

Zero- cost Organic Certification System: A Beginning

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Abstract

Organic Certification systems have been a boon and a bane for the organic agriculture movement. The stringent organic standards and certification system has mainstreamed traceability and promoted food safety to a large extent. However the inspection and certification process have become too cumbersome and very expensive for the poor farmers. These additional costs are charged on the consumer which makes organic produce even more expensive and unaffordable. Instead of considering organic products as niche commodities there is a need to rethink organic agriculture as a system that provides innumerable environmental services through good health of soil, water and safe food. Conserving the soil, water, natural resources and environment should be the responsibility of the respective governments and appropriate mechanisms should be developed for its facilitation. A unique certification system for organic produce has been developed by Bhutan Agriculture and Food regulatory Authority (BAFRA) under the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests to support the organic farmers, custodians of environment. This zero-cost certification system was launched as Bhutan Organic Certification System (BOCS) which will be implemented in Bhutan to support and empower the small holder farmers.

Key words: Organic Certification, Bhutan

Introduction:

The maladies of the synthetic agro-chemicals based agriculture is well documented world over. Strong linkages have been established with the modern agricultural practices and climate change. Contamination of natural resources and food is on the rise world over. Farmers globally are realizing organic agriculture as a viable alternative to the conventional farming practices. Organic agriculture is not merely substitution of synthetic inputs with biological materials but a production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local conditions, rather than the use of inputs with adverse effects. Also it combines tradition, innovation and science to benefit the shared

environment and promote fair relationships and a good quality of life for all involved (IFOAM).

Organic agriculture includes all agricultural systems like permaculture, biodynamic farming, etc. that promote environmentally, socially and economically sound production of food and fibres. Soil fertility is the key to successful production in these systems which rely on natural nutrient-cycling processes to sustain and regenerate soil quality. The farming practices include crop rotation, mixed cropping, intercropping, strip cropping, trap cropping, mulching, tillage operations, cover crops, manure application (composting) and biological pest control. These agro-ecological methods retain more nutrients, organic carbon and moisture in the soil which facilitates the crops to withstand and resist unpredictable weather patterns and climatic stress like drought (Duba et al., 2008)

By respecting the natural capacity of plants, animals and the landscape, organic farming aim to optimize quality in all aspects of agriculture and the environment. Organic agriculture adheres to globally accepted principles, which are implemented within local social-economic, climate and cultural settings (IFOAM). Among consumers, organic products are in more simple words known as products produced without synthetic pesticides and inorganic chemical fertilizers, and without the use of antibiotics for livestock.

The practice of Organic agriculture is uniquely pro-poor, as it builds on the comparative advantages that poor farmers have, such as the relatively chemical-free land, optimal use of labour and the traditional knowledge of chemical-free production methods. These comparative advantages that the poor farmer posses has allowed cost effectiveness in producing organic food to a large population who are suffering from poverty and malnutrition (Thimmaiah,2007).

Organic Agriculture and Certification

The information and technology coupled with globalization of trade has enhanced the environmental awareness on food safety, place of origin of food and concern for health and social equity. Also it has catalyzed the growing demand among consumers for products and services that meet specific minimum standards. To fulfil such requirements, standardization and certification systems are important tools for market facilitation as they break barriers to trade by making products and services uniform and of assured quality.

Certification guarantees to the consumer that a product or service has been produced according to some specified standards and is of a certain quality. Standards may be management, primary production, and manufacturing and/or product quality standards. Standards are either set by government, civil society, professional bodies, producers or service providers in response to consumer demands, to protect public health or to

protect the public and other producers from sub-standard goods and services. Standards assure the consumer of safety, consistency and value for money.

Organic certification is a process wherein an independent third party gives a written assurance (to the buyer and seller) that a clearly identified process has been methodically assessed to provide adequate confidence for the specified products with specific requirements. In other words organic certificate is a written guarantee issued by an independent certification agency officially stating that the production processes or product complies with certain standards. It is very helpful for trading in the international markets wherein consumers cannot be assured of the quality of a product or its production process.

Organic certification opens up opportunities for protection of local resources, better market access, improvement of worker and consumer health, and eventually improving the livelihoods of the rural communities. It helps to differentiate the organic products from other products and to promote organic products in the market and fetch a premium price.

