OWNING ORGANICS:
DEVELOPING BOLIVIA'S NATIONAL ORGANIC STANDARD

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There is growing concern in the organic agriculture movement that national standards can threaten the movement's ability to define organic agriculture and its principles. This paper assesses whether, and to what extent, Bolivia's new, mandatory national standard poses such a threat. The standardization of organics within Bolivia creates a bureaucracy that limits the flexibility of what is defined as organic in order to create a sufficiently strict standard that protects the rights of certified organic farmers. Yet private, farmer-based organizations in Bolivia have set standards of their own for years, which have reflected organic farmers' principles and have been created in transparent and open processes. Primary research in Bolivia and secondary sources suggest that the country's organic movement has retained a sense of ownership over the standard, as the Association of Organic Producer Organizations of Bolivia (AOPEB) has taken an active role in drafting the standard and in lobbying, passing, and implementing the associated regulation. Thus AOPEB is playing a fundamental role in the institutionalization of the national standard and is ensuring that the standard reflects the basic ethical values of the Bolivian organic movement.

Introduction

This paper is a brief summary of research conducted in Bolivia from July to December 2007. The research provides the basis of my Rural Planning and Development Master's of Science in Planning thesis, to be defended in April 2009. The thesis focuses on Bolivia in order to examine the relationship between national standards and organic movements.

The Bolivian organic movement is entering a new historical phase. The left-of-centre government of Evo Morales now plays an important role in the development of the organic sector, from the municipal to the national levels. In November 2006, a law passed that aims to regulate organic agriculture through a national standard for organic certification. "Law of Regulation and Promotion of Organic Farming and Non Timber Forestry Products" made organic production an official part of Bolivian agricultural policy. However, there is growing concern in the organic agriculture movement that national standards can threaten the movement's ability to define organic agriculture and its principles. This paper briefly summarizes whether, and to what extent, Bolivia's new, mandatory national standard poses such a threat.

Goals

The goals of the research were to:

1. In a literature review, identify opportunities and challenges presented by national standards in developed and developing countries;
2. Assess which of these challenges is of particular importance to Bolivia;
3. Explain the conditions required to avoid or overcome the identified challenge.

Methodology

Data was gathered using the following tools:

1. Document review:
    - Documents gathered through library-based research at the University of Guelph;
    - Materials collected from key informants in La Paz, Bolivia.
2. Key Informant Interviews in Bolivia:
    - Qualitative, open-ended interview questions developed according to category of actor (national and international non-governmental organizations, farmers' organizations, certifying bodies, and academics) and covering a range of topics developed according to research objectives.

Global Context

Certified organic products represent the fastest growing sector in agriculture (Knudsen et al., 2006). Indeed, the increase in the production and consumption of organic food is "one of the major market trends of our time" (Allen & Kovach, 2000, p. 221). According to the 2007 edition of *The World of Organic Agriculture*, certified organic agriculture is practiced in more than 120 countries globally and uncertified organic agriculture presumably in even more countries (Willer & Yussefi, 2007).

Knudsen et al. observe that, since the 1980s, organic agriculture systems around the world have transformed "from a loosely coordinated local network of producers and consumers to a globalized system of formally regulated trade which links socially and spatially distant sites of production and consumption" (Knudsen et al., 2006, p. 28). One aspect of this transformation has been the development of national and international certification systems in order to guarantee the authenticity of an organic claim. Currently, there are hundreds of private organic standards worldwide as well as over 70 national standards implemented or in development (IFOAM, 2005; Rundgren, 2007). These national governments are establishing the standards mainly to prevent fraud and mislabeling, boost the credibility of the organic sector, and help the development of the organic market.

National standards set minimum criteria for certified organic agriculture and explicitly outline substances and practices that are permitted or prohibited. Due to diverse interpretations of what is "organic", the process of establishing a standard can be long and arduous, especially if organic growers, processors, and consumers are involved.

