



POSITION PAPER

THE FULL DIVERSITY OF ORGANIC AGRICULTURE: WHAT WE CALL ORGANIC



The term “organic agriculture” is often taken to mean only certified organic. Organic agriculture goes far beyond this narrow definition; The mission of IFOAM - Organic International embraces the worldwide adoption of organic agriculture in its full diversity, including various forms of non-certified organic agriculture. IFOAM - Organics International regards any system that uses organic methods and is based on the Principles of Organic Agriculture, as ‘organic agriculture’ and any farmer practicing such a system as an ‘organic farmer.’ Organic agriculture benefits farmers and society, well beyond the market place.

IFOAM - Organic International supports the adoption of organic agriculture regardless of whether the products are marketed as organic or not. There are organic farmers for whom formal certification does not have any advantages: this is true for farmers who practice subsistence farming and do not engage in the market at all, and for farmers for whom the organic claim has little or no marketing value. These groups engage in organic agriculture because of benefits such as increased productivity, lower production costs, a healthier working environment, and other social, environmental, and economic sustainability considerations.

For farmers wanting to demonstrate the organic quality of their production to their buyers, there are several possibilities:

THIRD PARTY CERTIFICATION

IFOAM - Organics International regards third party certification as the most recognized, and a reliable tool for guaranteeing the organic status of a product, the most relevant for international trade, and a necessary condition for most regulated markets. IFOAM - Organics International has developed a comprehensive private sector system of Norms and an accreditation program to promote and develop reliable third party certification. Third party certification, both private sector and government regulated:

- has been developed as a tool for organic farmers, to show and guarantee to the consumers that a product has been produced in an organic way.
- is the formal and documented procedure by which a third party assures that the organic standards are followed.
- leads to consumers’ trust in the organic production system and the products.
- gives organic farming a distinct identity and credibility and makes market access easier.
- can also be used as a tool for defining groups eligible for support programs, e.g. government support.



IFOAM - Organics International believes that third party certification needs to be adapted to local conditions. One such adaptation is Smallholder Group Certification. Here, several small-scale farmers with similar farming practices who market collectively can be certified together, with internal "inspectors" inspecting every farm, and a certification body auditing the group's Internal Control System.

IFOAM - Organics International does not see third-party certification as 'universal', or as the only tool to describe organic agriculture. There are other methods to verify organic production and farmers for the market place, which are outlined below.

Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS)

These are locally focused quality assurance systems. They certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange.

PGS across the globe are very diverse but have in common some key features:

- Norms are conceived and adopted by the stakeholders through a democratic and participatory process, but always in accordance with the commonly understood sense of what constitutes an organic product.
- Grassroots Organization: The participatory certification should be perceived as a result of a social dynamic, based on an active organization of all stakeholders. The participatory nature and horizontal structure of PGS programs allow for more appropriate mechanisms of certification, making it very suitable to small-scale producers. Organizations are driven by principles and values that enhance the livelihoods and well being of farming families and promote organic agriculture.
- Documented management systems and procedures to demonstrate the producers' organic commitment and integrity. This includes farmer pledges and mechanisms to verify farmer's compliance to the established norms, while stimulating participation, organization and learning processes for all the stakeholders.
- Seals or labels providing evidence that the farm has followed organic practices.
- Clear and previously defined consequences for farmers not complying with standards, actions recorded in a data base or made public in some way.

IFOAM - Organics International sees great potential in these participatory systems and is supporting their development through various projects.

Direct farmer-consumer relationships

Where there is direct contact between farmers and consumers, trust can often be maintained without any systematic verification mechanism. In its simplest form this is represented by direct sales at the farm-gate or in farmers' markets. More complex situations are represented by Box Schemes and Community Supported Agriculture, which is a partnership of mutual commitment between a farm and a community of supporters, providing a direct link between food production and consumption. Supporters cover a farm's yearly operating budget by purchasing a share of the season's harvest and in some cases they assist with the farm work. In return, the farm provides, to the best of its ability, a healthy supply of seasonal fresh produce.

Challenges ahead

Recognizing that it is not certification alone that defines organic agriculture, and also that the situation of all farmers is neither equal nor static, IFOAM - Organics International sees a need to find solutions flexible enough to allow farmers to move from one type of organic quality assurance system to another and to encourage, rather than inhibit, the development of a diversity of such systems. The environmental services that organic farming is delivering to society are gaining increased recognition, but it is yet to be seen which tools are most appropriate for the verification of those services.

