

IFOAM 18th World Congress

Title: Organic Certification Evolution

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Author background: Raymond Yang has been involved in sustainable and organic agriculture, as well as organic certification for the past 20 years. He did his first inspection in 2006 for Korea-based and IFOAM-accredited Doalnara Certified Organic Korea, and continued to inspect for almost 7 years until early 2013. He has also performed inspections for Bioagricert, Ecocert, Australian Certified Organic, and BCS Korea.

Raymond is credited with growing the IFOAM certification program, as well as other international programs in Korea, in addition to forming a strong international network of accredited certified bodies including ACO, Argencert, Bioagricert, Biogro, IBD, and IMO. He was awarded a Certificate of Commendation by the Minister of the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries for his efforts in the promotion and development of certification for the organic program of South Korea.

In June 2012, he became a member of the IFOAM Accreditation Requirements Committee that reviews and updates the regulations concerning IFOAM accreditation of certification bodies.

Raymond is the founder/CEO of Organic Partner, which provides services to promote certified organic products in Korea through expos and trade shows. He also provides services to assist in the export and import of organic products.

Summary: The present certification process is more and more becoming focused on chain of custody and documentation. There is a necessity to go away from a bureaucratic-type of certification process to one that takes only as much time and documentation as necessary. Two possible solutions is expanding equivalency between certification programs and developing participatory guarantee systems. This requires the collaboration between producers, certification bodies, accreditation bodies, and certification program agencies.

Background: "Farming, rearing animals, transforming nature into food without adding external, chemical and petrol-based inputs should be perfectly normal. It's those who add chemical fertilizers, pesticides, additives and preservatives who should declare that they are doing so, and who should certify and document their 'abnormality.' This is a matter of principle – and not a minor one - but it exposes the sad truth: natural, wholesome food is no longer the norm. In the current global food system the norm is food that has somehow been altered. Food that is considered the result of 'conventional' farming, and the use of this term is quite illuminating. Those who want to produce organic food are not 'conventional': they're weird and belong to a minority, and therefore must be subject to certifications and controls."(1)

Recent frauds of certified organic products have placed greater scrutiny on not only the produces and third-party certifiers, but also the leading international programs. This is causing a "snowball" effect not only in the certification process, but the accreditation process, as well. Certifiers are more focused on the chain-of-custody, causing producers to spend more time documenting and collecting documents. "The need for certification transforms this concept into a mere label deprived of its core values – soil fertility, environmental safeguard of natural systems, and therefore of biodiversity, landscapes and rural communities."(2)

Main chapter: "Farmers have reported spending more time completing forms and maintaining records. A certain amount of records are essential to ensure organic farmers are meeting the organic standards, such as planting non-genetically modified seeds or raising dairy cattle on organic pasture. But, too much focus on paperwork can detract from farming activities that support organic principles, such as conservation and cycling of resources."(3)

A major paradigm shift in organic certification is necessary as the times have changed since IFOAM's humble beginnings on November 5, 1972. What began with a group of people from France, UK, Sweden, and USA has grown to the IFOAM of today that boasts 800 members from 120 countries representing all five continents. Certification is now an international and global issue. Does organic certification as we know it cater properly to our modern, international clientele?

Certification programs maybe private (eg. IFOAM) or government-based (eg. EU), but in the end, it's up to the accredited third-parties to do the verification. The third-party certification bodies need to strive to make the process as streamlined as possible, working with the proper agencies that oversee the certification programs. The USDA, for example, is working on what is known as a "sound and sensible approach to organic certification." This is a step in the right direction.

Solutions: One method is to push for more equivalency between organic programs, such as the recent US-EU equivalency that was signed at Biofach in February 2012. Equivalency is neither easily reached nor quickly attained. However, it is up to the certification bodies to work with their local government to push equivalency.

Another method is to promote participatory guarantee systems (PGS). The individual producer in the US or Europe will seek organic certification regardless of the time and price because the market demands it. What about the poor farmers in the less-developed countries? Of course, they can't afford the certification alone, so this is where group certification comes in. Group certifications are an even more time-consuming process, sometimes involving thousands of farmers and covering thousands of hectares. The sheer effort and time it takes to properly verify the group can be mind-boggling. A PGS is a "form of certification (that) is based on mainstream organic standards; however, it takes place at the community level, involves a wide variety of actors, employs simple verification procedures, minimizes bureaucracy and costs, and incorporates an element of environmental and social education for both producers and consumers."(5) A sound PGS program would make organic certification accessible and grow the organic market.

"We no longer live in a world of arm's-length transactions where we all know and trust each other, so third-party certifications, such as organic, have become a vital way to reasonably ensure that consumers (and firms) get what they expect for their money. Equally important, if not more so, we need clear assurances that the approaches we use enable producers to also achieve their own goals of satisfaction, healthy environment, and a decent livelihood.

Organic certification is important not only from an economic perspective, but also because consumers expect it and are seeking it out, and both society and the environment benefits from it."(7)