

Returning to the roots of the organic ideal: Local markets and participatory certification in Mexico

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https://vinculando.org/organicos/returning_to_the_roots_of_the_organic_id.html

Abstract:

The amount of organic production in Mexico has been increasing rapidly over the past several years, and today over 80 000 producers farm organically on over 300 000 hectares of land.

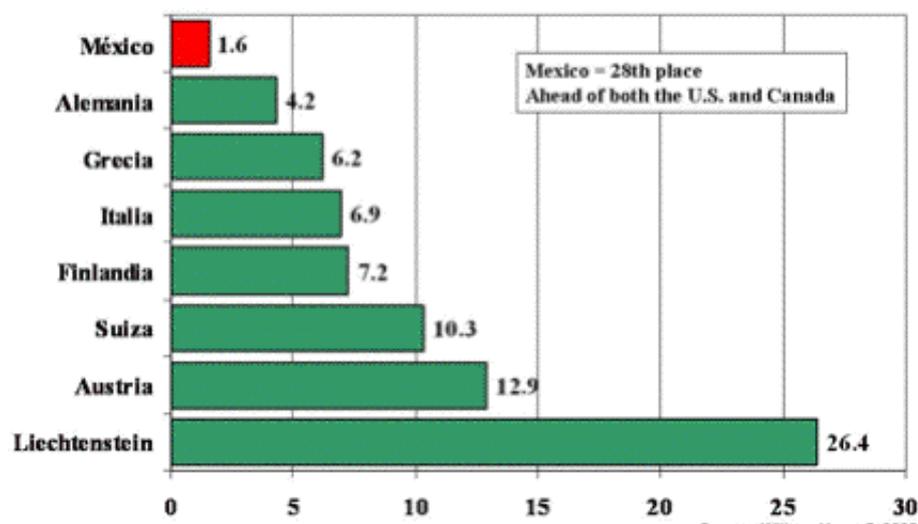
The vast majority of this production is focused on monocrop farming of export goods "“ particularly coffee, but also cacao, coconut, and other fruits and vegetables. This situation raises questions regarding the degree to which organics is truly providing an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable alternative for Mexican producers and consumers. However, over the past three years a network of local organic markets has begun to emerge across the country.

These markets are an important means of ensuring that organic foods are not just available as a luxury product in the North, but also to consumers in the South. One of the many challenges confronting these new markets is that economic and bureaucratic barriers make it difficult for the small scale producers involved to obtain organic certification. The notion of participatory certification offers a means to address this problem, as it relies on a combination of community based inspections, transparency, and trust between producer and consumer to maintain the integrity of the organic label. While this system may be problematic for export oriented production, it is a useful way of helping promote and support local networks of organic production and consumption. Although still in its early phases, the Mexican experience with local organic markets and participatory certification offers an important alternative to the industrialized, export-oriented, "“mainstream” organic sector.

Introduction

In the late 1980s, consumer demand for organic products began to increase dramatically in the countries of the Global North. This demand could not be satisfied by Northern production alone and, as such, many countries in the Global South responded by developing their own organic agriculture sectors. In Mexico, this process began with foreign agents contacting Mexicans and soliciting specific organic products, generally from regions where the use of chemical inputs was traditionally low or non-existent. For example, organic coffee from indigenous regions of Chiapas and Oaxaca "“ where industrial agriculture had never truly taken hold "“ was sought out. Later, American businesses began to become involved, in many cases funding Mexican companies and producers in order to induce a shift to organic production. By 2004 1.6% of Mexican agricultural land was under organic production (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Principle Countries in Terms of Land Devoted to Organic Production (as % of total), 2004



Today, organic agriculture has

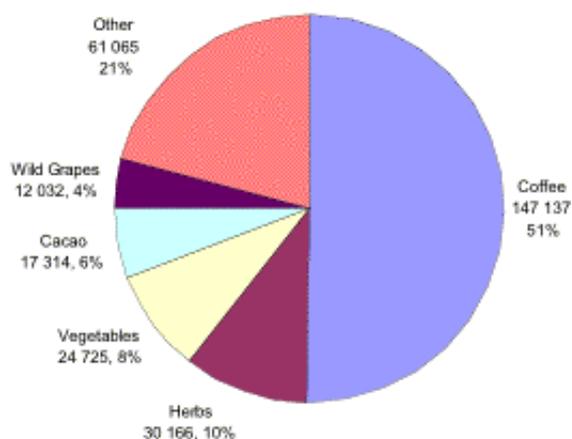
become one of the most successful segments of the Mexican agricultural sector. Indeed, while economic crisis has created widespread problems for the country's agricultural production, the organic sector has been characterized by dynamic growth. For example, since 1996 the amount of Mexican land devoted to organic crops has grown on average by 33% annually, employment in the sector by 23%, and income generated by 26%. As a result of this rapid growth, by 2005 over 80 000 Mexican producers were cultivating almost 300 000 hectares organically and generating more than 250 million U.S. dollars in income. Approximately half of this production is accounted for by coffee, which is followed in importance by herbs, vegetables, cacao, and other fruit crops (see figure 2).

