ORGANIC CERTIFICATION—A DREAM FOR POOR FARMERS

Poor and illiterate farmers are unable to benefit from organic cultivation as they cannot afford certification or are unable to file requisite paperwork. Perhaps a trust based model not requiring certification could be introduced for small scale farmers for short supply chains

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PARTICIPATORY GUARANTEE SYSTEMS

PGS are an alternative to third party certification, which enable the direct participation of producers, consumers and other stakeholders in:

- Choice & definition of standards
- Development & implementation of certification procedures
- Certification decisions

A century ago, we were all eating organic but that changed with the advent of chemicals in agriculture. In the 1960s, the ill effects of chemicals in agriculture came to light and with the spread of human health awareness amongst farmers and consumers, chemical free or organic farming re-emerged.

Initially, at the local level, mutual trust between producers and consumers was sufficient to run this system. However, it soon crossed the national boundaries and the rapidly growing worldwide demand for organic food is now a reality. But the question linked with this process is how to ascertain if a product is really organic. A witness is required who can certify that it is indeed, organic. To do this, a work of certification mechanism has been developed.

FORMAL THIRD PARTY CERTIFICATION

Since a certification body comes between producers and consumers, it is called third party certification. Organic certification is a process for producers of organic food and other organic agricultural products including seed suppliers, farmers, food processors, retailers and restaurants. Certification requirements vary from country to country, and generally involve a set of production standards for growing, storage, processing, packaging and shipping that include:

- Avoidance of synthetic chemical inputs (ex, fertiliser, pesticides, antibiotics, food additives), genetic modification, irradiation, and the use of sewage sludge
- Use of farmland that has been freed from prohibited chemical inputs for a number of years (often, three or more)
- For livestock, following specific requirements for feed, housing, and breeding
- Keeping detailed written production and sales records (an audit trail)
- Maintaining physical separation of organic products from non certified ones
- Undergoing periodic onsite inspections

In addition, for first-time farm certification, the soil must meet basic requirements of being free from use of prohibited substances (synthetic chemicals) for a number of years. A conventional farm must adhere to organic standards for this period, often two to three years. This is known as being in transition. Transitional crops are not considered fully organic. Certification for operations other than farms follows a similar process. The focus is on the quality of ingredients and other inputs, and processing and handling conditions. A transport company would be required to detail the use and maintenance of its vehicles, storage facilities, containers, and so forth. A restaurant would have its premises inspected and its suppliers verified as certified organic.

HOW CERTIFICATION WORKS

For organic producers, certification identifies suppliers of products approved for use in certified operations. For consumers, 'certified organic' serves as a product assurance, similar to 'low fat', '100% whole wheat', or 'no artificial preservatives'. Individual certification bodies have their own service marks, which can act as branding to consumers—a certifier may promote the high consumer recognition value of its logo as a marketing advantage to producers.

CERTIFYING BODIES

There are three main organic standards that prevail all over the world. These are USDA of USA, JAS of Japan and EU of European countries. India has her own standards under NPOP that is almost a combination of all three.

Internationally, equivalency negotiations are under way, and a few agreements are already afoot, to harmonise certification between countries, facilitating international trade. There are also international certification bodies, including members of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) working on harmonisation efforts. Where formal agreements do not exist between countries, organic products for export are often certified by agencies from the importing countries, who may establish permanent foreign offices for this purpose. In 2011, IFOAM introduced a new programme—the IFOAM Family of Standards—that attempts to simplify harmonisation. The vision is to establish the use of a single global reference (the COROS) to access the quality of standards rather than focus on bilateral agreements.

NEGATIVES IN THE SYSTEM

However, this system has several drawbacks that need to be addressed:

- It is a costly and cumbersome process and is not feasible for a majority of farmers who are poor and not able to maintain records. The common example is of default organic farmers who produce organic products but are not able to get certification under this system. Moreover, standards vary from country to country and therefore, production of certified organic is possible by big corporate houses, which can bear costly certification and testing of produce. An annual inspection/certification fee currently starts at Rs 5,000 to 5,00,000 (USD 79 to 7,884) to per year, depending on the agency and the size of the operation. A common farmer has to associate himself with such exporters if he wants to export his product.
- Organic farming is the integration of all eco technologies along with efficient recycling of local resources but the certification is done in a mechanical way by only verifying the compliance of standards. Therefore, it least promotes sustainable organic farming.
- Since the certification is done by humans, the possibility of error and bias cannot be overruled.

All the above points compel both, the producer and the consumer to search for an alternative system.

PARTICIPATORY GUARANTEE SYSTEMS

Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) are an alternative to third party certification, especially designed for local markets and short supply chains. PGS, also known as Participatory Certification, can complement third party certification with a private label that brings additional guarantees and transparency. PGS enable the direct participation of producers, consumers and other stakeholders in:

- The choice and definition of the standards
- The development and implementation of certification procedures
- Certification decisions

Presently in India, there are two agencies doing PGS certification—the National Centre of Organic Farming and the PGS Council of India. A newly launched (2015) Government of India's scheme, *Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojna* works for the promotion of organic farming that includes PGS certification. Although this certification is farmer friendly, low-cost and mainly works on trust, the system still needs several modifications to get the confidence of consumers and importers.

TRUST-BASED OPTIONS

The word 'organic' is central to the certification (and organic food marketing) process, and this is also under debate. Where organic laws exist, producers cannot use the term 'organic' legally without certification. To bypass this legal requirement for certification, various alternative certification approaches, such as using currently undefined terms like 'authentic' and 'natural', are emerging.

The most convenient approach is making local producers/consumers associations wherein groups of consumers visit production areas and get organic produce without certification. This has several advantages such as curtailment of certification cost, consumers get farm fresh products, urbanites know the production process and enjoy the natural environment for a weekend. Above all, a fraternity will develop between the producer and consumer, as well as, an understanding of the environment that will help in the development of an eco friendly society.

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