

**PARTICIPATORY ORGANIC CERTIFICATION:  
AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO  
MAINTAINING THE INTEGRITY OF THE ORGANIC LABEL**

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*Over the past two decades, the rapid growth of the organic sector has resulted in an increasing emphasis on the certification of organic goods. Consumers want guarantees that the organic items they purchase are worthy of the label (and of the price premium that often goes along with it), and producers look to certification as a way to enter the niche organic market. However, although organic certification is useful in many ways, mainstream certification systems have been criticized for promoting an input substitution vision of organic agriculture and for being inaccessible to small scale producers, primarily in the Global South. In an effort to address some of the problems associated with mainstream certification, groups around the world have begun to implement alternative organic certification systems. Commonly referred to as participatory guarantee systems, this form of certification is based on mainstream organic standards; however, it takes place at the community level, involves a wide variety of actors, employs simple verification procedures, minimizes bureaucracy and costs, and incorporates an element of environmental and social education for both producers and consumers. This article begins with a discussion of mainstream organic certification, followed by an exploration of the participatory certification paradigm. It then uses the case study of the Mexican Network of Organic Markets, and particularly the local organic market in Chapingo, Mexico, to demonstrate how participatory guarantee systems are being put into practice. Drawing on both this case study and the literature, the challenges facing the participatory certification movement are then presented.*

## **Introduction**

In a world dominated by a productionist paradigm rooted in the industrial revolution, global agricultural production has come to be characterized by massive amounts of industrial and capital inputs, highly specialized monocrop production, rapidly increasing farm sizes, and a vast reduction in the amount of labour required to operate farms (see for example Altieri,

1998; Pretty and Hine, 2001; Lang, 2003). Increasing doubts regarding the degree to which this model is environmentally, socially, and even economically sustainable have led growing numbers of people to seek alternatives, and one such alternative has been provided by the organic agriculture movement (see for example Bird, 1988; Altieri, 1998; Pretty and Hine, 2001; Carson, 2002).

Over the past two decades, this movement has been characterized by rapid growth around the world (see for example Goodman, 2000; Vos, 2000; Guthman, 2002). Today, almost 31 million hectares (or 0.7% of global agricultural land) are cultivated organically, and an additional 62 million hectares are used for organic wild collection (Willer and Yuseffi, 2007). In financial terms, sales of organic goods in 2006 were estimated at approximately 40 billion US dollars, up 43% from 2002 levels (Willer and Yuseffi, 2007).

This growth has sparked a heated debate about what organic agriculture means to people, how it should be conceptualized and defined, what practices should be involved, and how the organic food chain should be structured (Buck et. al., 1997). One of the ways in which organic agriculture is commonly defined is through the use of certification standards. The purpose of this paper is to explore the notion of organic certification, with an emphasis on the relatively new concept of participatory certification, which has not yet received sufficient attention in the literature. First, the evolution of organic standards and conventional certification processes will be discussed and critiqued. Secondly, the development of alternative, or participatory, certification systems will be introduced. This general discussion will be followed by a more focused examination of organic certification in Mexico. Finally, the case study of the local organic market in Chapingo, Mexico will be used as an example of participatory certification in action, and some of the challenges and limitations facing this emerging movement will be analyzed.

### **Mainstream organic certification**

The term ‘organic agriculture’ first came into use in the 1940’s in North America, Europe and Japan to refer to production without the use of synthetic chemicals (Vos, 2000). However, as the organic sector has grown, many interpretations have emerged regarding what organic agriculture means. These varying interpretations occur because development of organic systems is highly context specific, and is shaped by factors such as the country in which it takes place, the goals of the individuals or groups involved, and the certification agency used (if any). As a result, Vos (2000: 250) notes that today “there exists a continuing dialogue encompassing multiple and heterogeneous organic food and farming constituencies”, and this makes defining the term concisely or definitively problematic.

As mentioned above, one way of defining organics is to use a regulatory framework provided by a certification agency. The notion of defining products through official certification first arose in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as artisanal French wine producers sought to differentiate their wines from those produced using industrial processes (ECOVIDA, 2004). Indeed, the primary purpose of certification is to help consumers differentiate a product, process or service from other similar products, processes or services. This differentiation allows for

added value and entry into niche markets, and also serves to decrease competition with unspecialized goods and stimulate continuous improvements in quality (ECOVIDA, 2004).