While in many ways the growth of organic production in Mexico is a positive development, the Mexican organic sector unfortunately remains characterized by extensive monocropping and export-orientation. This focus limits the environmental, social, and economic benefits that organic agriculture can offer. Environmentally, monocrop production leads to significant decreases in soil fertility and also elevates vulnerability to pests and diseases. In addition, the export-oriented nature of the vast majority of Mexican organic production requires the burning of fossil fuels, thus contributing to global climate change. 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. It should be noted that there are some important exceptions to export-oriented organics in Mexico. Notably, considerable amounts of organic honey are consumed within the country's borders, and essentially all organic meat and dairy production is destined for national consumption.

The Development of an Internal Market for Mexican Organic Products

**Figure 2: Mexico's Principle Organic Crops
(ha., percentage of total), 2005**

Source: CIESTAAM, 2005



The internal market for Mexican

organic products is currently in the early stages of development. Indeed, today only about 15% of national organic production is consumed within Mexico, and just 5% of that is marketed specifically as organic. However, while just ten years ago there was essentially no local market for organic goods, today a considerable number of initiatives are devoted to the development of local channels for the marketing and sale of organic products. For example, a number of stores, restaurants and cafes that specialize in natural and/or organic goods have been opened "“ primarily in and around Mexico City, and some Mexican mainstream grocery stores have begun to offer certain organic goods, particularly dairy products and apple juice. In addition, a growing number of local organic markets have been sprouting up around the country.

In accordance with trends in other parts of the world, the primary motivation cited by Mexican consumers of organic goods is personal health concerns. The people who are most likely to buy organic products are middle class women with small families (four or five members) and young children. However, the greatest amount of organic consumption is accounted for by high income consumers with high levels of education, as it is this segment of the population that is most able to afford the price premiums for organic goods. Concerns about the environment, or about the benefits that organic agriculture may offer to producers, were secondary in the opinion of most consumers. This reflects a lack of information and education regarding the impact that consumption has on the environment as a result of conventional production practices, packaging, transportation, energy use, etc. Indeed, many consumers of organic goods consider the presentation, packaging and price of a product before the artisanal or environmental value that the product may offer.

The Development of the Mexican Network of Organic Markets

In an effort to help develop local channels for organic production and consumption, over the past several years a number of small scale markets have been created around Mexico. Supported by committed producers and consumers, and in many cases linked to universities and non-governmental organizations, 10 of these markets are already relatively well established in the states of Mexico, Oaxaca, Jalisco, Veracruz, Tlaxcala, Baja California, Chiapas and Puebla, and new initiatives are continuously being developed. Unlike the mainstream organic sector, these markets focus on the sale of organic goods that are produced locally, in most cases by small scale producers "“ who are primarily female.

The primary functions and benefits of these markets include: to organize and coordinate direct production-consumption networks for organic products; to offer ecological products at prices that are fair for both producers

and consumers; to connect city dwellers with the countryside; to create ecological and social conscience regarding responsible production and consumption; to promote the philosophy of organic agriculture; to limit the transportation and packaging of food products; to distribute technical and scientific information amongst producers as well as the general public; and to offer space for cultural and community events.

How a Market Begins: the Case of the Organic Market in Chapingo[\[1\]](#)

One of the first markets created was in the community of Chapingo "" home to the University of Chapingo, Mexico's principle agricultural university. The initiation of this market was spurred by a group of professors and researchers who were interested in organic agriculture, and particularly in the consumption of organic goods. These people organized information sessions on organics, arranged events where the public could sample organic products, and pursued research in the field of organic production. In addition, they worked to establish contacts with local producers of organic goods (both certified and non-certified), with the goal of being able to provide a diverse supply of organic products to local consumers. In the second phase of development, contacts with distributors were strengthened, as representatives from farms, businesses, or organizations were invited to participate in information and tasting meetings. At this time a small vehicle and storage space were also obtained, which allowed goods to be stored in a central location. The third stage in the creation of the Chapingo market was the opening of an actual market space, where producers could come to sell their products directly to local consumers. This market was officially opened in November of 2003.

