



Photo: Erin Nelson / Laura Gomez

The participatory certification committee in action. The farm visit is viewed as an educational experience for all those involved.

Growing a local organic movement: The Mexican Network of Organic Markets

Erin Nelson, Rita Schwentesius Rindermann, Laura Gómez Tovar and Manuel Ángel Gómez Cruz

Over the past several years, in response to the rapid growth in global demand for organic goods, the amount of organic production in Mexico has increased dramatically. Indeed, while Mexican agriculture as a whole has suffered severe crises, the organic sector has boomed, and today more than 83 000 producers farm organically on over 300 000 hectares of land. Of these producers, 98 percent are small scale, farming an average of three hectares, and over 50 percent are indigenous people. Unfortunately, as is the case in many developing countries, the vast majority of organic production remains focused on export crops – particularly coffee, but also cocoa, coconut, and other fruit and vegetables – with 85 percent of organic goods being sent to foreign markets. From an environmental point of view, export-oriented production is extremely damaging because of the amounts of fossil fuels required for transportation. In addition, packaging for export consumes precious resources and creates mountains of waste. Moreover, an export-oriented focus constrains the degree to which domestic markets are developed, and it leaves Mexican producers highly vulnerable to international market fluctuations.

An alternative organic vision

These problems have not gone unnoticed in Mexico. In fact, as in many other countries, a local organic movement has been growing alongside the more conventional industry. For example, some Mexican grocery stores now carry organic goods, and a number of organic speciality shops and cafés have opened, primarily in and around Mexico City. One of the more grassroots efforts, which focuses specifically on small scale local organics, has been the emergence of a number of organic markets across the country. Supported by committed producers and consumers, and in many cases linked to universities and non-governmental organisations, 17 of these markets are already well established in

nine states, and new initiatives are continuously being developed. Since 2004, these markets have joined together to form the Mexican Network of Organic Markets.

While remaining independent entities with distinct characteristics, the markets do share a common vision. Besides the desire to improve the environment by supporting organic agriculture practices, the Network views sustainability in broader terms, regarding social and economic justice. In the Network's view, promoting social and economic justice includes making healthy, safe, organic products more readily available to all Mexicans – and not just to those who live in urban centres and can afford to pay high premiums. Towards this goal, the organic markets focus on goods produced locally by small scale farmers, as well as on linking consumers directly with producers. By reducing the transportation and packaging of products and by eliminating intermediaries, the organic markets make it possible for small scale producers to earn more from their production while at the same time offering relatively affordable prices to consumers. Supporting these kinds of linkages also serves a more philosophical purpose – of building community solidarity and trust relationships.

Indeed, community building is at the heart of Mexico's local organic markets. They are not conceived of as simply places where people go to buy and sell goods. Rather, they are meant to be spaces where commerce and consumption can become a political, social, ethical, educational, and enjoyable act. In an effort to combine these various elements, the vast majority of the Network's markets offer a wide variety of workshops, lectures and other activities for both adults and children. In addition, many also host cultural events such as dance or musical performances, or other special events such as anniversary celebrations or fairs. As a result, the markets are dynamic initiatives that seek to support organic agriculture in

a truly holistic sense, helping move towards environmental, social, and environmental sustainability.

Challenges facing the Mexican Network of Organic Markets

Although the number of local organic markets in Mexico is growing rapidly and there are a considerable number of highly committed producers, consumers, and organisers working tirelessly in support of the movement, each market confronts some significant challenges, and many of these are common across the Network. One of the primary challenges for each market is the struggle to secure the physical and human resources required in order to function. Unfortunately, market profits are generally not yet at a level that enables groups to pay for things like space rental or salaries to co-ordinators. Thus, the markets are heavily dependent on donations of resources and volunteer labour, which can be problematic.

A lack of funds also limits the degree to which the Network can pursue training and education programmes for both producers and consumers. Significant numbers of producers have demonstrated interest in shifting to organic production and accessing an organic market, but they lack the necessary expertise, and cannot access the educational resources needed to assist them in the endeavour. The difficulties in getting access to extension services exacerbates another problem in terms of growing local organic markets – insufficient supply of locally produced organic goods. In fact, although insufficient demand is often cited as a problem for local organics, the reality for many existing organic markets is that sometimes consumers come looking for goods and find them either sold or not available at all. In response to this problem, the markets are constantly searching for new producers to expand the supply of existing products and introduce new ones to meet consumer needs and preferences. The Network would also like to facilitate the inter-market exchange of products; however, a lack of funding for transportation has meant that this has not yet been possible.

