



## ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION AND A NETWORK CONFORMITY ASSESSMENT APPROACH

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The last issue of TOS (May, issue no. 37) reported briefly on a workshop on 'Alternative Certification' organised by IFOAM, Agroecology Movement for Latin America and Caribbean (MAELA) and Centro Ecologico/Rede ECOVIDA, and held in Brazil. The following article provides further details from the workshop, covering the findings as well as reflecting on the role of these systems and governance in the organic food industry.

The first International Workshop on Alternative Certification took place on 14 –16 April 2004 near Porto Alegre in southern Brazil. The people and organisations attending represented a wide range of initiatives, some that began in the 1970s in the early days of the organic agriculture movement, right up to the schemes that appeared in the 1990s and even more recently. These included the early community supported agriculture schemes (CSAs) in the USA; the Teikei system in Japan and COOLMEIA Ecological Fairs in Brazil, as well as more recent developments that offer alternatives to big anonymous markets and national regulations on organic labelling. These schemes mainly involve small farmers and small enterprises working in a system that promote social and environmental aspects that are important for sustainable living. To achieve their goals they have all developed a method that allows local customers to identify their products within the market place. They included schemes in seven countries with implemented organic regulations (Argentina, Costa Rica, India, Japan, Philippines, Thailand, USA), three with finalised organic regulations but not yet fully implemented (Brazil, Chile, Mexico), four with a draft regulation/standard (Peru, Lebanon, Uruguay, New Zealand), and three where no regulatory developments have yet taken place (Palestine, Paraguay, Uganda). The type of organisations involved in Alternative Certification were diverse, including farmers' associations, consumers cooperatives, clubs, marketing organisations and informal and formal non-governmental organisations (NGOs). A common label, logo or seal is normally used but also written statement (affidavit). Means of promotion varies, including mouth to mouth communication, publications (brochures, newsletters) direct mailing, farmers' markets, training sellers staff and websites. Schemes can be local, regional or national in scope.

### Results from the workshop

Although the Alternative Certification schemes (ACs)\* represented at the workshop all have very different backgrounds and function in very diverse conditions, they share many common features. Most use standards based on the IFOAM Basic Standards (IBS), Codex and/or national regulations adapted to their local socio ecological conditions, small-scale production and processing, and local marketing. Procedures are simple. There is minimal bureaucracy to maintain low costs to farmers or time spent filling-in forms. Most rely on an educational process and social control involving all actors from productive chain focusing on consumer participation to uphold their organic quality system. Transparency is maintained through stimulating active participation within the network.

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## Key features of Alternative Certification systems

<b>Principles, values and ideology</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Food sovereignty ('no' to agrifood sector) concentration), food security and food safety.</li> <li>▪ Appropriate to small farmers' realities and small agricultural and enterprises.</li> <li>▪ Flexible system emphasising a learning process in a transparent and trust-building system.</li> <li>▪ Priority to local markets and long term relationships.</li> <li>▪ Co-responsibility and decentralised decision-making, emphasising empowerment, capacity building and gender sensitivity.</li> </ul>
<b>Participation</b>	Inclusion of grassroots participation not just 'qualified' technicians.
<b>Standards &amp; norms</b>	Inclusion of social justice norms alongside organic production norms.
<b>Co-responsibility of the Guarantee System programme</b>	<p>Principles and standards are built together, put in practice and verified through the involvement of all participants (farmers, partner organisations, distributors, consumers, technicians) in the network.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Standards/norms are normally revised every 2 or 3 years.</li> <li>▪ Minimal and simple paperwork and registration procedures.</li> <li>▪ Frequent meetings, visits and social interactions between participants within the network.</li> <li>▪ Visit report is evaluated by committees in the network. Approval, sanctions and deregistration are decided collectively</li> <li>▪ Conflict of interest is managed through prohibiting farmers or stakeholders to take part in the evaluation related to their property, and encouraging the active participation of conscientious consumers</li> <li>▪ Emphasis is placed on training and empowering participants in the network to take an active role in the norm setting and certification process.</li> </ul>
<b>Documentation and transparency</b>	Transparency and open access to information is the general norm for all schemes.. Some are mainly based on oral accounts, most function with minimal paper work
<b>Funding and resources</b>	Schemes rely a lot on voluntary work. Direct costs are covered by membership dues, donation, consumers payment in advance and/or percentage of sales. Many indirect costs are covered by development funding from international and/or national government and private agencies.

