

Let trust and cooperation grow together

It is a popular myth that organic regulations were put in place to protect consumers. But there are very few examples in the world where it was the consumer that demanded their government regulate the sector. Instead, it was mainly the sector itself that went to their governments and asked for regulation. Certification bodies were often the driving force behind this. They had many reasons to do so: 1) to increase their market by forcing non-certified producers to be certified (or to leave the organic market); 2) to increase the value of certification as the only tool to get organic market access, 3) to protect those certified from competition from non-organic producers claiming to be organic and, 4) to ensure that other certification bodies played by the same rules. The last point, particularly played a very big role in motivating the certification bodies. Many did not trust each other and often spent a great deal of time denigrating their colleagues, with the unfortunate result that the whole market fell into disrepute. Certification bodies did not manage to cooperate at either the national or international level.

This lack of trust not only led to the process of forming legislation, but also to the development of detailed regulations and standards aimed at closing all loop-holes. No wonder governments did exactly that. However, in the end many certification bodies discovered that regulations are more like straight-jackets. Most affected are those operating under multiple regulatory regimes. They end up with a regulatory overload and even

sometimes conflicting requirements from accreditors and regulators.

Instead of running to the government to sort out their differences or to tackle new challenges, organic certification bodies should maturely discuss their differences with their peers and with the sector at large. There have been attempts: councils of certification bodies have been established in the US and the EU, the IFOAM accredited certification bodies have had a platform for cooperation since the late 1990s and IFOAM has taken the initiative of starting the global Certification Body Forum, which held its second meeting at the IFOAM Certification Conference in Rome. These steps in the right direction should be encouraged and supported, and those not yet participating should join.

Fifteen years after the implementation of the EU Regulation, legislators, regulators and certifiers have come to realise that there is need for cooperation – at national and international

levels. A good example of how a problem, for the sector and governments alike, can be solved was the process of getting global consensus on requirements for group certification. Spearheaded by IFOAM in 2000-2002 the process did not result in any new regulatory text, but the outcome has generally been accepted. Not only was it a process in which the sector could take the responsibility. It was also a very thorough process that involved many people, thereby ensuring reasonably good rules and encouraging other actors to join in. The sector needs more of this. It also showed that cooperation and dialogue can work well between private sector actors and governments. Mutual trust and cooperation reinforce each other, and a positive spiral can be established instead of a vicious one.

The big question is whether governments will reward cooperation and industry agreements with any kind of recognition? It is obvious that the energy invested in cooperation will be multiplied if the actors know that the result will have some practical relevance. ■

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