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THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF GROUP CERTIFICATION FOR ORGANIC AGRICULTURE IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

In a global market for organic food which in 2011 was estimated to 63 billion US Dollars (Sahota, 2013), smallholding are important as they could fuel further growth. One of the main constraints for organic certification of smallholdings is the cost of certification, which is quite high compared to the turnover. Group certification for organic agriculture is a type of certification which does not require yearly inspection of all farmers and it comes with a smaller price tag for each individual farmer. In several countries such as Canada, India and East African countries the group certification is possible while at the moment in the EU it is not. This article investigates the potential impact of group certification for Romania in the context of the EU still undergoing debate regarding the review of the EU policy on organic agriculture.

Introduction

Certification and certified products such as organic, fair trade, Rainforest Alliance and SA-8000, are gaining popularity and these markets have had an ascending trend in the last decades. The media coverage for organic and fair trade products is also significant, both praising and raising questions regarding fraud cases. Moreover, as consumers' interests in such products increases, governments and international organizations are also becoming increasingly interested in the regulation of markets of the certified products.

However, not all certification programmes have good reputations and are regarded as reliable and there may even be fraud in the use of labels (Dankers and Liu, 2003). Therefore it is obvious that the existing control mechanisms are not 100% efficient and sufficient.

In 2011 the global market for organic food has expanded fourfold compared to 1999 and it was estimated to 63 billion US Dollars (Sahota, 2013). Although growth rate of the early 2000s has slowed since 2008 due to the financial crisis, sales have continued to slowly increase.

In the EU the total value of the organic market was estimated at around 21.5 billion euros in 2011 (Willer et al., 2013). In 2008 the growth rate was 8% per year and in 2011 it reached 9%. Market growth rates are expected to recover as the European economy strengthens and some analysts project the European organic market to continue to increase by around 7% per year, with revenues reaching 30.5 billion Euro in 2016 (EC, 2014).

The question some analyst raise is when will the organic market reach saturation and the growth rates experienced in the previous years be halted? As mature markets such as Germany, France reached a stable equilibrium, the growth in the EU can be fuelled by east and central European countries. However, an additional growth potential is represented by smallholdings which also play an important role in the overall rural employment as the majority of the agricultural holdings are small.

A 2011 study by EU Commission - General Directorate for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI, 2011) showed that in 2007 the economic dimension of 40% of the EU farms was below 1 European Size Unit (ESU, representing the economic size of farms) while 56% of the EU farms had an economic dimension below 4 ESU. At the time of the study one ESU was 1200 Euro.

In Romania, agricultural plots are highly fragmented and the average area of the used agricultural plots is 1.95 ha, according to the 2010 data of the National Institute for Statistics (NIS 2012 – p. 13), Moreover, 97% is the number of arable land plots in Romania where less than 10 ha (household type of agricultural area) represents 37% of the area of the arable land plots (NIS 2012, p. 423).

In recent years smallholdings have received increased attention in the political debate particularly because of their potential to promote growth in the organic agricultural sector. For smallholdings the adoption of organic agriculture is highly dependent on the market access (and the premium prices that could be obtained) and therefore small agricultural operators should not be marginalized or excluded from the organic sector due to factors beyond their control (standards, cost of control and inspection). One of the main constraints for organic small scale agriculture is the cost of certification, which is quite high compared to the turnover.

Group certification for organic agriculture is a type of certification which does not require yearly inspection of all farmers and it comes with a smaller price tag for each individual farmer. In several countries such as Canada, India and East African countries, the group certification is possible while at the moment in the EU it is not.

This article reviews some of the most important and largely adopted organic standards worldwide, reviews the debate on group certification in the EU in the context of the review of the EU policy on organic agriculture and investigates the potential impact of group certification for Romania in the context of the EU still undergoing debate.

The article is structured as follows: the second section briefly explains organic certification while the third section presents the most popular organic standard in the world. Section five presents the benefits and constraints of organic certification while section six focuses on the characteristics of organic group certification. The last sections analyse the potential impact of group certification in Romania in the European context.

What is organic certification?

