in Organic Agriculture**

6 – 7 October, 2008

Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland

## **Background and Summary**

The eighth and last ITF meeting was held from 6-7 October 2008 at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, with UNCTAD serving as host. The 37 participants included 27 government representatives, and seven from intergovernmental organizations and three from the private sector/civil society. During this meeting the ITF approved two Tools, which are intended as practical solutions to the problem of trade barriers arising from multiple organic standards and certification performance requirements in the public and private sectors. IROCB (International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies) is a normative document that aims to foster equivalence and recognition in organic conformity assessment. EquiTool (Guide for Assessing Equivalence of Organic Standards and Technical Regulations) is a guideline for assessing the equivalence of one or more sets of standards for organic production and processing. The ITF also reviewed and approved an Summary document which captures all ITF recommendations and agreements, and a final Communiqué. A presentation by the Steering Committee on outreach to promote the ITF Tools and recommendations was followed by small group discussions among participants, who generated and reported ideas for how they can move the ITF results forward in their regions and sectors. The meeting concluded with reflections from members on the process and achievements over the course of the six-year term of the ITF.

The main ITF meeting was followed by a high level public session, during which officials of the three convening organizations (UNCTAD, FAO and IFOAM) delivered remarks and launched the two ITF Tools.



## Welcome

UNCTAD Secretary General, Dr Supachai Panitchpakdi welcomed the ITF participants and offered opening remarks. He noted that, although WTO is now negotiating drastic cuts in tariffs, technical barriers to trade from standards and related requirements have increased. Citing UNCTAD's conclusion that the multitude of organic requirements are one of the main obstacles preventing developing countries from taking full advantage of the many benefits of organic agriculture, Dr Supachai commended the ITF for its impressive intellectual analysis and development of practical solutions to this problem. He congratulated the ITF members for their work so far, and urged them to approve the two ITF tools at the meeting and then to go out as ambassadors to promote the tools and recommendations.

## Steering Committee Report

The ITF Steering Committee reported on its activity since the 7th meeting in 2007, which included three in-person meetings, two conference calls, the development of a communications strategy and related materials, targeted presentations on the ITF, and preparation of a summary report.

## EquiTool

### (Guide for Assessing Equivalence of Organic Standards and Technical Regulations)

The ITF received a brief report on the development process for the EquiTool since the first draft which was presented at the 7th meeting in Bali, 2007. This process included two written consultations and an expert workshop held at the Organic World Congress in June, 2008. Qualitative changes between the first and final drafts were noted, including that the final draft of the tool is more efficiently organized and written in simpler and clearer language.

The EquiTool final draft was presented as a tool to facilitate acceptance that different standards or technical regulations on the same subject fulfill common objectives. The EquiTool recommends reference to international standards as "base standards" for this process; however, any other sets of standards can be compared using the procedure and criteria in this guidance document. EquiTool features a clear process and criteria for identifying and assessing differences in standards. The procedure provides for transparency and allows for exclusions of items that cannot be judged as equivalent. The guide presents the basic elements of the assessment process, which are then followed by a detailed procedure, criteria for assessing variations and considerations for acceptance of differences. The procedure is also presented in a flow chart. An annex contains a sample template to manage the equivalence assessment process.

### *Discussion:*

ITF members discussed the utility of choosing an international standard as a base standard,

although also noting that EquiTool can also be used to compare any sets of standards. Some participants expressed a preference for using paraphrased or summarized texts in making comparisons rather than the actual production and processing standards, which tend to be detailed. Paraphrased or summarized texts were seen as enabling a focus on objectives. It was noted that expert panels could take up the preparation of paraphrased or summarized texts. Some participants suggested including additional details such as qualifications for expert panels, process for clarifying objectives and more detailed provisions for transparency. However the meeting concluded that revisions such as these should be considered after the Tool is implemented and some experience with it has been gained. ITF participants agreed to the following changes to the final draft prior to its approval:

- 3.2 and 4.1 change to “Panel can be composed of the representative parties/ representatives of.”
- Annex 2 delete “minimizing use “ (of synthetic chemicals).
- Annex 2 change “biotechnology” to “genetic engineering/modification and change “irradiation” to “ionizing radiation.”
- Annex 4: ensure that any quantitative references such as totals in columns have been deleted.
- Annex 4: add cross-reference to 3.6
- Annex 4: Change “MoU” to “Agreement”.
- Annex 4: Add a 4th flow chart regarding resolution of outstanding issues.