National standards are enforced by a government-designated body, usually the existing food inspection agency. The body accredits independent certification agencies to certify production as organic; the certification agencies are must meet the established criteria set by the standard. In this way, the enforcement of the standard should ensure that "the certification bodies have the capacity to carry out certification" (Dankers, 2003, p. 8). The governing body also controls the use of organic labels. An organic certification label is a "label or symbol indicating that compliance with standards has been verified" (Dankers, 2003, p. 8). While there are countless organic labels by the many certification bodies, a national standard should limit the use of organic labels to those certifying bodies accredited under the national standard. In addition, a national standard often has a label unto itself. For example, the United States' (USA) national standard uses a voluntary label while Japan's is mandatory on all organic products (Dankers, 2003).

The two main types of certification are external and internal control systems. External systems make use of a third party for certification; internal control systems, commonly referred to as participatory guarantee systems (PGS), certify with the participation of the farmers themselves. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), third-party certification is the prevailing practice in Northern countries whereby "the guarantee that products are indeed produced according to organic principles can be provided by an independent certification organization" (Vossenaar, Jha & Wynen, 2004, p. 50). Internal control systems are more common in developing countries where the costs associated with third-party certification are harder for farmers to meet. In an internal system, groups of farmers inspect each other's farms. Key aspects of PGS include minimized bureaucracy, reduced costs for the farmer, and elements of social and environmental education for farmers and consumers (Nelson, Gómez Tovar, Rindermann & Gómez Cruz, 2008). National standards usually recognize only external control systems as a legitimate form of certification.

Theoretical Context

A review of the literature reveals a concern about the loss of ownership of organic principles that organic movements may experience with development of national standards. The standardization of organics within a country creates a bureaucracy that limits the flexibility of what is defined as organic. The function of this bureaucracy is to create a sufficiently strict law that will protect organic farmers, yet for many years, private, farmer-based organizations in the organic movement assumed this role. Therefore, there is a loss of ownership among those in the movement who no longer have control over defining organics.

Vogl, Kilcher, and Schmidt comment that the rapid growth of interest in organic from consumers, processors, importers/exporters, and governments has reduced the amount of control farmers have over the movement:

> Since public interest in organic farming has grown rapidly, the ownership of the process of defining organic farming is no longer in the hands of farmers and the original principles and aims of the movement seem to be threatened by a bureaucratic view of "recipe"-organic farming. (2005, p. 6)

For example, in the US, the national standard was developed over ten years in a very bureaucratic process. Vogl, Kilcher, and Schmidt argue that its "content and philosophy … for organic farming shows that the organic farming movement has lost control over defining and accepting possible development and innovation in organic farming" (2005, p. 17). For example, no certification agency can use standards apart from the government's official standard, and any changes that the agency wishes to make need to be validated by US government officials (Vogl, Kilcher & Schmidt, 2005). Prior to the implementation of the national standard, these changes were discussed and decided upon in a democratic process by the farmer organizations. There are similar concerns about the EU organic standard. Van Elzakker and Neuendorff argue that the EU organic regulation "has completely taken away the role of standard setting from the original main stakeholders . . . Within a period of 20 years, [the private organic sector] has come close to losing the ownership of the term 'organic' " (2007, p. 43).

Other studies suggest that national standards are often developed and implemented with corporate interests in mind and thus fail to promote sustainable organic agriculture. For example, DeLind is alarmed by the corporate sector's role; she argues that "standardizing organic to fit *their* [corporate] needs, then, can only cripple the organic movement and quietly and efficiently move organic, as anything other than an industrial commodity, toward extinction" (DeLind, 2000, p. 205). The codification of organic agriculture is cause for concern due to the loss of ownership experienced by the organic movement. DeLind asks the following questions:

> Will the codification of organic undermine its capacity to support a socially and environmentally sustainable agriculture and food system? Will national standards get in the way of diverse, locally based solutions and, in the process, will the organic mindset be represented by conforming commodities rather than by more intimate and varied connections to place? (2000, p.198)

The creation of national standards also removes the right of certification bodies to allow for local adaptations in the defining of organics, as it must generalize agricultural production within the country and adapt to global standards. In these ways, the ownership of the organic movement over organic principles can be lost to a national standard.