Participatory organic certification system

Another major challenge confronting local organic markets are the economic and bureaucratic barriers that make it difficult for the small scale producers involved to obtain organic certification. This can make ensuring consumer confidence in the integrity of the products for sale difficult. In response to this issue, the organic markets that participate in the Network support the notion of participatory certification, and are working to develop smoothly

functioning “Participatory Guarantee Systems”. Key aspects of these systems are that they minimise bureaucracy, do not require any payment from the producer, and incorporate an element of social and environmental education for producers and consumers. In a major step forward for participatory certification in Mexico, the Network successfully lobbied for its inclusion in the recently passed law governing organic agriculture. As a result, products certified through participatory processes can now legally be referred to as “organic”.

In Chapingo’s organic market, for example, the first step for a producer wishing to achieve participatory certification is to contact the market co-ordinator and fill out a questionnaire regarding current and past production practices. This questionnaire is reviewed by Chapingo’s participatory certification committee, which consists of local consumers, producers, agricultural researchers and students. The committee uses a combination of the norms of the National Organic Program of the United States and those of the Mexican certification body Certimex as a reference. If, based on the questionnaire, the producer meets the requirements for organic certification, a visit to the farm is scheduled.

This farm visit is not viewed as an inspection *per se*, but rather as an interactive experience designed to be educational for all those involved. During the visit, committee members consult a checklist that includes basic data about the farm operation (e.g. size of territory, number of crops, etc.), as well as basic organic control points such as the following: source of seeds and water; soil, pest and disease management practices; post-harvest treatment of crops; and the potential for contamination from neighbouring farms.

Following the farm visit, the case is discussed in a meeting of the entire certification committee. If producers comply with all standards, they are granted organic status within the market and certified without condition. In most cases however, certification comes with a set of conditions. The most common ones include the need to develop natural barriers to prevent contamination from neighbouring conventional farms, and to thoroughly compost manure before application to crops. Provided that the producers work with the committee to meet these conditions, and that they are not in serious violation of organic standards, they can then begin to sell their goods in the “natural” section of the market, which is physically separated from the organic section and marked with a sign. Follow-up visits and continuous communication are used to ensure that the conditions are being

The birth of a local organic market

One of the first markets created was in the community of Chapingo – home to Mexico’s principle agricultural university. The Chapingo initiative began with a group of people at the university who organised courses and workshops on organic agriculture, as well as tasting sessions where members of the public could sample organic goods. They also contacted local organic farmers and began to organise a system of organic product delivery for consumers at the university and in neighbouring communities. By 2003, the number of consumers and producers involved in the project had grown to such an extent that the organisers decided to move from the order and delivery system to a fully functioning public market (or “*tianguis*”). Thus, in November of that year, the Chapingo market was officially inaugurated in a building lent out free of charge by the university.

Today, the Chapingo Organic Market opens every Saturday from 10:00 to 15:00 and has more than twenty participating vendor tables. There is a growing number of consumers coming from the surrounding communities and also, in many cases, from Mexico City, which is about an hour’s drive away. The products offered include fruit and vegetables, meats, dairy products, eggs, baked goods, honey, coffee, processed goods such as

syrup, oil, *salsa* and dried fruit, biodegradable cleaning and beauty products and artisanal work. In addition, consumers can enjoy a brunch of *tlacoyos*, *quesadillas* or *tamales* and drink coffee, chocolate or hibiscus juice. The market does not just offer goods for sale – it also has a small library with books about environmental and organic agriculture issues, an information table with books and pamphlets, and a space to hold free educational workshops for children and adults.

In many ways, the Chapingo market is representative of the other markets that form the Mexican Network of Organic Markets. Most of the markets run on a weekly basis, include educational elements such as workshops and presentations, are working towards developing participatory certification systems, and are run primarily on volunteer labour. The Mexican Network of Organic Markets pursues a wide variety of activities (including public education, marketing and promotion), but one of the primary objectives of the Network is to assist in the creation of new markets. Today there are 17 functioning markets and 8 proposals for new ones. The long term goal is to have 100 local organic markets open in Mexico.



Photo: Erin Nelson / Laura Gomez

One of the workshops regularly organised as part of the Chapingo Organic Market. Producers and customers exchange ideas about dried herbs.

met, and eventually the producer may be eligible for full organic status (refer to Figure 1 for the full picture of the process). Because transparency and community involvement are integral aspects of the system, the results of all questionnaires and committee decisions are available to the public, and anyone who wishes to join the certification committee is more than welcome to do so. In addition, consumers are encouraged to interact with producers at the Chapingo market, and this interaction has led to the development of strong relationships of trust, and in some cases friendship, between the buyers and sellers of organic products. These relationships are an important means of supporting the participatory certification process, as they provide the consumer with an extra sense of security.

