

How to grow a local organic movement: the case of the Mexican Network of Organic Markets

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While for consumers these products are becoming more mainstream, what challenges and opportunities does this pose for small-scale producers?

Introduction

Over the past several years, in response to the rapid growth in global demand for organic goods, the amount of organic production in Mexico has increased dramatically (see table 1). Indeed, while Mexican agriculture as a whole has suffered severe crises, the organic sector has boomed, and today more than 83 000 producers farm organically on over 300 000 hectares of land. 98% of these producers are small scale, farming on average approximately 3 hectares, and over 50% are indigenous people. Unfortunately, as is the case in many developing countries, the vast majority of organic production remains focused on export crops – particularly coffee, but also cacao, coconut, and other fruits and vegetables – and 85% of all organic goods produced within Mexico are sent to foreign markets. Environmentally, export-orientation is extremely damaging, as it requires the burning of massive amounts of fossil fuels, thus contributing to global climate change. In addition, packaging for export consumes precious resources and creates mountains of waste. Equally problematic, is that the focus on meeting foreign demand constrains the degree to which domestic markets - which would have greater socio-economic benefits for the Mexican population – are developed, and it leaves Mexican producers highly vulnerable to international market fluctuations.

Table 1: Growth of Mexican Organic Agriculture, 1996-2005

	1996	1998	2000	2004	2007	Average Growth Per Year
Land (ha)*	23 265	54 457	102 802	307 692	545 000	33%
Number of Producers	13 176	27 914	33 587	83 174	126 000	23%
Employment (1000 workdays)	3 722	8 713	16 448	40 747	--	31%
Income Generated (1000 USD)**	34 293	72 000	139 404	270 503	430 000	26%

*74% of the land is certified organic, while the rest (26%) is not

**value of export crops, excluding sales within local markets

An Alternative Organic Vision: The Mexican Network of Organic Markets

The problems associated with export-oriented organics have not gone unnoticed in Mexico. Indeed, as in many other countries, a local organic movement has been growing alongside the more conventional industry. For example, some Mexican grocery stores now carry organic goods, and a number of organic specialty shops and cafes have opened, primarily in and around Mexico City. One of the more grassroots efforts, which focuses specifically on small scale local organics, has been the emergence of a number of local organic markets across the country. Supported by committed producers and consumers, and in many cases linked to universities and non-governmental organizations, 17 of these markets are already relatively well established in the states of Mexico, Oaxaca, Jalisco, Veracruz, Tlaxcala, Baja California Sur, Puebla, Morelos, Mexico City and Chiapas, and new initiatives are continuously being developed (for example in Tabasco, Guerrero and San Luis Potosi). Since 2004, these local organic markets have been organized in the form of the Mexican Network of Organic Markets (La Red Mexicana de Tianguis y Mercados Orgánicos - www.chapingo.mx/ciestaam/to), which receives valuable funding support from the Falls Brook Centre – a Canadian NGO (www.fallsbrookcentre.ca).



(A crowd gathers to celebrate the third anniversary of Chapingo's local organic market in November, 2006. The celebration included food, drink, music, dance, and the raffling of baskets filled with organic goods.)

Although the markets that participate in this Network are independent entities with distinct characteristics, they do share a general vision. Perhaps the most obvious aspect of this vision is the desire to improve the environment by supporting an ecological form of agriculture that does not pollute the air, soil or water with toxic chemicals. However, the markets that form the Network are not merely concerned with the environmental issues associated with the conventional agro-food system. They also tend to view sustainability in much broader terms, acknowledging that in order to be truly sustainable it is important to focus not just on environmental factors, but also on social and economic justice.

From the Network's perspective, part of promoting social and economic justice involves making healthy, safe, organic products more readily available to a broad cross section of the Mexican population - not simply those who live in urban centres and can afford to pay high premiums. In order to help achieve this goal, the organic markets focus on goods produced locally by small scale farmers, as well as on linking consumers directly with producers. By reducing the transportation and packaging of products and by eliminating intermediaries, the organic markets make it possible for small scale producers to earn more from their production while at the same time offering relatively affordable prices to consumers. Supporting local production-consumption networks and direct producer-

consumer relationships also serves a more philosophical purpose, as it highlights the importance of building community solidarity and relationships of trust.



(Doña Braulia (who has been involved with the market since it began) prepares tlacoyos with local organic corn and beans for hungry customers in Chapingo)

Indeed, community building is at the heart of Mexico's local organic markets. They are not conceived of as simply places where people go to buy and sell goods. Rather, they are meant to be spaces where commerce and consumption can become a political, social, ethical, educational, and enjoyable act. In an effort to combine these various elements, the vast majority of the Network's markets offer a wide variety of workshops, lectures, and other activities for both adults and children. In addition, many also host cultural events such as dance or music performances, or other special events such as anniversary celebrations or fairs. As a result, the markets are dynamic initiatives that seek to support organic agriculture in a truly holistic sense, helping move towards environmental, social, and environmental sustainability.