Bolivian Context

Bolivia is a landlocked, South American country, and third poorest in the Americas, after Guatemala and Haiti (*Statistics – Human Development Reports*, 2008). Bolivia's population in 2006 was 9,354,000 with 64.4 percent urban and 35.6 percent rural (WHO, 2007; WHO, 2008). In a 2001 national census, 31 percent of the population identified themselves as Quechua, 25 percent as Aymara, and 6 percent as Guarani or other Amazonian indigenous groups. Thirty-eight percent did not identify as belonging to an ethnic group and are likely descendents from Spanish settlers or immigrants. About 63 percent of the population was living in poverty with 35 percent of this group considered extremely poor (WHO, 2007). Some statistics estimate incidents of rural poverty to be as high as 80 percent of the population (*Instituto Nacional de Estadistica – Bolivia*, 2008).

Three geographical zones, the *Altiplano* or high plain in the west, the semi-tropical *Las Yungas*, and tropical lowlands in the east, define the country. While other zones exist, these are the dominant areas of the country. Soils are varied across each region. Similarly, climatic conditions vary widely with temperatures depending on altitude, from tropical in the eastern lowlands to polar in mountainous areas of the *Altiplano* (Vera, 2006). The staple crops grown for domestic consumption are potatoes, quinoa, beans, maize, bananas, fruits, and vegetables (Noriega, Personal Communications, 10 October 2007; Milz, Personal Communications, 31 October 2007). Bolivia has the second largest population of South American camelids, mainly llamas and alpalcas, in the world after Peru. Sheep and cattle are also common (Vera, 2006). This diversity of crops is due to the country's diversity of agroecosystems. The major non-organic export crop in Bolivia is soya. Others include Brazil nuts, and fruit and fruit products, coffee, and quinoa.

In the 1980s, Bolivia began exporting significant amounts of Fair Trade and organic products such as coffee, quinoa, cocoa, and Brazil nuts (*Reglamentación del sistema nacional de control de producción ecológica en Bolivia*, 2007). With this growth, local producer organizations and NGOs saw the need for a national association to support the production, certification, and commercialization of organic products. As such, six organizations and companies founded the Association of Organic Producer Organizations of Bolivia (AOPEB) in 1991.

AOPEB operates as a non-profit association, which seeks to represent the organic movement in Bolivia. AOPEB's original mission was to support organic certification for the benefit of farmers, with a focus on small farmers. They saw that small farmers were profiting less from their organic products by using intermediaries to access export markets (*Qué es AOPEB?*, n.d.; Ramirez, Personal Communications, 3 May 2007) AOPEB's current mission is to "promote sustainable human development and increase the production and consumption of organic products" (*Qué es AOPEB?*, n.d., p. 2). By 2000, AOPEB had started to diversify its focus crops from coffee, quinoa, and cacao to other globally in-demand organic crops such as Brazil nuts, amaranth, and sesame. Their new members reflected this diversity, and as of 2007, AOPEB had more than 60 member organizations, including producer organizations, companies, and NGOs, which represents over 30, 000 organic producers.

Bolivia currently exports 12,000 tons of certified organic products annually, worth about US$ 25 million. The products are mainly quinoa, coffee, cocoa, Brazil nuts, amaranth, and soya. The organic quinoa is grown in the *Altiplano*, Brazil nuts in the Amazon, and coffee and cacao in *Las Yungas*. In total, Bolivia has 364,100 hectares of certified organic land, which is the fifth largest area in Latin America. These hectares represent almost one percent of the total agricultural area. There are 6,500 organic farms in Bolivia (Vildozo, 2007; Willer & Yussefi, 2007). The principle markets are the European Union, the United States, and Japan while new, developing markets include Colombia, Chile, Saudi Arabia, among others (Vildozo, 2007).