Today, the market serves a growing number of people from the immediate area, and also draws a significant number of clients from Mexico City, which is approximately one hour away. Open every Saturday, the Chapingo market offers a wide variety of products, including fruits and vegetables, meat, dairy, eggs, bread, honey, coffee, and processed goods such as granola, syrups, salsas, tamales and dried fruits. In addition, the market boasts a selection of crafts and a small food stand where visitors can enjoy a breakfast or lunch of quesadillas and *tlacoyos* washed down with a refreshing hibiscus juice or organic coffee. Equally important to providing high quality organic products is the importance that the Chapingo market places on educating the public. As part of this effort, the market space includes a resource library on environmental issues and organic agriculture, an information table, and an area for weekly workshops on everything from environmental arts and crafts for children to lectures on organic agriculture topics from farmers, students and researchers. While the Chapingo market still receives a substantial amount of support from the University of Chapingo, the long term goal is for it to become a fully independent entity, coordinated by its own producers, with the support of consumers.

The Importance of Networking

One of the most important functions that the University of Chapingo has played in terms of supporting local Mexican organics is that it has been the driving force behind the creation of the Mexican Network of Organic Markets. The benefits of consolidating individual markets in the form of a national network include: ensuring that each market can learn from both positive and negative experiences in other markets; creating a sense of solidarity that comes from the knowledge that one is participating in a shared struggle; helping boost consumer confidence in the organic products offered through the markets; providing information sharing opportunities regarding organic agriculture issues; and giving those involved with local organic markets a greater national presence and voice.

Currently, the Mexican Network of Organic Markets receives valuable funding support from the Falls Brook Centre "" a Canadian NGO that is heavily involved in the organic agriculture movement both in Canada and

abroad. As a result of this funding, the Network has been able to have several annual meetings, where representatives from markets across the country gather to share their experiences. These meetings are extremely important in terms of allowing people to share information and exchange expertise. They also serve as brainstorming sessions, where new ideas regarding how to shape the future of local organics in Mexico are born. In addition, they provide useful opportunities for working as a group to address some of the considerable challenges that face the local organic movement in Mexico.

Challenges to Local Organic Markets

Indeed, while the growth of local organic markets in Mexico is certainly an inspiring example of grassroots sustainable community development, the movement has not advanced without challenges. One of the most general problems for the development of local organics has been a lack of government support. Indeed, without the help of Mexican non-governmental institutions such as the University of Chapingo and Canadian NGOs such as the Falls Brook Centre, it would have been very difficult for the Network to have moved forward as much as it has. The recent approval of a law governing organic agriculture at the national level provides some hope that the government is beginning to pay closer attention to this segment of the agricultural sector; however, there is still little or no direct financial support offered to encourage organic development.

A second key problem for the development of local organics in Mexico is a lack of training and education regarding organic techniques. Indeed, significant numbers of producers have demonstrated interest in converting to organic production and entering into the network of organic markets, but they lack the expertise to convert on their own, and cannot access sufficient resources to assist them in the endeavour. 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 consumers come looking for goods and, all too often, find that these goods are either sold out or not currently available. In response to this problem, an important activity for the Network, and for each individual market, is the constant search for new producers who can help expand the supply of existing products as well as introduce new products for sale at market.

Related to the issue of supply, another major challenge confronting local organic markets is that economic and bureaucratic barriers make it difficult for the small scale producers involved to obtain organic certification. Indeed, around the world certification by widely recognized bodies such as the Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA) remains out of reach for many producers who cannot afford the high costs involved and/or do not have the necessary expertise to navigate the extensive bureaucratic steps required to complete the certification process. Small farm size and extensive crop diversity is also problematic for achieving mainstream certification. Because the majority of products offered in the local Mexican markets have not been certified by internationally recognized bodies, they lack the official stamp of approval that helps ensure the confidence of many consumers.