International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) is an international body that aims to promote the organic agriculture via research, certification, education and growers and is one of the most influential voluntary accreditation schemes (Barrett et al., 2002). However, IFOAM accreditation has no legal status in the EU.

As the IFOAM standards have been a major influence on the development of national laws that regulate organic farming, including the EU regulation and the Codex *Alimentarius* guidelines set up by FAO and WHO, their definition of the organic agriculture is worth mentioning here. Therefore, IFOAM defines organic agriculture as a “*production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local conditions, rather than the use of inputs with adverse effects. Organic agriculture combines*

tradition, innovation and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and a good quality of life for all involved.” (IFOAM, 2014).

A simple definition of organic agriculture is obviously not operational, various standards provide many more details regarding the organic agricultural practices and technologies, final output for organic agriculture and even labelling of organic products. A large number of standards have proliferated all over the world as a result of private and public initiatives to provide labelling and consumer assurance.

The IFOAM norms are the basis in many countries for the regulated and legally enforced methods of organic farming. Moreover, the IFOAM principles of organic agriculture are to a large extent part of the EU Regulation for organic food since 2007 (Padel et al., 2009).

Standards of organic certification

The first standards on organic agriculture were developed by private organizations such as the IFOAM which first published organic standards in 1980 and has been continuously developing them ever since.

In the last couple of years a variety of voluntary social and environmental standards and certification programmes in agriculture have appeared. Some of these standards are private while others are public. According to Dankers and Liu (2003), most social and environmental standards have been developed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO), Social Accountability International (SA-8000 standard) and the SAN/Rainforest Alliance ('sustainable agriculture programme').

However, some of the most relevant organic standards are the public ones, such as the one in EU (since 1991), Canada (1999), Japan (since 1999), and USA (2000).

The organic standards with a significant impact on the global market are the IFOAM Norms, the EU organic legislation, The East African Organic Products Standard (EAOS), Japanese Agricultural Standard (JAS), The National Organic Program (NOP) in U.S., Canada Organic Regime (COR) in Canada and they are briefly presented in the following paragraphs.

The IFOAM Norms, last updated in 2014, are composed of three separate documents: The IFOAM Standard, The IFOAM Standards Requirements, also called the Common Objectives and Requirements of Organic Standards and the IFOAM Accreditation Requirements. This family of standards are the core of the IFOAM's Organic Guarantee System which aims to support the worldwide adoption of environmentally, socially,

and economically sound systems based on the principles of organic agriculture (IFOAM, 2014).

In 1991, the Council Regulation (EEC) No 2092/91 was the first European legislation on organic farming. This regulation defined organic farming, control and labelling requirements and also the rules for import of organic products. In June 2007, the Council Regulation No (EC) 834/2007 on organic production and labelling of organic products and repealing Regulation (EEC) No 2092/91 was adopted. This new regulation provided a more accurate definition of organic farming and described its objectives and principles, and also linked the organic control system to the Regulation (EC) No 882/2004 on official controls performed to ensure the verification of compliance with feed and food law, animal health and animal welfare rules and made obligatory the accreditation of private Control Bodies.

The EAOPS is the second regional standard for organic agriculture in the world, following the EU one. It was developed through a participatory process involving a public-private sector partnership in East Africa and it is based on the standards existing in the region as well as the IFOAM Basic Standards and the Codex Alimentarius.

The JAS is a standard for quality and production methods for foods, beverages other than alcohols, and forestry products. However, there is a clear mention that the JAS is not a standard on food safety, HACCP or GAP as it regards either quality, such as composition, grading, performance or production methods, such as organic foods. The JAS certification system ensures the reliability through certification by Registered Certifying Bodies, which are third party organizations (MAFF, 2014). Since 2006, as a result of amendments to the Law and Ordinances on JAS, any certifying bodies from any countries are able to apply for the status of Registered Overseas Certifying Bodies.