Summary of Research Results

Three primary factors are helping the Bolivian organic movement, led by AOPEB, retain a sense of ownership over Bolivian organics and its principles. These are the political

instability of the Morales government, AOPEB's ongoing role in the bureaucracy of the standard, and the new national standard's recognition of a participatory guarantee system for organics marketed within the country.

Political Instability

In December 2005, Bolivia elected the first fully indigenous president in the Americas. Juan Evo Morales Ayma of the Movement Toward Socialism party (MAS) won 54 percent of the vote, an unusual occurrence in recent political history (Saavedra-Vargas, 2006). The Morales government has proposed significant changes in Bolivian policy; in December 2007, President Morales proposed a new constitution that will "promote re-distribution of the country's wealth and give a greater voice to the indigenous majority" (*Timeline: Bolivia*, 2008). On January 25, 2009, this new constitution will be put to a national referendum.

Several new policy initiatives emphasize the role that organic agriculture, or agroecological practices in general, may play in Bolivian development. The November 2006 "Law of Communitarian Reconducción of the Agrarian Reform" (Law 3545) emphasizes "the importance of agroecological practices in creating solutions to many of the problems faced by poor Bolivian farmers" (Vildozo, 2007, p. 1). The June 2006 "National Plan of Development: Dignified, Sovereign, Productive and Democratic Bolivia, To Live Well" and the national standard's Law 3525 include a shift in the government's approach to agricultural technology, as they recognize the inherent value of indigenous production techniques. They understand small-scale techniques to have a sustainable and ecological focus, as they have been designed for local environmental conditions (*Reglamento de la Ley # 3525/06*, 2006). This is a fundamental shift away from previous agricultural policies.

The Morales government is under significant domestic pressure; many argue that the country is on the verge of civil war over questions of regional sovereignty and the location of the capital city. Blockades and strikes are common in major cities and along important highways. While the situation at the time of research is less turbulent and violent than in the early 2000s, one local journalist has commented that, "Bolivia has fallen into a political époque in which confrontation has converted into the predominant rule" (*Tensiones en Bolivia*, 15 November 2007, A5, Author's translation). Political turbulence and the government's focus on the new constitution (which will protect the rights of indigenous people) prevent the prioritization of the proposed agricultural policies, including the organic standard.

Even if the Morales government stays in power for the remainder of its term, multiple sources suggest that it will not implement the standard. The Appendix provides a flow chart of the government agencies mandated to implement and manage the standard. At the time of research, the National Service for Livestock Health and Food Safety (SENASAG) (the competent authority for the National Control System of Organic Production) was in the process of registering all Bolivian and international certifying bodies that would be operating in the country (Milz, Personal Communications, 31 October 2007). Interviewees suggested that SENASAG would not "have the capacity to implement the standard" after registrations were completed (Catacora, Personal Communications, 19 November 2007, Author's translation), and indeed it had not received a budget to do so. The National Council for Organic Production (CNAPE) was also without government funding. In addition, all

interviewees indicated that high staff turnover in all government departments and agencies would significantly slow implementation.

For the standard to succeed, the National Control System of Organic Production and the National Council for Organic Production require significant ongoing funding. Until then, the organic movement will continue to operate outside the legal framework.

AOPEB's Role

The national standard was drafted by AOPEB in consultation with NGOs, farming organizations, certification agencies, processors, and companies. AOPEB gathered information from these groups through online questionnaires and local workshops. The information collected related mainly to stakeholders' experiences with organic certification. Recognizing that such consultations would create a better standard, AOPEB redrafted the document after each round (*Qué es AOPEB?*, n.d.; Ramirez, Personal Communications, 7 November 2007; Catacora, Personal Communications, 19 November 2007; Ramirez & Ramos, Personal Communications, 22 November 2007).

