The case for IFOAM accreditation

IFOAM Accreditation has evolved

Almost 20 years ago the decision to develop a private sector accreditation for organic certifiers based on the IFOAM Norms was taken at the time both European and USA regulations on organic agriculture were first published. It was questioned then whether a private sector guarantee was needed. Over two decades later IFOAM accreditation has been an integral part of the development of many organic certifiers. Now it has evolved and is part of a wider IFOAM Organic Guarantee System. Meanwhile the world has become full of country regulations on organic agriculture. So what is the case for accreditation against IFOAM Norms now?

The need for the private sector

In a world with an ever-increasing number of country organic regulations, some might question the need for a private scheme but the arguments remain as strong as they were back in 1992.

The IFOAM Norms have undeniably been a point of reference for all regulators and continue to be so. The IFOAM Norms for example have led the way with regard to fraud prevention. IFOAM commentaries, policy papers and lobbying have all shaped the definition of organic we use today. The strength of that influence is directly related to the number of certifiers applying the IFOAM Norms.

Governments establish laws but they are not necessarily the best defenders of organic integrity because they inevitably have to balance a wide range of demands and needs. That is not an argument that we do not need the regulators. We do. It is however an argument for a strong international private sector voice which is rooted in practice and which can feed into regulations all over the world ensuring that civil society has its say. A strong private sector supports the regulators but also acts as watchdog.

International

IFOAM accreditation has always been an international programme and the IOAS an organisation that has drawn upon the best talent we can find wherever the person may be based. That international perspective and knowledge ensures that certifiers receive a rigorous but empathetic assessment.

The new IFOAM certification standard being launched in 2011 will be a landmark development; a truly international organic standard that can be taken off the shelf by any certifier. Developed from the IFOAM Basic Standards, the certification standard will be fully updated and form the framework for application to any environment. In-built equivalence to the major regulations will mean that this standard can become the only standard certifiers and their operators need refer to for the international market. Global harmonisation with local adaptation.

IFOAM - the heart of the organic movement

The goal of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) is 'the worldwide adoption of ecologically, socially and economically sound systems that are based on the principles of organic agriculture'. Looking up from their desks, by far the majority of certifiers working in this field can easily identify with, and support, that wider goal. For an organic certifier, being IFOAM accredited is the purest expression of support for IFOAM and the international movement in its work to expand organic agriculture on an international basis. That is surely what we are all working for.

Accreditation against the IFOAM Norms brings certifiers closer to the IFOAM mission, allows greater engagement in the further development of the IFOAM Norms and their influence on the rest of the world and of course front line involvement in application of the Norms at farm level.

IOAS excellence

Accreditation against IFOAM Norms not only engages you in the IFOAM mission but you also gain from the undisputed expertise and understanding of the IOAS. As the only accreditation body in the world that uniquely focuses on assessment of certifiers in organic agriculture, and one that has conducted assessments in over 40 countries we bring that breadth of experience and focus to your organisation.

What IOAS clients repeatedly appreciate about the IOAS is the quality improvement that our assessment and surveillance work provides and the responsive service that we offer which is unmatched by any other accreditation service.

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IFOAM accreditation was always intended as a harmonising and levelling force bringing the same principles and approach to all organic producers and their certifiers no matter in which country they work. That goal remains core today as the sector struggles with multiple demands from different regulatory and private norms.

That goal is promoted with the introduction of the IFOAM certification standard. The idea of bringing together many certifiers around a common organic standard that may nevertheless have structured derogations is a supremely powerful concept. Once again the more organisations that work with that standard, the more convincing and influential the concept can be when it comes to recognition by government regulators for international trade.

**Working together**

Under the umbrella of IFOAM accreditation the accredited certifiers have, since the beginning, naturally formed personal relationships and worked together in support of both developing the IFOAM Norms but also in enhancing their own services. Often an underestimated benefit of IFOAM accreditation, the group of IFOAM certifiers is intent on further enhancing these benefits.

The Global Alliance of Organic Certifiers is a group that proposes to create closer ties, more harmonised working practices, greater sharing of resources and exchange of ideas. Brought together by the commonality of purpose of the IFOAM mission, GAOC is a significant benefit of IFOAM accreditation and further enhances harmonisation and simplification of the sector; a benefit for the whole organic movement.

**Recognising IFOAM accreditation**

Recognition of IFOAM accreditation for imports by country regulators is a simple, reliable and cost effective way to resolve the burgeoning accreditations problem. IFOAM is recognised by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) as an international standard setter. The IOAS is recognised as implementing IFOAM accreditation to ISO Guide 17011 by the National Institute of Standards & Technology. The accreditation programme is at the service of all countries. The more certifiers that commit themselves to IFOAM accreditation, the louder this message will be heard.

**Accreditation against IFOAM Norms**

There are now two accreditations available against IFOAM Norms. Both are assessments against the IFOAM requirements for certification bodies. Full IFOAM accreditation can be awarded when the organic standard used is the IFOAM certification standard or is another standard which has been assessed as compliant to that standard. Global Organic System accreditation (GOSA) requires use of an organic standard in the IFOAM Family of Standards ie those standards that have been determined as equivalent based on the IFOAM Common Objectives and Requirements for Organic Standards.

For worldwide adoption of organic agriculture, talk to us about IFOAM accreditation.

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