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No. 2

Review of Key Systemic Issues and Findings Resulting from Activities of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF) and the Global Organic Market Access (GOMA) Project

Diane Bowen, in collaboration with Ulrich Hoffmann



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secretariat)

UNFSS | United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards

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Preface

The United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS) aims to facilitate and strengthen the effective and active participation by developing countries in the international dialogue on voluntary sustainable standards (VSS). UNFSS thematic working group activities add a dimension of public-private collaboration and efficiently deliver practical results in key strategic areas of VSS. The thematic activities and their results also bring to light broader and/or more specific issues and opportunities that should be addressed by the Forum. The UNFSS Working Group on Enhancing Interoperability of VSS, including their Harmonization and Equivalence carries on thematic activities that were undertaken by the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence of Organic Agriculture and the Global Organic Market Access Project. These projects have been innovative in implementing WTO TBT guidance, public-private dialogue and cooperation, meta-governance of VSS and geopolitical regionalism. With this paper, the authors aim to preserve the institutional memory and to share knowledge and lessons gained in these projects with stakeholders within and beyond the organic agriculture sector.

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Definitions

Equivalence: The acceptance that different standards or technical regulations on the same subject fulfill common objectives.

Harmonization: The process by which standards, technical regulations and conformity assessment on the same subject approved by different bodies establishes interchangeability of products and processes. The process aims at the establishment of identical standards, technical regulations and conformity assessment requirements.

Organic Standards Scheme: A private or public system of organic standards and measures for the assessment of conformity to the standard.

Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS): Any non-obligatory set of requirements explicitly designed to promote the objectives of sustainable development.

Abbreviations

CFIA	Canadian Food Inspection Agency
COROS	Common Objectives and Requirements of Organic Standards
IROCB	International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies
NOP	National Organic Program (USDA)
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
VSS	Voluntary Sustainability Standards

Executive Summary

Over the course of ten years, the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) joined forces to address barriers to trade of organic products that have arisen from the worldwide proliferation of organic standards schemes in both the private sector and government sectors (i.e. as technical requirements under regulation). This partnership was structured in two phases, the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF), which operated from 2002 to 2008, and the Global Organic Market Access project, which was in effect from 2009 to 2012.

The ITF: The partners organized an international conference in 2002 to share information about the situation of organic standards and technical regulations, and to raise awareness of key problems and challenges. The conference's main outcome was the decision to continue the dialogue by establishing the ITF, inviting participants from governments, intergovernmental organizations, the private sector and interested NGOs. The Task Force defined its main objective as facilitating international trade of organic products and access of developing country producers to international markets. It originally set out to analyze the current situation, and to propose and communicate solutions. The task force focused on opportunities for harmonization, recognition, equivalence and other forms of cooperation within and between government regulations on organic agriculture and private organic standards schemes. WTO rules, especially those on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT), served as the general framework for the approach to analysis and solutions. In an initial phase, the ITF reviewed and analyzed the situation, including the impact of established organic regulations on trade, current models and mechanisms that enable organic trade, and potential models and mechanisms for harmonization, equivalence and mutual recognition. Developing equivalency among existing schemes was seen as a core solution. In order to encourage and facilitate equivalence, the ITF went beyond its original mandate and developed two practical equivalence tools. The *EquiTool* supports equivalence assessment of organic production and processing standards, and the *International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies (IROCB)* supports equivalence assessment of the requirements for performance of certification. The tools offer a means to standardize the equivalence assessment process, enabling various parties to equivalence discussions to avoid the burden of process design for the assessments, and they provide efficient frameworks for assessments. At its closing in 2008 the ITF launched the tools and issued a number of formal recommendations, advisory statements, and calls for action.

The GOMA Project: The partners committed to carry on efforts to implement and build upon the results of the ITF. The Global Organic Market Access (GOMA) project focused on practical implementation of ITF-developed tools and recommendations at the level of countries and regions, also leaving room for continued monitoring and analysis of the overall situation. GOMA strategy was to continue to spread information on the work and results of ITF, and to

catalyze and respond to demand for services coming primarily from governments. A large task force was not needed. Instead, the steering committee from the three partner organizations took up the design and implementation of activities, assisted occasionally by several GOMA Ambassadors coming from the ranks of the ITF. Changes in the environment since the formation of ITF affected the course of GOMA's work, most notably the phenomenon of geopolitical regionalization. Noting this, GOMA placed priority on supporting regional harmonization of standards and technical regulations and recognized that the tools should also serve as a benchmark for harmonization processes in addition to functioning for equivalence assessment.

One of GOMA's first activities was to reposition and add more functionality to the EquiTool through the addition of a normative annex, *Common Objectives and Requirements of Organic Standards* (COROS). Indeed, in GOMA's regional initiative in Asia, COROS served as the foundation for development of an Asian Regional Organic Standard, which was crafted by a working group of stakeholders from Asian governments and the private sector. As the GOMA project came to an end, a sub-set of the working group prepared to propose this standard for adoption by ASEAN as regional standard as part of its blueprint for developing the ASEAN Economic Community.¹

GOMA also supported a process for a common organic standards scheme among the five Central American nations plus the Dominican Republic. These regional processes have exposed government and private representatives from eighteen countries to the GOMA tools and recommendations. GOMA also provided technical support to several countries for a self-assessment of their standards and certification requirements using the tools. However, results of this activity were not as fruitful as the regional work. It still remains for interested governments to implement the tools in an official equivalence process.