*The ITF approved the final draft of the EquiTool as amended.*

## **IROCB**

### **International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies**

A brief history and overview of the development of IROCB was presented. Consultation on this Tool included two written consultations with a broad group of stakeholders plus two additional written consultations with ITF members in preparation for the 6th and 7th ITF meetings. The document was also shaped through two expert workshops connected to the 6th and 7th meetings, an in-person expert working group prior to preparation of the 4th draft, and intensive group work by the ITF at the 7th meeting.

Participants were reminded that at the 7th meeting the ITF decided that the final IROCB draft for ITF approval would be prepared and distributed in early 2008, and that no further consultation would be undertaken. The Steering Committee noted that the final draft has been formatted and copyedited and one redundancy has been deleted, and therefore that the document is finalized for publication.

#### *Discussion:*

In response to questions and comments, clarifications were given on the normative character of the document and its potential use for direct accreditation, and about who can use the IROCB. Discussion was taken on whether to delete or modify language to address the questions and

concerns expressed, but those making comments agreed not to change the language in light of the discussion. One participant requested consideration of preparing a guidance document for certification bodies to implement the certification requirements. It was mentioned that IFOAM already has a certification program guidance document that contains much of the relevant information. It was agreed that IROCB can also be useful as a guide for developing sectors.

*The ITF approved the final draft of IROCB with no amendments.*

## **ITF Summary Report**

The ITF Summary Report, which recaps all ITF recommendations and agreements, includes five key conclusions from the ITF work:

- Base acceptance of imports on equivalence.
- Judge equivalence according to International Standards (Codex and IFOAM) and the IROCB.
- Use several mechanisms for import acceptance, as there is no one mechanism that fits all situations.
- Accept diversity and innovation, e.g. group certification and participatory guarantee systems.
- Forge private-public partnership in development and implementation of import regulations.

The ITF's work concentrated on four areas: production/processing standards, certification performance requirements, cooperation and recognition, and future developments. ITF conclusions and recommendations in these areas are based on ITF criteria for solutions, which are a part of the Summary document. Conclusions and recommendations are:

### **Production Standards**

- Standards used in various countries/regions will be different but they should follow a basic framework upon which equivalence can be based.
- The ITF recommends that for import approvals governments use Codex Alimentarius CAC/GL 32 & IFOAM Basic Standards as the basis.
- EquiTool should be used for equivalence assessment.

### **Requirements for Certification Bodies**

- There is one set of international certification performance requirements that can be the basis for equivalence – the IROCB.
- IROCB should be used when regulating imports and also for recognizing certification bodies in private guarantee systems, and when developing requirements for organic certification bodies.

### Cooperation and Mutual Recognition

- Governments should utilize and encourage in their regulatory systems, cooperation and mutual recognition in certification and accreditation.
- One evaluation/assessment can form the basis for multiple accreditations.
- A platform for cooperation between accreditation/approval bodies for organic certification should be created.
- Mutual recognition between certification bodies should be used as one option for import approval.<sup>1</sup>
- Delegation of the certification decision should be considered (as reflected in IROCB).

### System Development

- Group certification should be recognized everywhere.
- Participatory guarantee systems should be considered in the future.

The draft of this paper presented at the meeting contained three highlighted items which were reconciled via ITF's approval of IROCB and EquiTool and approval of one final recommendation, as noted above, on the use of mutual recognition between certification bodies as an option for import approval by governments. During the discussion on this point, one participant pointed out that governments will only be able to accept this option if a) they can clearly see what mutual recognition agreements are happening between certification bodies, and b) there are conditions on the certification bodies e.g. for reporting and oversight. It was also pointed out that up to now there has been no dialogue and exchange between governments and private sector certification bodies regarding imports, and that this recommendation opens the door. The ITF approved all the recommendations in the document.

