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CONFORMITY ASSESSMENT\*

Organic agriculture

Submitted by the International Task Force on  
Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture

This document provides information on the latest activities of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture.

It is presented to delegates for information. Apart from some minor editorial changes, the paper is reproduced in the form in which it was received.

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\* The present document has been submitted after the official documentation deadline due to resource constraints.

1. An UNCTAD/FAO/IFOAM International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF) was set up in February 2003 to study the issue of harmonization and equivalence in organic agriculture. The main purpose of the Task Force has been to promote the international trade of environmentally friendly products, in particular from developing countries. Representatives of the Working Party on Regulatory Cooperation and Standardization Policies (WP.6) participated in establishing the group.
2. The Task Force tries to bring together regulators, standardizers and consumers to look at means of facilitating trade; hence the Working Party's interest in monitoring those of its activities which were presented at previous WP.6 sessions.
3. The representatives of the Working Party have also taken part in some of its meetings and provided information on the regulatory mechanisms developed by the Working Party (in particular, UNECE Recommendation "L" - "International Model for Technical Harmonization"). During the latest meeting, which was held in Tunisia in December 2005, the Task Force discussed a proposal on using "International Model" approaches to develop common regulatory objectives for organic products.
4. The Task Force whose main objective is to overcome "organic" trade barriers caused by all the standards and regulations has made considerable progress. It has continued to attract participation from Governments, including the Economic Commission, and intergovernmental bodies (e.g. World Trade Organization (WTO), Organisation for Co-operation and Development (OECD), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the private sector, including certification bodies, accreditors, trade, and international non-governmental organizations. The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) continue to lead the process.
5. Based on a strategy paper, the Task Force has agreed on a number of long-term activities on:
  - Standards
  - Conformity assessment requirements at the certification level
  - Accreditation or approval of certification bodies.
6. Some short-term action aimed at improving the situation in the short run and supporting the accomplishment of the long-term action was also agreed upon.
7. Dialogue in the Task Force has clearly influenced the proposed revision of the EU organic-product regulation and the direction of the IFOAM Organic Guarantee System. It has also led to increased dialogue, understanding and cooperation between the private sector and Governments, as well as between importing and exporting countries.

8. At its fifth meeting, which included a workshop specifically dealing with this topic, the Task Force made considerable progress in developing a set of international requirements for certification bodies. The group also completed studies that further analysed activities proposed in the long- and short-term strategy. These analyses dealt with (a) experiences of equivalence and recognition mechanisms, (b) experiences with and opportunities for cooperation between conformity assessment bodies, and (c) usefulness of common regulatory objectives (CROs) for harmonization and equivalence of major organic regulations.

9. Taking the results of the studies into account, the group agreed to carry out the following activities during 2006 and 2007 in developing: (a) a guidance document for judging equivalence, (b) an inventory of CROs, (c) a set of international certification requirements, (d) a review of consumer studies, (e) a study on competitive effects of standard differences for farmers, and (f) a study on participatory guarantee systems. Furthermore, they agreed to pursue a number of outreach and promotion activities, such as a workshop on requirements for certification bodies, participation in upcoming revisions of the Codex Alimentarius Organic Guidelines and the IFOAM Basic Standards, the setting-up of an Organic Multilateral Agreement and a communiqué with policy recommendations.

10. The Task Force is planning to hold its sixth meeting on 11-13 October 2006 in Stockholm. Prior to the meeting, on 9 October, a workshop will be held on requirements for certification bodies. This workshop will further discuss and provide recommendations to the Task Force on developing a set of international certification requirements. At the meeting itself, papers on the following topics will be discussed: (a) the potential effect of equivalency agreements on the competitiveness of operators, (b) an inventory of regulatory objectives and recommendation for common regulatory objectives, (c) a review of consumer studies, and (d) a guideline for judging equivalence.

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