Achievements: The ITF and the GOMA projects have significantly raised awareness of governments and the private sector alike of the need and advantages of harmonization and equivalence approaches. Governments such as Canada have expressed clear political will to fast-track equivalence and have developed a variety of approaches to implement it. On the harmonization side, a global mind-shift can also be observed. Whereas the European Union was the only example of regional harmonization of organic regulations before 2002, several groups of countries have since then developed harmonized regional standards schemes, some with the direct support of ITF and GOMA, such as the Central American countries along with the Dominican Republic. These projects have also demonstrated the power of public-private cooperation and dialogue. They show that partnerships between intergovernmental institutions and international civil society organizations can be highly synergetic. Furthermore the ITF and GOMA's Asia working group are models for public-private policy dialogue, and factors for their success are given in the main body of this paper. The organic sector has proven to be a good laboratory for work on the emerging field of meta-governance of voluntary sustainability standards and for practical implementation of WTO objectives concerning

¹ In April 2013, the ASEAN Task Force on Horticulture and Food Product Standards decided to create a working group tasked to develop an ASEAN organic standard and conformity assessment scheme.

technical barriers to trade. The ITF and GOMA projects represent the leading edge of imposing some order among standards schemes in the context of their interoperability for trade. While focusing on trade, this work should be seen as contributing to the larger goals of inclusive sustainable development.

I. Introduction

A. Addressing Barriers to Trade of Organic Products

This paper reviews a partnership of three international institutions to address barriers to trade of organic products that have arisen from the worldwide proliferation of organic standards and regulatory schemes, which is still ongoing. From 2002 to 2012, the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), joined forces to investigate the situation of multiple organic standards schemes and their impact on trade, to identify potential solutions to the resulting barriers, and ultimately to reduce the barriers with new tools and related approaches for equivalence and harmonization of organic standards schemes. This review accounts for the structure, process, achievements and gaps of the partnership in achieving the objectives of the ITF and the GOMA project. The International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF) operated from 2002 to 2008, and the Global Organic Market Access project was in effect from 2009 to 2012. The review also highlights models for solutions and change emerging from this partnership in the broader context of public-private cooperation, meta-governance of sustainability standards, and geo-political regionalization.

B. Roots and Branches of Organic Agriculture Standards Schemes

Organic agriculture standards arose from a movement based on a biological systems-based paradigm of agricultural production, whose roots were set during the early 20th century in Europe, India, Japan and the United States. In this respect, the history of organic standards is unique. Sustainability standards in agriculture arising thereafter have not been formed with such a paradigm but mostly from objectives and approaches to minimize negative social and environmental impacts of production. The modern proliferation of sustainability standards is a response to factors ranging from consumer-driven commercial opportunity to the failure of economic systems and governments to account for the full costs of production including environmental and social resources (Salmon, 2002). In contrast, organic agriculture's contributions to a more sustainable world arise from its core paradigm and related principles.

Originally, organic standards and certification schemes were initiatives of farmers associations, several of which were formed in the 1970's in North America and Europe, and augmented by activists who set up co-operatives and promoted the marketing of organic produce. By the

1980's these "movements" began to work with governments on establishing technical regulations setting the rules for the production, processing, certification and labeling of organic products in order to assure the integrity of organic agriculture production systems. This basic model has since been replicated and adapted around the world, with the establishment of national organic movement associations that focus on standards and certification, market development and public policy, including regulation. But not all organic regulations have arisen from initiatives of the private sector. Since the enactment in 1991 of the European Union (EU) regulation on labeling of organic products sold in the EU, many governments have taken the initiative to develop similar regulations, motivated by the desire to achieve access to this market and subsequently, the organic market of the United States, which was regulated starting in 2000. By 2002, fifty-six countries had regulations at some stage of development,² thirty-six of these were fully implemented and others were at various stages of development, and by 2012 some one hundred countries harbored organic regulations in some nature and stage. By virtue of their legal authority and effect on trade, these government regulations have had large impacts in the organic sector, a trend that continues in the present.

Hundreds of private-sector organic standards, long held by associations and other entities, still function to brand and differentiate organic products in the market. Since the advent of regulations, the impact of private standards on trade has diminished, but they still impact, both positively and negatively, the ability of some products to enter certain value chains. Some private standards function in order to fulfill regulatory requirements, for example, the EU organic regulation requires operators to be certified to a standard that meets but is separate from the EU regulation itself. Other private standards schemes arise for reasons of market differentiation. They are strongly branded in some regions and markets, and have provisions that restrict the sourcing of products bearing the certification brand. Private standards have also expanded the scope of organic products, for example to textiles and cosmetics. Approximately five hundred certification bodies (CBs), mostly private but some in governments, function worldwide to verify compliance of operators to organic standards. These bodies range from small, regional non-governmental organizations to large multinational certification businesses. The mix of regulatory and private organic standards schemes presents a complex landscape, which organic producers and traders must navigate to participate in value chains effectively.

All these organic standards in public and private domains are relatively cohesive, due to networks created by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), which facilitated shared principles and developed an international IFOAM Basic Standard starting in the 1970's, and further reinforced by the development of Codex Alimentarius Commission *Guidelines for the Production, Processing, Labeling and Marketing of Organically-Produced Foods*, developed and approved in stages starting in 1999. Also, some governments seeking market access to the United States and the European Union based their technical regulations for organic production and processing requirements on one or both of these regulations.

² The prime objective of regulation is the assurance of the integrity of organic production and guarantee systems, i.e. the meeting of specific management criteria.

Despite a measure of cohesion, organic standards and related conformity assessment schemes are also characterized by diversity. Because organic agriculture practices are site-specific and practices depend also on available resources, it is expected that organic standards will vary to some degree among regions. Historical factors, legal and regulatory frameworks, market competition and stage of development have also contributed to variation in organic standards schemes.

C. Standards Proliferation and Regulatory Fragmentation

This situation contrasts with that in most of the other sustainability standards schemes. Most sustainability standards schemes have been developed relatively recently in the private sphere by one or a few international actors, and in a more centralized framework, as opposed to the bottom-up development of standards in the organic sector. In no other sustainability sector are there the nearly ubiquitous, parallel dimensions of private schemes plus government schemes and consequently, regulatory fragmentation.³ According to one academic observer, “It is safe to say that, given the possibility to design an optimal global regulatory system for organic agriculture, none of the stakeholders involved would opt for the current level of multiplicity.” (Derckx, 2010) Against this very background, analyzing progress on harmonization and equivalence in organic agriculture can offer many valuable lessons for other sectors.