*The ITF approved the Summary Report without amendment.*

## Communiqué

An updated version of the ITF Communiqué, based on the original document from the 6th ITF meeting, was presented.

*The ITF approved the Communiqué without amendment.*

## Outreach: The Way Forward

The information kit, consisting of a folder with the ITF brochure and fact sheets, was presented. The uses of the information kit, an ITF slide set and new ITF "outreach" website were explained. The Steering Committee requested ITF members to act as ambassadors (acting on

---

<sup>1</sup> This item in the draft paper was approved by the ITF at the 8th meeting.

their own) from this meeting forward. In the ambassador role ITF members should use the communications resources for presentations, organize national and regional workshops and other initiatives, and encourage use and testing of the ITF Tools. It was explained that the convening organizations have delegated (with ITF approval) the stewardship of the ITF Tools to IFOAM. The organizations also plan that IFOAM would manage funds in a follow-up project. The follow-up project would continue the cooperation of the convening organizations to further communicate and promote ITF results, provide assistance to developing countries in implementing ITF tools and recommendations, foster regional cooperation, and receive updates and revise communications and ITF Tools as necessary. The Steering Committee reported that it has received an oral commitment from one donor to carry this work forward.

ITF meeting participants organized themselves into three small groups to discuss individual and joint activities to promote and implement ITF results. The groups reported on their discussions.

### **Group One**

- ITF Tools will be promoted to governments in East Africa that are now elaborating regulations.
- EquiTool could be used in equivalency negotiations with South Africa and other African countries.
- ITF tools will be promoted in the Caribbean countries that are working on organic regulations.
- In the EU, elements of EquiTool have already been applied and will continue to be implemented. EU is committed to flexibility for local conditions when considering imports.
- ITF should support an initiative (using the Tools) for a regional standard that is applying for recognition by EU or US.
- There should be additional exchange among countries that have elaborated or are elaborating regional standards.

### **Group Two**

*Promotion:* Promotion should be done in OECD meetings, and regional organic meetings e.g. Sarawak. It is critical that the organic movement is fully informed and included in the process so that they support it rather than seeing only threats from imports.

*Field Testing:* Intergovernmental organizations e.g. FAO should encourage countries to test the Tools. The Pacific regional organic initiative volunteered to test the tools. There should be beta-testing (countries are not bound by results). More than one country should test so that there can be comparisons of processes and results.

*Long Term Uptake:* More detailed guidance on IROCB could assist its long-term uptake. IROCB should be recommended to the International Accreditation Forum (IAF). Initiatives in Latin America on equivalence and harmonization should use the ITF Tools (Central America could use IROCB as the certification requirements in its proposed Central

American Standard). In Japan, IROCB could be useful for equivalency determinations in the private sector.

### **Group Three**

Thailand will use the EquiTool to benchmark its standard against USDA NOP, China and EU standards.

India will consider to apply the organic sector requirements of IROCB in addition to ISO 65 requirements to all certification bodies, domestic or foreign.

China will present the ITF results to stakeholders in China and attempt to organize a task force to look into use of the Tools for harmonization strategies.

Tunisia reported that Arab countries are developing standards and EquiTool could be used for development.

The group members made several recommendations, including that:

- Other economic partnerships among countries should be looked at for opportunities to introduce the Tools.
- It might be good to consider in future revisions of IROCB to add requirements for inspectors.
- Countries using the Tools should cooperate among themselves to gain leverage.

### **Closing and Reflections**

ITF members reflected on the process and results from beginning to end of the ITF. Several themes emerged from the individual reflections. ITF has provided an opportunity to examine how the world works – harmonize with your neighbor as possible and cooperate with others based on common objectives. The process itself was unique and remarkable for its cooperative and cordial nature, the exchange between the public and private sectors, modeling of the public-private teamwork that will be needed to solve these and other problems, and the attainment of objectives. This process and why it worked is a story that should be told to many others so that they can learn from the ITF lessons. ITF shows the power of ideas to become reality. The ITF communication and information was complex and difficult to understand, especially towards the middle of the process, but then at the end, the results and especially the tools are simple and easy to understand and communicate. It was and is a process of maturity and the overall effort must continue beyond ITF. The networking, contacts, results (including studies) and visibility resulting from the ITF will assist the general cause of organic agriculture in government policy and programs. The ITF donors are very much appreciated for making all this possible.

