

Policy development in the organic movement

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IFOAM, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, is the world's leading body in organic agriculture, with more than 700 member organizations from over 100 countries. Almost half of its members come from the so-called developing world, including many NGOs, farmers groups, local certification bodies or small businesses. The General Assembly is the highest body of the federation, but, due to its international nature, most decisions, policies and procedures are decided by the World Board, which is elected every three years during the General Assembly.

Decisions made within IFOAM have a direct impact on the way organic agriculture is practised around the world and on how national and international policies are developed and implemented. A clear example comes from its Basic Standards for Organic Agriculture and Processing, which for more than 30 years have been the basis for the development of organic regulations worldwide, or from its Criteria for Organic Certification Bodies, which regulate the way accredited certification bodies operate and are a reference for all competent authorities worldwide. IFOAM's Accreditation Programme is implemented by the International Organic Accreditation Service: of particular importance for small farmers was IFOAM's pioneering acceptance and regulation of the certification of smallholder groups, in order to improve their access to national and international markets of certified organic products. Among other IFOAM activities with direct impact worldwide are the joint FAO-UNCTAD-IFOAM task force on harmonisation and equivalence in organic agriculture; the initiative to build closer links between certified organic agriculture, fair trade and social accountability; the organization of an international meeting on organic seed in July 2004; and the long but successful fight, together with organizations from India and Europe, against a case of flagrant biopiracy involving the neem tree (see Box 1).

IFOAM is a democratic organisation and several key decisions are taken in the General Assembly, where the World Board and IFOAM staff are subject to direct scrutiny from the membership. Several months before the General Assembly, the head office in Bonn, Germany, prepares and compiles documentation relevant to decisions to be taken there, in coordination with several committees and groups that rely on members' voluntary work. These may deal with modifications of the norms (standards and criteria), changes in the statutes or policies, motions and recommendations from the members, election of a new World Board or totally new work items. The most recent General Assembly took place in Adelaide, Australia, in September 2005 and the following are some of the author's impressions on a few issues that generated considerable debate before and during the General Assembly. These issues illustrate the dynamics within a large international organisation, as well as the difficult task of ensuring democratic decision-making and efficiency while at the same time, bringing practice into policy.

Principles of organic agriculture

An essential point on the agenda of the General Assembly, and the one that brought most intense discussion, was the revision

and approval of the Principles of Organic Agriculture, which should be the basis of all IFOAM's work. An intense, participatory two-year process was followed, involving the establishment of a task force and close consultation with the membership via internet and email. At the end of the day, the IFOAM General Assembly approved the revised Principles of Organic Agriculture. These principles are to inspire the organic movement in its full diversity, and to articulate the meaning of organic agriculture to the world at large. They are "the roots from which organic agriculture grows and develops", and according to IFOAM's president, they should also be recognized as a foundation for public regulations.

Box 1. EU Patent Office revokes "biopiracy" patent on fungicide derived from neem tree seeds

The neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*) is indigenous to the Indian subcontinent. It is mentioned in Indian texts written over 2000 years ago and has been used for centuries in agriculture as an insect and pest repellent, in human and veterinary medicine, toiletries and cosmetics. India has always freely shared its tree and knowledge of its many uses with the world community. Still there have been many attempts, of which some successful, to patent this resource. The neem patents are generating large sums of money for their 'owners' while the communities which first understood neem's uses will not be compensated at all.

In March 2005 however, a landmark victory was won in the world's first case against biopiracy, when the European Patent Office upheld a decision to revoke in its entirety a patent on a fungicidal product derived from neem seeds. The legal challenge lasted over ten years and was led by Dr. Vandana Shiva (on behalf of the Research Foundation for Science Technology and Natural Resource Policy, India), Magda Aelvoet (then President of the Greens in the European Parliament) and Linda Bullard (then Vice-President of IFOAM). The neem patent challenge was initiated in solidarity with the Neem Campaign of India, launched in 1993 by farmers in India who feared that their genetic resources and traditional knowledge were increasingly under foreign control through the legal mechanism of patents. Just after the ruling, Magda Aelvoet said "...it is a victory for traditional knowledge and practices....it is a victory for solidarity with the people of developing countries who definitively earned the sovereign rights to their natural resources and with our colleagues in the NGOs who fought with us against this patent for the last ten years. It can also inspire and help people from developing countries who suffer the same kind of theft but did not think it was possible to combat it."

