

**INTERNATIONAL TASK FORCE ON HARMONIZATION AND EQUIVALENCE  
IN ORGANIC AGRICULTURE (ITF)**



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations



International Federation  
of Organic Agriculture  
Movements



United Nations  
Conference on  
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**4th (interim) Meeting of the**

**International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in  
Organic Agriculture**

**28<sup>th</sup> February 2005**

**Nuremberg, Germany**

# **FINAL REPORT**

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## **SUMMARY**

The International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture held its fourth meeting in Nuremberg, Germany, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 2005. 33 experts participated, in their own personal capacity. They came from three UN bodies (FAO, UNCTAD, UNEP), 16 governmental institutions (Argentina, Brazil, Canada, China, Costa Rica, Switzerland, USA, Tunisia, Germany, the Philippines, and Sweden), three international NGOs (IFOAM, IOAS and ISEAL) and five national private organizations involved in certification and accreditation.

This meeting was a so-called interim meeting set up in conjunction with the Biofach Fair so as to bridge the time between the last full meeting of the ITF in November in Rome and next full meeting of the ITF in December 2005. The meeting was not aimed at deciding on new work items but to obtain feedback on the work done since the third meeting in Rome in November 2004. At first the ITF discussed and provided feedback for changes to a compiled and amended version of the paper on a long-term strategy and the paper on short-term actions towards harmonization as discussed at the last meeting of the ITF. Secondly, the ITF provided feedback on the preliminary results of a study comparing certification requirements of the main organic regulations and private sector system, and an analysis the applicability of ISO 65 for organic certification. Thirdly the ITF advanced in developing a “Glossary of Terms” It was also agreed to proceed with the following activities:

- Development of feasibility study for a comparative database for organic norms.
- Further investigation of research design and methodology for a consumer study on sensitivity to differences in standards and certification requirements.
- Analysis of experiences with cooperation of CABs and blueprint for future cooperation,
- Analysis of experiences with equivalency, recognition and other trade enhancing mechanisms
- Analysis of the common objectives underlying current organic regulations (CRO's), and recommendation for formulating CRO's.

## ***INTRODUCTION***

The International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture was launched on 19 February 2003 in Nuremberg, Germany. This is a joint initiative of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), United Nations Conference on Trade And Development (UNCTAD) and the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), supported by the Governments of Sweden and Switzerland

The Task Force is an open-ended platform for dialogue between public and private institutions involved in trade and regulatory activities in the organic agriculture sector. The objective is to facilitate international trade of organic products. It is a practical response to the difficulties faced by organic producers and exporters due to the hundreds of different organic regulations, standards and labels worldwide, and a follow-up to the recommendations of the Conference on International Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture held by the three organizations in February 2002.

At its first meeting, the Task Force formulated its Terms of Reference and work plan. The second meeting was held at UNCTAD, Geneva, Switzerland, 20-21 October 2003 to review the existing standards, regulations and conformity assessment systems. The third meeting in FAO, Rome, 17-19 November 2004, moved the process towards formulating concrete proposals on mechanisms for achieving harmonization and equivalence in the organic sector and means of facilitating access to organic markets, particularly by developing countries and smallholders.

The main objective of the fourth meeting on the 28th of February in Nuremberg, was to evaluate if the work done in the meantime was in line with the decisions of the third meeting and to realign or focus the work of the ITF if deemed necessary.

**Report of the interims Meeting of the ITF in Nuremberg  
28 February 2005**

***FIRST SESSION: INTRODUCTION AND PRESENTATION OF  
DRAFT PAPERS***

**Introductory Remarks**

In his introductory remarks Mr. Gunnar Rundgren, chair of meeting, pointed out that at the last meeting the ITF had decided to pursue a considerable number of actions.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the main objective and nature of the fourth meeting were different from those of regular ITF meetings. The aim was not to decide on new actions but to evaluate if the work done in the meantime was in line with the decisions of the third meeting and to realign or focus the work of the ITF if deemed necessary.

**Strategy for Solutions for Harmonising International Regulation of Organic Agriculture**

After its presentation the attendees discussed the new draft of the paper “Strategy for Solutions for Harmonising International Regulation of Organic Agriculture Strategy” as summarized below.