In the case of organic agriculture, certification schemes began to arise in the 1970s as a means of regulating the use of the organic label. These early systems were generally organized regionally, and involved farmers certifying each other on a voluntary basis using fairly general standards (IFOAM, 2007). In 1985, the Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA) was founded as one of the first official organic certifying agencies (OCIA, 2007). Today there are almost 400 agencies offering organic certification around the world. Some certification bodies, like OCIA, are accredited by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), meaning that their standards have been deemed acceptable by this global leader in the organic movement, while others function without this stamp of approval (Willer and Yussefi, 2007). Today, there are over 30 million hectares of certified organic land worldwide, representing well over half a million farms, and an additional 62 million hectares of land certified for organic wild collection (Willer and Yussefi, 2007).

In addition to the standards provided by certification agencies such as OCIA, to date over 60 national governments have codified organic standards into law (as is the case with the United States' National Organic Program or NOP, the European Union's Regulation 2092/91 and Japan's JAS program) (Gómez Tovar et al., 1999). These legislative regulations are becoming increasingly important, as they are legal requirements for organic sales, and a lack of compliance can mean products are barred from entry into lucrative markets. For example, between 1997 and 2000, organic exports from Chile to the EU decreased by 30%, largely because Chilean certification processes did not meet the stringent EU requirements, which include ISO 65 accreditation (Martinez and Bañados, 2004).

The framework for defining organic agriculture provided by the above mentioned mainstream certification standards and legislative regulations tends to focus on allowable inputs and practices, for example by providing lists of prohibited substances such as chemical fertilizers and pesticides, genetically modified organisms, and sewage sludge (Vos, 2000). Thus, relying on certification standards, organic agriculture can be defined as food and fibre production without the use of synthetic chemicals or other inputs and practices that are disallowed by certification bodies. These prohibited inputs and practices vary somewhat, depending on the regulatory agency, but their general aim is to address specific environmental concerns associated with specific conventional agricultural methods, particularly the application of agrochemicals to soils and crops. The relatively coherent definition of organics provided by regulations has been lauded for creating a barrier against those who would fraudulently attempt to enter the organic market, and for setting a standard that provides consumers with access to information about production processes and helps ensure confidence in the organic label (Allen and Kovach, 2000).

### **A critique of mainstream organic certification**

Although organic certification provides a fairly clear definition of organic agriculture, and facilitates a high degree of consumer confidence in the integrity of organic products, it is also

subject to criticism. For example, the definition of organics that is drawn from regulatory standards has been criticized for breaking down the organic paradigm into its component parts and, in the process, failing to capture the essence of the organic ideal (Allen and Kovach, 2000; Kaltoft, 2001). As Rigby and Bown (2003: 5) explain, “standards are far more able to refer to prohibited inputs than to deal with precise criteria for the assessment of whether producers are acting in a manner which is socially just or ecologically responsible.” For example, only a few certification bodies include any measures aimed at safeguarding producers’ human rights, and even these are very limited (Raynolds, 2000). In addition, there is nothing inherent in organic regulations that prohibits the entry of large agribusiness into the market, protects small scale family farms, limits the extent of monocrop production, or that favours local production and consumption networks. As such, the regulatory definition of organic agriculture offers an essentially input substitution model, in which chemical inputs are replaced with biological ones, but a more holistic vision of sustainability, which includes the interrelated notions of ecological, social and economic justice, is generally not addressed.

It should be pointed out that this issue has not gone without notice. Indeed, many producers and consumers now seek out fair trade certification as a complement to the organic label (Raynolds, 2000). As well, in 2005 IFOAM adopted a broad based definition of organics that includes the idea that “organic agriculture should provide everyone involved with a good quality of life, and contribute to food sovereignty and reduction of poverty” (IFOAM, 2007). This concept is outlined in Chapter 9 of IFOAM’s basic organic standards and, as such, certification agencies accredited by IFOAM should, theoretically at least, include social and economic justice issues in their standards. Although this perspective has not yet been adopted by most certifying agencies, the new IFOAM definition does signal momentum for promoting more holistic versions of the organic definition.