Summarized from IFOAM's website.

Guarantee systems

Another hot issue during the General Assembly was the revision of IFOAM's Organic Guarantee System. While it is clear that this Organic Guarantee System is the world's leading system for organic standard-setting and accreditation, a lot of certified organic trade worldwide still occurs out of its influence. The discussion here dealt with fundamental issues, since IFOAM's mission statement mentions that its role is to lead and

unite. In the end, the majority of those present at the Assembly decided that although “to lead and unite” are highly relevant goals, all efforts need to guarantee the integrity of organic production and markets. The work of a special taskforce on participatory guarantee systems was also discussed. Such systems involve farmers and consumers, in order to guarantee the credibility of organic produce, which is crucial to local and alternative marketing approaches.

Regional groups

As a large and diverse organisation, IFOAM cannot rely solely on a centralised structure and so it was recommended to develop improved mechanisms of coordination and support with its regional groups and initiatives. This does not mean that a federal structure for decision-making is desired but rather that working through regional groups may be a better way to bring the federation more in touch with the remote regions. It is obvious, however, that regional groups can only be useful if the regional members participate in its activities and discussions.

Social justice

Before the General Assembly, several worldwide organisations organised a meeting to discuss issues related to social justice in organic agriculture. While some within IFOAM still consider that organic agriculture and social justice (at least from the normative point of view) are unrelated notions, to many others, organic agriculture needs to strive for social justice in order to be sustainable. The Assembly approved a recommendation urging all certification bodies that are members of IFOAM to implement Chapter 8 of its Basic Standards (which deals with social justice) and to ask IFOAM to better integrate all its work related to social justice in organic agriculture.



Photo: IFOAM

Delegates at IFOAM's General Assembly cast their votes.

Box 2. The approved Principles of Organic Agriculture

- Principle of Health - Organic agriculture should sustain and enhance the health of soil, plant, animal, human and planet as one and indivisible.
- Principle of Ecology - Organic agriculture should be based on living ecological systems and cycles, work with them, emulate them and help sustain them.
- Principle of Fairness - Organic agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities.
- Principle of Care - Organic agriculture should be managed in a precautionary and responsible manner to protect the health and well-being of current and future generations and the environment.

Is it worth all the energy?

Many stakeholders in the South might still think that IFOAM is a “white man’s club” or that it is dominated by traders and certifiers from the North, rendering its decisions and discussions not relevant for small farmers in the South. However, if we want to shape the world in a different way we need to participate actively, expressing disapproval of the current globalisation that pushes for a homogeneous world that is easy to manipulate, and fighting for an ecological globalisation, which requires minds free from prejudice and which celebrates diversity. IFOAM still has a long way to go in order to be more relevant for the countries of the South, but many steps have already been taken. Still, it cannot solve the immoral imbalances between rich and poor alone. IFOAM needs to become a more and more powerful tool for change and this can only be done if all those involved commit themselves. There is no democracy and no development without participation.

The challenge is enormous and with many difficulties, but this in no way should prevent everybody from shaping IFOAM and the organic world at large into a system that not only can provide wealthy consumers with quality products, but which also helps small farmers to survive and contribute to eradicate rural poverty. For that, better linkages and stronger commitment are needed at all levels.

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For more information on IFOAM: <http://www.ifoam.org>. The final version of the Principles of Organic Agriculture can be found here under “Organic Facts” and the work of IFOAM's Task Force on Participatory Guarantee Systems as Standards and Certification under “About IFOAM”.