In response to a commenter’s suggestion regarding chapter 2.2 “Criteria for the assessment of solutions”, to add a criterion on “environmental protection” it was explained that such a separate criterion does not need to be included because it is an inherent component of the first criterion, “Provide for continued growth of organic agriculture and maintenance of its principles”.

Other participants were concerned about the order in which the criteria were mentioned in the document and wondered if the order was based on the importance attached to them. The author clarified that the list is not in any hierarchy of importance. Some participants felt that the issue of sovereignty (criterion 7) was of such a high importance that it should be moved up in the list or even be used as an overarching criterion (chapeau). It was argued that national sovereignty is a reality of life, and that every decision in regard to trade facilitation, for example on equivalency, is a decision of a sovereign nation, which should be acknowledged in the paper. In response to this it was suggested to clarify this in the lead-in section to the criteria. Others pointed out that agreeing on a “chapeau”-criterion would be difficult as the opinion about the relative weight of this criterion differs depending on the individual point of view, especially when overarching international agreements are taken

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<sup>1</sup> Third Meeting of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture 17-19 November 2004 Rome, Italy - Report

into consideration. Additionally, it could further be seen as an argument in favour of market protection, which would contradict the trade facilitation objectives of the ITF.

Another issue of discussion was the inclusion of “food safety” under the criterion of sovereignty. It was acknowledged that although food safety is an issue of consumer protection (criterion 4), organic requirements (standards or technical regulations) do not deal with food safety. In this context the ITF also discussed that it had not yet defined its scope and whether its scope is limited to the food sector only or also covers organic non-food products such as textiles and cosmetics. The participants acknowledged that this decision would affect the recommendation to agree upon one international reference standard, as for example the Codex Alimentarius guidelines only apply to food and could currently not be used as reference for non-food products. One participant pointed out that using principles instead of standards would make it easier to establish a broad scope.

Another proposal was to merge the criteria eight (transparency) and nine (principle trade policy provisions) because transparency is a trade policy provision. Furthermore, one commenter stressed that the ToR of the ITF are clearly targeted to the needs of developing countries and this needs to be reflected in the criteria.

The ITF concluded the discussion on this section of the paper deciding that the ITF-SC and author will review the comments and make appropriate adjustments.

Concerning the subsequent sections of the paper the ITF agreed that:

- in the first paragraph of chapter 3 the word “must” be replaced with “should”,
- “new certification bodies” be addressed in the first paragraph of chapter 3.2.
- Chapter 3.3 and the third bullet point of the first paragraph of chapter 3.4 need to take into account the situation of countries without an accreditation system and therefore no approval based on ISO 17011 (ISO 61).
- The paper is to spell out more clearly that the focus of the ITF is on international trade (cross border trade).
- 3.4.4 should refer to the first criterion both the growth or organic agriculture and maintenance of its principles.
- 3.4.5 should mention the low participation by the organic sector in ISO.

The chair of the meeting informed the participants that the current work plan of the ITF is derived from the actions and activities suggested in chapter four of the paper. The chair clarified that those actions that had not been translated into ToRs are also on the work plan of the ITF-SC. The chair asked for items that should come off the plan and suggestions for items that were missing. The ITF agreed maintain the current work plan but that a TBT study should be scheduled for a later point of time. Furthermore, it was proposed to launch an exchange with developing countries regarding their experiences with exporting organic products to the three main importing markets (EU, US,

Japan) and to use the feedback to reflect if some of the recommendations of the paper could be implemented.

### **Invitation to prepare country reports on regulatory systems**

Finally, the ITF decided to invite those of its members representing governments to prepare, with respect to the aims of the ITF, a brief description (no more than 4 pages) regarding their system for the regulation of organic products, e.g. policies and procedures for import acceptance.

### **Requirements for Certification Bodies – Situation and Scope for Harmonisation**

The decision to commission this paper was taken at the meeting in Rome. The study was commissioned with the objective to analyse the main differences and similarities between the different requirements for conformity assessment and assess the suitability of ISO 65 for organic certification. Because the paper was not finalized by the meeting, the aim was to obtain feedback on the preliminary findings, conclusions and recommendations. The author presented the structure of the study and the findings so far. Although results from Certification Bodies were incorporated into the preliminary assessment, at this stage the presentation did not reflect the findings from interviews with government regulators, which had not yet been undertaken.