D. Trade Impacts

Proliferation of organic standards schemes has been accompanied by proliferation of organic seals and labels, and much has been written and discussed about the consumer confusion – real and potential – arising in this context. Opportunity costs are inherent in the scenario, considering that resources dedicated to the development and maintenance of this multi-tiered regulatory complex might have instead been allocated to developing other aspects of organic agriculture such as producer capacity and consumer education. But the most direct and profound impact of the proliferation of organic standards schemes worldwide is the impact on international trade of organic products. The plethora of standards schemes in the private and especially the public sector raise transaction costs for trade and often prevent producers and traders from accessing markets that are governed by foreign standards schemes. A producer seeking to sell products that end up in multiple value chains in multiple countries can be required to obtain multiple certifications to various government and/or private standards schemes applicable in the target markets. The many and collective requirements for trade create a major obstacle for continuous and rapid development of the organic sector, and especially limit opportunities for small producers in developing countries to sell their products into value chains involving international trade. Likewise, certification bodies, which are subject to accreditation, must obtain multiple accreditations to ensure that the certification is recognized in the various target markets of their clients. This represents another layer of transaction costs in the system of organic trade. The net effect is that minor variances in

³ It could be argued that the regulatory fragmentation in the organic sector is unsurpassed by standards schemes in any other sector of enterprise.

standards and conformity assessment requirements can become major barriers to trade of organic products.

E. A Partnership for Solutions

Sharing great concern over the problems outlined above, FAO, IFOAM and UNCTAD decided to join forces to search for solutions. The three organizations have complementary areas of competence, which are all central to addressing the problem: IFOAM in organic agriculture, UNCTAD in trade and development and FAO in agriculture, rural development and food quality, including the normative work of the Codex Alimentarius Commission. FAO's interest in this case was to maintain opportunities for sustainable agriculture and rural development through organic agriculture. For IFOAM, the motivation to engage was to support the growth and development of organic agriculture worldwide. UNCTAD aimed to preserve and expand trade opportunities for developing countries and their producers in a robust market characterized by premium prices and high returns. The partners also recognized benefits available from collaboration among intergovernmental institutions and one from civil society, including networks and credibility across public and private sectors. Collectively, the partners were able to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders and motivate them to engage in collaborative dialogue. Also recognized was the potential of this collaboration to serve as a laboratory, out of which could emerge a model for problem-solving, and meta-governance in the expanding universe of sustainability standards.

II. An International Task Force

The partners organized an international conference in 2002 to share information about the situation of organic standards and technical regulations, and to raise awareness of key problems and challenges. The Conference's main outcome was the decision to continue the dialogue by establishing an international task force, subsequently called the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF). The partners invited participants from trade and agricultural ministries of governments, intergovernmental organizations, private sector businesses, national organic movement bodies, and certification and accreditation bodies. Individuals were asked to provide input in their personal capacity in order to optimize communication and creativity. The ITF was conceived as an open-ended dialogue among private and public institutions involved in trade and regulatory activities in the organic agriculture sector. In the time span of 2002 to 2008, participants came from twenty-nine countries, eight intergovernmental organizations and twenty-five organizations in the private sector/civil society.

A. Ambitions, Approaches and Achievements

The Task Force defined its main objective as facilitating international trade of organic products and access of developing countries to international markets. Initially it established rather modest ambitions to review the existing situation of organic standards and technical

regulations, investigate potential solutions for the identified problems and make recommendations. Specifically, the task force focused on opportunities for harmonization, recognition, equivalence and other forms of cooperation within and between government and private organic standards schemes. WTO guidelines, especially those on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT), served as the general framework for the approach to analysis and solutions.

ITF implemented its review and investigation of solutions via a series of studies, proposals and draft recommendations, which were reviewed by the task force at its annual meetings. These meetings and the work in between were facilitated by a steering committee comprised of two representatives from each of the partner organizations, supported by a Secretariat. Members of the steering committee worked in complementary roles to facilitate the discourse, attract participants from government and private sectors, and disseminate information in their respective channels. Transparency was high, facilitated by studies and reports that were freely available on a website hosted by UNCTAD, and news of the project was disseminated in the communication channels and networks of the partner organizations.

In an initial phase, the ITF reviewed and analyzed the situation, including the impact of established organic regulations on trade, current models and mechanisms that enable organic trade, experiences of cooperation, recognition and equivalence in the organic sector, and potential models and mechanisms for harmonization, equivalence and mutual recognition. In a second phase, the ITF developed solutions in three areas: standards for organic production and processing, conformity assessment, and new ways of public and private cooperation.

In comparison to private standards systems, government regulations were identified as having the greatest present and future impact on market access. In the course of time, ITF's main focus was therefore on the public sector, although with due consideration to the roles played by the private schemes and especially the opportunity for recognition and cooperation between the public and private schemes. Early in the discussions it was agreed that solutions should not include creating any new organization to govern harmonization and equivalence processes among the schemes. Instead, it was decided to work with existing organizations and systems.

Developing equivalency among existing schemes was seen as a core solution. In order to encourage and facilitate equivalence, the ITF went beyond its original mandate and developed two practical equivalence tools, one supporting equivalence of organic production and processing standards and the other supporting equivalence of conformity assessment, in particular, requirements for the performance of certification. The tools offer a means to standardize the equivalence assessment process, enabling various parties to equivalence discussions to avoid the burden of process design for the assessments. Their main appeal is that they can confer a high degree of efficiency in assessments and avoid multiple side-by-side comparisons of norms.