## Annex One: Meeting Agenda

### Eighth Meeting of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalency in Organic Agriculture

Room XXV, Building E, Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland  
6 – 7 October 2008

#### Agenda

##### Monday 6 October, 2008

- 09:00 -10:00 Introduction  
**Opening remarks:** Dr Supachai Panitchpakdi, Secretary General of UNCTAD  
Agenda approval  
Introductions  
Steering Committee Report
- 10:00 -10:30 **Presentation:** EquiTool (Guide for Assessing Equivalence of Organic  
Standards and Technical Regulations), Final Draft
- 10:30 -11:00 *coffee/tea break*
- 11:00 -12:30 **Discussion:** EquiTool, Final Draft
- 12:30 -14:00 *Lunch*
- 14:00 -14:30 **Report:** International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies (IROCB)
- 14:30 -15:30 **Presentation and Discussion:** ITF Summary Report
- 15:30 -16:00 *coffee/tea break*
- 16:00 -17:00 Discussion of ITF Summary Report (continued)
- 17:00 -18:00 **Presentation and Discussion:** ITF Communiqué

##### Tuesday 7 October, 2008

- 09:00 -10:30 The Way Forward  
Outreach  
Concept for follow up project
- 10:30 -11.00 *coffee/tea break*
- 11:00 -12:30 Approval of ITF Tools and Results  
IROCB  
EquiTool  
Final Report and Recommendations  
Communiqué
- 12:30 -14:00 *Lunch*

- 14:00 -15:00 Closing Session  
    Member reflections and commitments  
    Closing remarks
- 15:00 -15:30 *coffee/tea break*
- 15:30 -17:30 High Level Public Session
- 15:30-15:35 Welcome remarks, UNCTAD
- 15:35-15:50 Overview of the ITF presentation
- 15:50-16:20 High-level speeches by UNCTAD, FAO and IFOAM  
    Dr Supachai Panitchpakdi, Secretary-General, UNCTAD  
    Dr Alexander Müller, Assistant Director-General, FAO  
    Dr Urs Niggli, Vice-President, IFOAM
- 16:20-16:25 Launching of IROCB and EquiTool (tools developed by the ITF)
- 16:25-17:30 Statements and comments by ITF and UNCTAD members
- 17:30 Closing
- 
- 17:30 – 19.00 Organic Reception  
    Escargot Bar, 3rd floor, Lausanne end of building

**Wednesday 8 October, 2008**

Field Trip organized by FiBL (Research Institute of Organic Agriculture)



## Annex Two: List of Participants

Aebi	Patrick	Quality and Sales Promotion Unit (QSPU), Federal Office for Agriculture (FOA)	Switzerland
Assawaprapa	Phawana	National Bureau of Agricultural Commodity and Food Standards.(ACFS)	Thailand
Backes	Margit	Bundesanstalt für Landwirtschaft u. Ernährung (BLE)	Germany
Van Boxem	Herman	European Commission, DG AGRI	Belgium
Castro	Miguel	National Organic Program, Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock	Costa Rica
Chen	Yunhua	China National Accreditation Service for Conformity Assessment	China
Eboku	David	Uganda National Bureau of Standards	Uganda
Gacanja (Kiarii)	Eustace	Kenya Organic Agriculture Network	Kenya
Gouri	PVSM	APEDA	India
Gschwendtner	Therese	Quality and Sales Promotion Unit (QSPU), Federal Office for Agriculture (FOA)	Switzerland
Guiramand	Maryline	Roundtable on Sustainable Biofuels	France
Huber	Beate Verena	FIBL	Switzerland
Indramangala	Jintana	Department of Livestock Development, Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives	Thailand
Jönsson	Marianne	Kommerskollegium – National Board of Trade	Sweden
Kasterine	Alexander	ITC	The Netherlands
Kenji	Matsumoto	Japan Organic and Natural Foods Association	Japan
Leu	André	Organic Federation of Australia	Australia
Lu	Zhenhui	Product Certification Centre, WIT Assessment	China
Maamer Belkhiria	Samia	Organic Agriculture Directorate, Direction Générale de la Production Agricole Ministère de l’Agriculture	Tunisia
Mapusua	Karen Lee	Women in Business Development Inc.	Samoa
Montenegro	Laura Cecilia	Argencert SRL	Argentina
Naqvi	Asad	United Nations Environment Programme	Switzerland
Niggli	Urs	FIBL	Switzerland
Oetiker	Barbara	Quality and Sales Promotion Unit (QSPU), Federal Office for Agriculture (FOA)	Switzerland
Ong	Kung Wai	Humus Consultants	Malaysia