### ***Discussion***

In general the participants expressed their appreciation of the quality of the presentation. It was pointed out that the USDA's NOP (National Organic Program) regulation does not refer to ISO 65 but that this is not based on opposition to ISO 65 itself. The requirements in section E and F of the NOP expand to areas not covered/not detailed enough in ISO 65 and NOP does not address areas covered by ISO 65 but considered to be not relevant for organic certification. Most certification bodies that are accredited under the NOP are also ISO 65 accredited. It was pointed out that the Chinese accreditation criteria are a mixture of ISO 65 and the IFOAM Accreditation Criteria. One participant questioned if ISO 65 or the existing governmental regulations are the right tools for detecting fraud, which ultimately should be the main aim of organic regulations. In response to a proposal to focus harmonization on standards first and then later on the certification level, the ITF SC explained that previously the ITF had decided to follow the two tracks simultaneously. It was suggested that developments in other labelling schemes be taken into account for example that UTZKAPEH is planning to drop ISO 65 and replace with a process-based certification guideline.. After a suggestion to include the situation of developing countries, it was clarified that the author was not asked to analyze regulations of developing countries but rather the experiences of certification bodies in developing countries with the requirements of the regulations of the importing countries. The inspection bodies covered in the study are located in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Europe. One commenter noted that the study addressed the differences between the regulations but not where the key pressures are in the system and the conflicts that should be tackled by harmonization efforts, e.g. that a

government does not accept certification carried out by a foreign certification body abroad. Another remark stressed the difficulty of application procedures, e.g. the fact that at the moment every single operator has to apply for certification. It was also stressed that a major difficulty for farmers stems from the documentation requirements. The ITF discussed what role private solutions, e.g. software systems that provide checklists (for different regulations), could play in achieving the aims of the ITF. One advantage could be that they might exist already or will be provided, simply because there is a demand for them. The major arguments against private systems were that affected parties in developing countries might not have access to them, e.g. because they might be too expensive and that they are only necessary because of a lack of harmonization.

### ***Invitation from Tunisia to host ITF Meeting***

The participant from Tunisia confirmed her country's interest in and support of the ITF. She reported about the history, current policies (subsidies, national training and research programs) and regulations concerning Organic Agriculture and the certification bodies operating in Tunisia. A comparison of the Tunisian regulation, similar to the one discussed above, with the EU, NOP and Swiss regulation had been carried out. Furthermore, Tunisia had applied for inclusion in the EU third country list but had not been informed about a decision yet. The Tunisian Ministry of Agriculture offered to host the next meeting of the ITF. The meeting was planned to take place in the first week of December 2005.

### **Glossary of ITF Terms**

The presenter noted that the glossary of terms was based on the discussions and decisions taken at the last ITF meeting. In the discussion following the presentation the ITF mainly discussed the definition of the term Harmonization. It was noted that the U.S. government, OECD and others had a different understanding of what the term harmonization means, than the one of the proposal. For the USA harmonization means identical regulations whereas equivalence describes the acceptance that two regulations use different measures to accomplish the same objective. However, it was also argued that the process of harmonization, as reflected in Figure 4 "Harmonization Tools" of the solutions paper, encompasses stages described as "Equivalence" and "Mutual Recognition". the ITF also decided that the definitions should only refer to situations that are relevant in the context of the work of the ITF. Therefore, terms like "services" and "test result" are to be removed from the definitions.

The discussion suggested that the definitions could be resolved as follows:

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

**Equivalence:** The acceptance that different standards or technical regulation on the same object fulfil common objectives.

Following another comment the new draft of the glossary of terms will be sent to the ITF for comments.

## ***SECOND SESSION: NEW WORK ITEMS***

### **Concept Note for International Comparative Database of Organic Norms**

The chair informed the audience that at this meeting the aim was to discuss and decide on the objectives underlying the project rather than on the technical issues related to setting up a database.

#### **Objectives of Database**

It was noted that in general there are two routes that could be followed. The first route would lead to providing the service of “standards comparison” to interested parties for their own uses. The other route would be directed towards achieving harmonization. An alternative proposal made by one participant was to assess what tools already exist in the private sector and rather than developing a database, to provide stakeholders, especially those in developing countries, with the information about these private initiatives/solutions.