The notion of certification has also been criticized for making the organic label inaccessible to small scale, low income producers (see for example Raynolds, 2000; IFAD, 2003). Indeed, in order to achieve certification from mainstream agencies, producers must go through a lengthy, expensive and highly bureaucratic process. This process may last as long as three years (the standard period for transition from conventional to organic agriculture required by certification bodies), during which time producers do not receive price premiums, but must pay the costs of certification (Raynolds, 2000). The lack of harmonized standards increases these costs, as producers must be certified by multiple agencies if they wish to sell in multiple markets (Raynolds, 2000; Meirelles, 2003). In addition, the extensive bureaucracy associated with certification (which has increased significantly as a result of the EU’s decision to require ISO 65 accreditation) can be difficult for producers to navigate, and in many cases it is a significant challenge to provide agencies with the required documentation. In some cases, farmers form cooperatives in order to share the burden of organic certification (Gomez Tovar, 2005). Internal control systems, in which a certifying agency agrees to randomly inspect 10 or 20% of the plots in a producer organization on the condition that the organization will self-inspect 100% of the land, are another means by which small scale producers in developing countries have managed to achieve organic certification. However, in spite of these strategies, in many other cases small scale producers

may farm organically without official recognition, reaping ecological benefits, but few social or economic ones (IFAD, 2003).

A final important critique of mainstream organic certification is that it is a highly top-down process that some argue runs counter to the true ideals of organic agriculture. For example, the need for producers to have their credibility tested by agents from outside their own community can be viewed as disempowering, and even insulting, as it is based on the logic of distrusting farmers and privileging technical expertise above traditional knowledge (Meirelles, 2003). Furthermore, the majority of organic certifying agencies are based out of Europe and North America, thus privileging definitions of organics created in developed countries. As such, it can be argued that the necessity to comply with the standards and requirements of these agencies serves to increase dependency of developing countries on the rich nations of the North (Gómez Tovar et al., 1999).

### **Participatory guarantee systems**

In response to some of the above mentioned critiques of mainstream certification systems, an alternative certification movement has emerged. Commonly referred to as participatory certification, this movement can trace its roots as far back as the 1970s (Fonseca, 2004); however, in recent years the concept has become more widely adopted. Participatory certification systems generally rely on norms and standards similar to those developed by organizations such as IFOAM. What makes them different is that they adapt these norms, employ simple verification procedures, minimize bureaucracy and costs, and incorporate an element of environmental and social education for both producers and consumers.

In 2004, Brazil hosted the first international workshop on alternative certification. Organized by IFOAM, the Agroecology Movement for Latin America and the Caribbean (MAELA) and the ECOVIDA Network, this event included participants from Community Supported Agriculture groups, as well as other farmer associations, consumer cooperatives and non-governmental organizations. The countries represented at this first meeting were Argentina, Costa Rica, India, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, the United States, Peru, Lebanon, Uruguay, New Zealand, Brazil, China, Mexico, Palestine, Paraguay and Uganda. As is clear by this list, participatory certification is a particularly appealing alternative for developing countries, where the barriers to mainstream certification are most pronounced.

### **The participatory certification paradigm**

The term ‘participatory’, as it pertains to rural development, first came into popular use with the works of Paulo Freire in the 1970s and Robert Chambers in the 1980s. According to Freire (1982), the essence of participation is that people be viewed as ‘subjects’, able to take action to improve their lives and their communities, rather than as ‘objects’ to be acted upon by outside forces. Freire (1982) and Chambers (1987) also highlighted the importance of respecting rural people’s knowledge, rather than privileging ‘scientific’ knowledge above all else. Participatory certification processes are an active attempt to put these values into practice, as they emphasize the notions of empowering both producers and consumers, and valuing the unique knowledge and experience that each person can bring to the system.

Indeed, one of the pillars of participatory certification is that it encourages, and actually relies upon, the active **participation** of a wide variety of stakeholders, including producers, consumers and trained agronomists, all of whom are viewed as equals in the development of standards and the implementation of certification processes (ECOVIDA, 2004; PGS Working Group, 2007).

