



Certification of Organic Products

Laércio Meirelles¹

THE ORIGIN

Certification of Organic Products started at the same time as a differentiated market for clean products. With the first experiences of production alternative to the chemist/reductionist model, proposed by agronomical science and disseminated by the 'Green Revolution', a new market for this alternative production was created. This 'special market' comes from a natural desire of both consumers and producers. For consumers it was the wish of having access to healthier products and for producers the expectation being valued for their efforts on producing without the advertised 'facilities of the conventional model'.

As the years went by, the market for Organic Products grew and became noticeable in statistical surveys. With the establishment of this market, the market for certification of these products also grows. Thus, what used to be an initiative of small farmers to differentiate the product of their work and to identify it with a label, ended up becoming an intricate mechanism which involves laws, regulations, credentials, inspections, contracts, certificates, labels and also strong commercial interests.

At first there were some producers trying to establish their brands in the market, identifying themselves as Organic Producers. Today there is a great number of companies selling services to the producer, in order to make assure to the consumer that he really buys what he wishes: an organic product, clean, free from contaminants. They are the Certifiers of Organic Products.

The arguments that defend the necessity of certification for organic products are reasonable and seductive: to guarantee to the consumer the quality of what he buys, even more when this consumer is ready to pay a considerable overprice for these products.

¹Agronomist. Coordinator of Ipê Ecological Centre, NGO that has been working with rural extension and education in Ecological Agriculture since 1985.

THE CRITICS

Speaking clearly, it might be opportune to analyze the eventual **disadvantages** of the methodology of certification used today in the 'organic world'. **Price is one of them.** Considering the reality of small scale agriculture in Southern countries, the price charged for the services of certification prevents the farmers from being part of the game. In addition to the price charged by the certification companies, many buyers from the North demand particular certificates, forcing the exporters from the South to hire the service of more than one certification company. Sometimes there is the need for four or five certifications for the same area, increasing the costs to unaffordable levels for the producers.

Besides the price, the **methodology of certification** is a problem in itself, especially when we talk about small scale producers. The stimulus to the organization and self-determination of the farmers have always been important when Organic Agriculture is referred in the realm of small scale farming. Inspection by a neutral element does not stimulate the emergence of organizational formats that could be designed to also meet this need, of conferring credibility to the organic product. The fact that this credibility is 'given' by the inspection, by people and structures aliens to the community, does not create a process of empowerment of the producer family or of the community.

The **premise of suspecting the farmers**, intrinsic to this logic of certification, is another disadvantage of the process, since it brings discomfort to the ones who seek for certification and does not contribute for the rescue of the self-esteem of the farmers involved in this.

The **over-price** itself, which increases the elitization of organic products consumption, if it is true that is not exclusive consequence of certification, has a close relationship with it. Certification is more legitimate once the prices of organic products are higher than the conventional ones. The price³ of organics becomes higher depending on the price paid for the certification. With this mutual conditioning, the breakage of the barrier of the 'market niche' and the search for massification and democratization of cleaner products production and consumption becomes more difficult.

The **normalization** plays an important role in making clear what it means when one talks about organic production. On the other hand, it **pasteurizes proceedings and bureaucratizes the access of the producers** to the condition of 'organic producers'. The standardization limits creativity and tends to reduce the organic agriculture practice to abiding by pre-established rules.

What we step for

In our experience, been working for over 15 years with production and commercialization of organic products, we have noticed that the cost/benefit relation of certification is high. **However, our position, very polemic for sure, is against the legal obligation of certification for organic products commercialization.** Firstly, because we believe that the existing regulations over consumer rights protection conform the necessary and sufficient juridical mark to prevent and punish eventual frauds when this is needed. And, secondly, we do not see certification as a sufficient mechanism to foment the production and consumption of Ecological Products. However, the majority of countries have regulations, or are in the process of bringing them forward, which include the obligation of certification for all products that will be commercialized under the qualification of organic, ecological, biological and other similar terms.

As we are in a context where obligation of certification is a fact, we feel compelled to try to develop certification processes which are most adequate to the dynamic of small scale farming. It has been noticed that this search has occurred in different places and distinct realities. The south of Brazil² is one of these regions.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF ALTERNATIVES

In the eighties, decade which marks the re-democratization process of Brazilian society, and after nearly 20 years of military dictatorship, many popular and non-governmental organizations concerned with building an alternative to the agriculture model characterized by the named "green revolution" emerge in the south of Brazil.

