

The Organic Guarantee System - Keeping up with the Times

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Instilling confidence - A consistent objective

Since its inception, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) has sought to define and spread organic practices. One of the most powerful tools for this is the market. Instilling confidence about organic goods in the market is critical. Unless consumers generally believe that the products labeled as organic really are organic, there is little hope this market category can survive. This concept has not changed over the years.

The word “organic” describing a product in the market means two things: (1) that the product was made according to certain practices, i.e. in accordance with a standard or set of norms; and (2) that somebody checked to make sure those standards were really followed. Both aspects are important: the standard must be meaningful enough to make a difference, and consumers have to believe that claims about following the standard are sincere. These two complementary aspects create a “guarantee” of sorts to the market. IFOAM’s Organic Guarantee System (OGS) embraces these two critical components in innovative and leading ways.

Systematizing a concept

From grass-roots to global – the IFOAM basic standards

The organic movement sprung from many places around the globe. IFOAM is after all the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements. There were (and still are) regional variations in relatively minor aspects of what “organic” means to people, but the common ground has always dwarfed the differences. Accepting these minor differences however has been a longstanding challenge. What is “organic enough?” “How can we trust that you are really organic compared to us?”

The IFOAM Basic Standards (IBS) first came into being in 1980, an attempt to describe the common ground in organic practices, the baseline. It was a “standard for standards,” without enough detail to be fully enforceable or verifiable in an objective way. Those who wanted to fill in the missing details or improve upon this baseline were welcome to do so. The IBS went through various amendments and improvements over the next 25 years, and have served as the foundational material for most if not all of the organic standards existent on the planet today.

A multiplicity of regional, national, governmental or private organic standards stemming from the IBS was cause for some confusion or inconsistency among different standards owners (usually national organic movements or governments, and their certification bodies) and their users (namely farmers, processors, and traders). In the earlier stages of the organic movement’s evolution, it was logical to jealously guard every detail one

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believed important, to protect the integrity of the standard and keep it from being eroded by people you didn't know or necessarily trust. Thus, gaps were plugged on a case-by-case basis – usually bilaterally between two standards owners or certification bodies (CBs) – so that they could each be sure the other's standard met their own expectations.

Building trust in the market

With a growing organic market, there were more demands for certification - so more CBs came into being, aiming to provide this service. But who's to say that the CB checked well enough? That they have personnel that really know what they are looking at? That they don't have a conflict of interest and therefore go too leniently on some clients?

Who could be the judge of whether a CB is competent? By 1986, IFOAM's technical committee started evaluating CB performance, helping critique, improve and/or weed out the weaker players. As the market continued to grow, this became a world of activity in itself, separate from continued development of the IBS, and it became necessary to more formally separate the tasks of standards development from that of verification or certification against the standards. Thus, in 1992, IFOAM established its own accreditation program, with a set of requirements that CBs needed to fulfill in order to be deemed competent to verify that the IBS were indeed being met in a consistent, transparent, impartial way across all operators they served.

The IFOAM Accreditation Program (IAP), with its own set of accreditation criteria, began implementation in 1993. The IAP went a long way toward standardizing the practices of organic certification. This was becoming increasingly important in a market going global and needing to be seen as credible across international borders.

Seeing that the growth of the organic market was gaining significance, governments followed IFOAM's lead. Most notably the European Union began demanding more consistency and rigor, and in 1997 began demanding that CBs achieve accreditation to globally recognized procedural norms for certification bodies, namely EN45011 or ISO Guide 65, a set of norms for CBs and similar conformity assessment bodies.

Impartiality is needed throughout the system to assure fairness. One strategy for achieving this is to have separate job responsibilities, to help avoid conflicts of interest. Thus, to help assure legitimacy of the IAP, in 1997 IFOAM separated its accreditation functions from itself by creating the International Organic Accreditation Service (IOAS), a separate legal entity with its own governance structure independent of IFOAM. The IOAS remains a daughter company of IFOAM and under its oversight, but makes all accreditation decisions independently from IFOAM.

The IOAS is the world's only international accreditation body for the organic sector, and specializes in sustainable agriculture only. IFOAM believes that international accreditation is often a better model for organic certification than national accreditation. The IOAS operates internationally in one sector, as opposed to national accreditation bodies that cover a wide variety of sectors in a given country. This affords the IOAS the ability to build greater expertise in evaluating the organic sector in particular. Additionally, international accreditation bodies can accredit certifiers worldwide, thus establishing a basis for equivalence and recognition of certificates issued by different CBs around the world.