The ITF noted that the first numbered point in the concept note is a by-product rather than a main objective and that it should be deleted.. Regarding the second point it was commented that this could be a means for easily identifying relevant requirements. However, it was also pointed out that most likely governments would and could not solely rely on the correctness of the database but would have to carry out an evaluation of the correctness of the information themselves. Database ownership was mentioned as a factor that will determine stakeholders’ buy-in. The ITF also decided to divide the last application (point 4) into two separate points. The database could also serve harmonization, because interested parties can use it to develop their standards based on those already in the database. This would allow equivalency determination and ultimately the development of harmonized standards based on common regulatory objectives. It was suggested to have both long term and short term objectives for the database.

#### **Commitment to Database**

When asked, the majority of the attendees expressed their support for continuation of the project. One commenter pointed out that the database is a medium term project requiring the appropriate devotion and commitment of the ITF.

The ITF discussed the topic of who should maintain the database. Various opinions were expressed, ranging from maintenance in the private sector by a single source (at least for the major international and importing norms) to decentralized maintenance by a variety of governments and private bodies. It was suggested to find out if private initiatives outside the organic sector have developed similar databases that are accepted by governments and to also

find out what the costs and benefits are. It was however acknowledged that the willingness to take over this responsibility would depend on the resources available.

The resources and financial commitment necessary for a database were also discussed. The resource need increases with the number of regulations covered by the database. One reason for not getting involved in such work could be that governments might have invested considerable resources in similar projects already, as is the case with the USDA

### **Format and Scope of the Database**

Another discussion focused on the format of the database. It was pointed out that a common international format would be a true value added to what currently exists and that ITF should provide this. The database could incorporate the work done by other parties. The ITF agreed that the main format should be subject-based and not referenced to any specific document. It was pointed out that a subject-based format already exists in work done by IFOAM and IOAS.

It was suggested that the database should accommodate interpretations, e.g. interpretations of the EC regulation by the member states. It should also cover those regulations that influence neighbouring states, as it is the case for example for China. . . .

The following points under qualities of the database were added:

1. The frame and hosting must be stable and robust
2. The database must be credible – maintained by a credible host in a credible way.
3. The major interested parties will maintain the database.

### **Decision**

The ITF decided to commission a feasibility study based on the feedback summarized above. The feasibility study is to include an analysis of the value of a database for developing countries.

### **Terms of Reference for a Study of Consumer Sensitivity to Differences in Standards and Compliance Verification Systems**

The chair pointed out that, here again the main issue of discussion was to evaluate if the objectives outlined in the Terms of Reference are consistent with the basis on which the ITF started the idea to research consumer sensitivity and to seek input regarding needed changes.

Once again the importance to also include developing countries was brought forward in the meeting. Some attendees argued that consumers do not at all know the standards, and therefore a survey should not be aimed at standards. Instead it should be at more general consumer values and reasons for buying organic products. .

Mr. Ulrich Hamm the research expert specifically invited to the meeting, made some remarks. He noted that we already know a lot about consumer expectations. Most studies show that the holistic approach underlying organic agriculture is not known by consumers but that consumers chose one component that appeals to them. He confirmed that most European consumers do not know anything about organic standards. They want to trust in a label. The most important topics for European organic consumers regarding imports are food miles and energy use.

Another participant pointed out that regulations are not, as usually argued, based on consumer expectations and resulting from the supposed need for consumer protection. Instead regulations are based on assumptions on what are thought to be the expectations. In response to this it was proposed that a study could aim at confirming that consumers are not aware of the details underlying the differences in standards. In line with this argumentation it was also proposed that the ITF should declare that if a country argues based on consumer protection, it needs to provide proof for its arguments, and that the consumer should not just be an excuse not to cooperate. As a counter argument to this statement it was noted that not every standard is developed for consumer-protection objectives.

Other participants argued that instead of commissioning a new study the primary data as available in existing studies should be compiled in some kind of meta-analysis. Another focus of the study could be an analysis of reasons for standards development other than consumer protection, e.g. protection of special interest groups like farmers.

Another participant reasoned that the approach that could meet the ITF objectives would be to ask consumers if their government says a product from another region meets its own regulatory objectives, then would they accept that the standards in the other region could be somewhat different from their government's standard.