Guidelines for Assessing Equivalence of Organic Standards and Technical Regulations (aka EquiTool), is a set of procedures for organizing equivalence assessments, including a short list of criteria for deciding on the acceptability of variations, or gaps, between standards. EquiTool

was later amended to function as a more robust tool by expanding its annex on regulatory objectives into a fully-fledged normative document on, “Common Objectives and Requirements for Organic Standards” (COROS). *International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies* (IROCB) is a model set of norms for the performance of organic certification, which is based on the requirements of ISO Guide 65 and a representative set of organic sector-specific requirements drawn from requirements in the IFOAM Accreditation system, Codex Alimentarius Organic Guidelines, and several regulations. IROCB represents a reasonable common denominator of these norms for certification in the organic sector. In addition to functioning in equivalence, the aim was also to catalyze convergence of the various certification requirements. These tools may be applied to equivalence assessments in both the private and public sectors. The ITF went on to develop a communications plan that placed high priority on presenting the tools to governments, and since then activities have focused mainly on the public sector.

The ITF also made a number of formal recommendations, advisory statements, and calls for action. Some of these were directly related to the use of the tools. Others emerged from discussions of the problems and potential solutions. Some of the recommendations guided the further work on harmonization and equivalence in the subsequent GOMA project. However, several recommendations relating to concrete actions, such as the formation of a platform for cooperation of accreditation bodies, and undertaking revision work on the Codex Organic Guidelines, were not implemented for reasons of timing and complexity.

In a third phase, ITF shifted some of its technical focus to a more political one, with the objective to raise the level of awareness and political support for the recommendations and Tools of the ITF. This was an important step, because the ITF was not a formal structure and lacked authority. Furthermore, the government participants tended to be mid-level technical managers who would depend on higher level support to effect commitments. A strategy and plan of action for communications was developed, in which specific activities were outlined and assigned to relevant actors to implement. Some activities, such as reaching out to intergovernmental organizations, were assigned to the Steering Group and others to the ITF members, for example, for the ITF participants from governments to present the work and results at higher levels of their government ministries/agencies. Presentation materials and media information were developed in English and Spanish versions, including a website, information kits for in-person presentations, and plans for articles in relevant publications. The ITF project period ended before many of the planned communications activities were implemented, and the partner organizations arranged for this work to be carried over into the subsequent “Global Organic Market Access” project.

III. Results of the Task Force

A. Primary Achievements

The vision for organic products to have global market access without any regulatory barriers to trade guided the work of ITF, but it was not a practical objective. The work of the ITF was to set the stage for achieving this goal in the longer term. It was envisaged that the long-term goal would be realized, step-by-step, through decisions by key actors, especially the governments. ITF increased the understanding of many stakeholders of the issues around organic regulations and market access. It has directly and indirectly influenced actors in a direction of supporting more market access and in particular highlighted the need to take into account conditions in developing countries. According to one academic review of ITF, “international understanding and capacity development on the topics enhanced the whole worldview of many governments with respect to organic trade, stopping countries from thinking about their own standards (scheme) in isolation or just a few export destinations, and placing harmonization and equivalence firmly on the agenda.” (Derkx, 2010).

Solutions identified and proposed by ITF were highlighted in a series of agreements and recommendations from the task force. Furthermore, ITF exceeded its objectives by developing and publishing two practical tools for assessing equivalence of organic standards and certification requirements. The tools were launched by executives of the three partner organizations at the final ITF meeting, accompanied by media communications.

B. Other Achievements

The ITF had beneficial effects that were not specifically targeted in the original formulation of the project. Collectively, these secondary achievements furnish procedural models for approaching and addressing geopolitical issues around harmonization and equivalence.

The ITF is a model process for global-scale problem solving involving dialogue and cooperation between the public and private sectors. Key elements of this model are:

- shared leadership from a partnership characterized by complementary strengths, expert guidance, and continuity of the involved individuals;
- a well defined problem and realistic common goals;
- an arrangement wherein task force members could speak in their personal capacity, thus encouraging open dialogue;
- mutual respect and commitment among task force members;
- inclusion and teaching of new task force members;
- a well structured and transparent process for studies, discussion, decisions and recommendations.

This process led to building relationships and trust among the individuals and institutions involved, among governments, and between private and government sectors. The time frame

for building trust must not be under-estimated in such processes though. “The ITF over time shaped a community of like-minded people with a common vision,” noted the academic study on the ITF. (Derkx, 2010).

C. Remaining Gaps to be Filled

The timeline of the ITF was determined by its terms of reference, in particular the tasks it set out to implement and its funding situation. As previously observed, one strength of the ITF was that it limited its ambitions to what could be realistically accomplished by the task force in a reasonable time frame. In this context and indicated by the results of discussions, priorities were established and certain initiatives were not fully implemented.

Toward the end of the ITF, there were indications that work should be extended in several areas.

Harmonization: The ITF specifically decided to forego any effort to coalesce around one or the other international organic standards (IFOAM Basic Standards and Codex Organic Guidelines) or even to advocate that there be one internationally harmonized standard. Although ITF developed a normative document for certification performance requirements (IROCB), it is aimed mainly as a guidance document for equivalence. Equivalence was the higher priority and considered more achievable. Toward the end of ITF, there was a growing awareness of regionalization as a means for developing countries to leverage their position in trade, and the dawn of its application to organic trade, for example, work of Pacific island countries towards their potential trade partners, Australia and New Zealand. Opportunities for other regionally harmonized standards schemes were also coming to light (such as the East African Organic Products Standard).

Using common objectives for equivalence of standards: Respecting the WTO TBT guidance on equivalence, the ITF made room for studies and discussion of common objectives of organic standards. However, this did not materialize in the EquiTool as a foundation for equivalence assessment. The first edition of EquiTool was essentially a set of procedures and a brief list of criteria that could be the basis for rationalizing gaps between two or more standards. An Annex listed some common objectives identified during the ITF discussions but did not connect them to analysis. It was later decided that the EquiTool should have a more robust equivalence assessment mechanisms, based on objectives, which would be more aligned with the WTO framework.

Communications and development of political will among governments: By the end of the ITF project it was observed that more time and dedication of resources would be necessary to fully disseminate and explain the tools and recommendations. The tools were launched at the last meeting of ITF, leaving little time for presentation of these final results. Although the ITF was successful in calling general attention to the work, in-depth presentations and discussions with broader and higher levels of government ministries/departments were deemed important in order to achieve uptake of the ITF results.