In the United States, the regulatory framework governing organic food is The National Organic Program (NOP) which is also the name of the organization in the Department of Agriculture (USDA) responsible for administering and enforcing the regulatory framework. The NOP was promulgated as regulation in 2000. In the U.S. certification is handled by state, non-profit and private agencies that have been approved by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

In 1999 the first national standard entitled Canada Organic Regime (COR) was published in Canada and it defines specific requirements for organic products to be labelled as organic or that bear the Canada Organic logo (CFIA, 2014). The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) is responsible for the monitoring and enforcement of the Organic Regulations. Under the COR,

Certification Bodies are accredited based on the recommendation of Conformity Verification Bodies that are designated by the CFIA. The Certification Bodies are responsible for verifying the application of the Canadian Organic Standards.

A major issue is that organic agriculture and organic products are regulated at both national level (e.g. Canada, Japan) and regional level (e.g. the cases of EU and East Africa). In order to export organic products to other countries, specific legislation applies regarding labelling in the country of import. In the context of a plethora of organic standards there is a stringent need to assess the equivalence of organic standards in order to support international trade of organic products.

In order to facilitate commerce, the aspect of certification equivalence is a topic under discussion, with constant undergoing negotiations. For the EU, the issue of certificate equivalents with third countries is regulated in the Annex III to the Commission Regulation (EC) No 1235/2008. This annex mentions 11 countries as equivalent: Australia, New Zealand, Argentina, Costa Rica, India, Israel, Tunisia, Switzerland, United States, Canada and Japan. While in general these agreements are unilateral, in recent years the Commission has developed mutual equivalence arrangements with third countries, notably with the U.S., Canada, Switzerland and Japan. Moreover, the assessment of equivalence with more countries is underway.

In June 2011 the European Union entered an arrangement on the trade of organic products with the Government of Canada (CFIA, 2011). Since 2012, organic products certified in Europe or in the United States may be sold as organic in either region. The U.S. – European Union Organic Equivalence Arrangement means that organic products certified by the USDA organic or EU organic standards may be sold, labelled, and represented as organic in both countries. As long as the operator is certified by a USDA- or EU-accredited certification body, there is no need for the U.S. or EU organic operations to have a separate certification to the EU standards and respectively U.S. (EC, 2012).

Benefits and constraints of organic certification

The organic certification means simply the issuing of a certificate by a certification body to prove that a specific operator is compliant with the organic standard under discussion. The certification process comes with both benefits and constraints for the organic operators.

A major argument for organic certification is that it allows producers to access niche market and obtain premium prices. However, premium prices are not always easy to obtain in the case of developing countries and smallholders. It is also relevant that the organic premium prices need to

cover higher production costs (especially labour) and the certification and inspection costs (Dankers and Liu, 2003).

As a secondary argument, labelling is crucial for obtaining the organic premium prices for the organic processed goods. Labelling of organic products is generally strictly regulated in EU (EC, 2007) as to ensure that the consumer is protected against misleading or deceptive labelling practices. Moreover, in 2010, the Commission published best practice guidelines for voluntary certification schemes for agricultural products and foodstuffs (CC, 2010), with the purpose of avoiding consumer confusion and increase the transparency and clarity of the schemes requirements.

In the last years a fast multiplication of organic logos has led to increasing confusion of the customer and increasing risks of misleading. At the moment, there are many private organic logos and other scheme logos on the market as most certification bodies and organic association use a specific logo. A study funded by the EU and realised by Ipsos and London Economics (2013) found a total of 901 quality schemes in the EU, among which 234 were related to organic farming.

There is an additional aspect of correct labelling, that of labels that allow or restrict market access in case of specific markets. Producers who want to export must comply with regulations in the import countries and in some cases multiple certifications are needed in order to gain access to specific markets. In France, for example, some producers created a new label Bio - Cohérence (<http://www.biocoherence.fr/>) and in Switzerland there is the Bio Suisse (<http://www.bio-suisse.ch/>) certification that is required by many of the Swiss buyers.

The cost of certification is probably the constraint for those willing to get an organic certification. The calculation of the certification fee by the certification bodies can be quite sophisticated and not transparent in all cases, making it difficult to assess which certification body is actually cheaper. Most of the time the total fee is composed of a basic fee and a variable fee according to the area, the type of crop, the number and type of animals. According to the CERTCOST (2012) report on the costs of three organic certification systems project, the inspection fee is the most relevant monetary expenditure for organic operators with respect to the certification costs. Moreover, the same report states that the total costs of inspection and certification favour large commercial farms where the impact of the costs of certification is much less compared to a smallholding.