The latest evolution

Standards: Equivalence rather than compliance

In a world where organic products are certified in different places to different standards by different CBs and traded between potentially any country and market, easing bureaucracy and reducing technical barriers to trade is imperative. The IBS may have been the basis for organic standards worldwide, but in and of itself it never became an actual standard in force in any country. Instead, the world saw the development of many very similar standards with minor differences among them. Sometimes these differences acted as trade barriers between countries or private standards owners, each demanding the other comply exactly with every point of its own standard. Negotiations to harmonize standards carried on for years, usually without full satisfaction.

Nonetheless, the organic sector kept growing. The wave of progress by the organic movement and market has become in fact so large and compelling – as a market driver as well as a social and ecological one – that it now overwhelms these minor details and realizes that the dynamics of a mainstream market require an acceptance of minor regional differences, with the knowledge and pragmatism that the objectives held by different standards are indeed common to all of those standards.

In 2010, IFOAM, in partnership with FAO and UNCTAD, working together through the GOMA (Global Organic Market Access) Project, led the wave forward by creating the COROS - Common Objectives and Requirements of Organic Standards¹ - an organic standard developed through a multi-stakeholder consultation, which reflects the core content and objectives of all organic standards. Standards owners (governmental or private) can each compare their standard to the COROS, and the results of this comparison then be shared with all. Even further, the IFOAM Secretariat performs an assessment of standards, using its team of experts, who provide a consistent lens for doing these assessments. Standards deemed equivalent to the COROS can be included in the IFOAM Family of Standards², a visualization of a goal of organic certification - to draw a line between what is organic and what is not.



Figure 48: Logo IFOAM Family of Standards

The IBS was one of the standards included in the IFOAM Family of Standards. In 2012, the IBS gave way to the new IFOAM Standard,³ a fully complete, off-the-shelf organic standard that can be used anywhere in the world. The IFOAM Standard is now just one member in the Family of Standards. The Family is a key part of the Organic Guarantee

¹ Information on the COROS – Common Objectives and Requirements of Organic Standards is available here: http://www.ifoam.org/about_ifoam/standards/norms.html

² Information on the IFOAM Family of Standards is available here : http://www.ifoam.org/about_ifoam/standards/ogs.html

³ Information about the IFOAM standard is available here http://www.ifoam.org/about_ifoam/standards/norms/IFOAMNormsVersionAugust2012withcover.pdf

System, which qualifies as a valid standard because it is deemed equivalent to the COROS.

Accreditation: IFOAM and IGOSA

Acknowledging both the excellence of the IOAS and the fact that there is also widespread national accreditation of CBs, and building on the concept of standards equivalence, in 2012 IFOAM adjusted its OGS to allow for two kinds of accreditation:

- 1) IFOAM accreditation, based on compliance with the IBS as well as the IFOAM Accreditation Criteria. This now evolves into compliance with the new IFOAM Standard and the slightly re-named IFOAM Accreditation Requirements (IAR).



Figure 49: Logo IFOAM accredited

- 2) IFOAM Global Organic System Accreditation or IGOSA, which is accreditation of a CB to the IFOAM Accreditation Requirements (IAR) as long as it uses a standard included in the IFOAM Family of Standards.



Figure 50: Logo IGOSA - IFOAM Global Organic System Accreditation

Both types of accreditation are administered by the IOAS and recognized as equally credible under the OGS.

Brand Recognition: The Global Organic Mark

Aiming to further lead and unite the organic world, IFOAM offers a branding mark for products from operators in good standing in the OGS – the Global Organic Mark.¹ First offered in late 2010, this additional service of the OGS allows operators and consumers alike to reap the benefits of an organic market that is globally present and united, regionally relevant and accessible, and credible to all concerned.

¹ Information on the Global Mark is available here
http://www.ifoam.org/about_ifoam/standards/OGS/GlobalMark.html



Figure 51: Global Organic Mark

In 2012 IFOAM began forming partnerships with the first organizations to act as agents for spreading the Global Organic Mark in their respective countries, in Thailand and Malaysia. IFOAM anticipates further promotion of the Mark in other countries, by other agents and through direct efforts from the IFOAM Head Office itself.

Moving forward

Some of IFOAM's greatest strengths – and benefits to the organic movement and organic markets worldwide – are its long-term vision and its strategies for leading and uniting the sector. IFOAM believes the increased spread of organic practices by farmers is inevitable. There is mounting scientific evidence on the ecological, economic, and social benefits to support such development. Farmers and the value chains that stem from them will benefit from the sustainability benefits that organic agriculture brings. But rewards in the market can likely only be assured if guarantee systems remain credible and are scalable. Although still in its early stages, the Organic Guarantee System is a model that shows a way forward, a uniting approach that affords efficiencies and creates a common language that can be used by the private sector and governments alike.