IV. Global Organic Market Access

A. Project Concept

The partners committed to carry on efforts to implement and build upon the results of the ITF. In 2009 they opened a new three-year project with the same overall objectives of ITF—to facilitate trade and market access for organic products— but with a changed structure and focus. Global Organic Market Access (GOMA) focused on practical implementation of ITF-developed Tools and recommendations, at the level of countries and regions, also leaving room for continued monitoring and analysis of the overall situation. By implementing activities to achieve stated objectives, the project aimed to increase the use of harmonization and equivalence in the system of organic trade, thus lowering the current technical trade barriers. The following four objectives were defined for this project:

1. Adoption and use of the ITF tools and recommendations in both developed and developing countries.
2. Implementation of tools and recommendations.
3. Regional co-operation among stakeholders on harmonization and equivalence.
4. Monitoring and continuous improvement of tools and recommendations.

GOMA strategy was to continue to spread information on the work and results of ITF, and to catalyze and respond to demand for services coming primarily from governments. A large task force was not needed. Instead, a GOMA project manager, and the steering committee of the three partner organizations took up the design and implementation of activities. However, in order to expand its reach, the GOMA Steering Committee appointed several “GOMA Ambassadors” from among the ranks of the ITF. The terms of reference for the Ambassadors called for them to represent GOMA at events where there is an opportunity to present or otherwise feature the topic, and to make targeted presentations in their respective regions, primarily to government officials with decision authority in the matter of organic regulations and trade.

In a review of the ITF project conducted by the University of Utrecht (Derkx, 2010), it was noted that the ITF succeeded in part because it set relatively modest and realistic goals. Similarly, the GOMA project established a general goal and objectives but it did not set quantitative targets or aim at specific achievements, e.g. that a certain number of countries would use the EquiTool in at least a few bilateral equivalence processes. The exception was to aim at supporting and completing at least two new processes of regional cooperation on harmonized standards and conformity assessment.

B. Situation Surrounding GOMA

The GOMA partners noted that there had been significant changes in the global context for GOMA activities in comparison to the situation at the beginning of the ITF.

Global concerns and crises: A global food price crisis and food scares in Asia and Western Europe were affecting political agendas related to agriculture in governments and intergovernmental institutions. This sparked increased rhetoric on “sustainable agriculture” within the sustainable development agenda, and a consequent tension of opposing forces, those who would define sustainable agriculture as an agro-industrial paradigm, and those who define it as agro-ecological paradigm (especially represented by organic agriculture). These pressures gave impetus to new demands on producers from buyers in supply chains, including new standards schemes. It also gave rise to a new perspective of ITF and subsequently the GOMA work, in that organic agriculture has gained more visibility as a best-practice solution for true sustainability in agriculture. Furthermore, supportive policies for market access and sector expansion grew in relation to policies and regulations to protect and restrict national organic markets.

Proliferation of other sustainability standards: At the outset of ITF in 2003, standards proliferation was viewed mainly in terms of the rapidly expanding population of organic standards. Indeed, other sustainability schemes existed and they both competed with and complemented organic standards schemes. Some of these standards schemes, such as standards on Good Agricultural Practice (GAP), embodied requirements aimed at food safety and included some requirements focused on social and environmental objectives. Many sustainability standards were also developed to be more easily taken up by large agribusiness actors than organic standards schemes.

By the advent of GOMA in 2009, supply chain demands for other sustainability standards schemes in agriculture changed the dimensions and dynamics of market access especially for poor producers in developing countries, with which the partners were most concerned. Organic labels still provided some of the best premiums and profitability to producers, and organic markets continued to grow in most key import markets, but market access challenges for developing country producers and others were diversifying and magnifying in the context of demands for new and more labels to meet the demands of international buyers.

Assessing these trends, the partners decided to maintain the focus of GOMA on harmonization and equivalence within the organic sector itself, as this original problem was still in search of a practical solution and there had been good progress on tools for such. Other organizations and initiatives, especially the International Social and Environmental Labelling Alliance (ISEAL) were engaged in efforts to decipher, organize and cope with the totality of these standards schemes. Apart from GOMA, UNCTAD and IFOAM, together with GlobalGAP, began an initiative to introduce efficiencies into audits for organic producers who also need GlobalGAP certification for entry to supermarket shelves, while FAO began an initiative to introduce efficiencies into audits for organic producers who also need Fair Trade certification. Thus, GOMA proceeded in its original path.

Regional Cooperation and Integration: Nations are increasingly looking to regional cooperation to achieve objectives in the areas of economics, security, politics and culture. Higher levels of cooperation take the form of regional integration, wherein supra-governance systems are created through treaties or similar forms of agreement. The trade agenda is a strong driver of

such arrangements, with free trade in the region as a central objective. Among the benefits of regional integration is the strengthening of the interaction of the region with other regions and powerful nation states. But the arrangements among a region's members also create new opportunities for economic growth. The growth of the organic sector in areas undertaking regionalization favors its inclusion in regional cooperation and integration initiatives. The ITF has also contributed to networking among governments and key stakeholders in certain regions, leading to ideas for regional harmonization, equivalence and recognition. Regional organic standards schemes are increasingly gathering political support and their development processes are paving the way toward a new regionalism for organic agriculture. In parallel the private organic sector is also tending to network and cooperate regionally, providing a platform to contribute expertise and further political support for the regional harmonization and recognition processes. The priority of GOMA on regional cooperation and integration of organic standards systems grew throughout the project, and became especially focused on Asia,⁴ based on strong participation of Asian governments and private stakeholders in ITF and dynamic, developing organic agriculture and markets in the region.