The conversion to organic farming is an intricate process which involves fundamental changes of a technical and economic nature (Dankers and Liu, 2003). The farmers need

technical information regarding organic technologies and appropriate technical advice is not always available. Moreover, there are clear economic impacts as the yields in organic farming are expected to be lower and more irregular and also farmers have to assume the losses during the conversion period (two or three years depending on the crop) during which the products cannot be sold as organic.

Group certification

Group certification is defined by IFOAM (2014) as "*the certification of an organized group of small-scale producers with similar farming and production systems. The requirements for group certification apply only to such groups when the certification applies to the group as a whole and when special inspection arrangements have been applied*".

The group certification is designed to facilitate access of smallholders to organic certification. Group Certification is regulated by a specific set of requirements in the IFOAM Accreditation Requirements for Bodies Certifying Organic Production and Processing. According to the accreditation requirements for group certification, groups shall be constituted of operations with similar production systems, the group members shall be in geographic proximity, a viable internal control system that assures compliance of individual members with production standards should be implemented, and the group shall have coordinated marketing.

The concept of Internal Control System (ICS) is closely related to the concept of group certification. According to the IFOAM (2014) an ICS is the part of a documented quality assurance system that allows an external certification body to delegate the periodic inspection of individual group members to an identified body or unit within the certified operator. This means that the third party certification bodies only have to inspect the well-functioning of the system, as well as to perform a few spot-check re-inspections of individual smallholders.

In the EU, the current control rules that require annual inspection of all operators (Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007) do not allow group certification. However, in some countries (such as Belize, Canada, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Madagascar, Mexico; Nepal; Senegal) a system of group certification has developed and provides small farmers an opportunity to have access to the global organic market.

In each of these countries the rules applying for group certification differ, for example in Indian National Programme for Organic Production (NPOP, 2005), the guidelines set up a size limit of four hectares for participating farms to the group certification while under the COR a grower group

may be organised as a co-operative or as a structured group of producers affiliated to a processor (CFIA, 2012).

In 2013, the European Commission through the Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development - organised a public consultation on the review of the EU policy on organic agriculture through an on-line questionnaire launched during the first quarter of 2013 which generated more than 46.000 replies and consultations in Brussels (EC, 2013).

The largest stakeholders that attended the EC consultations in Brussels were producers, traders, industry representatives, consumers' representatives, environmental organisations, animal welfare organisations. Some of the stakeholders present were IFOAM EU Group, the European Organic Certifiers Council, Committee of Professional Agricultural Organisations, and Copa - Cogeca - an European umbrella organisation of the agricultural cooperatives of the European Community, European Council of Young Farmers, European Coordination Via Campesina, European Liaison Committee for Agricultural and Agri-Food Trade (EU, 2013).

As part of the public consultation on the review of the EU policy on organic agriculture participants were asked whether group certification for organic agriculture should be allowed in the EU. Most of the respondents (70%) agreed. In more detail, the following stakeholders expressed their favourable opinion on group certification in the EU: Slow Food, the Soil Association, the Women of Europe for a Common Future and IFOAM EU while Bio-Austria and Copa - Cogeca were against. Among the different categories of stakeholders, the strongest supporters were among the following groups of stakeholders: non-EU public authorities (80%), consumers (74%), researchers (71%), citizens (71%), advisory services (70%) and others (67%) (EU, 2013). In the stakeholders' categories, those opposing group certification in the EU are private control bodies (44%), national associations (37%), and farmers (36%) as well as retailers (31%) (EU, 2013).

The EU debate on group certification

There are several standards that allow for group certification: The IFOAM Norms, the COR in Canada, the NPOP in India, and EAOS in East African Countries. Group certification is not necessarily observed only in developing countries but also in Canada.

In most developing countries, local third party organic certification bodies are not often available. A major benefit of group certification is that allows developing countries, which could not be annually inspected by a third party certification body (Dankers and Liu, 2003).