Opal	Charlotte	Roundtable on Sustainable Biofuels	USA
Oyson	Teresita G.	Department of Trade and Industry, Bureau of Export Trade Promotion	Philippines
Piccioli	Fabio	ICEA - Institute per la Certificazione Etica e Ambientale	Italy
Prosecka	Katerina	European Commission, DG AGRI	Belgium
Pu	Min	Chinese TBT/SPS Contact Point	China
Schönenberger	Stefan	Quality and Sales Promotion Unit (QSPU), Federal Office for Agriculture (FOA)	Switzerland
Seta	Ananto Kusuma	Ministry of Agriculture	Indonesia
Steenblik	Ronald	OECD	USA
Vivas	Lara	Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agriculture and Fisheries Product Standards	Philippines
Wang	Maohua	CNCA, The Certification and Accreditation Administration of P.R.C	China
Wannamolee	Wibulwan	National Bureau of Agricultural Commodity and Food Standards	Thailand
Zapata Gomez	Josè Altagracia	National Program for Organic Agriculture, Organic Agriculture Control Office	Dominican Republic
<b>ITF Steering Committee:</b>			
Compagnoni	Antonio	Institute per la Certificazione Etica e Ambientale (ICEA)	Italy
Doyran	Selma H.	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Codex Alimentarius Commission / Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme	Italy
El Hage Scialabba	Nadia	Food and Agriculture Organization	Italy
Rundgren	Gunnar	Grolink	Sweden
Twarog	Sophia	Trade, Environment and Development Branch, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development	U.S.
<b>ITF Secretariat:</b>			
Bowen	Diane	International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM)	U.S.

## **Annex Three: Report of the High Level Public Session**

Dr Ulrich Hoffmann of UNCTAD welcomed those attending the High Level Public Session following the ITF meeting. He explained the three objectives of the session as launching the ITF Tools, discussing ITF's work with UN and WTO people, and reflecting on achievements and the way forward. Dr Sophia Twarog from UNCTAD gave a brief presentation on the ITF work and results. This was followed by addresses from high officials of the three convening organizations, UNCTAD Secretary General Dr Supachai Panitchpakdi, FAO Assistant Director General Alexander Müller, and IFOAM Vice-President Urs Niggli.

Dr Supachai noted that the food supply and price crisis has called attention to problems in agriculture and the need for change in the way the world grows its food; and that organic agriculture is an approach with strong potential to address the problems. Dr Supachai observed that organic agriculture is particularly well suited for smallholder farmers as it preserves traditional knowledge and reduced dependence on external inputs and exposure of farm families to harmful chemicals. Furthermore, organic agriculture preserves biodiversity, soil and water quality, and it sequesters carbon. A major constraint for small farmers is to obtain certification for different markets, which the ITF has addressed. Dr Supachai urged all sectors, public and private, to embrace the ITF findings and use the Tools.