Third Party Organic Certification: Challenges and Constraints in Bhutan

Third Party Certifications are very popular for organic products in both domestic and international trade. This system has many challenges and constraints in mountain agriculture systems wherein the land holdings are small and farmers are poor like,

1. Certification costs are very high and small holders cannot afford.
2. The certification process is too cumbersome and requires additional human resources to maintain records as per the international standards.
3. Bhutan does not have a national organic certification agency for inspection and certification.
4. Majority of farmers in Bhutan are small holders and cannot access the international market.
5. The arable area of Bhutan is less than 3% of the geographical area which is predominantly mountainous and economies of scale are the limitation.
6. The geography of the region restricts the logistics.
7. Inadequate processing, storage and transportation facilities which poses a serious risk for perishable and semi-perishable agriculture commodities for export.
8. Limited international agri-business groups operating in organic agriculture business in Bhutan.

9. Inadequate technical capacity to develop certifiable production operations and establishing internal control systems.
10. Limited exposure to farmers on organic certification, standards, exports potentials etc.
11. Numerous standards to comply with for accessing different markets.
12. International donor agencies not keen on promoting organic agriculture.
13. Lack of local market for certified organic produce in Bhutan though the local population prefers the local produce which is organic by default as most farmers use the traditional farming methods.

To overcome the inherent problems associated with the commercial third party certification system, Bhutan Organic Certification System (BOCS), is an alternative certification system which has no cost implication on the farmers while maintaining the integrity of the organic produce (BOCS, 2013).

Bhutan Organic Certification System

Bhutan Organic Certification System (BOCS) is a national certification system, which involves field inspection whereby the records of farm operations are checked, soil, water and agriculture/livestock produce are analyzed at the laboratory for pesticide, drug and antibiotic residues. The inspections are conducted by the inspectors of Bhutan Agriculture and Food Regulatory Authority (BAFRA). On establishment of the authenticity of the organic produce the farm or farmers group is certified as organic. BOCS comprises of;

1. Standard

The farmer and farmers group are assessed based on the National Organic Standards of Bhutan (NOSB, 2013). The Internal Control System (ICS), inspection and certification procedures are made simpler and farmer- friendly without compromising on the integrity of the organic production system.

2. Process:

The farmer or farmers group will apply for inspection after undergoing training in organic agriculture, group formation and book keeping by the relevant agencies of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Bhutan. Whenever the farmers feel confident to go for organic certification, they apply to BAFRA requesting for inspection. The trained inspectors of BAFRA schedule an inspection visit and undertake audit. Soil and Water samples are collected and sent to the laboratory. The inspection report is analyzed by organic certification committee and the decisions are made for organic in-conversion or to fully organic. The certified farmers can use the organic logo for marketing their produce. The entire process is conducted by the government officials and the farmers

are not charged for the service. The detailed inspection process and procedures are furnished in BOCS document (BOCS, 2013). It is an alternative certification system which has no cost implication on the farmers while maintaining the integrity of the organic produce. This certification system can harness the comparative advantages of the poor farmers such as relatively agro-chemical free land and production methods with abundant traditional knowledge. It will help the farmers to adopt the traceability systems and documentations of all the farm activities which in turn facilitate the inspection process by BAFRA and assure the consumers of the organic intent and in turn food safety. In addition to the organic quality assurance, BOCS will help to mobilize farmers to organise themselves in groups and undertake farming as a collective endeavour with multiple benefits for rural development.

Conclusion:

The organic certification system though assures the quality of the produce for the consumer is very cumbersome and expensive for the poor farmers. Organic agriculture provides a sequel of environmental services in addition to producing safe food. The governments should take onus to promote organic agriculture by supporting the organic farmers, the environment stewards. Bhutan has initiated an innovative system of certification without any cost implication to the farmers which is called as Bhutan Organic Certification System (BOCS). There is a need for other nations to emulate this system and facilitate the poor farmers with zero cost certifications for markets access and empowerment.

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the opinion of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Royal Government of Bhutan.

Acknowledgements:

I acknowledge the support of Mr. Sherub Gyaltshen, Secretary, Mr. Karma Dorji, Executive Director, Bhutan Agriculture and Food Regulatory Authority, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Royal Government of Bhutan for their support in developing Organic agriculture and quality assurance systems.

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