Revision of the Private International Organic Guarantee System: During the time of the ITF, IFOAM was reviewing and revising its private Organic Guarantee System, which had originally included a private international "Basic Standard", similar to the standards in Codex Organic Guidelines, and an accreditation program based on the IFOAM Basic Standard and IFOAM Accreditation Criteria. At the outset of GOMA, the revised system was committed to supporting trade and equivalence of standards schemes, in contrast to differentiating best practices in organic standards and certification. Throughout the ITF private-public cooperation was discussed and recommended, and the revisions in the IFOAM scheme positioned it to provide new services, including to governments, develop equivalence and harmonization of organic standards schemes. The main effect of this in the GOMA project was the cooperative development by the GOMA project and IFOAM of the Common Objectives and Requirements of Organic Standards (COROS), a normative document for use in assessing equivalence of standards based on how they fulfill common objectives. GOMA expanded its EquiTool to upgrade the Annex on common objectives into COROS. IFOAM has used COROS to develop an IFOAM Family of Standards, which identifies legitimate and competent organic standards on a global basis.

C. Activities and Results

To address the four objectives during implementation, the project was organized according to eight workspaces.

1. Adoption of tools and recommendations;
2. Fostering practical implementation of tools and recommendations;
3. Supporting regional initiatives on harmonization and equivalence;
4. Recognition of regional organic standards and regulatory systems;
5. Analysis and evaluation of the tools, emerging issues, and developments;

⁴ In the GOMA context, this included East, South and South-East Asia.

6. Communications to create awareness and disseminate information about the project's approach, activities and achievements;
7. ISO/Codex: to explore how these international forums could facilitate long term "life" for the ITF tools, and enhance accommodation of organic agriculture in their standards and guidelines;
8. Conference to review the topic and project, update the analysis, and maintain the momentum.

Four major activities and results are particularly worth highlighting:

Enhancement of the ITF tools and their expanded scope to include both equivalence and harmonization: Based on feedback, both tools were revised, including the addition to EquiTool of the COROS, for assessing equivalence of standards according to common objectives and requirements. COROS was based on a study of objectives and principles stated or inherent in private, national and international organic standards. Co-developed with IFOAM it was consulted with stakeholders in both the private and public sectors. GOMA's regional work also brought to light the applicability of the tools as a foundation for developing harmonized regional standards and certification performance requirements.

Support and Progress on Regional Harmonization of Organic Standards Schemes: GOMA has been directly involved in facilitating two new regional standards and technical regulatory frameworks for organic agriculture and trade, namely in Central America/Dominican Republic and South, South-East and East Asia. These processes have exposed government and private representatives from eighteen countries to the details of the tools, although to different degrees. The harmonization process in Central America did not directly employ the tools in the development process, although during the course of the process, governments learned about them. In the Asia Initiative to produce a framework for cooperation on organic labeling and trade, the tools were more central to the harmonization process. This initiative was facilitated by GOMA and implemented by a working group comprised of key government and private sector stakeholders in the region. Seven governments compared their standards and certification requirements to the Common Objectives and Requirements for Organic Standards (COROS, the expanded Annex of EquiTool), and IROCB. This provided the groundwork for the development of an Asian Regional Organic Standard (AROS), which is highly consistent with the COROS, and for acceptance of IROCB as the instrument for recognizing conformity assessment in the Region. Work was done on how to include cooperation on recognition of organic certification in the countries in the framework, even if they do not currently regulate the organic sector.

Toward the end of the GOMA project, government stakeholders from members of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) formulated and committed to steps to take AROS as the reference scheme for developing an ASEAN organic standard, as well as to take up discussion on a model for recognition of conformity assessment developed in the working group. Parallel to this development, an alliance of certification bodies primarily from ASEAN countries, developed its own regional standard, which is harmonized with AROS.

Awareness, Support and Adoption of GOMA Tools and Approaches: GOMA's approaches, recommendations and tools have been widely disseminated through its website (in English and Spanish versions), targeted presentations by Steering Committee and GOMA Ambassadors, regional workshops, and general presentations and communications in UNCTAD, IFOAM and FAO channels, many of which are translated to Spanish. In 2012, GOMA organized a high-level international conference, "Let the Good Products Flow", which examined the past, present and future of global organic market access, and identified emerging issues. The conference drew key stakeholders from private and public sectors and its timing coincided with the announcement by the United States Department of Agriculture and the European Commission of a bilateral equivalence arrangement for trade of organic products. Information on GOMA's work and results have reached at least ten governments in Africa, twelve governments in Latin America, nearly all governments in East, South-East and South Asia and EU member states, Oceania (Sixteen Pacific Islands, Australia and New Zealand), Canada, United States, and many members of the private sector/civil society. In addition to the use of GOMA tools in the Asian initiative, Canada conducted pilot assessments of the tools. The European Commission referenced the tools as best practices for equivalence assessment in its "Guidance for Import of Organic Products into the European Union." However work remains to be done, because the Commission has not yet used the tools directly for this purpose.

Review and Analysis of Bilateral Equivalence Processes: By the end of the GOMA project, several bilateral equivalence processes had been completed among trading partners in developed countries, namely between Canada and the United States, Canada and the European Union, and The European Union and United States. The aim of this study was to expand the transparency of the arrangements and disseminate knowledge to other governments that may consider engaging in equivalence processes with their trading partners. GOMA interviewed key members of the equivalence delegations and reviewed the processes leading to the conclusions of the equivalence negotiations. This analysis concluded that success of the arrangements was highly dependent on underlying trust and high transparency between the trading partners, and that investing in maintenance of the agreements is essential to their long-term stability. The report recommended that although the trading partners that are parties to these arrangements represent a large share of the world's trade in organic products, there is a need to expand arrangements to also recognize equivalence of organic standards schemes of developing countries and provide equal market access to their organic producers. Lock-in mechanisms of equivalence agreements that exclude others should be avoided.