In addition to participation, several other interrelated elements are integral to participatory certification systems (see figure 1). One of these elements is **trust**, which is built over time between various stakeholders in the system. Because trust is such an important feature, participatory certification systems tend to be viewed as long term endeavours, as it is understood that relationships of confidence need time to develop (Fonseca, 2004). Closely linked to trust is the notion of **transparency**, as one helps to engender the other; i.e. if those involved in participatory certification trust each other, it becomes easy to share information openly, just as making information available to everyone helps to generate trust. One way of ensuring transparency is through the active participation of a wide variety of actors, as the more involved people become in the process of certification the easier it becomes to spread information. In addition, generally all documents related to certification, (such as producer questionnaires explaining production processes, notes from farm visits, official decisions made by the certification committees, and a manual explaining how the system functions), are available to anyone who may be interested (PGS Working Group, 2007).

Another essential aspect of the participatory certification paradigm is that it includes an **educational** element for all those involved – producers, consumers, students, professors, agronomists, etc. Indeed, farm visits are not viewed as ‘inspections’ as is the case with mainstream organic certification, but instead more as peer reviews, where all those involved are free to ask questions, and everyone is encouraged to learn from each other and from the experience. For example, producers who participate in farm visits often learn valuable techniques that they can apply to their own production practices. In addition, they gradually learn to understand organic standards, and this knowledge helps ensure that they will be able to comply with those standards. Within this collective learning process, everyone is considered both a teacher and a student. Stemming from this premise, another feature of participatory certification systems is that relationships and decision-making processes are **horizontal** rather than vertical, with no one person having official authority over others. Instead, decisions are made through a process of consensus, in which every participant has an equal voice.

**Figure 1: Key elements of participatory organic certification systems\***

- 1. Participation**
- 2. Trust**
- 3. Transparency**
- 4. Learning Process**
- 5. Horizontality**
- 6. Decentralization**
- 7. Formation of Networks**
- 8. Local Focus**
- 9. Food Security and Sovereignty**

\*Adapted from: ECOVIDA, 2004 and PGS Working Group, 2007

Just as every individual is recognized as an equal within participatory certification systems, so too is every local group recognized as having a fairly high degree of independence. Organization is highly **decentralized**, and decisions about how certification processes should be structured are decided at a very local level. In this way, groups can take into account local ecological, social and economic conditions when developing organic certification procedures, in much the same way that organic practices themselves focus on the need to adapt to local particularities. Although participatory certification groups tend to be relatively autonomous at the local level, they are often incorporated into larger **networks**. The formation of networks, such as Brazil's ECOVIDA project (one of the global leaders in the participatory certification movement), is a non-hierarchical way of organizing, and it facilitates information sharing, communication and organization.

Within the participatory certification paradigm it is not just decision-making that is **locally focused**, but rather the entire production-certification-consumption network. Indeed, products certified in a participatory way are almost entirely geared to the local market and, as of yet, none are exported with the organic label. In part, this is because the relationships of trust between producers and consumers that are at the core of participatory certification systems cannot be maintained when goods are purchased far from their location of production. However, even if it were possible to integrate participatory certification into the lucrative organic export market, it could be argued that this would be antithetical to the movement's ideals. Indeed, in its current form, participatory certification is more than just a system for ensuring the integrity of organic production. Instead, it is also a means of helping the organic movement return to its philosophical roots, with a focus on supporting small scale producers, encouraging community based consumption, building meaningful relationships between producers and consumers, and making healthy organic products available at prices that are fair for both producers and consumers. As such, for many of those involved in the participatory certification movement, export orientation is not only currently unviable, but is also viewed as undesirable. Instead, the vision of organics promoted within participatory certification systems focuses on achieving **food security and sovereignty** through the promotion of local organic production and consumption.

## **Mainstream and participatory organic certification in Mexico**

Over the past decade, the growth of the organic sector in Mexico has been dramatic. Since 1996 the amount of Mexican land devoted to organic crops has grown on average by 33% annually, employment in the sector by 23%, and income generated by 26%. As a result of this rapid growth, by 2007 over 83 000 Mexican producers were cultivating more than 300 000 hectares organically and generating more than 270 million U.S. dollars in income (Gómez Cruz et al., 2006; Willer and Yussefi, 2007). Approximately half of this production is accounted for by coffee, which is followed in importance by herbs, vegetables, cacao, and other fruit crops, and the vast majority – some 85% - is destined for export (Gómez Cruz et al., 2006).