The Birth of a Local Organic Market: the Case of Chapingo

One of the first markets created was in the community of Chapingo – home to Mexico's principle agricultural university. The Chapingo initiative began with a group of people at the university who organized courses and workshops on organic agriculture, as well as tasting sessions where members of the public could sample organic goods. They also contacted local organic farmers and began to organize a system of organic product delivery for consumers at the university and in neighboring communities. By 2003, the number of consumers and producers involved in the project had grown to such an extent that the organizers decided to move from the order and delivery system to a fully functioning public market (or tianguis). Thus, in November of that year, the Chapingo market was officially inaugurated in a building lent out free of charge by the university.

Today, the Chapingo Organic Market opens every Saturday from 10am to 3pm and has more than 21 participating vendor tables. There are a growing number of consumers who come from the surrounding communities and also, in many cases, from Mexico City, which is about an hour's drive away. The products offered include fruits and vegetables, meats, dairy products, eggs, baked goods, honey, coffee, processed goods such as syrups, oils, salsas and dried fruits, biodegradable cleaning and beauty products and artisan work. In addition, consumers can enjoy a brunch of tlacoyos, quesadillas or tamales and drink a coffee, chocolate or hibiscus juice. The market does not just offer goods for sale – it also has a small library with books about environmental and organic agriculture issues, an information table with books and pamphlets, and a space to hold free educational workshops for children and adults.



(Workshop with kids, making organic chocolates.)

Challenges Facing the Mexican Network of Organic Markets

Although the number of local organic markets in Mexico is growing rapidly and there are a considerable number of highly committed producers, consumers, and organizers working tirelessly in support of the movement, each market confronts some significant challenges, and many of these are common across the Network. One of the primary challenges for each market is the struggle to secure the physical and human resources required in order to function. Unfortunately, market profits are generally not yet at a level that enables groups to pay for things like renting space or paying salaries to coordinators. Thus, the markets are heavily dependent on donations of resources and volunteer labor, which can be problematic.

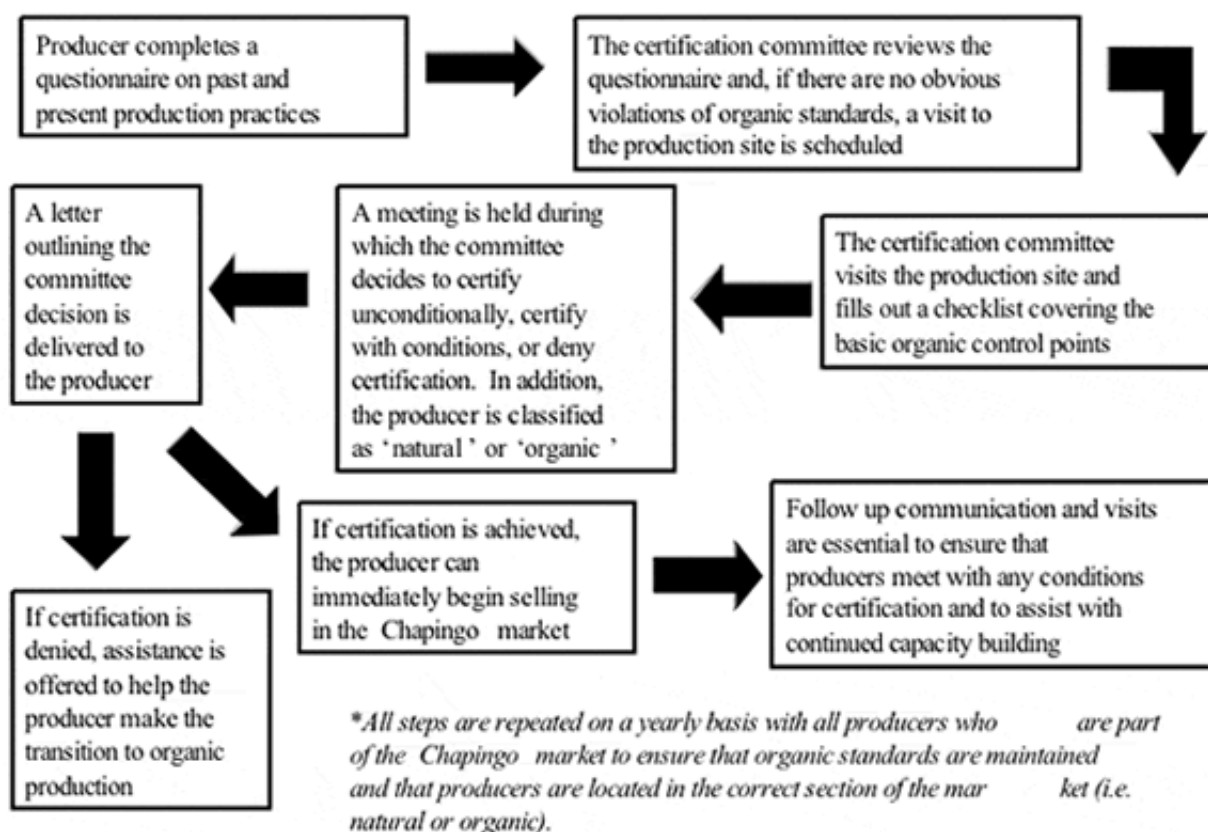
A lack of funds also limits the degree to which the Network can pursue training and education programs for both producers and consumers. Significant numbers of producers have demonstrated interest in converting to organic production and entering into an organic market, but they lack the necessary expertise, and cannot access the educational resources needed to assist them in the endeavor. The lack of access to organic agriculture extension services exacerbates another problem in terms of growing local organic markets – insufficient supply of locally produced organic goods. In fact, although insufficient demand is often cited as a problem for local organics, the reality for many existing organic markets is that sometimes consumers come looking for goods and find them either sold not available at all. In response to this problem, the markets are constantly searching for new producers to expand the supply of existing products and introduce new ones to meet consumer needs and preferences. The Network would also like to facilitate the inter-market exchange of products; however, a lack of funding for transportation has meant this has not yet been possible.