## Quality assurance

The ACs presented at the workshop have adopted different types of assurance systems:

- First-party assurance, where farmers take on a pledge and sign an affidavit, e.g. CGN and NOFA-NY (USA) and Tierra Viva (Chile).
- Second-party assurance, where the organisation that markets the products backs the scheme with its reputation, e.g. El Rincon Organico (Argentina), NOGAMU (Uganda) and COOLMÉIA (Brazil).

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- Third-party assurance, where a farmers' organisation belongs to group certification scheme with an internal control system, implemented to facilitate the export of their main crop; individuals or groups of farmers can then sell their side crops in the local market, e.g. GreenNet (Thailand) and ANPE (Peru).
- Participatory network assurance, i.e. Organic Farm (New Zealand), ECOVIDA and ACS (Brazil), and IIRD (India).

## **Network and third-party conformity assessment and controls methods**

**Third-party certification** is based on a third-party's assurance that the product, service, system, process or material conforms with specific requirements. The conformity assessment (i.e. the inspection) is carried out by an independent certification body. It was recognised that normal third-party organic certification is too much of a cost burden for small-scale farmers. To accommodate this problem, smallholder group certification was developed. Whilst such group certifications lower certification costs for small-scale producers and share some common features with participatory network certification, their origin, main purpose and practises are different from each other.

**Participatory network certification** is based on an assurance by a network of people and organisations involved in the production, distribution and consumption/use of the product/service with co-responsibility for guaranteeing the quality system. Farmers in a group certification scheme normally have similar production and centralised marketing. The certificate of a group certification belongs to the group. Production in a participatory network is normally diverse, and marketing is not always centralised. Participatory network farmers are certified as individuals, and the certificate belongs to the farmer.

Group certification, based on an internal control system, is mainly used for organic production by smallholders in low income countries who want to export to markets in high income countries. Income is believed to be the primary objective of farmers joining a group certification scheme. Participatory network certification, on the other hand, is based on peer review visits and social control, and is for domestic marketing for the time being. Participatory network farmers' objective for organising themselves include food security and food sovereignty, as well as a fair price.

Group certification schemes focus on the managers and field officers/inspectors to ensure compliance through the internal control system. Participatory network certifications focus on training everyone (farmers, workers, consumers) involved in the process of production, distribution and consumption of organic food. They conduct 'peer reviews' instead of inspections. Peer review visits are carried out by extension workers and farmers that have practical knowledge in organic production and include support activities. Consumers also take part on the visits and share responsibility for the quality guarantee system. The certification decision-making is decentralised.

Participatory networks also rely on '**social conformity**', enhanced through procedures and social conventions, such as common group purpose, group standards setting, co-responsibility of certification, membership codes, interaction, interdependence and long term relations. Trust is engendered within the social construction and processes of the participatory network built over time between all participants within the network. A trusting relationship, however, does not eliminate opportunities for deliberate violations, but neither are third party systems 100% fraud free.

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## Strengths and weaknesses

The table below lists strength (advantages) and weaknesses (disadvantages), identified from questionnaires filled by participants before the workshop and some discussions in which alternative certification systems were compared with ISO65/IFOAM accredited certification systems

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Stronger communication and relationships between producers and consumers/society.</li> <li>▪ Easier assess for small producers and agri-enterprises' to a quality assurance system.</li> <li>▪ Stimulates local development.</li> <li>▪ Raises farmers' reputation to urban people and technicians.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Need a high degree of dedication from stakeholders.</li> <li>▪ Difficult to develop a group where self-esteem and confidence is low.</li> <li>▪ Long term process – requires time for competency and capacity building to achieve results.</li> <li>▪ Lack formal recognition.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Greater ownership and responsibility by users of the guarantee system.</li> <li>▪ High transparency within the supply-consumption network.</li> <li>▪ Long term relations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Requires more meetings between participants to establish social control.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Decentralised power and decision-making (individual and community empowerment and involvement).</li> <li>▪ Local development-base adapted to local social cultures.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Complex social organisation.</li> <li>▪ Group specific – difficult to multiply model to others.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Less documentation and bureaucracy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Little accurate data collection and record keeping.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Low direct costs to farmers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Requires a lot of voluntary work.</li> <li>▪ High indirect costs to maintain support services, e.g. extension and marketing.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Inclusion of support services (extension, research, marketing).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Could happen a High level of conflict of interests.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Standards and norms adapted to local conditions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Standards and norms currently not widely recognised.</li> </ul>