In 2003, AOPEB presented their draft of the standard to the Bolivian legislature. In November 2006, the national standard for organic certification became one of the first pieces of legislation passed by the Morales government. Previous Bolivian governments had shown little interest in organics (Vildozo, 2007; Ramirez & Vildozo, 2007; Willer & Yussefi, 2007). Communication between AOPEB and the Ministry of Agriculture was minimal before Morales became president. According to senior AOPEB staff, this has changed significantly (Ramirez & Ramos, Personal Communications, 22 November 2007). While the Morales government prioritized the standard, the organic movement itself created it.

One of the most important results of the law and the standard is the establishment of the National Council for Organic Production (CNAPE). CNAPE is responsible for the planning, promotion, management, and support of organic agriculture in Bolivia, and has both private and public sector members, including AOPEB. As a representative of the organic agriculture movement in Bolivia, AOPEB's membership in CNAPE ensures that the movement's voice will be heard within the new bureaucracy.

Participatory Guarantee System

When the national standard was first drafted by AOPEB, it was modeled after the Codex Alimentarius and the standards of Argentina and the European Union (Ramirez & Ramos, Personal Communications, 22 November 2007). However, the Bolivian standard and the associated regulation include the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS), a very important distinction from these other standards. PGS allows groups of farmers to monitor each group member's compliance with the national standard rather than relying on expensive third-party certification. PGS farmers must be inspected annually, and the groups must be registered with SENASAG. PGS-certified products are only considered organic within Bolivia; they are intended for local, regional, and national markets.

AOPEB's inclusion of internal control systems like the PGS in the national standard promotes several key parts of the organization's mandate and the movement's basic ethical

values. By making organic certification affordable for small farmers, it develops the domestic market, increases organic production, and promotes sustainable development. Many developing countries have small domestic markets for organics, and their national standards are focused on exported cash crops. AOPEB's consultation period in Bolivia showed strong resistance to an export-focused standard, as many small farmers have limited access to export markets. For those farmers, PGS is a realistic alternative to foreign certifying bodies and even to the Bolivian certifying body, Bolicert. AOPEB also established a chain of organic grocery stores across the country's major cities, developing that domestic market (Robast, 2007; Ramirez, Personal Communications, 7 November 2007; *Qué es AOPEB?*, n.d.). A standard requiring all organic products to be certified by an ISO 65 accredited certifying body would have made organic certification a remote possibility for small, resource-poor farmers. In this way, the principles of Bolivia's organic movement have been maintained.

Conclusions

During field research in late 2007, the Bolivian media began reporting on the emerging global food crisis. As food prices rose in Bolivia, the Central Bank of Bolivia informed the population that the price increases were mainly due to international pressures. Other pressures included bad weather such as flooding and drought from El Niño, increased domestic demand for food, so-called "imported inflation" (through the importation of more expensive food), and the limited capacity of domestic producers (*La inseguridad alimentaria…*, 4 November 2007, A8). In the context of Bolivia's increasing food insecurity, many would have considered organics a low priority, but the Morales government pressed on. The linkages between organic agriculture and food security are well established. As food security is one of the main tenets of the government's new development plan, it is logical that the plan also supports organic agriculture.

In Bolivia, implementing the national standard will increase the size and viability of the organic sector. Even if the government does not fully implement the standard, its legislation has already had positive effects on the organic sector by providing credibility to organic producers, processors, and non-governmental organizations such as AOPEB and Agrecol Andes.

Some scholars argue that standards and regulations can threaten an organic movement's ability to define organic agriculture and its principles. DeLind asks if "the codification of organic [will] undermine its capacity to support a socially and environmentally sustainable agriculture and food system?" (2000, p. 198). In Bolivia, the organic movement has successfully retained ownership over the organic sector, even as the sector has been institutionalized. This success is due to the inclusion in the standard of PGS certification for domestic products, the consistent role of AOPEB in the standard's development and in the regulation's implementation, and the extreme political instability of the Evo Morales government. The implemented Bolivian standard will improve access to certification for poor farmers and protect the rights of certified farmers while also maintaining the movement's basic principles.

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Appendix – Flow Chart of Law 3525