When discussing the Mexican organic sector it is essential to note that 98% of the country's organic producers are small scale, meaning they farm 30 hectares or less. The average size of these farms is just 3.3 hectares; however, it is this group that accounts for 84% of the organic land cultivated and generates 69% of the organic sector's earnings (Gómez Cruz et al., 2006). For these small scale producers, many of whom are indigenous, the costs and bureaucracy associated with mainstream organic certification can be overwhelming. In order to address this problem, many have formed cooperatives and established internal systems of control so that the costs of certification can be shared (Gómez Tovar, 2005). In addition, some farmers receive assistance from NGOs (or, in the case of Chiapas, from the state government) that can help them pay for certification (Gómez Cruz et al., 2006). However, in spite of these efforts, the high price and extensive documentation required for certification from OCIA-Mexico, Certimex, IMO Control, Naturland, or other agencies active in the country, leaves this option out of reach for many Mexican producers. As a result, approximately one quarter of the organic land in Mexico mentioned in the above statistics is not certified.

While the issue of organic certification has always been essential in terms of accessing the lucrative export market for organic products, with the passing of a new law governing the Mexican organic sector in 2006, certification will now be a legal requirement for using the organic label both for export and for sale within the country. This new regulation could have been potentially devastating for small scale organic producers who do not certify but still want to differentiate their product in the marketplace; however, thanks to heavy lobbying by the Mexican Network of Organic Markets (one of the primary promoters of small scale, local organic production and consumption in Mexico), article 24 of the new law recognizes participatory certification as a viable option, provided it is used for local sale only. Although the details of the new law have yet to be refined, the inclusion of the notion of participatory certification was seen as a major victory for the local organic movement in Mexico, and indeed around the world.

### **Participatory certification in action: The case of the local organic market in Chapingo**

As noted above, the Mexican Network of Organic Markets has been a key player in the Mexican organic movement, and has worked hard to develop local networks of organic production and consumption in Mexico. Founded in 2004 with just 4 markets, this network

currently represents 15 fully functioning local organic markets from across the country, as well as a growing number of market initiatives that are still in the process of formation. The vast majority of producers who participate in these markets are small scale and, while some have achieved mainstream certification, most have not. As a result, the Network has made developing participatory certification systems a high priority. For example, taking advantage of funding from the Falls Brook Centre – a Canadian NGO – the Network has organized exchange visits between markets to help build capacity for implementing participatory certification. In addition, the topic has been a focus of attention during several national meetings of the Network, and three special workshops on participatory certification have been held for Network members. Although not all markets have advanced at the same rate, several have already made a great deal of progress implementing participatory certification systems.

One of the leading markets in terms of participatory certification is the Chapingo Organic Market. Founded in 2003, this market certifies and sells a wide variety of products, including fruits and vegetables (e.g. broccoli, lettuce, mushrooms, blackberries, plums, etc.), herbs, meat (turkey, chicken and beef), dairy products (e.g. milk, cheese, yogurt, cream), eggs, bread and other baked goods, honey, coffee, processed foods (e.g. syrups, oils, salsas, jams, etc.), biodegradable cleaning and beauty products and artisanal crafts and jewellery. These products are divided into specific groups, with some being sold as ‘natural’ and others as ‘organic’ depending on a number of factors which will be discussed below.

The Chapingo market has close ties to the University of Chapingo – Mexico’s principle agricultural university. This institution has provided crucial support to the organic market, and has been extremely helpful in the development of a participatory certification system. For example a university professor, who is also a professional organic certifier for agencies such as Certimex and OCIA, has provided invaluable leadership and has been essential in helping Chapingo’s participatory certification committee learn about organic standards and how to conduct certification visits. In addition, the committee is based out of the university – a staff person there organizes farm visits and meetings, a university van is used for transportation, and approximately half of the committee is made up of university staff and students.

