ISEAL to improve small producer access to multiple certifications.

Producers need to meet an increasing number of market and regulatory requirements to access export markets and organic certification is one of a number of social and environmental certifications, along with food safety and quality requirements. Meeting such requirements is particularly difficult for small producers from developing countries. Many do not know what is required to comply, or have the resources or infrastructure to obtain and manage multiple certifications. The ISEAL Alliance convened a workshop on the subject of improving small producer access to multiple certifications in April this year. The workshop held in Guatemala was attended by twenty-seven representatives from producer organisations, traders, standards owners, certification and accreditation organisations, donors and multilateral agencies. The ensuing report, available from the ISEAL website, stresses the usefulness of developing a common framework for internal quality management systems. Small producers could use such tools in order to increase their capacity for managing their own operations and for interfacing with external certification systems. The ISEAL Alliance has established the Accessibility Network to facilitate the exchange of information and cooperation in this area between multiple stakeholders.

Creating an action plan

Besides sharing experiences on the ground, workshop participants also created an action plan for future collaboration and ways of extending existing regional efforts systematically around the world. Whilst cost remains a significant barrier for small producers to achieving multiple certifications several positive ways forward were identified. Joint inspections are already happening, but. ensuring the quality of audits does not suffer as the number of certifications increases may require specialist training for the auditors involved. Changes in certification infrastructure could streamline and simplify the process of accessing multiple certifications, including eliminating conflicts between standards and developing common inspection reports. To enable producer groups to implement standards in their locality, a framework could be developed within which a locally relevant interpretation of a standard could be approved for use by certification bodies. Finally, participants identified the need for internal quality management systems that promote continual improvement within the producer organisation itself, and also meet the requirements of the certification bodies.

Building capacity through internal quality management systems

There are successful examples of producer groups managing complex and multiple requirements and a number of templates and tools have been developed to support them. The Rainman Landcare Foundation in South Africa, that works with the Ezemvelo Farmers Organisation {case study below) is an example. It is supporting farmers by providing training in Internal Quality Management. Pronatur, an organisation in Peru successfully manages eleven certification requirements. At the workshop General Manager Jan Bernhard presented his experiences and a

series of common internal inspection forms that integrate information requirements from various certification systems into one common form.

While there are a number of organisations around the world working on internal quality management systems to strengthen small holder producer groups and improve their capacity to manage external certification requirements, coordination among the groups to reach a common harmonised framework was thought to be useful. Once agreed, the common framework could be reviewed by standard-setters to ensure that the internal quality management system requirements were consistent with external standards and certification processes (including external certification requirements for internal control systems). This could then become a baseline internal quality management system standard, upon which compliance with a number of different certification standards could be built in a modular way. At the workshop, CRECER (Guatemala) offered its own modular internal quality management system as a starting point for review and discussion to reach a common framework. ISEAL will be posting this model on its website and is inviting comments from the network and any interested stakeholders.

Join the Accessibility Network

ISEAL members, i.e. IFOAM, FLO, FSC, Rainforest Alliance, Marine Stewardship Council, Marine Aquarium Council and Social Accountability International, have a range of experiences in implementing mechanisms to support small scale producer access to their systems. These include group certification models, differentiated minimum and process criteria, capacity building training services, and explorations into participatory certification models, among others. The purpose of the Accessibility Network is to bring together ISEAL members with other organisations that play critical roles in this area; extension organisations, inspection and certification bodies, external consultants and the producers themselves.

ISEAL invite interested parties to comment on the CRECER model and inform what a common internal quality management system might look like. For more information about this programme, to obtain a copy of the workshop report or join the network, contact us secretariat@isealalliance.org or visit the Accessibility Network's dedicated page at: www.isealalliance.org/programs/access.htm

The majority of the featured documents are available in both Spanish and English and comments are welcomed in both languages.

Additional box:
Nothing has happened unless it is documented
Certification constraints faced by Zulu Organic Farmers in South Africa *by Dr Raymond Auerbach*

The Ezemvelo Farmers Organisation has grown from 27 members in the year 2001 to over 200 members in 2006. All members are certified organic, and most of the first grade produce is sold to Woolworths (the South African equivalent of the British Marks & Spencers).

Woolworths insists that EFO should follow the European Union standards for organic farming, as well as complying with basic HACCP and Food Safety regulations, as the South African Government has not yet approved organic regulations (after five years of discussion).

Although certified organic since 2001, EFO has had on-going difficulties in meeting the requirements, not because of any problems with following organic production guidelines, but rather because the record-keeping requirements of HACCP and product traceability demand a sophisticated system which is beyond the capability of a small group of modest farmers. The management group finds it difficult to explain to farmers that they should write down each time they go to the toilet that they washed their hands – they argue that not even school children at a very strict school are expected to do such things. It seems insulting to adults that each process in the food safety chain is deemed not to have happened unless there is a positive record that it was checked.

Likewise, when over a hundred farmers are delivering the same crop to a central depot, it seems like unjustified bureaucracy to insist that the crop of each farmer should be labelled as separate lot numbers so that if someone in town complained, the vegetables could be traced to a particular field. Since the produce goes into a bulk container at the local depot before being trucked to the packshed, individual lots often mean that a number of half-empty containers must be transported to the packhouse, causing significant extra costs.

Farmers are very proud of their quality management, but less impressed by the requirements of a record-hungry system. And we are not even exporting ……