After supporting all the points of UNCTAD's Secretary General, Dr Müller noted that organic agriculture presents a very good opportunity for small producers to participate in trade. Market demand is strong, he said, and consumers know that the quality of organic products is high, the production system is environmentally friendly, and there is transparency about how the products are produced. But this opportunity for producers is hindered by the multitude of certification and accreditation requirements in the sector. The ITF is a model of successful public-private partnership to address this core problem for market access. The tools produced by ITF follow relevant principles of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, ISO 65 and WTO, and thus they offer a truly international basis for facilitating trade of organic products. Noting FAO's investment in the ITF, Dr Müller committed to following up, including informing FAO's Committee on Agriculture and the Codex Alimentarius Commission and its Committee on Food Labelling, about the ITF achievements and potential adoption of the ITF Tools as Codex guidelines.

Dr Niggli expressed appreciation for the UNCTAD Secretary General's remarks on the benefits of organic agriculture. He noted that this ITF cooperation with UNCTAD and FAO to solve problems in the organic sector is key achievement in IFOAM's history. Dr Niggli summarized the opportunities and challenges for organic agriculture that continue since IFOAM was founded 36 years ago. Organic farmers want equitable terms of trade. Consumers, who increasingly are concerned about the quality of food and the environmental consequences of food production, want to support organic agriculture and look for credible guarantees for organic products. Organic markets are growing fast and traders/retailers want a high quality but harmonized system for standards and certification. Society wants farmers to deliver public benefits such as natural resource preservation and therefore public authorities want standards

that reflect and support these benefits. The ITF results address these challenges and opportunities via equivalency approaches, and harmonization could well be a future development. IFOAM will integrate the ITF results and tools into its policy and look for ways to intensify its cooperation with the UN partners, FAO and UNCTAD.

Following the remarks by officials, ITF members reflected on the process and achievements of the ITF.

The session ended with the launch of the IROCB and EquiTool by the UNCTAD, FAO and IFOAM officials.

# Communiqué

from the

8th ITF meeting  
Geneva, Switzerland

The International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF) is composed of individuals working in government agencies, inter-governmental agencies, and civil society and other private sector organizations<sup>1</sup> involved in organic agriculture regulation, standardization, accreditation, certification and trade. These individuals joined together from 2003 to 2008 in a platform for dialogue among public and private stakeholders. The goal of the ITF was to address and seek solutions to trade barriers arising from the many different standards, technical regulations and certification requirements that function in the organic sector, and enable developing countries to have more access to organic trade.

Jointly led by FAO, IFOAM and UNCTAD and supported by several donor organizations<sup>2</sup> the ITF focused on opportunities for harmonization, equivalence, recognition and other forms of cooperation within and between government and private organic guarantee systems. Its formal results include technical studies and briefing papers, recommendations and tools for solutions. The ITF's work and results have progressed in two phases.

The Review Phase of the ITF work identified and analyzed:

- Impact of existing organic certification requirements, standards and technical regulations on trade;
- current models and mechanisms that enable organic trade;
- experiences of cooperation, recognition and equivalence in the organic sector;
- potential models and mechanisms for harmonization, equivalence and mutual recognition.

The results of this phase guided the exploration of potential solutions.

---

<sup>1</sup> ITF participants have come from government agencies of twenty-nine countries (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Costa Rica, Cuba, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Fiji, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Italy Japan, Kenya, Netherlands, Philippines, Russia, Samoa, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, Thailand, Tunisia, Uganda and United States), eight inter-governmental agencies (EU, OECD, FAO, UNCTAD, UNECE, UNEP and WTO) and twenty-five civil society and other private organizations.

<sup>2</sup> The ITF appreciates the support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the Norwegian Agency for Development (Norad), and the Government of Switzerland for financial support to conduct its work and achieve its result.

The Solutions Phase of the ITF produced two practical Tools for harmonization and equivalence:

- The International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies (IROCB), a reference norm that can be used by governments and private accreditation and certification bodies as a means of accepting certification of organic products outside of their own system.
- Guide for Assessing Equivalence of Organic Standards and Technical Regulations (EquiTool), a set of procedures and criteria for deciding when a standard applicable in one region of the world is equivalent to a standard applicable in another region.

During this phase the ITF agreed to support the two International Standards for organic production and processing (IFOAM standards in the private sector and Codex Alimentarius Commission standards in the government sector), and encourage harmonization and equivalence based on these standards.

