



Food and Agriculture  
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Movements



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on Trade and Development

## INTERNATIONAL TASK FORCE ON HARMONIZATION AND EQUIVALENCE IN ORGANIC AGRICULTURE

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### **Communiqué** from the 8th ITF meeting Geneva, Switzerland

The International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF) is composed of individuals working in government agencies, inter-governmental agencies, and civil society and other private sector organizations<sup>1</sup> involved in organic agriculture regulation, standardization, accreditation, certification and trade. These individuals joined together from 2003 to 2008 in a platform for dialogue among public and private stakeholders. The goal of the ITF was to address and seek solutions to trade barriers arising from the many different standards, technical regulations and certification requirements that function in the organic sector, and enable developing countries to have more access to organic trade.

Jointly led by FAO, IFOAM and UNCTAD and supported by several donor organizations<sup>2</sup> the ITF focused on opportunities for harmonization, equivalence, recognition and other forms of cooperation within and between government and private organic guarantee systems. Its formal results include technical studies and briefing papers, recommendations and tools for solutions. The ITF's work and results have progressed in two phases.

The *Review Phase* of the ITF work identified and analyzed:

- Impact of existing organic certification requirements, standards and technical regulations on trade;
- current models and mechanisms that enable organic trade;
- experiences of cooperation, recognition and equivalence in the organic sector;
- potential models and mechanisms for harmonization, equivalence and mutual recognition.

The results of this phase guided the exploration of potential solutions.

The *Solutions Phase* of the ITF produced two practical Tools for harmonization and equivalence:

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<sup>1</sup>ITF participants have come from government agencies of twenty-nine countries (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Costa Rica, Cuba, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Fiji, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Italy Japan, Kenya, Netherlands, Philippines, Russia, Samoa, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, Thailand, Tunisia, Uganda and United States), eight inter-governmental agencies (EU, OECD, FAO, UNCTAD, UNECE, UNEP and WTO) and twenty-five civil society and other private organizations

<sup>2</sup> The ITF appreciates the support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the Norwegian Agency for Development (Norad), and the Government of Switzerland for financial support to conduct its work and achieve its result.

- The *International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies* (IROCB), a reference norm that can be used by governments and private accreditation and certification bodies as a means of accepting certification of organic products outside of their own system.
- *Guide for Assessing Equivalence of Organic Standards and Technical Regulations* (EquiTool), a set of procedures and criteria for deciding when a standard applicable in one region of the world is equivalent to a standard applicable in another region.

During this phase the ITF agreed to support the two International Standards for organic production and processing (IFOAM standards in the private sector and Codex Alimentarius Commission standards in the government sector), and encourage harmonization and equivalence based on these standards.

In the course of its meetings the ITF made several recommendations. These include that:

- Governments and the private sector make every effort to utilize the Tools and other ITF results in order to facilitate trade, and include them in their efforts to build or enhance the organic sector;
- Governments commit to using international standards as the reference point for import approvals;
- Public-private participation is improved in decision-making for both international organic standards (IFOAM and Codex Alimentarius Commission);
- Governments should utilize and encourage mutual recognition on the level of conformity assessment in their regulatory systems.
- The *International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies*, in addition to serving as a reference for equivalence and recognition, should be considered as a catalyst for convergence of certification requirements in the long term and may be adapted for use in direct accreditation as possible;

The ITF also achieved:

- Increased understanding among all kinds of organic sector stakeholders of the technical situation and issues affecting the trade of organic products;
- Influence on new organic regulations and revision of existing ones.
- Shared experiences and establishment of networks among stakeholders in different regions working to develop organic market access;
- Regional cooperation to develop harmonized standards and technical regulations and other measures to reduce organic trade barriers.

The work and results of the ITF, including its technical papers and reports, have been chronicled in a series of publications, "*Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture*." These publications are available in book form from the ITF Secretariat and in electronic format from the ITF Website, [www.itf-organic.org](http://www.itf-organic.org).

### Call to Action

The ITF calls for governments, intergovernmental organizations and the private sector to support, promote and implement the ITF's recommendations and Tools. Specifically, governments and private sector standards setting and conformity assessment bodies should use the ITF Tools for assessing equivalence of standards and certification requirements and accepting organic products certified in different systems. The ITF also calls for other forms of cooperation within and between all levels: governments (with or without an organic regulation), accreditation bodies and certification bodies.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Key examples of other forms of cooperation, such as the development of regional standards, are published in ITF technical papers.