

## **INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP ON ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION**

Organic producers all over the world have been developing methods for guaranteeing the organic status of their product to consumers, processors, traders and increasingly also to governmental agencies in charge of food quality. It has also been important for producers to differentiate organic products from non-organic producers making “organic” or organic-like claims.

The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) has been developing an organic guarantee system with a democratic process of consultations with the people involved in organics since the 70s, which has resulted in a sophisticated and effective structure. This Organic Guarantee System, consisting of IFOAM Basic Standards, Criteria for Accreditation, the IFOAM Accreditation Program and the IFOAM Seal, has demonstrated its efficiency over the years, especially in the mass-markets of developed countries and in the ever-growing international organic trade.

Many of the existing certification bodies began as farmers associations or similar organizations. Due to professional development and external pressures, they have developed concepts to conform with other certification schemes, which has resulted in the IFOAM Guarantee System being based on a similar approach to quality assurance as the ISO norms (such as ISO 65 Guide)

In the local sphere, groups of farmers in different countries have meanwhile developed less formal methods for guaranteeing the ecological status of their production, especially in the countries of the South looking for systems more adapted to their realities. Informal systems also exist in the North, where the interest is growing. The reasons for these “alternative” methods of certification vary, but are often a result of high certification costs, disagreement with the paradigm for ensuring credibility, or a political ambition to strengthen the farmers. In such cases ISO 65 type certification is seen as unnecessary.

Following the worldwide agreement on what the word “organic” means, most of them use the General Principles or the Standards that were developed over the years by the organic movement. But the application of those principles in the overseeing of production, processing and trade varies widely. Some have written standards, some rely on affidavits or producer’s statements, some have seals from

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farmers or consumers organizations, and some guarantee through the name of a company or shop, etc.

These systems often address not only the quality assurance of the product, but are linked to alternative marketing approaches. All over the world, box schemes, home deliveries, community supported agriculture groups (CSA's or Teikei's), farmers markets, popular fairs and other direct and indirect sales arrangements help to educate consumers about products grown or processed with ecological methods, which build trust and confidence in organic agriculture.

It is in this context that IFOAM and MAELA (Latin American Agroecology Movement) promoted the International Workshop on Alternative Certification, hosted by the NGO Centro Ecologico, in the North of Porto Alegre, State of Rio Grande do Sul, in April 13 to 17, 2004.

More than 20 countries were represented in the Workshop. Organized in discussion groups, the participants discussed the common points in their diverse systems to guarantee the credibility of the organic product, and the challenges to provide legitimacy to these methods.

In the participants view, there is a need to look for alternatives adapted to the different economic, social and cultural realities of small farmers all over the world.

Experiences like Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in USA, the Ecovida Agroecology Network in the South of Brazil and the Organic Farm in New Zealand, among others, demonstrate the importance of the involvement of farmers and consumers in the generation of credibility for the organic product. It was a common perception of the participants of the Workshop that these mechanisms of certification, that involve the participation of the key parties interested in the production and consumption of organic products, can be very efficient in guaranteeing the organic quality of the products. The participants also agreed that for the local markets, which are high priority for organic producers, the alternative certification systems are very adequate. One of the conclusions of the Workshop was the need to search ways to legitimize and get recognition of these strategies of certification on markets that go beyond the local sphere.

The recent Brazilian Organic Legislation, that doesn't require certification for trading processes that are based on a direct relationship between producers and consumers and that recognize Participatory Certification as a valid methodology on the certification process, was seen as an interesting example, and various participants from several countries pledged to lobby their governments so their countries legislations include similar contents.

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**IFOAM Head Office:** Charles-de-Gaulle St. 5, 53113 Bonn, Germany  
Tel. +49-228-926 50 10 Fax +49-228-926 50 99 [headoffice@ifoam.org](mailto:headoffice@ifoam.org) [www.ifoam.org](http://www.ifoam.org)

Lastly, the participants stressed their decision to work together, not only in the quest for legitimacy of these alternative methods in other spheres, but also to prevent the growing “conventionalization” of organic agriculture, where so called “markets needs” have separated the organic movement from its initial platform.

IFOAM and MAELA, and the rest of the participating organizations, pledged to promote this issue within their structures. A Working Group with representatives from various continents was elected to take responsibility in assuring the continuity of the discussions and actions generated during the Workshop.

**Torres and Dom Pedro de Alcântara, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, April 2004.**

**SEMINÁRIO INTERNACIONAL CERTIFICAÇÃO ALTERNATIVA  
INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP ON ALTERNATIVE  
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<b>Participantes /</b>	<b>País / Country</b>	<b>Organização / Organization</b>
Anne Boor	Alemanha / Germany	IFOAM
Daniel Vildoza	Alemanha / Germany	GTZ
Maria Calzadas	Argentina / Argentine	El Rincon Orgánico
Pipo Lernoud	Argentina / Argentine	MAPO/IFOAM
Georgina Catacora	Bolivia	Aqrecol
Ana Meirelles	Brasil / Brazil	Centro Ecológico
André Luiz R. Gonçalves	Brasil / Brazil	Cornell University– Centro Ecológico
Marcia Oliveira	Brasil / Brazil	ACS - Acre
Jean Pierre Medaets	Brasil / Brazil	MDA/Federal Brazilian Government
Sílvio Porto	Brasil / Brazil	CONAB/Federal Brazilian Government
Rogério Rosa	Brasil / Brazil	Red Eco Vida
Cristina Ribeiro	Brasil / Brazil	ABIO
Maria Fernanda Fonseca	Brasil / Brazil	PESAGRO-RIO
Daniela Oliveira	Brasil / Brazil	Centro Ecológico
Laércio Meirelles	Brasil / Brazil	MAELA/Centro Ecológico
Volmir Forlin	Brasil / Brazil	AECIA
Willian Rada da Rocha	Brasil / Brazil	Coolméia
Luiz Carlos Rebelatto	Brasil / Brazil	Red Ecovida
Andrea Tuczec	Chile	Tierra Viva
Mário Ahumada	Chile	MAELA
Paola Giancáspero	Chile	IEP
Hugo Valdes	Costa Rica	CEDECO
Manuel Amador	Costa Rica	CEDECO
Elizabeth Henderson	EUA / USA	CSA
Ron Khosla	EUA / USA	Naturally Grown
Armando Aquino	Filipinas / Philippines	MASIPAG
Alexander Daniel	India	IIRD
Mathew John	India	Keystone
Fabio Piccioli	Itália / Italy	ICES
Pilar Santacoloma	Itália / Italy	FAO
Jaime Morales	México	RASA
Dominique Rueqseger	Nicarágua	VECO
Chris May	Nova Zelândia / New Zealand	Bioglobal
Jenny May	Nova Zelândia / New Zealand	Bioglobal
Dr. Thameen Hiiawi	Palestina / Palestine	PARC
Mario Paredes	Paraguay	Altervida
Edgardo Caceres	Peru	ANPE
Patricia Flores	Peru	RAE
Gudrun Hubendick	Suécia / Sweden	SSNC
Gunnar Rundgren	Suécia / Sweden	IFOAM
Inger Kallander	Suécia / Sweden	Ecological Farmers Association
Vitoon Panyakul	Tailândia / Thailand	Green net
Moses Kiqqundu	Uganda	NOGAMU
Alberto Gomez	Uruguay	CEUTA
Hugo Bértola	Uruguay	APODU

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