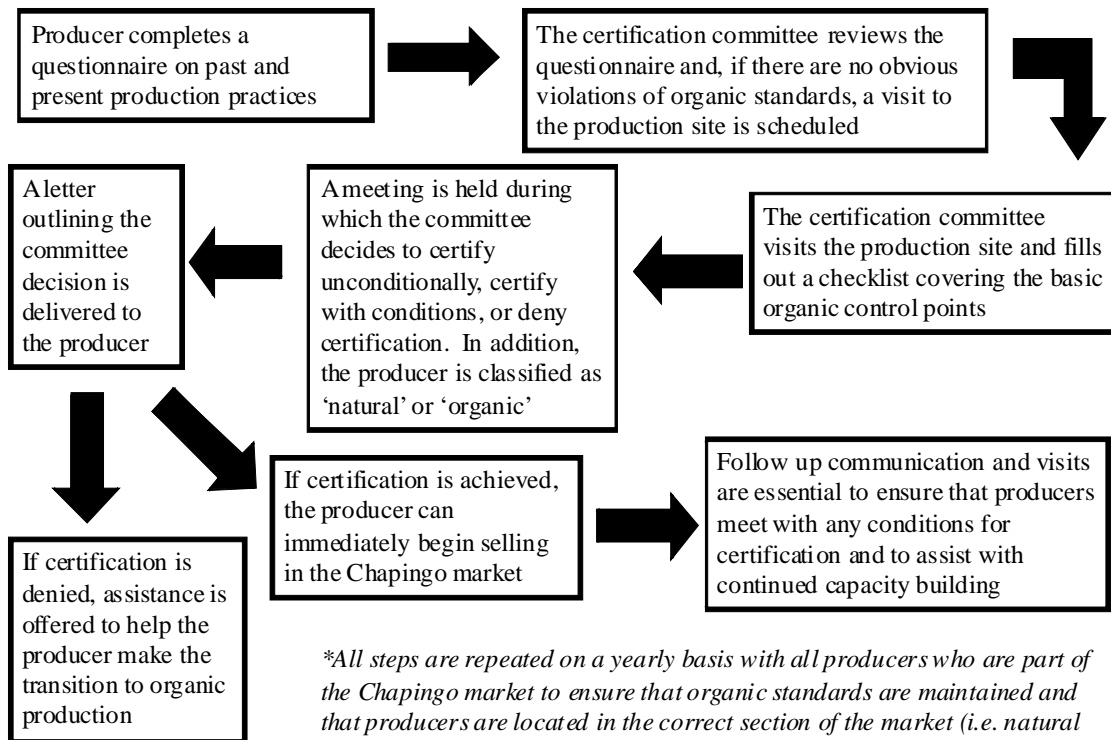
It is the above mentioned certification committee that forms the basis for the participatory certification system which, it should be noted, carries no costs for producers. In Chapingo, the committee has approximately 14 members (although this number fluctuates) and is made up of producers, university professors and staff, students and consumers. The first step for a producer wishing to achieve participatory certification and enter the market is to fill out an initial questionnaire outlining past and present production practices. There are three types of questionnaires – one for crop production, one for animal production, and one for processed goods – and they can be obtained by visiting the market or by contacting the market coordinators. Upon completion, the questionnaire is reviewed in a meeting of the certification committee. If no obvious barriers to certification are evident, a farm map, daily activity log, and sales log are requested, and a visit to the farm or processing site is scheduled.

As noted above, this visit is not viewed as an inspection per se, but rather as an interactive experience designed to be educational for all those involved. The farm visits are conducted by members of the certification committee and normally last approximately 2 hours. In most cases 5-7 people attend the visits; however, all members of the committee are always welcome to participate. It is important to note that the members of this committee have varying degrees of knowledge regarding organic standards and production practices; however, everyone is encouraged to actively participate in the visits with the understanding that they will gradually develop their abilities. Indeed, although there is a tendency to rely on the expertise of the above mentioned trained organic inspector, a distinct effort is being made to decrease dependence on this one committee member, so that the committee will achieve balance amongst its members and thus be strengthened as a whole. As part of the effort to build the capacity of all members, the committee organizes continual training workshops; however, it is also recognized that active participation during visits is one of the most effective ways to develop certification skills.

During the farm visits, committee members consult a checklist that includes basic data about the farm operation (e.g. size of territory, number of crops, etc.) as well as basic organic control points, as outlined in IFOAM's manual for organic inspectors. These key points are: source of seeds; source of water for irrigation; soil management practices; pest and disease management practices; post-harvest management of crops, including storage and cleaning; and the potential for contamination from neighbouring farms. It cannot be emphasized enough that these visits are not merely designed to decide whether a producer qualifies for organic status, but also to provide advice and support for those producers wishing to improve their operations and move closer towards the organic ideal. As such, committee members are not looking to find fault with farmers for a lack of compliance with organic control points. Instead, they use these points as a reference to offer constructive criticism with regards to how producers can optimize their management practices.

