

Organic Certification

Pacific Organic Policy Toolkit
<http://www.organicpasifika.com/poetcom>

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Certification

Certification is a system by which the conformity of products to applicable standards is determined and confirmed. This confirmation can be done by:

- First party Supplier (self-certification)
- Second party Customer (the buyer)
- Third party Independent body (a company in the business of certification)

“Certification” in the context of Organic Agriculture is normally used to refer to third-party certification. General principles for certification programs are developed in the ISO Standard 17065. Products, processes, and services can be certified. In recent years, certification of Quality Systems (as in certification according to ISO 9001 and GMP (Good Manufacturing Practices) has been very popular. Each type of certification must develop verification procedures relevant for what is certified, and for the “risks” involved in non-compliance. Product testing as one example can be very relevant for product certification. For products where safety concerns are high it can be interesting to test each single product while for others a certification of the production process as such is sufficient. For quality systems certification, certification is based on competency, documentation and procedures

Certification of Organic Agriculture

Organic agriculture is a production system, and organic products are products originating from such a system. Certification of Organic Agriculture is primarily certification of a process (the organic production method). Furthermore, in order to be interesting on the market, the certification must encompass the handling of products originating from such a production system. The “organic” quality of the product cannot be verified through product testing as in most other product-related certification systems. Testing can however be used to determine, in some cases, that a product is not produced according to the standard (substantial residues of a certain pesticide etc.).

Principles and criteria for organic certification programs were developed earlier and published as IFOAM Accreditation Criteria by IFOAM in 1992. Now called the IFOAM Accreditation Requirements, this norm remains an important part of the IFOAM Organic Guarantee System. Many of the requirements are based on the international requirements of ISO (The International Organization for Standards).

Most government organic regulations reference ISO 17065 / EN45011 and add some additional organic system requirements. Certification bodies, seeking to certify to regulatory requirements must follow and comply with the respective accreditation and/or registration requirements. Certification bodies operating several different organic certification programs for markets in different countries and/or private schemes) must implement them according to their respective certification and standard requirements, unless allowed to do otherwise by the respective regulatory

authorities (for example if there is an equivalence arrangement between authorities).

What is certified?

Normally, certification of organic production is a “three step” approach with certification of:

1. Producers: The producer and the fields and facilities used in the production.
2. Production system: The organic production method and processing methods. This includes the documentation and precautionary measures taken for keeping the integrity of the production system.
3. Products: The products finally labelled with the mark (logo, symbol) of the certification program.

Elements of an organic certification system

An organic certification system normally has the following elements:

Standards and technical requirements

The technical term, “standard,” is used when referring to non-mandatory requirements e.g. private standards. “Technical requirements” refer to mandatory requirements usually related to regulations. For the purpose of this section the term standard is used to mean both. Standards should be clearly formulated and communicated to all participants of the certification system as well as available for interested parties. Private organic standards must also comply with any existing regulation both in the country of production and in the country where the product is marketed. Organic standards usually reflect the conditions in the country or region at the time they are set. Thus, they normally change over time.

Contracts and legal framework

All producers within a certification system are bound by written agreement with clear conditions, and consequences in case of violation. The certification system is handled by a legally registered body with ownership of its certification label or mark.

Inspection

The inspection normally covers:

- Agricultural production
- Transactions
- Storage, Processing
- Labelling and certificates

Certification, approval and handling of violations

Organic agriculture is a production system. The certification of producers and production is, in many cases, complicated and cannot be reduced to simple checklist procedures. This makes the element of decision making, in certification, critical.

Certifiers have procedures for handling of non-compliances (also called non-conformity) and an appeals process.

A note to developing countries

Current international standards (IFOAM and Codex) are primarily influenced by the practices and ideologies of organic agriculture in the industrialized world, especially in Europe. This is even more the case with the EU regulation, which can cause problems for emerging organic production in developing countries or other countries with different conditions. This does not only concern production methods, also inspection and certification methods, where European concepts often impose a high service cost with respect to organic production in developing countries.

Participatory Guarantee Systems

Introduction

Alternatives to third party certification, which are more affordable and accessible to small holders, have been gaining ground and recognition, especially due to the work IFOAM – Organic International. Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) are a good example an effective way to develop local organic markets, particularly adapted to small-scale farming. Although there are some exceptions, PGS are not generally used for production and products that are exported.

“Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) are locally focused quality assurance systems. They certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange.” (IFOAM definition, 2008). There are many PGS serving farmers and consumers around the world. Although details of methodology and process vary, key elements and features across countries and continents are consistent. The life-blood of these initiatives lies in the fact that they are created by the very farmers and consumers that they serve. As such, they are adopted and specific to the individual communities, geographies, politics and markets of their origin. PGS subscribe to the same ideals that guided yesterday’s pioneering organic farmers. PGS require a fundamentally ecological approach to agriculture that uses no synthetic chemical pesticides, fertilizers or GMO’s, and further sustains farmers and workers in a cradle of long-term economic sustainability and social justice.