Participatory Organic Certification

Another major challenge confronting local organic markets are the economic and bureaucratic barriers that make it difficult for the small scale producers involved to obtain organic certification. This can make ensuring consumer confidence in the integrity of the products for sale difficult. In response to this issue, the organic markets that participate in the Network support the notion of participatory certification, and are working to develop smoothly functioning participatory guarantee systems. Key aspects of these systems are that they minimize bureaucracy, do not require any payment from the producer, and incorporate an element of social and environmental education for producers and consumers. In a major step forward for participatory certification in Mexico, the Network successfully lobbied for its inclusion in the recently passed law governing organic agriculture. As a result, products certified through participatory processes can now legally be referred to as organic.

In Chapingo's organic market, the first step for a producer wishing to achieve participatory certification is to contact the market coordinator and fill out a questionnaire regarding current and past production practices. This questionnaire is reviewed by Chapingo's participatory certification committee, which consists of local consumers, producers, agricultural researchers and students. The committee uses a combination of the norms of the National Organic Program of the United States and those of the Mexican certification body Certimex as a reference. If, based on the questionnaire, the producer meets the requirements for organic certification, a visit to the farm is scheduled.

Figure 2: Steps to Achieving Participatory Organic Certification in Chapingo *



This farm visit is not viewed as an inspection *per se*, but rather as an interactive experience designed to be educational for all those involved. During the visit, committee members consult a checklist that includes basic data about the farm operation (e.g. size of territory, number of crops, etc.) as well as basic organic control points, such as the following: source of seeds and water; soil, pest and disease management practices; post-harvest treatment of

crops; and the potential for contamination from neighboring farms.

Following the farm visit, the case is discussed in a meeting of the entire certification committee. If producers comply with all standards, they are granted organic status within the market and certified without condition. In most cases however, certification comes with a set of conditions. The most common ones include the needs to develop natural barriers to prevent contamination from neighboring conventional farms, and to thoroughly compost manure before application to crops. Provided that the producers work with the committee to meet these conditions, and that they are not in serious violation of organic standards, they can then begin to sell their goods in the natural section of the market, which is physically separated from the organic section and marked with signage. Follow up visits and continuous communication are used to ensure that the conditions are being met, and eventually the producer may be eligible for full organic status.



(Chapingo's Participatory Certification Committee visits the fields of a market participant. Each committee member asks questions and takes notes.)

Because transparency and community involvement are integral aspects of the system, the results of all questionnaires and committee decisions are available to the public, and anyone who wishes to join the certification committee is more than welcome to do so. In addition, consumers are encouraged to interact with producers at the Chapingo market, and this interaction has led to the development of strong relationships of trust, and in some cases friendship, between the buyers and sellers of organic products. These relationships are an important means of supporting the participatory certification process, as they provide the consumer with an extra sense of security.

It should be noted that the process of participatory certification is not without its own set of problems and limitations. One of the most prominent challenges for the implementation of participatory certification is that it is currently all done on a volunteer basis. This places significant constraints on the amount of time that people are able to devote to the process. In addition, many participants come and go and this creates a lack of consistency and continuity within the certification committee. Finally, a lack of training and education means that several people who are currently active in the committee still lack the sufficient expertise to carry out inspections. These challenges have made it difficult to keep up with the demand for certifying new producers who wish to enter the market, and also to consistently monitor the farms of existing market members.

Conclusions

The rapid growth of the Mexican Network of Organic Markets demonstrates that there is a great deal of interest on the part of both Mexican producers and consumers to work together to create sustainable food systems. By increasing the links between producers and consumers and by providing high quality organic goods at prices that are fair for everyone involved, these markets help broaden the reach of the organic movement while simultaneously returning it to its philosophical roots. By facilitating the involvement of small scale producers and encouraging a focus on local food networks, the notion of participatory certification furthers this effort. Indeed, although still in its early phases, the Mexican experience with local organic markets and participatory certification offers an important alternative, not only to the conventional food sector, but also to the industrialized, export-oriented, "mainstream" organic sector.



(Erin Nelson, one of the authors, and Fidel Mejia, the Coordinator of the Chapingo Market checking registration forms)