

**Dr. Supachai's Opening Remarks at the
8th and final meeting of the UNCTAD-FAO-IFOAM International
Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic
Agriculture**

9 am, 6 October, Room XXV

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to this 8th and final meeting of the UNCTAD-FAO-IFOAM International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture. I am delighted that today we can crown six years of dedicated work with successful results, which will serve to facilitate developing countries' participation in the production and trade of organic agricultural products.

It is now widely recognized that - in a world where tariffs are gradually being lowered through processes of unilateral, bilateral or multilateral liberalization - the relative importance of standards and certification requirements as potential obstacles to trade has increased significantly. And if this is true for most goods, it is particularly the case for organic agriculture, whose products by their nature must often distinguish themselves from conventional agricultural products by means of standards and certifications.

Indeed, at a time when the WTO is negotiating drastic cuts in tariffs, standard requirements seem to increase both in breadth and depth. In order to address this, the TBT and SPS Agreements of the WTO already promote harmonization and equivalence among standards, as well

as reference to existing international standards. Unfortunately, however, progress towards actual implementation of these principles has been slow.

In addition, we are witnessing a mushrooming of private voluntary standards, many of which are created by NGOs, sometimes in concert with retailers in the developed world. Some of these standards are often driven more by consumer or specific producer-group concerns than by the real requirements in the producing countries and seem to be constantly moving targets. Needless to say, multiple certification requirements and standards can impose significant costs on producers, particularly small farmers in the developing world.

UNCTAD's intergovernmental and research work has identified the multitude of different organic requirements as being one of the main barriers preventing developing countries from taking full advantage of the many benefits organic agriculture offers. In 2002, UNCTAD's Trade Commission asked the secretariat to join with other partners to examine "ways to promote the practical application of the concept of international equivalence and mutual recognition, including between governmental and private sector standards".

Against this very background, this International Task Force (ITF) was created in 2003 to help reduce technical barriers to trade in organic agricultural products and to promote harmonization and equivalence among organic agricultural standards and technical requirements.

The ITF is an excellent example of an international public-private partnership for sustainable development. It brings together experts from Governments, the private sector and civil society from around the world,

as well as many United Nations agencies, such as FAO, UNCTAD, UNEP, WTO and OECD. It is a sustainable development partnership because production and trade in organic agricultural products are a triple win opportunity --a win for trade, a win for the environment and a win for development.

After 8 meetings and 6 intense years of work, the Task Force has now achieved impressive intellectual and practical results. You have produced high-quality analytical papers published in several volumes. Your work has also led to an enhanced understanding of the importance of removing technical barriers to organic trade, and what is required to achieve this, as well as to a real dialogue and cooperation between private and public sector and among governments. As such, your recommendations have become a catalyst for regional harmonization processes and more trade-friendly organic import regulations.

I would therefore like to congratulate and thank all of you for your contribution to the ITF.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Of course, this 8th and final meeting of the ITF still has a very important job to do. Your main goal is to approve the final version of the two practical tools developed by the ITF, which are:

- The International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies (IROCB), and
- The Guide for Assessing Equivalence of Organic Standards and Technical Regulations - the "Equitool".

After many drafts and consultations, these tools are now to be launched at tomorrow's High Level Public Session. I am confident that these tools will prove useful to policy makers in many countries, and facilitate the participation of developing countries in the production and trade of organic agricultural goods.

In addition, you will also have an opportunity to look into the future and discuss the "Beyond the ITF" project. After all, even if this is the final meeting of the ITF, your work does not end here. In fact, it is rather the beginning.

You are the Ambassadors of the ITF, and you should work to ensure that its message is spread and that its recommendations are taken into account by your colleagues. Indeed, the impact of the ITF work is now in your hands.

I wish you every success.

Thank you very much.