PGS share a common goal with change to third-party certification systems in providing a credible guarantee for consumers seeking organic produce. The difference is in approach. As the name suggests, direct participation of farmers and even consumers in the certification process is not only encouraged but may be required. Such involvement is entirely realistic in the context of the small farms and local, direct markets that PGS are most likely to serve. Active participation on the part of the stakeholders results in greater empowerment but also greater responsibility. This requires PGS to place a high priority on knowledge and capacity building –not only for producers but for consumers as well. This direct involvement allows PGS programs to be less onerous in terms of paperwork and record-keeping

requirements – an important element, since PGS seek to be absolutely inclusive in bringing small farmers into an organic system of production. In stark contrast to third party certification programs that start with the idea that farmers must prove they are in compliance to be certified, PGS use an integrity-based approach that starts with a foundation of trust. It builds from there with transparency and openness, maintained in an environment that minimizes hierarchies and administrative levels.

Key elements

Shared vision: A fundamental strength of PGS lies in the conscious shared vision that farmers and consumers have in the core principles guiding the program. While PGS initiatives may vary in the level of actual participation, they thrive because of the active awareness of why, how, and not least of all WHO is being served.

Participation: PGS are based on a methodology presupposing intense involvement by those interested in the production and consumption of these products. Principles and rules for organic production are conceived and applied with the contribution of all stakeholders – producers, consultants and consumers. The credibility of the production quality is a consequence of participation.

Transparency: All stakeholders, including farmers, must be aware of exactly how the guarantee mechanism generally works, the process and how decisions are made. This does not mean that every detail is known by everyone but rather a basic understanding of how the system functions. People should be aware about the criteria of how decision on certification is made, especially the reason why some farms cannot be certified. This implies that there must be some written documents available about the PGS and the documents are made available to all interested parties. Privacy and commercially sensitive information of producers gathered during the operation of PGS must be treated with confidentiality. But such confidentiality should not be used to compromise the transparency principle. This may seem in conflict with transparency but a line must be drawn between privacy and commercially sensitive information, on the one hand, and access to information for the purpose of transparency.

Trust: The advocates of PGS hold to the idea that farmers can be trusted and the organic certification system should be an expression of this trust. It should reflect a community's capacity to demonstrate this trust through the application of their different social and cultural control mechanisms, providing the necessary oversight to ensure the organic integrity of their organic farmers. Thus, a variety of culturally specific (local) quantitative and qualitative mechanisms for demonstrating and measuring organic integrity are recognized and celebrated. These are integral to the certification process.

Learning process: The intent of most PGS has been to provide more than a certificate, also aiming to provide the tools and mechanisms for supporting sustainable community and organic development where the livelihoods and status of farmers can be enhanced. It is important that the process of certification contributes

to the construction of knowledge nets that are built by all the actors involved in the production and consumption of the organic product. The effective involvement of farmers, consultants and consumers on the elaboration and verification of the principles and rules not only leads to the generation of credibility of the organic product, but also to a permanent process of learning which develops capacities in the communities involved.

Horizontality: Horizontality means sharing of power. The verification of the organic quality of a product or process is not concentrated in the hands of few. All involved on the process of participatory certification have the same level of responsibility and capacity to establish the organic quality of a product or process.

Key features of a PGS

- Norms conceived by the stakeholders through a democratic and participatory process, but always in accordance with the commonly understood sense of what constitutes an organic product. The norms should stimulate creativity, which is a characteristic of organic farmers, instead of inhibiting it.
- Grassroots Organization: certification should be perceived as a result of a social dynamic, based on an active organization of all stakeholders.
- Suitable to smallholder agriculture: because the participatory nature and horizontal structure of the initiative allows for more appropriate and less costly mechanisms of certification, and actually highlights, celebrates and encourages consumers to seek out smallholders.
- Principles and values that enhance the livelihoods: at the basis of the initiative is the will to promote the well being of farming families and promote Organic Agriculture.
- Documented management systems and procedures: paperwork is still required of farmers – there will be ways in which they are expected to demonstrate their organic commitment and integrity and these ways must be documented by the PGS.
- Mechanisms to verify farmer’s compliance: various mechanisms can be used to verify compliance to the established norms, such as regular Peer Reviews, which also stimulate participation, organization, and which allow a learning process for all the stakeholders.
- Mechanisms for supporting farmers: these refer to tools that allow improvement of organic production and empowerment for certified organic farmers, including trainings, visits by field advisors, newsletters, farm visits, web sites, etc.
- Farmer’s pledges: it is essential that farmers have the opportunity to state their understanding, agreement and commitment with the established norms.
- Seals or labels: providing evidence of organic status.

- Clear and previously defined consequences for non-compliance: farmers must be aware of how cases of non-compliance with standards will be dealt with, and the actions are ideally recorded in a data base or made public.

Useful links

[Ifoam – Organics International PGS](#)

[Pacific Community: PGS information](#)

[POETCom Toolkit for PGS in the Pacific](#)

[PGS in Fiji](#) (video)