In the course of its meetings the ITF made several recommendations. These include that:

- Governments and the private sector make every effort to utilize the Tools and other ITF results in order to facilitate trade, and include them in their efforts to build or enhance the organic sector;
- Governments commit to using international standards as the reference point for import approvals;
- Public-private participation is improved in decision-making for both international organic standards (IFOAM and Codex Alimentarius Commission);
- Governments should utilize and encourage mutual recognition on the level of conformity assessment in their regulatory systems.
- The International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies, in addition to serving as a reference for equivalence and recognition, should be considered as a catalyst for convergence of certification requirements in the long term and may be adapted for use in direct accreditation as possible;

The ITF also achieved:

- Increased understanding among all kinds of organic sector stakeholders of the technical situation and issues affecting the trade of organic products;
- Influence on new organic regulations and revision of existing ones.
- Shared experiences and establishment of networks among stakeholders in different regions working to develop organic market access;
- Regional cooperation to develop harmonized standards and technical regulations and other measures to reduce organic trade barriers.

The work and results of the ITF, including its technical papers and reports, have been chronicled in a series of publications, “Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture.” These publications are available in book form from the ITF Secretariat and in electronic format from the ITF Web site, [www.itf-organic.org](http://www.itf-organic.org).

### **Call to Action**

The ITF calls for governments, intergovernmental organizations and the private sector to support, promote and implement the ITF's recommendations and Tools. Specifically, governments and private sector standards setting and conformity assessment bodies should use the ITF Tools for assessing equivalence of standards and certification requirements and accepting organic products certified in different systems. The ITF also calls for other forms of cooperation within and between all levels: governments (with or without an organic regulation), accreditation bodies and certification bodies.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>. Key examples of other forms of cooperation, such as the development of regional standards, are published in ITF technical papers.





## Annex 1

### **Terms of Reference** for the International Task Force on Harmonisation and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture

The International Task Force on Harmonisation and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture, convened by FAO, IFOAM and UNCTAD, will serve as an open-ended platform for dialogue between public and private institutions (intergovernmental, governmental and civil society) involved in trade and regulatory activities in the organic agriculture sector. The objective is to facilitate international trade and access of developing countries to international markets.

More specifically, the Task Force will:

*1. Review the existing organic agriculture standards, regulations and conformity assessment systems including:*

- Their impact on international trade in organic agriculture products;
- Models and mechanisms of equivalency and mutual recognition;
- Extent of international harmonisation.

*2. Build on the recommendations of the IFOAM/FAO/UNCTAD Conference on International Harmonisation and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (2002), and on the reviews mentioned above, to formulate proposals for the consideration of governments, Codex Alimentarius Commission, relevant bodies of FAO, UNCTAD and IFOAM and other appropriate organisations on:*

- Opportunities for harmonisation of standards, regulations and conformity assessment systems;
- Mechanisms for the establishment of equivalence of standards, regulations and conformity assessment systems;
- Mechanisms for achieving mutual recognition among and between public and private systems;
- Measures to facilitate access to organic markets, in particular by developing countries and smallholders.

These proposals will take into account their impact on production systems, their relevance to consumers and the need for transparency.

*3. Advise stakeholders and provide information on developments following discussions of the above proposals.*



## Annex 2

### Definitions

Accreditation	Procedure by which an authoritative body gives a formal recognition that a body or person is competent to carry out specific tasks.
Certification	Procedure by which a third party gives written assurance that a clearly identified process has been methodically assessed, such that adequate confidence is provided that specified products conform to specific requirements.
Conformity assessment	Any activity concerned with determining directly or indirectly that relevant requirements are fulfilled. (Ref: ISO).
Conformity	Body that performs conformity assessment services and that can be the object of accreditation. (ISO/IEC 17000).
Equivalence	The acceptance that different standards or technical regulations on the same subject fulfil common objectives. (Ref: ITF)
Harmonization	The process by which standards, technical regulations and conformity assessment on the same subject approved by different bodies establishes interchangeability of products and processes. The process aims at the establishment of identical standards, technical regulations and conformity assessment requirements. (Ref. WTO modified)
Recognition	Arrangement (either unilateral, bilateral, or multilateral) for the use or acceptance of results of conformity assessments. (Ref: ISO modified)
Requirements for conformity assessment	Any procedure or criteria used directly or indirectly to determine that the assessment relevant technical regulations or standards are fulfilled. (Ref: WTO modified) <i>Note: this could include requirements on the body itself.</i>