It should be noted that the process of participatory certification is not without its own set of problems and limitations. One of the most prominent challenges for the implementation of participatory certification is that it is currently all done on a voluntary basis. This places significant constraints on the amount of time that people are able to devote to the process.

In addition, many participants come and go, and this creates a lack of consistency and continuity within the certification committee. Finally, a lack of training and education means that several people who are currently active in the committee still lack the sufficient expertise to carry out inspections. These challenges have made it difficult to keep up with the demand for certifying new producers who wish to enter the market, and also to consistently monitor the farms of existing market members.

Future steps

The Mexican Network of Organic Markets is expected to continue growing, as it is doing that now at a very fast rate. Looking into the future, the Network's plans include to:

- solidify the participatory certification systems (i.e. make sure that they are codified in writing and that they are followed homogeneously in all markets);
- systematically determine the characteristics of the various markets (including number of producers involved, products available, income generated, resources invested, etc.);
- offer training for market managers;

Participatory Guarantee Systems

Tegan Renner

Over the past three decades, organic agriculture has evolved into a global system of third party certification and international trade. This system has seen tremendous growth in recent years, but it has presented more challenges than opportunities for small scale producers, especially those in the South. There are many who abide by the principles but who are unable to market their crops as organic because they lack the third party certification that the global market demands. The reality is that most farmers are not able to afford the high costs associated with third party certification. The amount of paperwork that is required is also often seen as an obstacle. Aside from these barriers, the fact still remains that international organic standards like the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement's (IFOAM) Basic Standards have been developed in the North, despite 75 percent of IFOAM's members being from the South. The result is standards that do not consider southern climates or economies.

In reaction to these challenges, small farmers around the world have created alternative systems of organic certification that are suited to their local ecological and economic realities. Still

founded on the principles of organic agriculture, these systems are often loosely based on IFOAM's Basic Standards but with the necessary modifications made to reflect their community's needs, including different cultural means of quantitatively or qualitatively measuring "organic." Most basic are changes involving reduced certification costs and amounts of required paperwork, but more significant are the structural differences. Very much a community organisation, the shared emphasis of participation in all these alternative systems has led to the overall term, "participatory guarantee systems" (PGS). With a focus on the local community, standards are created jointly by the producers and consumers that the system will serve. In this way and others, both transparency and participation are entrenched as core values in these alternative systems of certification. Trust is also a cornerstone of PGS –not only because of the joint participation of its creation– but also because of the continued relationship between producers and consumers in direct purchasing at markets or farm-gate sales and a close relationship between producers who work together to keep the PGS functioning. Sharing information and experience with each other is one way that this trust is established. Capacity building is also a key component of PGS, and training is often a requirement, as well as meetings to discuss farm management issues and share