## Recognition pending

Achieving recognition is a common challenge for all the Alternative Certification schemes (ACs) represented at the workshop. In countries with implemented organic labelling regulations, an alternative method employed by ACs\* is to avoid labelling their products as 'organic' but to use some other term that implies the naturalness of the product. For instance, in the USA one scheme labels their products 'certified naturally grown'. Another option (e.g. in Costa Rica) is to lobby governments for 'extra-official' recognition of ACs\* managed by farmers' associations in partnership with NGOs, universities and/or agriculture research institutes (public and private). It is acknowledged that these would act as a

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guarantee system for sales in local markets but not as a formal certification. In countries such as Brazil and New Zealand, where regulations are yet to be implemented, ACs\* are lobbying to be recognised within the legal framework.

One characteristic of Alternative Certification systems that needs to be discussed is that most, if not all, currently involve few processing units, downstream from the production, using little or no raw materials from outside the system. The possibility to include these and facilitate trade between distant countries and distant conscientious consumers would be a major challenge for such systems. Formal recognition of such systems will enhance further development of their procedures as a credible assurance system.

Over the past three decades the organic food system has evolved from a loose assortment of independent local networks of producers and consumers to a global, formal and regulated trade system. Market activities are not purely economic relationships. They encompass social norms and institutions that mediate their effects. Governance evolves and reflects conventions developed between key social, political and economic players engaged in developing and enforcing particular ideas and practises.

Since its formation in 1972, IFOAM's role in the governance of the organic food system has focussed largely on the international promotion of certification systems, established largely by Northern producers and organisations to regulate organic quality. Current efforts to define and enforce 'certified-organic' quality specifications inadvertently promotes the superiority of 'certified-organic' labelled products over all others, bolstering industrial and commercial conventions (based on efficiency, standardisation, bureaucratisation and price competitiveness) at the expense of organic-movement oriented domestic and civic values (personal trust, local knowledge, ecological diversity and social justice), practises and institutions.

Since the 1990s, one of the main objectives of Agroecology Movement for Latin America (MA and Caribbean (MAELA) ), has been to promote participatory certification systems, established by Southern producers and organisations to regulate organic quality and promote local markets. It promotes social control methods and supports domestic civic conventions. Whilst national government regulations bolster the authority of organic certification systems and define the world market for certified organic products, Alternative Certification systems are trying to be recognised as quality guarantee systems and define a global, socially-oriented fair trade of organic products.

Social movements are as important as state authorities and economic organisations in fuelling and regulating international trade. There continues to be value contradictions in the global trade of organic products within mainstream industrial-commercial conventions. Market values rooted in efficiency, standardisation, and price competition are chipping away domestic-civic conventions linked to personal trust relationships, ecological diversity and social justice. Globalisation has, to date, extended market conventions more rapidly than social commitments. The existence of Alternative Certification systems is a promising sign of new initiatives that revitalises social norms and practices in organic food networks globally. They are a reality to be stimulated and supported, alongside current formal certification systems.

Recognition by IFOAM that it is time to pay attention to Alternative Certification systems – exemplified by its decision to organise this workshop (in partnership with MAELA) and also initiate a project (SASA Project) with the Fair Trade Labelling Organisation (FLO) on harmonising Organic and Fair Trade standards and certification procedures – was viewed as a positive sign by the workshop participants that

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the international federation may be moving beyond formal certification systems to promote conventions rooted in social cultural values. The sentiment in the end of the workshop was 'Another world is possible' and it is 'fun to share'.

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