D. Achievements

Building the public-private cooperation model: GOMA's work in Asia was a regional application of the ITF's public-private cooperation approach. The integration of government and private sector participants in the Asia Working Group and its Drafting Group for the Asian Regional Organic Standard yielded mutual learning, cooperation and empowerment. The governments clearly appreciated the contributions of the private sector participants, who brought much technical expertise and practical problem-solving skills to bear on the challenges. However, at the stage where governments needed to work on details of their own peer review and

cooperation, some government representatives expressed a preference to work in a group composed exclusively of their peers, and this preference was honored in organizing the last GOMA Asia meeting, which was limited to the participants from governments.

Regional standards schemes as building blocks for global harmonization and recognition: Regional standards schemes, and the concept of equivalence among them, can be building blocks for scaling up harmonization and equivalence of organic standards and regulatory systems. The tools and GOMA's flanking advocacy, trust-building, information exchange, financial support and capacity building have been instrumental in developing several regional schemes. The emerging regional governance of the organic sector is bound to benefit global organic trade, starting with intra-regional trade in developing countries and expanding to global connectivity.

Change of focus from import compliance to systemic equivalence: As affirmed by the 2012 GOMA Conference, over the course of the ITF and GOMA projects there has been a re-prioritization in organic regulation towards equivalence as the main mechanisms for facilitating imports, as opposed to compliance with the regulation of the importing country. In 2002, it was observed that individual developing countries with export agendas were writing standards and technical regulations that were essentially proxies for those in its main target markets, e.g. the EU or USA, hoping that the strategy of mimicry and compliance would gain attention in these markets and provide market access. In some cases it did, e.g. Argentina, but it also locked such countries into regulations that were not entirely appropriate to their own situations.

Now, largely as a result of ITF and GOMA's work, the attitude and approach has shifted. We are in a new phase of equivalence, regional harmonization and cooperation to facilitate organic trade. In his keynote address at the GOMA Conference, (at that time) WTO Deputy Director-General, Harsha V. Singh, observed that "indeed, the work of the ITF and GOMA on the development of practical tools for equivalence both in standards and conformity assessment, as well as facilitation of regional harmonization of standards, can be seen as an innovative model of practical implementation of TBT objectives on harmonization and equivalence,"

E. Challenges and Gaps

No direct uptake of the Tools in equivalence processes: From the conception of the tools in the ITF, it was envisioned that individual governments and perhaps private scheme owners would adopt these instruments for direct use in bilateral or multilateral equivalence processes. Instead, the tools have been applied in other ways, such as in the harmonization process in Asia and in several pilot "self-assessment" exercises by governments. In the time period of GOMA, three bilateral equivalence arrangements were completed among trading partners in the major organic markets of US, EU and Canada. However, the tools were either too little, too late, too unfamiliar or too unusual to be employed in these equivalence processes. The European Commission indicated that, in its case, COROS was not robust enough to function for purposes of recognizing equivalence of production and processing standards. Although CFIA (Canada) engaged with GOMA in a pilot project for self-assessment and evaluation of the potential of the

tools and was motivated to gain efficiency in equivalence assessment, the exercise and results were too late to impact the equivalence processes with the US and EU and other approaches were becoming entrenched. Although briefed several times by ITF and GOMA, the National Organic Program (NOP) of the US has been the least engaged in ITF and GOMA, and committed to a traditional side-by-side assessment design for comparing production and processing standards. During the GOMA period, developing countries were not engaged in technical equivalence processes with other countries. Canada, US and EU were focused on their bilateral agreements. Developing countries with regulations mainly concentrated on implementing or revising their regulations, or on regional harmonization. Despite the lack of uptake for equivalence processes, the project met most of its objectives and employed the tools in regional harmonization activities.

Public-private cooperation model not fully implemented in the Central American case: The processes for regional cooperation on organic standards and regulatory schemes in Asia and Central America, both supported by GOMA, had significantly different histories and outcomes. In the case of Asia, a relatively high share of government and private sector participants in ITF were from Asia, reflecting the new dynamism of organic agriculture and market development in that region, and interest to assimilate globally. This positive momentum carried over into the collaborative work between public and private sector on the Asia framework for cooperation on organic labeling and trade during the GOMA project. Conversely, GOMA's engagement with Central America/Dominican Republic had only shallow roots in the previous ITF process. In this case, GOMA engaged with a regional intergovernmental body, Institute for Inter-American Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) to facilitate completion of a process already started by the governments. GOMA aimed to provide some financial support to the process, explore use of the tools in the harmonization process, and ensure a public-private consultative approach to the final stages of development for the standard. Lacking an early, comprehensive discussion of assumptions and expectations, the cooperating parties, including the government authorities, soon learned that they had different operating concepts. While GOMA assumed it would fulfill an advisory role in the development process for the standard, its Latin American counterparts saw the role of the GOMA project as primarily a funding function for the activities of the governments. In the end, GOMA was not represented during the development meetings, but the governments took its comments on consultation of private sector stakeholders into account, with some results that were mutually satisfactory.

Use of GOMA Ambassadors not optimally effective: As noted earlier in this paper, the GOMA Steering Committee appointed several ambassadors to promote the Tools and other results of the ITF in key regions. Although guided by terms of reference, the role of these ambassadors was primarily voluntary, although some modest fees and expenses were paid. Accountability on the part of the GOMA Steering Committee and the ambassadors towards each other was informal. Ambassadors accepted and executed some assignments with good results. One such result was facilitating a pilot "self-assessment" of the Canadian organic standard to COROS. In other cases, the commitments of Ambassadors did not materialize. More uptake of the ITF and GOMA results by governments, especially the Tools, might have been achieved if there had been local support from more expert advocates.