- Standard** Document approved by a recognized body that provides for common and repeated use, rules, guidelines or characteristics for products or related processes and production methods, with which compliance is not mandatory. It may also include or deal exclusively with terminology, symbols, packaging, marking or labelling requirements as they apply to a product, process or production method. (Ref : WTO/TBT)  
*Note: the recognized body can be any relevant constituency.*
- Technical regulation** Document which lays down product characteristics or their related processes and production methods, including the applicable administrative provisions, with which compliance is mandatory. It may also include or deal exclusively with terminology, symbols, packaging, marking or labelling requirements as they apply to a product, process or production method. (Ref: WTO/TBT)  
*Note: technical regulations can refer to, or be based on, standards.*

***Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture, Volume 1. Background papers of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture. 1/1/2004. eds. Joy Michaud, Els Wynen and Diane Bowen; UNCTAD/DITC/TED/2005/4. ISBN no. 3-934055-47-8.***

Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture, Volume 1, presents the first results of the International Task Force (ITF) on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture. This volume features the first four background papers that describe the current situation in organic regulation and trade, and offers some models that could apply to potential solutions. A Terms of Reference of the ITF and reports of the first two task force meetings are also included.

***Strategy on Solutions for Harmonizing International Regulation of Organic Agriculture. Volume 2 Background papers of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture. UNCTAD/DITC/TED/2005/15.***

This second volume of background papers of the ITF on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture presents the long-term strategic goal and medium term objectives agreed upon by the ITF in order to solve the trade challenges in the organic sector. It also includes the reports of the third and fourth ITF meetings.

***Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture. Volume 3 Background papers of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture. UNCTAD/DITC/TED/2007/1. ISBN-10: 3-934055-80-X. ISBN-13: 978-3-934055-80-3***

The third volume of background papers of the ITF on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture presents four discussion papers that further develop the potential solutions as proposed by the ITF in Vol. 2 of this series. A Terms of Reference of the ITF, the ITF definitions and a report of the fifth ITF meeting are also included.

***Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture. Volume 4. Background papers of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture. UNCTAD/DITC/TED/2007/14. ISBN-13: 978-3-934055-93-3***


The fourth volume of background papers of the ITF on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture presents four discussion papers presented at the sixth meeting of the ITF, as well as the first draft of the International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies (IROCB), which is a tool for equivalence of organic conformity assessment systems. In addition, the volume contains an ITF Communiqué.

***Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture. Volume 5. Background papers of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture. UNCTAD/DITC/TED/2008/3. ISBN-13: 978-3-940946-05-8.***

The fifth volume of background papers of the ITF on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture presents four discussion papers presented at the seventh meeting of the ITF, as well as the fourth draft of the International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies (IROCB), which is a tool for equivalence of organic conformity assessment systems, and a report on the seventh ITF meeting.

*Please visit the ITF website at [www.unctad.org/trade\\_env/ITF-organic](http://www.unctad.org/trade_env/ITF-organic) to download electronic copies of all ITF publications. Paper copies of these publications can be obtained from the ITF Secretariat.*

*For contact information please refer to the ITF website.*



Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture, Volume 6, presents the 2008 work and final results of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF). Organized by UNCTAD, FAO and IFOAM, the ITF sought solutions to international trade challenges that have arisen as a result of the numerous public and private standards and regulations for organic products that now prevail worldwide.

This final volume presents the Report and Communiqué of the Eighth ITF Meeting, the Summary Report on the ITF's work 2003-2008, and the tools developed by the ITF. The tools are the International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies (IROCB), a reference norm that can be used for determining the equivalence of certification systems and recognizing certification bodies, and EquiTool, which is a guideline for evaluating equivalence of organic standards and technical regulations.