

Internal Control Systems (ICS): A Useful Tool in the Certification of Organic Produce from Smallholder Organisations

Manfred Fürst, Birgit Wilhelm

*Naturland – Association for Organic Agriculture, Kleinhaderner Weg 1, D-82166 Graefelfing, Germany
naturland@naturland.de*

Keywords: smallholder groups; internal control system; certification

Introduction

In the past twelve years, very many smallholder groups have converted their agricultural production to conform to the standards for organic agriculture, especially in Latin America. Organic cultivation of the ever decreasing area of agricultural land affords the farmers more reliable and sometimes even greater harvests. This has led to a considerable improvement in the living conditions of the smallholders who up until then were at an economic disadvantage, and has enhanced the self-reliance of the organisations.

Difficulties

Whenever smallholders' co-operatives wish to sell their organic produce to the European Union, they have to submit to inspection at least once a year according to the EU organic regulation 2092/91. This means that every farm which is a member of a smallholders' co-operative has to be inspected.

Where these organisations are extensive, i.e. with several hundred or even thousands of smallholders in several villages covering an area of up to 10,000 square kilometres, it is impossible for an external inspector to perform such a task quickly enough and would incur enormous costs.

Description of project

The problem presented the challenge of developing a control system allowing smallholders' groups with up to 2,000 members to be inspected both efficiently and at the least expense possible.

In order to perform 100% inspection, an internal control system was created some years ago by Naturland and various international certifiers with the approval of IFOAM's accreditation programme, IOAS. This has been developed further over the years by Naturland, in conjunction with IMO an international inspection organisation, and the smallholders' co-operatives. A prerequisite for the establishment of an internal control system is an enormous transfer of know-how from the certification organisation to the smallholders' co-operative, so that the smallholders' organisations are in a position to accomplish part of the demanding inspection work required under the stipulations of the EU organic regulation themselves.

Some of the co-operatives' staff are trained to become qualified local inspectors capable of assisting the EU inspectors (in external controls) when performing their complicated inspection tours. The local inspectors are responsible for the inspection of all the smallholders under EU organic regulation 2092/91. The external inspector checks to see whether the internal control system is working correctly, monitors the procedures employed in processing and selling the organic produce and examines the flow of goods from the harvest to export from the harbour.

Conclusions

Early in 2000, Naturland published a manual with the title „Manual For Quality Assurance: A Guideline for Internal Control Systems (ICS) in Smallholder Organisations", a work of reference on how to organise an internal control system. This manual was revised in 2002 and describes each step to be taken on the way to establishing an internal control system. This covers the development of internal standards, the training of quality assurance managers and local inspectors, the establishment of an efficient system of consultation, the performance of qualified inspection and the complete documentation of the flow of goods.

It was Naturland's lobby work that went a good way to convincing the EU authorities that spot checks of 10% are quite sufficient in practice. Indeed, some EU countries were insisting upon the regulation stipulating spot checks of between 20% and 30%.

In February, 2001, IFOAM held its first seminar on the harmonisation of the internal control systems developed by various countries and certifiers. This was an important step toward establishing uniform criteria for an internal control system.

References

Augstburger, F., Eisenlohr, U., Rüegg, E. & Wilhelm, B. (2002) *Manual for Quality Assurance: A Guideline for Internal Control Systems (ICS) in Smallholder Organisations*. 2nd revised edition. Naturland Association, Graefelfing, Germany.

Herrmann, G.A. and Heid, P. (2000) *The weakest go to the wall: inspection and certification overkill for small farmers*. Proceedings 13th International IFOAM Scientific Conference, p. 559-561, Basle, Switzerland.

IFOAM and FLO (2001) *Smallholder group certification*. Proceedings of the workshop, February 14, 2001, BIO FACH, Nuremberg. Workshop organised by Agro Eco Consultancy, NovoTrade Consult and Twin Trading.