The Ecovida Agroecology Network emerges as a result of this historical process, with the integration of many of these actors, and it has in the promotion of Agroecology its main objective.

According to an internal document "Ecovida Agroecology Network is a space of articulation between small scale farmers and their organizations, assessors' organizations and people who are involved and sympathetic to the production, processing, commercialization and consumption of ecological food. The Network has well-defined principles and aims and its target is to make agroecology stronger in its broadest aspects, disseminating information among the people involved and

² The Southern Region is one of five geopolitical regions of the Country and has an area of 580,000km² with an estimated population of 25 million people.

creating legitimate mechanisms for the generation of credibility and for the guarantee of the processes developed by their members”.³

Nowadays the Network is formed by 180 family farmers' groups from the states of Paraná, Santa Catarina e Rio Grande do Sul, involving a total of 2300 families. Ten cooperatives of consumers of ecological products and 20 NGO's are also part of it. The operational unit of the Network are the Regional Centers, which are twenty-one at the moment. The Regional Centers, as well as the own Network, are formed by small scale farmers' groups, consumer groups, and assessor organizations. Ecovida Network is an open articulation and the number of members are constantly increasing.

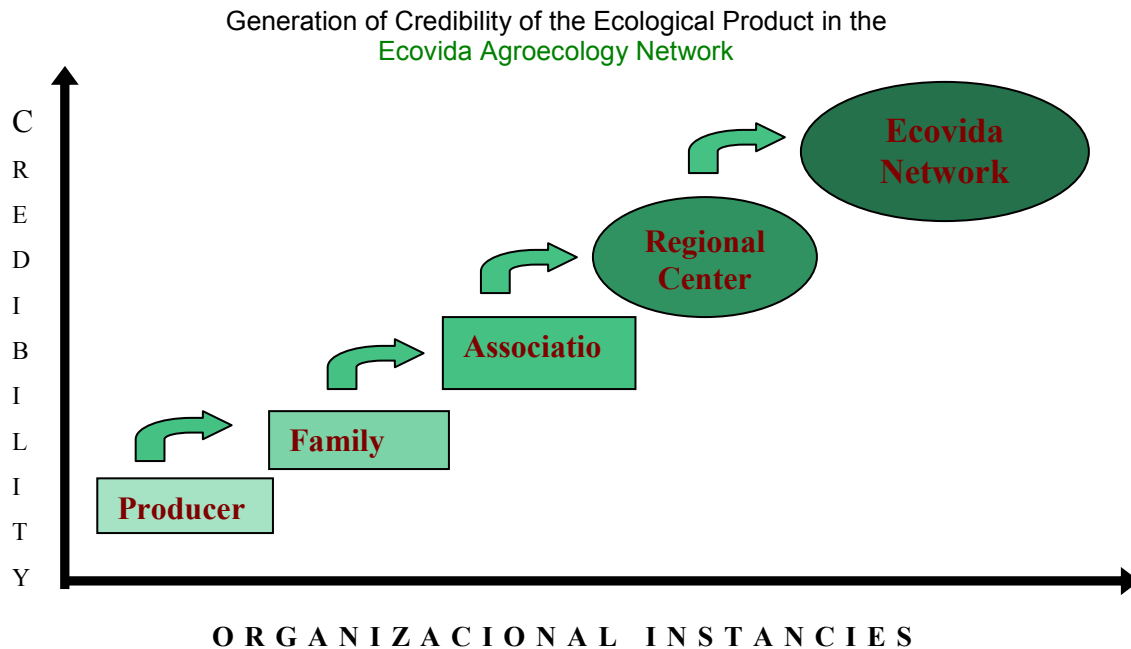
Inside Ecovida Agroecology Network, certification has been dealt with as a pedagogical process, where farmers, technicians and consumers are integrated with the aim of searching for a public expression of quality for the work they develop. We call this process **participative certification**.

PARTICIPATIVE CERTIFICATION

We call Participative Certification the process of generating credibility which supposes a supportive participation of all the segments interested in guaranteeing the quality of the final product and of the production process. This process is the result of a social dynamic which originates from the integration of the people involved with production, consumption and advertising of the products that will be certified.

In the case of Ecovida Agroecology Network Participative Certification occurs around the Organic Product and **credibility is generated from the seriousness which is conferred to the small scale farmer's word, and it is legitimated socially, in an accumulative form, in the distinct organizational instances that this farmer family is part of.**

³ Document. *Rede Ecovida de Agroecologia, Normas de Organização e Funcionamento*. Lages, December 2001.



