2.3 The Organic Quality Control System

Introduction
In order to assure the consumer that a product is produced organically, a kind of quality control is needed. The organic quality control system is based on standards, inspection, certification and accreditation. It is a rather complex field in organic agriculture, too large to be covered in detail in this module. This chapter shall provide a brief overview and general understanding.

2.3.1 Why is Certification Needed?

Building trust
More and more consumers are getting interested in organic products because they are worrying about their health or are concerned about the environment. Some of them are ready to pay a somewhat higher price for agricultural products.

On the other side, more and more farmers switch over to organic agriculture for various reasons. At least some of them expect to get a better price for their products because they have to face a higher work load or lower yields, and the products are more safe and tasty.

A premium price is possible only if there is mutual trust between producers and consumers. The consumer wants to be sure that the product he buys is really organically produced. The organic farmer also needs to be protected from unfair competition of other farmers who use the term "organic" in a fraudulent way.

Lessons to be learnt
- organic certification aims at building trust between consumers and organic farmers
- organic standards are minimum requirements for organic production
- organic inspection is a surveillance of the whole farming or processing process, laboratory testing is just one tool.
- indigenous certification programs are important for developing a domestic market for organic products and may reduce inspection costs.

Motivation: With or without a premium price?
Ask the participants the following questions:
- "Who of you think that organic farmers should get a better price for their products than non-organic ones? Who don't think that?" – Count the numbers.
- "Why do you think consumers should be ready to pay a higher price? Why don't you think they should?" – Note down the arguments in keywords on a board.
Transparency 2.3.1(1): A premium price for organic products can be achieved only if there is trust between consumers and organic farmers.

Discussion: How to build trust in organics?
Discuss with the participants how this trust relationship can be built up between consumers and organic farmers:
• if consumers and farmers are living in the same village
• if consumers live far away, in an other town or even in an other country.
**Organic labels and certification marks**
In order to show the buyers in the markets or shops that a product is organic, usually labels or certification marks are used. Like brand names, these labels are registered and protected and can be used only by authorized producers and processors.

Authorisation is usually gained by signing a contract when a producer or processor gets certified. Organic certification confirms that a product is produced and processed according to specific organic standards.

Labels and certification marks help the consumer to recognise trustworthy organic products easily. Therefore, they are important marketing tools and allow to achieve a better price compared to the one for conventional products.

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**Opinion forming: A national organic label?**
Ask the participants “Do you know of national organic labels or certification marks used in the country? Which foreign or international labels are used for export?” If there is no national label yet, ask the participants what such a national label should look like. Is it needed at all?
2.3.2 Organic Standards

What exactly does it mean if a product is labelled “organic”? The organic claim says that the product is produced according to certain requirements which are called “standards”. Organic standards do not define a quality status which can be measured in the final product (e.g. how many pesticide residues are allowed). They define the way of production (e.g. that no chemical pesticides shall be used).

Important organic standards requirements

The internationally most important organic standards are the IFOAM Basic Standards. The Basic Standards are revised regularly to assure that the standards reflect the reality of organic agriculture worldwide. Besides the minimum requirements, the IFOAM Basic Standards describe also the principles of organic farming and provide recommendations on how to achieve the minimum requirements.

There are various other organic standards on the private, national and international level. The IFOAM Basic Standards provide a framework for certification bodies and standard setting organizations worldwide to develop their own certification standards and cannot be used for certification on their own. Local certification standards may meet or exceed the IFOAM Basic standards but should take into account specific local conditions and provide more specific requirements.

Group work: Getting to know the IFOAM Basic Standards

Divide the participants into 3 – 4 groups associated with selected sections of the IFOAM Basic Standards (e.g. fertilisation, pest management, animal husbandry, processing and labelling). The members of each group get copies of the respective chapters of the IFOAM BS. Each group shall read the concerned chapter and discuss its meaning. With the help of the template provided in Annex 8.1, the groups summarize each standard requirement in their own words. Where appropriate, an example of practical relevance on the farm shall be given. After a fixed period of time, the groups shall present their results to the plenum.
2.3.3 Inspection and Certification

Inspection, certification and accreditation

It frequently appears that there is a lot of misunderstanding on what is inspection and certification. As these terms are important in organic agriculture, they shall be explained here briefly. Accreditation is the third level in the organic quality control system and is mentioned for completeness.