The main argument supporting the group certification in the EU debate (EC, 2013) is that group certification reduces the individual certification costs, increasing the access to certification of producers and therefore the supply of organic products on the market. The cost of the individual certification is disproportionate if large farms and smallholdings are compared, clearly on the disadvantage of the small farms (EC, 2013). It is very likely that farms could simply not afford the cost of certification.

In a study on the group certification based in Brazil, Pinto et al. (2014) found that group certification has permitted access to certification markets for a wider range of coffee producer profiles than individual certification, including medium and small-size producers. Moreover, the costs of the audits were lower for the farmers certified in groups. Beyond providing access to certification markets, group certification has created in this case opportunities for engagement with other producers and other actors along the coffee supply chain that could play an important role in strengthening social and market connections and facilitating knowledge and technology transfer.

In addition, group certification should mitigate the burden of administrative requirements implied by organic certification process, thus reducing obstacles to conversion to organic for small farmers. Moreover, as the current control system has reached its limits (EC, 2013) and is not able to deal with high numbers of farms at peak times such as harvest period during which inspectors should be visiting a large number of farms in a very short period, group certification or social control are solutions to be considered.

The proposed target segment for group certification in EU is the one of the small farms but the specific threshold for farms size is still under debate. The issue of definition is complex and opinions on what a small farm is varied as several criteria could be used income, labour, and size and the variations specific to each member state (EC, 2013).

The territorial dimension of group certification is also very relevant as facilitating the conversion of smallholdings to the organic farming scheme could benefit the entire regions (EC 2013), such as in mountain areas where many farms have not become part of the organic farming scheme due mainly to the costs and administrative issues.

As group certification is targeting smallholders, subsidies could help speed up the certification rate. Governmental support for organic farming in EU has been available since the first organic regulations.

Stolze and Lampkin (2009) in their policy analysis of the EU policy for organic farming, point out the main policy instruments used in the EU. One of the financial instruments of policy is the

area-related subsidies to support conversion and (in most cases) continued organic production is also implemented in Romania.

Tuson and Lampkin (2007) mention other financial instruments used in the EU (Germany, Denmark, Luxemburg, the Netherlands), that is the support of the inspection costs and also investment grants (Austria, Germany, Poland, Lithuania). This financial instrument would be more than welcomed by the Romanian operators, but at the moment there is no legal initiative in this respect.

Potential impact of group certification in Romania

An analysis regarding the area certified as organic in Romania was conducted to investigate the potential target group for the group certification. A sample of 4.989 of organic certificates was analysed, representing 33% the 14.873 valid organic certificates recognised by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development for the year of 2013. This sample is composed of 2.319 certificates that are issued to confirm the conversion period, meaning that the respective products cannot be sold as organic. For these certificates the information regarding the area under conversion is not available on the website of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The rest of the certificates in this particular sample (2.670) are certificates that confirm the organic status of the Romanian operators. Out of these, 466 certificates refer to apiculture, aquaculture and harvest from the wild, trade and processing, with no information about the land areas under the organic scheme. Additionally, other 275 certificates do not contain information regarding the land area, as these certificates are not master certificates and the master certificates are not available.

Considering only 1.929 certificates that do contain information regarding the organic area under cultivation, 41% of the organic operators have certified a land area under 5 ha, 31% of the operators have certified between five and ten ha, 17% of the operators have certified between ten and 30 ha, 6% of the operators have certified between 30 and 100 ha and the remaining 5% of the operators have certified more than 100 ha.

The above mentioned data shows that group certification is relevant for the Romania and at least a significant number of already certified operators could benefit, as the certification costs could decrease.

Most probably the major concern when it comes to implementation of group certification in Romania would be the difficulty that is observed at the moment in the market in forming any kind of association or cooperative.

Conclusions

Organic and fair-trade certification seem to lead to general quality improvements, which are valuable (Dankers and Liu, 2003).

The cost reduction for the individual farmer and the ease of the administrative burden that the group certification seems to be promising will prove beneficial to member states with a high share of small farms: notably Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Portugal, Greece, Italy and the Baltic States (EC, 2013).

Group certification could be also supported by governmental subsidies. Considering the case of Romania, additional subsidies for the organic sector could lead to an increase in the number of operators and organic areas, especially if they come to diminish the cost of inspection and certification.

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