Thus, the first instance of certification is the word of the small farmer and his family. The seriousness of the work developed by the family is approved by the group he is part of, through its Ethics Committee. This group also has its work approved by the Regional Center of which it is part, through the Center's Ethics Council. The products of this Center are approved by all other Centers, which have common rules of production and minimum standards of work, and that allows them to be mutually legitimated through Ecovida Agroecology Network.

The condition of being an Ecovida Network's member pre-supposes a commitment with Agroecology, but this condition is not an automatic authorization for the use of the label. It is necessary to go through the certification process. The certification process occurs from the demand of a small farmers' group which is interested in using the Ecovida label.

We list now the certification process steps which result in the utilization of Ecovida label.

- 1) Demand from a group of small farmers for the certification process. This demand occurs only if the group feels the need of making public the recognition conferred by the Network to its process/product;
- 2) Visit to the group's farms by the group's Ethic Committee members, the Center's Ethics Council and the assessors;

- 3) One of the members of the committee which was formed for the visit is in charge of writing a report where aspects of the visited farms are assessed, related to its degree of ecologization and other aspects which are mentioned in the internal rules of the Network.
- 4) A meeting with the group, members of Regional Center's Ethic Commission and assessors. In this meeting, the report and the degree of ecologization of the farms and group are discussed and the action plan to overcome the identified problems is elaborated.
- 5) Decision by the Center's Ethics Council about the approval or not of the use of the label by the group;
- 6) If the group obtains the authorization, it must inform the Regional Center's coordination on which products the label will be used and also the quantity.

This process is cyclic and must begin again, from step 2, whenever there is any doubt about the product or the process, or for any other reason that is found convenient.

ADVANCES AND LIMITS

This way of giving credibility to Ecovida Network's members' products and that has been called participative certification is still on the process of being built. The meaning of this construction is the search for a mechanism that allows the farmers and consumers to move inside a legal mark that demands certification, without losing the perspective of the necessity of turning popular the production and consumption of Organic Products.

At such stage it is possible to list some advances that we have made and some challenges we still must face.

Advances:

- a) The design of a certification methodology that is more appropriate to Small Scale Agriculture and which stimulates the integration among the small farmers and consumers and the social organization, promoting an active participation of all people concerned;
- b) Process of certification which brings a protagonism of farmers and consumers and does not concentrate power and resources in the hands of companies that provides services;

- c) Integration of farmers, consumers and assessors in a Network logic, where the relationship that is established is horizontal and interdependent, not 'allowing' hierarchies;
- d) The construction of legitimacy towards society considering the seriousness of the work developed by the Network.

Limits:

- a) Lack of legal recognition for the process of Participative Certification, preventing producers that make this choice from reaching certain markets;
- b) The lack of recognition of the validity of participative certification by 'conventional' certification bodies;
- c) The idea that the process of participative certification is only valid in the local market and not able to be used where there is a distance between the producer and consumer.
- d) The difficulty in finding an equilibrium point that on one hand allows the generation of sufficient documents to give transparency to the participative certification process, but on the other hand does not lose its characteristics or become bureaucratic and expensive, nor makes the protagonism of farmers and consumers unfeasible.
- e) The low quality of the demand in relation to certification, from the farmers as well as from the consumers, where the 'label culture' brings many times the perception that this label is more important than the product or the process of production.

THE NEXT STEPS

Ecovida Agroecology Network, as we said, is a result of the work developed in the last decades by thousands of people and hundreds of organizations. Work that has as the ultimate aim the creation of a rural environment where its inhabitants may have their needs met, without compromising the access of the future generations to the same satisfying conditions.

Participative Certification has been an efficient pedagogical instrument to motivate the articulation among these distinct actors. It is mainly in this sense that the efforts which have been made around the certification process are justified.

The challenges presented to this next period are of two kinds. One that is more internal, where it becomes necessary that all members of Ecovida Network internalize the procedures and aims of Participative Certification. The construction of a strong collective, united around the common perceptions and ideals, is an indispensable condition for Ecovida Network to contribute with the construction of a society more just and fraternal, its ultimate goal.

The other has a more external character. To find a connection with a set of works that have similar aims, and that have been done in the whole planet. The broadening of these connections, on one hand will confer more legitimacy to this certification process, and on the other hand will contribute to the contamination, in a positive way, of the ways of development of our society.

Ipê, November 2003.