Inspection

If an organic farmer wants his products to be certified, he has to undergo an inspection at least once a year. The inspector evaluates the performance of the farm activities with the help of the farmer's statements and records and by viewing the fields, animals and farm buildings. He or she checks whether the statements and records are correct and plausible. In case of doubt, the inspector can take samples for laboratory testing or later conduct unannounced inspections. However, laboratory testing is only one tool for inspection in cases of suspicion of application of or contamination with prohibited substances. Chemical analyses just reveal whether a certain sample contains a specific substance at a certain moment. There is only limited scope to detect residues of chemical fertilizers and pesticides after some time, and in addition chemical analysis are expensive. It therefore cannot replace the inspection of the whole farming process.

Certification

A defined procedure in which a certification body assesses a farm or company and assures in writing that it meets the requirements of the organic standards. The inspector transmits his findings to the certification body as a written report. The certification body compares the results of the inspection with the requirements of the organic standards. A certification committee decides whether certification may be granted or not.

Accreditation

In order to make sure that the certification program is competent to carry out inspection and certification, a third level of quality control is needed. Authorized bodies regularly evaluate certification programs and check their proper functioning according to certain criteria. In case the certification body complies with the criteria, they accredit the certification program.

Check participant’s comprehension

Ask the participants whether they understood the concept of inspection, certification and accreditation. Let them explain the three terms in their own words.
Foreign or Indigenous Certification?

Foreign Certification
Presently, a lot of the export oriented organic projects in developing countries are inspected and certified by certification bodies based in the importing countries. These international certification bodies usually have long experience in organic agriculture and its certification. Importers often prefer their services as they are well-known and provide their services worldwide. The disadvantage is that they sometimes do not know the local conditions and certification costs are high as usually frequent plane trips and Western salaries have to be paid.

Co-Certification
During the last few years, most Western certification programs started to build up local branch offices for conducting the inspections and to work with local inspection staff. Still, the inspection work is supervised by the head office, but the number of required flights is less. Local inspectors find it easier to inspect farms, as they usually speak the same language and are familiar with local conditions.

Indigenous Certification
Nowadays, more and more developing countries establish their own certification programs. Local certification bodies usually can offer cheaper inspection fees as less travelling is required and only local salaries have to be covered. Indigenous certification may especially support the development of a domestic market for organic products. However, for export purposes local certification bodies have to achieve international recognition which means to meet the different requirements of different import countries. This usually requires a couple of applications for acceptance and sometimes even more than one accreditation.

Analysis: The situation of certification in your country or region
If there is already an indigenous certification program, you can invite a representative of it to give a presentation. Or you do the presentation on your own, based on the material you collected.

If there is no indigenous certification program yet, ask the participants what they know about certification in their country or region. Who is presently doing organic certification and at what costs? Would it be reasonable to set up a national certification program? How could this process be started?
Smallholder group certification

Where large numbers of smallholders are to be inspected by a foreign certification body, the involved costs can be very high. Many organic smallholder projects in the South therefore implement a model referred to as group certification. Defined groups of farmers with similar production are organised by an NGO or corporate and are monitored with an internal control system (ICS). The ICS operates like a small internal control body: internal standards, a written commitment of the participating farmers, internal inspectors inspecting the farms at least once a year and an internal system of sanctions against defaulting farmers. The external certifier inspects the functioning of the ICS and re-inspects at random a certain percentage of the farms. Contracted party is the farmer group, project or corporate which also is the owner of the certificate.

On the one hand, the implementation of an internal control system can help to save costs for external inspection and certification. Furthermore it supports the farmers in production and record keeping according to the standard’s requirements. On the other hand, the set up and maintenance of an ICS needs considerable manpower and therefore also creates costs for salaries. Due to the re-inspection requirement, a part of the farms get inspected twice. Another problem is related to the ownership of the certificate: if the group is certified as a whole, single farmers (or the group without the consent of the NGO or corporate) can not use the certificate to sell their produce to other buyers. If during the external inspection some of the group members are found to be not complying with the standards, the whole group risks to lose the certification.

Where local certification services are available, farmer groups should assess whether complete external inspection or the use of an ICS is more appropriate and economic. In any case, advisory services offered by the NGO or corporate can contribute considerably to the success of an organic smallholder project, even if the inspection part is done by an external agency.

Transparency 2.3.3(6): Requirements for implementing group certification based on an Internal Control System (ICS)

Case study: Costs and savings through an Internal Control System (ICS)

Together with the participants select an example of a group of smallholders which is engaged (or planning to engage) in certified organic production. What would be (what are) the costs and efforts to implement an internal control system? What would it cost (what does it cost) if 100% external inspection is used? What would be (what is) the significance of the internal inspectors cum advisors? What would be the best option for this farmers group?

Recommended Readings

- “Building Trust in Organics”, IFOAM
- “Basic Standards for Organic Production and Processing”, IFOAM
- “A Guideline for Internal Control Systems (ICS)”, Naturland
- “The Organic Market in Switzerland and the European Union”, FiBL