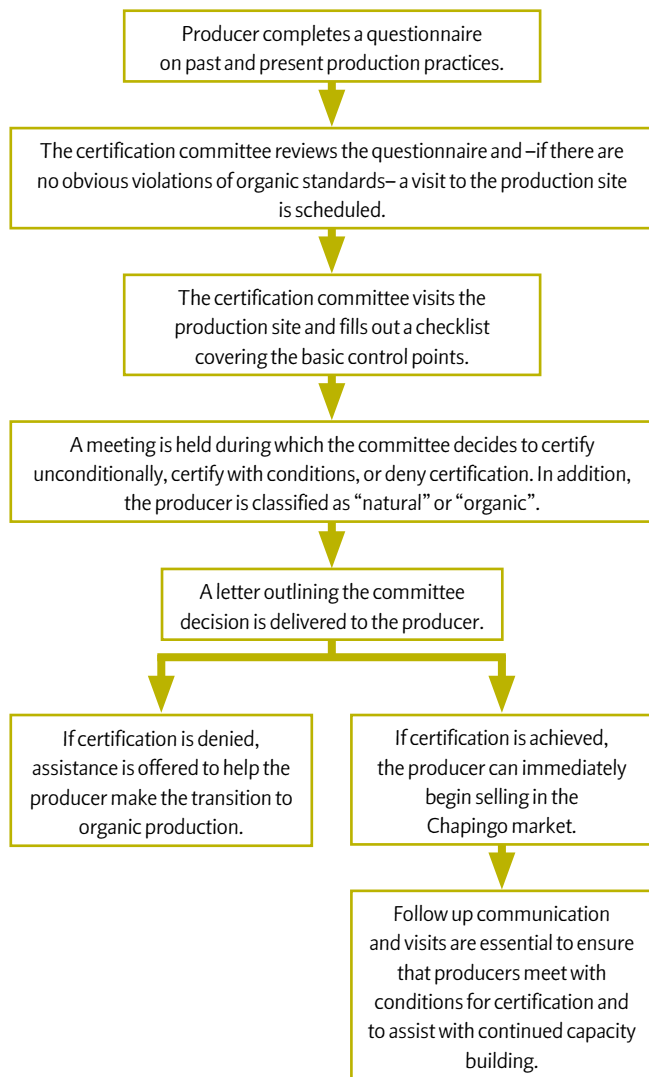


Figure 1: Steps to achieving participatory organic certification in Chapingo

- continue offering capacity building workshops on organic agriculture techniques as well as on price setting and small business management;
- address issues of gender within the local organic markets;
- increase promotion of the markets, for example by using radio and television and public events;
- visit elementary schools and offer education on the environment and organic agriculture; and
- continue to host meetings three times per year where all markets will be represented.

The rapid growth of the Mexican Network of Organic Markets demonstrates that there is a great deal of interest on the part of both Mexican producers and consumers to work together to create sustainable food systems. By increasing the links between producers and consumers and by providing high quality organic goods at prices that are fair for everyone involved, these markets help broaden the reach of the organic movement while simultaneously returning it to its philosophical roots. By facilitating the involvement of small scale producers and encouraging a focus on local food networks, the notion of participatory certification furthers this effort. Indeed, although still in its early phases, the Mexican experience with local organic markets and participatory certification offers an important alternative, not only to the conventional food sector, but also to the industrialised, export-oriented, “mainstream” organic sector. ■

Erin Nelson. University of Guelph, School of Environmental Design and Rural Development. 50 Stone Road East, Guelph, Ontario N1G 2W1, Canada. E-mail: enelson@uoguelph.ca

Rita Schwentesius Rindermann. Red Mexicana de Tianguis y Mercados Orgánicos/ Cuerpo Académico Socioeconomía en Producción, Certificación y Consumo Orgánico, Universidad Autónoma Chapingo. Km. 38.5, Carretera México- Texcoco, Apdo. Postal 90, C.P. 56230 Chapingo, México. E-mail: rsr@avante.net

Laura Gómez Tovar. Departamento de Agroecología, Universidad Autónoma Chapingo / Comité de Certificación Participativa del Tianguis Orgánico. E-mail: gomezlaura@yahoo.com

Manuel Ángel Gómez Cruz. Cuerpo Académico Socioeconomía en Producción, Certificación y Consumo Orgánico, Universidad Autónoma Chapingo. E-mail: grupoinvestigacionorganicos@yahoo.com.mx

offer alternative certification

solutions. Most PGSs are non-hierarchical, which is achieved through a relatively even distribution of responsibility among producers who belong to the PGS.

From participatory-driven principles to action, the Ecovida Network in Brazil provides an example of PGS. This scheme, set up by local NGOs and research institutions, has 2300 farm families, 25 support organisations, 15 consumer groups, 8 marketing enterprises and 7 small scale agro-industries as members. Most farmer members of the Network sell individually or through farmers’ groups at fairs and markets, but others sell to co-operative stores or agro-processing plants that are a part of the Network. Members are able to enjoy a price premium for their organic certification and are able to keep more of their profits as there is no intermediary.

IFOAM reports that there are dozens of PGSs around the world and they range in scale as well as approach. Though PGSs have common founding principles, how they run differs according to what is desired by the local community. It should be noted that even with a system like the Ecovida Network, the focus is still on direct local consumption. There are those within the PGS movement who wish to gain access to niche markets in the

North, but this ambition is far from being realised. There are many signs that IFOAM recognises the importance of PGSs in direct, local consumption relationships, but not as an export-oriented system. Nevertheless, IFOAM has published a number of suggestions to guide NGOs and policy makers in promoting PGS. Ideas include building PGS credibility through the establishment of local markets, arranging access to urban areas for rural farmers, revitalising the link between socioeconomic issues and organic agriculture and many other actions to encourage PGS, both in regions where it is and is not established. PGS presents the opportunity for the organic movement to again support local consumption, in turn strengthening community ties, economies and rural livelihoods. ■

Tegan Renner. University of Waterloo, 320-D Spruce St. Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3M7 Canada. E-mail: trenner@fes.uwaterloo.ca

References

- FAO, 2007. **Participatory Guarantee Systems for marketing organic products, Brazil.** Food and Agriculture Organisation. Rome, Italy.
- IFOAM, 2007. **Participatory Guarantee Systems: shared vision, shared ideals.** International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements. Bonn, Germany.
- Raynolds, Laura T., 2004. **The globalization of organic agro-food networks.** *World Development*, 32, 5.