

BY CONRAD THIMM

**Controls are good
but trust is better**

A certificate is not market access

An organic certificate is necessary to sell organic products in markets that require them. No doubt about it. But a certificate is not enough.

One also needs trusting buyers, a demand for good products and adequate logistics. This should be obvious, but these are all complex matters, and this is perhaps why much more focus and emphasis is often put on the clear-cut 'Yes or No' of a certificate. Certificates are much easier to discuss than the nitty gritty of specific organic production, markets and supply chains. It is a bit like Mullah Nasrudin searching for his key not where he lost it in the street, but where the street light is. Having been an organic consultant and international inspector in the 1980s, when private standards emerged before a legal status of organic food and farming was

established anywhere, I am well aware of the advantage of a clear definition of what organic is, and the need for a certificate to prove compliance. But now, as a marketing and organizational expert, I am often confronted with an expectation that a product should sell easily in a specific market just because it carries the appropriate certificate. This is not the case.

Nobody eats certificates

Consumers want food they can trust. Home-grown food is the most trusted. Food grown by a trusted neighbour is almost as good. A reliable grocery shop around the corner comes next. But the further away, the more anonymous or even hostile food production and trade is felt to be, giving rise to ever-growing demand for trusted food that is "pure", "natural" and "organic". This is one reason why most demand for organic food is in large cities and urban areas. It is the feeling, the instinctive relationship we have with a grocer or a branded product that is the most important driver

of trust. In its simplest form we trust people or brands. In a much more sophisticated form we trust a store or even a whole chain. In this case the multiple retailer becomes a brand in its own right. That is 'state of the art' retailing. Trust is always a relationship that is based on feelings and instinct, a "right brain" activity as the neurosciences call this nowadays. Food, whether to ward off hunger, or for pleasure, is also an instinctual "right brain" activity. A certificate, by contrast, involves rationality, facts and figures; typical "left brain" activities. It does not stand a chance against trust in food. But when a certificate supports trust by facts and figures, it is very welcome. Grocers use it happily to back trust in the product and the store. A grocer would never sell a product just because it has a certificate. A grocer needs a good product that fits into the overall offer, at a good price with a nice margin and reliably delivered to the store or the central warehouse. The grocer passes the consumer's call for trust down the

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supply chain. As trust is difficult to handle with many suppliers, the certificate provides a substitute.

But the grocer never takes the certificate for the real thing, the food with all its quality requirements. And this applies all the way down the supply chain to the distributor and the importer. Something though, changes down the supply chain. The further down the chain one goes the more specialized people and companies usually are. They don't handle 5,000 items in 100 categories but only 1 – 5 categories. They meet their suppliers in person and need to trust them. Reliability and product quality come first, but the certificate is also needed. For them controls are good (and necessary), but trust is better.

Those wanting to sell have to establish trusted relationships with buyers and to deliver reliably good products at a competitive price. This is best done by people who know the product, the ways of the producer and the customer: someone who can calculate. Marketing is an important service for producers and consumers, combining the ability to make and sustain relationships and know-how of the product and economy.

Certificates don't grow anything

When I started as an organic farming consultant in the 1980s, it was mostly on poor sandy soils in Northern Germany. I did not know the answers. Nobody knew them. Together, the local farmers and I, developed ways of organic farming on these poor sandy soils. They brought in their much deeper knowledge and experience of their farms and the surroundings and I brought in what I had learned on organic farms elsewhere, through exchanges with other consultants and at university. Our farmer's organization grew, more farmers and consultants joined, but the principal approach remained: farmers and consultants developing organic farming together. The most important steps forward usually came from farmers. Our

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role as consultants was more to recognize breakthroughs and to filter what was applicable where. It was a real participatory research and development unit and while sometimes we made mistakes we made tremendous overall progress in developing good organic practices on those soils and this development continues in Germany to this day.

This is what organic food and farming is all about: constantly developing and improving the best methods for healthy soils, plants, animals and human beings, serving customers and markets. This is the production basis for having good marketable products. It is the enthusiasm for working with nature in an agro-ecological system providing good food. Fundamentally, this has nothing to do with certificates. Practically it does, because the certificate is necessary and it is something that requires a lot of documentation

and bureaucracy. But this is not why people started organics. They started for the enthusiasm for the approach, or for the money, or both. Again, these are feelings and instinctive impulses, "right brain" activities. And certificates are like bookkeeping, facts and figures "left brain" activities.

If we can integrate both sides of our brain's activities this brings about the successful fulfilling experiences that we long for. This is hard to achieve if we focus too much on a certificate. And this is what I see, hear and read rather too often, an excessive focus on the certificate and too little on developing good organic farming practices.

My experience in many countries has taught me that there are quite a few different reasons for not focussing on good organic farming practices. Often the need for research and development for the specific situation is not recognized or seems to be too expensive. Or there is no available catalyst (e.g. in form of a consultant). Sometimes the cultural setting is such that a consultant is expected to know everything and can not, or must not, work on a par with farmers.

Conclusions and prospects

The basis of marketing is trust, a relationship between people. The basis of organic farming is farmers and growers working with nature, meeting different challenges. Organic food and farming can be enhanced by putting more focus on the lively aspects of participatory, hands-on organic research and development - that integrates production, marketing and economy according to the specific natural and social environmental conditions. Organizations and companies should apply this to their inner lives and their external communications and certainly, last not least, to education for organic food and farming. Certification, where needed, should be a secondary consideration. ■