In Chapingo one of the most important issues that has arisen during farm visits relates to soil management, as many producers believe that as long as they are not applying chemical fertilizers their production qualifies as organic. As a result, in cases where composting has not yet been effectively implemented, farmers may be certified to sell in the natural, rather than the organic, section of the Chapingo market, and the committee will offer them assistance and advice regarding how to improve their organic soil management techniques. Another common condition for certification in Chapingo is that farmers establish barriers, for example by planting cactus or other fast growing species, to prevent contamination from neighbouring plots, which in many cases are used for conventional corn production. Again, until barriers are achieved producers may sell in the natural section of the market.

**Figure 2: Steps to achieving participatory organic certification in Chapingo\***



As noted above, during the visits committee members take notes and fill in a checklist. Generally within a week of the visit, the committee meets and these notes are discussed and reviewed by those who participated in the visit as well as those who did not. These meetings usually last approximately 2 hours and the case is discussed until a consensus is reached by the committee with regards to whether or not a producer can be certified to sell in the market. The decision regarding certification is based on the standards of Certimex, OCIA, the EU's regulation 2092/91 and the US's NOP, and is delivered to the producer in the form of a written letter. If producers are in complete compliance and have completed a 36 month transition period away from conventional production, they will be granted 'organic' status within the market and certified without condition. In most cases however, certification comes with a set of conditions that must be agreed to by the producer. He or she can then begin to sell goods in the natural section of the market, and follow up visits and continuous communication are used to ensure that these conditions are being met.

Some examples of common conditions for certification include the development of natural barriers on the borders with neighbouring farms and the composting of manure before application. If follow up visits demonstrate compliance with the conditions, a producer may eventually be moved to the organic section of the market. In the case that certification is denied, clear reasons are outlined and the committee always offers to maintain a relationship with the producer and help them make the transition to organic production. In almost all cases, the letter that the committee provides for the producer also includes a set of

recommendations for improvement that are not necessarily conditions for certification, but are designed to help optimize production practices.

Because transparency and community involvement are integral aspects of the participatory certification vision, the results of all questionnaires and committee decisions are available to the public, and anyone who wishes to join the certification committee is more than welcome to do so. In addition, consumers are encouraged to interact with producers at the Chapingo market, and this interaction has led to the development of strong relationships of trust, and in some cases friendship, between the buyers and sellers of organic products. These relationships are an important means of supporting the process of participatory certification, as they provide the consumer with an extra sense of security that helps them place their faith in the participatory certification process.

### **Challenges and limitations to participatory certification**

Although in many ways participatory certification offers an attractive alternative to mainstream organic certification, it is not without its own set of problems and limitations. These challenges exist at an institutional level, at the level of producers, and also within participatory certification committees themselves.

At a macro, or institutional, level, participatory certification struggles with a lack of formal recognition on the part of both governments and mainstream certification bodies (Meirelles, 2003; Fonseca, 2004). As such, in countries with strict laws governing the use of the organic label, participatory certification can be difficult to implement. In some cases, producers get around this problem by using other labels such as ‘natural’ or ‘ecological’ to describe their production (Fonseca, 2004), while in other cases – such as Mexico – attempts are made to include participatory certification within the legal framework governing organics. However, even in Mexico, where participatory certification is recognized by the new law governing organic products, there are some concerns about the extent to which this recognition will be realized when the law becomes fully implemented, as many details of the legislation remain vague. It is worth noting that the struggle for formal or institutional recognition is particularly difficult because mainstream certification bodies have a vested interest in maintaining a monopoly on controlling the use of the organic label. However, IFOAM has recently given official recognition to what it refers to as ‘participatory guarantee systems’ (IFOAM, 2007) and this will hopefully add some credibility to the growing movement.

Another set of challenges involves the producers seeking organic certification within participatory systems. Although the bureaucracy associated with participatory certification is minimal, producers are still generally required to provide some kind of documentation regarding their operations. For example, as mentioned above, in Chapingo producers are expected to fill in an initial questionnaire, and provide a map, a daily log of production practices (including activities such as planting, compost application, harvesting, etc.) and a sales log. These documents are essential to the certification process; however, the vast majority of producers have a very hard time providing this documentation, primarily because there is no cultural tradition of maintaining such records.

