

The organic certification system in transition: Integrating a development-oriented approach into third-party certification – A case study of Demeter’s project “Projekt Anerkennung”

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Summary

This study will inspect the current situation and discussions on organic control and certification procedures and assess the applicability of a development-oriented certification procedure in organic farming. For this, recent issues with third party certification (TPC) for organic food are discussed and a pilot project currently tested by Demeter e.V. in Germany that aims at combining control, advice, and farm development in organic control and certification is evaluated scientifically. Additionally, consumer attitudes towards organic certification, control, trust, and a development-oriented approach are examined to evaluate the potential of alternatives to the traditional TPC.

Problem Statement

Organic labels are a useful tool for organic farmers to distinguish their produce from conventional food and a quality assurance for consumers. Historically, organic certification has been shaped by participation, mutual development and recognition of farmers (Padel et al. 2010, Niggli 2018). But with the introduction of the EU-organic regulation (EEC) No. 2092/91 in 1991 – replaced by regulation (EC) No. 834/2007 in 2007 and regulation (EU) No. 2018/848 in 2022, the control and certification procedure for organic food in the EU was fully transformed into a mandatory TPC and top-down system. Not only does the institutionalization of standards not leave room for the individual situation of farmers, also advisory services and farm development have been strictly separated from the control and certification procedure (Riddle and IFOAM, 2000). Today, separate formats like organic associations, governmental or private agencies offer advisory services to farmers. Furthermore, private standards or associations such as Demeter, Bioland, and Naturland in Germany complete or reinforce weak points in public standards (Thomazo 2021).

Although TPC is the basic standard to certify organic produce in the EU, it is often criticized, e.g. for supporting the conventionalization of organic agriculture (Buck et al. 1997, Nelson et al. 2010, Kaufmann and Vogl 2018), for promoting an input substitution model of organic agriculture (Seppänen and Helenius 2004, Nelson et al. 2010), and for fostering competition between different certification bodies (Padel et al. 2010). Additionally, a recent study in Tyrol found that farmers are unsatisfied with

the current organic certification procedure (Leitner & Vogl 2020). Organic associations like Demeter also use TPC as part of their certification procedure, however, since 2018 Demeter e.V. in Germany is testing a development-oriented certification procedure that involves farmers in the control and certification procedure of their farms. Besides, it has been reported that projects are initiated in different European countries to increasingly involve farmers and, in fewer cases, consumers in the development of standards and the certification procedure (Compagnoni 2019, IFOAM Organics International n.d., *Sistema di Garanzia Partecipata*, n.d.). One example of such projects are participatory guarantee systems (PGS) (May, 2019).

However, the scientific debate of PGS' potential to respond to the criticism to TPC is mainly focusing on the Global South. Furthermore, participatory control and certification as well as a combined procedure of control, advice, and farm development in organic control and certification and consumer attitude towards this concept have not yet been discussed in scientific literature.

Aim

The overall intent of this research is to evaluate the potential of combining control, peer-advice, and farm development in organic control and certification. Moreover, this research aims at investigating the consequences, benefits, or even disadvantages this transformation of the certification procedure may bring about for farmers, processors, and other stakeholders, and how consumers may respond to a such a development-oriented control and certification procedure.

Research Questions

- Which of the problems and criticism about TPC can a development-oriented certification system solve and improve?
- What are the conditions for and the potentials and implications of a development-oriented certification procedure for different sectors in organic farming and food production?
- What is consumers' attitude towards different certification procedures for organic food?

Case Study

To answer the research questions, the development-oriented certification tested in the "Projekt Anerkennung" was selected as a case study since combines TPC with participatory elements. The key element of "Projekt Anerkennung" is a moderated farm talk which gives room for discussing problems, questions, challenges and development objectives of the farm, aims at the inspection and advice giving by peer farmers, and entitles the visiting farmers to recommend Demeter the certification of the farm or define ways to improve critical situations on the farm.

Design and Methodology

This research is framed in a cumulative dissertation project comprising three papers and rooted in a socio-empirical approach. The first paper employs a mixed methods approach to understand consumers' level of knowledge about control procedures for organic certification and to analyze their attitude towards control procedures and a development-oriented certification. Therefore, this paper will start off with focus-group discussions with organic consumers and semi-structured interviews with representatives from consumer organizations and retail. The hypotheses developed during the qualitative research will be tested by analyzing a quantitative online consumer survey.

The second paper will be a profound evaluation and discussion of a mixed procedure of control, advice, and development in the control and certification procedure of an organic association. Therefore, this paper will set a strong focus on the case study of the development-oriented certification. In the first part, a Theory of Change will be developed to track the transition from the traditional certification to a development-oriented certification, to serve as a guideline for its continuous evaluation, and to explore questions on the potentials and challenges of this control and certification procedure. In the second part, the implementation of the development-oriented certification will be examined using previously developed SMART indicators. This paper makes use of qualitative social sciences methods such as semi-structured interviews, workshops, and a focus-group discussion with relevant stakeholders.

The third paper will examine further issues on TPC, a development-oriented certification, participatory control and certification, consumer attitude, or discuss the transferability of a development oriented-certification to other sectors in (organic) farming and food production and beyond the organic association Demeter.

Expected Outcomes and Significance

This study is expected to be relevant for current and future research on organic certification and control procedures. First, this research will provide new insights on consumer knowledge about control procedures, their attitudes towards control and trust in organic certification, and picture consumers' reactions towards a control procedure that involves peer-review and farm development in an organic control and certification procedure. Second, the results will give new insights into the potentials and challenges of development-oriented control and certification. Third, this research is expected to introduce a development-oriented certification procedure into scientific literature, reintroduce the concepts of farm development, knowledge exchange, networking, and farm resilience into the scientific discussion on organic control and certification, and to broaden the discussion on current and future organic control and certification procedures. Last, this work may serve as a guideline for transforming the control and certification procedure in other sectors of organic farming and processing.

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