Participatory Organic Certification

The notion of participatory, or alternative, certification has emerged in recent years in response to the problems associated with mainstream organic certification. Relying on a combination of community based inspections, transparency, and trust between producer and consumer to maintain the integrity of the organic label, this system may be problematic for export oriented production, but it is a useful way of helping promote and support local networks of organic production and consumption. In particular, participatory certification has become a popular

alternative in countries of the Global South, where the barriers to mainstream certification are particularly pronounced.

Participatory certification processes rely on the same norms and standards used by organizations such as the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) and OCIA. What makes them different is that they employ simple verification procedures, minimal bureaucracy and costs, and in most cases also incorporate an element of environmental and social education for both producers and consumers. Also significant is that participatory certification does not impose any direct cost on producers, and does not envision exportation as the goal of organic production, but rather emphasizes the importance of local production and consumption networks.

Beyond addressing some of the barriers that prevent small scale producers from achieving organic certification, participatory certification also speaks to a broader critique of the mainstream organic sector. Namely, many have criticized the organic sector for abandoning its philosophical roots, which focused on small scale, community based consumption, a direct relationship between producer and consumer, and a holistic vision of sustainable food systems. Within this ideological framework there was little or no need for external certification bodies because the consumer would personally visit the farm, or at least have a relationship with the farmer, and this personal relationship established trust in the integrity of the product. Today however, the majority of organic goods are consumed far from their location of production, thus breaking the relationship of trust between producer and consumer, and creating the need for independent certification agencies. Within this new, globalized organic market, the concept of participatory certification is not viable. As such, the development of participatory certification processes necessarily implies a return to the roots of the organic movement, with a renewed focus on local markets as opposed to export orientation. It also helps ensure that healthy organic products will be available at more accessible prices, thus making organic consumption available to lower income segments of the population, who have traditionally been unable to afford the price premiums associated with mainstream organics. Finally, participatory certification creates great opportunities to build meaningful bonds between producers and consumers based on the shared goals of promoting a holistic organic philosophy.

Participatory Certification in Action: the Case of the Organic Market in Chapingo

Although the concept remains relatively new, several of the markets that make up the Mexican Network of Organic Markets are well on their way to developing and implementing participatory certification strategies. While some producers who sell at the markets are certified by mainstream bodies such as OCIA, others rely on participatory certification to guarantee the integrity of their ecological production. In a major step forward for participatory certification in Mexico, the Network successfully lobbied for the inclusion of participatory certification in the recently passed law governing organic agriculture. As such, products certified through participatory processes can legally be referred to as organic.

In Chapingo, the first step for a producer wishing to achieve participatory certification is to fill out an initial questionnaire that can be obtained by visiting the market or by contacting the market coordinators. This questionnaire includes questions regarding current and past production practices. Upon completion, the questionnaire is reviewed by a committee that consists of local consumers, producers, and agricultural researchers. 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, an inspection visit to the farm is scheduled. This visit is conducted by a group of approximately three members of the participatory certification committee "“ ideally at least one producer and one consumer - who have all received training and education regarding organic norms and regulations. During the inspection, the committee members consult a checklist similar to that used by mainstream organic inspectors,

but less extensive. These inspection visits are not merely designed to decide whether a producer qualifies for organic status, but also to provide advice and support for those producers wishing to improve their operations and move closer towards the organic ideal. Upon completion of the visit, the inspectors write a report which is reviewed by the entire certification committee. The producer can either be certified, in which case they can immediately begin to sell at the Chapingo market, they can be certified on condition of making specific changes, in which case a follow-up inspection is scheduled, or they can be denied certification. Because transparency and community involvement are integral aspects of the participatory certification vision, the results of all questionnaires are available to the public, and producers welcome consumer visits to their farms.

It should be noted that the process of participatory certification is not without its own set of problems and limitations. In the case of Chapingo for example, one of the most prominent challenges for the implementation of participatory certification is that, currently, all members of the certification committee contribute their time 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. Organizers hope that, by accompanying more experienced inspectors on farm visits as well as by participating in courses and reviewing reading materials, new committee members will gradually gain the skills necessary to act as fully functioning members of inspection teams.

Conclusions

The explosive growth of the Mexican Network of Organic Markets demonstrates that there is growing interest on the part of both Mexican producers and consumers to work together to create sustainable food systems. Based on the ideals of increasing links between producers and consumers and providing high quality organic goods at a price that is fair for everyone involved, these markets are a means to help broaden the reach of the organic movement and simultaneously return 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.

Notes

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* UIT the collaboration of Aurora Lobato García

[\[1\]](#) Member of IFOAM since 2006.