An additional potential problem involving producers is that concerns about one's own eventual evaluation by the certification committee can affect judgement in other peer evaluations. This issue has the potential to manifest itself in two ways. One possibility is that producers can tend to be very easy on their peers in the hopes that this will encourage an easy evaluation when their own turn to be certified comes. The other possibility is that, because of feelings of competitiveness, producers can be overly critical of their peers in the hopes that poor evaluations of others will give them a higher standing within the group. In order to help avoid this problem, it is important that all certification committee members are educated regarding organic standards, so that decisions are based on these guidelines rather than on subjective feelings or personal concerns. This process of education takes time; however, the group working in Chapingo is making progress on this issue, and is confident that the problem can be gradually overcome with a great deal of patience, effort and understanding.

A final set of challenges associated with participatory certification systems exists within the certification committees themselves. As noted above, conflicts of interest may arise when producers are responsible for certifying other producers. However, it is not just producers who have the potential to bring personal issues into the committee, but rather all committee members. Indeed, interpersonal conflicts and strong differences of opinion can provide significant challenges for certification committees. As a result, the ideals of equal participation, horizontality, cooperation and consensus building can be difficult to effectively put into practice.

Another prominent limitation, recognized by Fonseca (2004), is that the functioning of certification committees, and indeed of the entire system, is highly reliant on volunteer labour. In Chapingo for example, the members of the participatory certification committee all donate their time to conduct farm visits and to evaluate the outcome of those visits. Thus, although many members may be highly committed to the ideals of participatory certification and want to participate actively, their time is limited by other factors such as work and family responsibilities. Sometimes they find they do not have time at all, and the fact that members join and then leave creates a lack of consistency and continuity within the certification committee. In addition, the process of building technical capacity is limited by the fact that people do not always have sufficient time to devote to education and training. In Chapingo, the challenges of making a system work with volunteer labour have made it difficult to keep up with the demand for certifying new producers who wish to enter the market, and also to consistently monitor the farms of existing market members.

Other organizational challenges exist in part because of the reliance on volunteer labour, but also because the development of participatory certification systems is relatively new, thus the movement is still struggling to find its feet. In Chapingo for example, the participatory certification committee has yet to publish a document clearly outlining the organic standards it uses as well as the way in which the system functions. ECOVIDA's operations manual (2004) notes that this kind of documentation is essential to the successful functioning of participatory certification endeavours, and the Chapingo group is well aware that it is necessary; however, as of yet it has not been possible primarily because of a lack of time on the part of participants. Related to this problem, because participatory certification systems

are so highly context specific, the standards and procedures of other groups can be used as a basis, but they cannot simply be replicated. As a result, as is the case in Chapingo, other groups find themselves learning through trial and error and, through this process, gradually developing functioning systems.

## **Conclusions**

In their manual on participatory certification, ECOVIDA (2004) quotes Paulo Freire: “The thinking subject cannot think alone; he or she cannot think without the co-participation of other subjects in the act of thinking about the object. There is no ‘I think’, there is ‘we think’...” This notion, of thinking and acting as a community, can be challenging to put into practice, especially in today’s increasingly individualistic society; however, it is at the heart of the participatory organic certification movement. Indeed, participatory certification is not merely designed to ensure consumer confidence in organic products, although that is certainly one important goal. Rather, it is meant to be a tool for holistic sustainable community development with a triple focus on environmental protection, community building and local economic development. It is meant to help support producers in the shift to organic production, to make organic products accessible to a wide variety of consumers and to help the organic movement return to the philosophical roots of its early pioneers.

Although it is still a nascent movement, experiences such as that of the Chapingo Organic Market demonstrate that participatory certification, although not without its limitations, can be implemented effectively, and can be a rewarding, if at times challenging, experience for all those involved. The subject is certainly worth a great deal more attention than it has thus far received in the literature. For example, more methodical study, including semi-structured or structured interviews with producers and consumers to better ascertain their opinions on the subject, would help shed light on how to best proceed with development of these alternative organic certification systems.

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