V. Lessons Learned in the ITF and GOMA Projects

In the course of ten years, the ITF and GOMA projects provided several lessons to the sponsoring partners and participants in project activities and also some general findings of interest to stakeholders in other sectors interested in achieving higher degrees of interoperability among VSS:

Equivalence and harmonization have interrelated effects:

Progress on equivalence may lead to progress on harmonization and vice versa. This conclusion is drawn from several cases in the GOMA project. Common Objectives and Requirements of Organic Standards (COROS) was developed as an instrument for assessing equivalence among organic standards. It also served as the reference for comparative assessment of national standards in the process of drafting of the Asian Regional Organic Standards. These assessments led to revision and further harmonization of many of the national standards. The GOMA review of the processes for bilateral equivalence assessments in Canada, the United States and the European Union revealed that knowledge exchange and confidence building between the national delegations led to several harmonizing revisions in standards and improved processes for oversight of conformity assessment. Greater harmonization reduces impediments to equivalence. This lesson is echoed in a study by the Norwegian Agricultural Economics Research Institute, which concluded that “international guidelines on how to apply mutual recognition and equivalence enhance harmonization.” (Elvenstad and Veggeland, 2005)

Regional standards schemes are building blocks for global harmonization and equivalence:

Regional standards schemes, and the concept of multilateral equivalence among them, are building blocks for significantly scaling up harmonization and equivalence of organic standards and regulatory systems. Regionalization itself creates multilateral regional recognition or a single harmonized system. Regional initiatives have the most potential where there are corresponding intergovernmental organizations, e.g. ASEAN, which can institutionalize harmonized schemes and elevate their political status in the context of global trade discussions. Recognition of conformity assessment as well as harmonization and/or equivalence of organic production and processing requirements should be taken into account in the development of regional strategies for organic labeling and trade.

Significant mitigation of organic standards proliferation will require a multi-faceted strategy:

Traditional bilateral equivalence processes, even with efficiencies gained from use of ITF/GOMA Tools, will be insufficient to fully clear pathways for organic trade, especially for developing countries. Incentives to invest resources on equivalence and harmonization processes are based on the severity of trade barriers, which are determined mainly by trade volumes

between countries. Absent regionalization, there will be low incentive for the major importing countries to negotiate with countries with which they have little or no export potential. This leaves many developing countries out of the picture for equivalence. However, this situation should increase incentives for regionalization, as described above and for other cooperative approaches leading to inclusive, substantial mitigation of barriers to organic trade on a global scale.

Agreements on trade liberalization offer only limited, if any, opportunity for establishing equivalency among organic regulatory schemes:

A study for the GOMA project examined the potential to establish mutual recognition for organic regulations in general trade agreements. The study concluded that the risk of undesirable lock-in effects, which also occur with stand-alone equivalence arrangements for organic regulations, would be magnified in general trade agreements and could have long-run detrimental effects on organic trade (Rundgren and Lissel, 2012).

VI. Overall Achievements of ITF and GOMA

Significantly elevating knowledge and prioritization on facilitating trade of organic products

The projects have significantly raised awareness of governments and the private sector alike of the need and advantages of harmonization and equivalence approaches. Government agencies are more aware of their role in facilitating trade of organic products. Whereas harmonization and equivalence concepts were largely ignored before the projects, the current situation is that many stakeholders and competent authorities have been sensitized, and some of them have developed true political will to cooperate on reducing trade barriers for organic products. The European Union for example, has moved towards a new approach to regulate imports, favoring the equivalence approach and opening up for cooperation with the private sector. Other countries such as Canada have also demonstrated clear political will to fast-track equivalence and have developed a variety of approaches to implement it. Their examples can now lead the way for many more countries. On the harmonization side, a global mind-shift can also be observed. Whereas the European Union was the only example of regional harmonization of organic regulations before 2002, several groups of neighboring developing countries have since then developed harmonized regional standards schemes, some with the direct support of ITF and GOMA.

Advancing Public-Private Policy Dialogue

The topic of public-private policy dialogue (PPPD) has assumed the status of a discipline in intergovernmental bodies and other agencies associated with policy and development. OECD has observed that, “The participation of civil society consumers, private entrepreneurs, employees, citizens, associations etc. in the design of public policies echoes the need of the

state and the government to establish their legitimacy by improving the transparency, quality and effectiveness of their policies.” (Pinaud, 2007). As previously noted, the periodic global scale dialogues in the ITF and regional dialogues in GOMA’s Asia initiative had many positive attributes and produced tangible results. Identification and analysis of factors contributing to the success of these dialogues can contribute to the larger analysis of this discipline.

Contributing to meta-governance of sustainability standards

Standards schemes have emerged as a major approach to fostering sustainable practices and influencing policies. The milieu of sustainability standards, organic being just one sub-sector, is characterized by ad hoc development, redundancy, fragmentation, lack of coordination, and competition. There is an emerging discourse on what is becoming known as the “meta-governance” of sustainability standards, which would create more order or focus in the milieu.⁵ The ITF and GOMA projects represent the first steps toward creating order among organic standards schemes in the context of their interoperability for trade. In this respect, the organic sector has served as a laboratory for developing and testing meta-governance approaches, such as the tools for harmonization and equivalence, and for fostering good practices such as stakeholder participation. The ITF and GOMA projects should give impetus to similar initiatives in other sectors.

VII. Future Outlook

The organic food and agriculture sector will continue to be a promising laboratory for meta-governance and interoperability of sustainability standards, and for practical implementation of WTO objectives, enshrined in the TBT Agreement. Employment of ITF/GOMA Tools to achieve harmonization, equivalence, other forms of enhancing interoperability, and capacity development in organic standards setting will be supported as part of a working group on interoperability of voluntary sustainable standards (VSS) under the auspices of the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards. It is anticipated that the new initiative will continue to train stakeholders in use of the tools, support new regional initiatives, encourage government use of private sector services on harmonization and equivalence, investigate and facilitate multilateral equivalence arrangements, and identify and address emerging issues related to interoperability of organic standards schemes in support of clearing trade pathways and facilitating market access. While focusing on trade facilitation and market access, this work should be seen as contributing to the larger goals of inclusive sustainable development. This work counter-balances the emphasis on standards and compliance that has characterized and sometimes dominated the organic sector in the past three decades. Stringent standards and regulation can promote credibility within markets, but they must be flanked by other supportive policies and approaches to develop the organic sector and thus promote sustainability in food and agriculture.

⁵ For more information on meta-governance of sustainability standards see: Derkx, 2013.

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