The group came to no firm conclusion on the focus of the consumer study.

Regarding the technicalities and costs involved, the participants acknowledged that if the ITF decides to pursue the idea of sensitivity study it needs to focus on a limited number of target countries that are known to be most relevant to the objective. . Furthermore, it should be limited to regular consumers of organic products. Another suggestion was to restrict the study to a very limited number of questions regarding key topics, e.g. if the loss of domestic value-added due to increased trade would influence the consumers decision. The attending ITF members acknowledged that even if the scope of the study would be limited the financial means needed (10.000-15.000 € for four focus groups with regular consumers/per country in a low cost version or 20.000-25.000 € if different and specific points of the standards are discussed) would make it necessary to put all other planned studies to a halt.

The ITF agreed that the next step should be restricted to proposing a methodology and expected outcomes of a consumer sensitivity study. The ITF

acknowledged that the study should address the issue of sensitivity to differences in standards and conformity assessment. The ITF also decided to commission the actual study not in this funding term (end of 2005) but in the subsequent one.

### **Remaining Terms of Reference**

As a next point the ITF discussed how to proceed with studies proposed in the ToRs for the

- IBS-Codex Alimentarius Guidelines comparison,
- comparison of the EU, US and Japanese regulation,
- analysis of experiences with cooperation of CABs,
- analysis of experiences with equivalency, recognition and other trade enhancing mechanisms
- analysis of the common objectives underlying current organic regulations (CRO's)

Based on the need to prioritize its work the ITF decided to proceed with the preparation of the last three of the above studies. The three Terms of Reference will be circulated to the ITF with a two-week period for comments. The possibilities for workshops in connection with developing the study on equivalency and recognition will be taken into consideration.

### **Additional Remarks and Action Items**

Due to time constraints the ITF did not discuss the agenda item, "OGS Review." However, the ITF will be provided with the relevant documents and invited to comment on the OGS review.

Furthermore, the ITF had decided to seek cooperation with the International Accreditation Forum (IAF) and will therefore invite the IAF to participate in the ITF.

The Chair pointed out that the funds for the ITF are secured up to the end of 2005 and that members are encouraged to forward suggestions for future funding. Finally all participants were thanked for their active participation in the meeting.

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## AGENDA

### Agenda Meeting of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture 28 February, 2005 CCN West, Exhibition Centre, Nuremberg, Germany

Time	Topic	Filename	Comments
9.00	Revised paper “Strategy for Solutions for Harmonising International Regulation of Organic Agriculture”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ITFSolutionspaper0502.pdf</li> </ul>	presented by David Crucefix
10.00	New Paper, “ Organic Certification Requirements and ISO Guide 65”		presented by Mildred Steidle
11.30	Glossary of ITF Terms, presented by Diane Bowen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ITF Glossary_0502 .pdf</li> </ul>	
12.00	Updates		e.g. IFOAM OGS Review
12:30	Lunch		
13.30	Comparison of organic standards and technical regulations a.) database project b.) IFOAM IBS- Codex Guidelines comparison c.) EU/NOP/JAS comparison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conceptnote_ITFdatabase_0502.pdf</li> <li>ToR_IBSCodex_0502. pdf</li> <li>ToR_EU-US-Japan comp_0502.pdf</li> <li>StandardsComparisonIFOAM/EU/Codex.pdf</li> <li>EUIFOAMstandardscomp.pdf</li> <li>Comp_Processing substnaces copy 2.pdf</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discuss possibilities for collaboration with EU and IOAS projects to meet ITF needs.</li> <li>Discuss existing comparisons and decide on next steps for key comparison studies.</li> </ul>
14.30	Terms of Reference: Consumer Expectations Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ToR_Consumer Sensitivity_0502 .pdf</li> </ul>	Decide on detailed objectives of this study.
15.30	Other Terms of Reference a.) Blueprint for CAB-CAB cooperation b.) Equivalence and other trade mechanisms c.) Study of objectives of major organic standards and regulations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ToR_CABCooperation_0502 .pdf</li> <li>ToR_Equivalency-recognition_0502.pdf</li> <li>ToR_Regobjectives_0502.pdf</li> </ul>	Discuss Brief ToRs for future work.
16.15	Other Actionable Items/Priorities/Next Steps/Next Meeting		
17.00	Adjourn		