

# Voluntary standards, certification, and accreditation in the global organic agriculture field: a tripartite model of techno-politics

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**Abstract** This article analyzes the institutionalization of the global organic agriculture field and sheds new light on the conventionalization debate. The institutions that shape the field form a tripartite standards regime of governance (TSR) that links standard-setting, certification, and accreditation activities, in a layering of markets for services that are additional to (and inseparable from) the market for certified organic products. At each of the three poles of the TSR, i.e., for standard-setting, certification, and accreditation, we describe how the corresponding markets were constructed over time and the role of the different actors in their evolution. We analyze the politics at stake among the actors at each pole, their competing or cooperative interests and visions, and the tensions between them in the promotion of markets. Through the lens of the TSR heuristic, we show that the institutionalization of the organic field beginning in the 1990s and its de facto inclusion in the broader sustainability field beginning in the 2000s contribute to a progressive distancing between the organic movement and its initial

political project of alterity, to which public and private actors both contribute actively. As a set of interlinked market institutions, the TSR orients and narrows the scope of debate, which becomes restricted to “market-compatible” dimensions and objects. We conclude that the TSR is a promising heuristic for analyzing contemporary global regulation.

**Keywords** Tripartite Standard Regime · Standards · Organic · Conventionalization · Certification · Accreditation · Regulation

## Abbreviations

AB	Accreditation Body
CB	Certification Body
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
IAF	International Accreditation Forum
IFOAM	International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements
IOAS	International Organic Accreditation Service
ISEAL	International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling Alliance
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
PGS	Participatory Guarantee System
SDO	Standard Development Organization
TSR	Tripartite Standard Regime
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

## Introduction

In Western European countries, organic farming initially diffused as a social movement that was bound to a particular kind of ecological morality (Balfour 1977). The

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intellectual roots of the movement can be traced back to the 1930s, when a number of renowned thinkers, who “invented” and fine-tuned specific agronomic techniques like compost making, low tillage, intercropping, and biodynamic preparations (Besson 2011). These specific types of knowledge and practices have been increasingly diffused since then as they were embedded in social movements as a socio-technical alternative to the dominant industrialized and “productivist” model of agriculture with its focus on high levels of synthetic inputs and industrial technologies (Lockeretz 2007). This had particular momentum in the 1960s–1970s as an alternative way of living and farming (Freyer and Bingen 2014) and as a socio-political alternative to capitalism (Leroux 2011): “at the time, organic farming was anti-establishment, if not absolutely revolutionary” (Geier 2007, p. 177). Beginning in the eighties, the field has steadily developed, structured and institutionalized, and its face has changed tremendously.

Although still marginal in terms of cultivated surface (0.9 % of the total agricultural land is certified organic at the world scale, 0.7 % in North America and 5.6 % in the EU), organic’s consumer base is growing and additional farmers have converted. Organic products are increasingly processed in industrial plants and commercialized in supermarkets. Long-distance supply chains have been organized to trade tropical organic products. International sales of organic food and drink approached US \$64 billion in 2012. The largest markets are the United States (\$26.9 million, 44 % of the global market), Germany, and France. The European Union controls 41 % of the global market and maintains the highest per capita consumption (Willer and Lernoud 2015, p. 23). In the late 1990s, in response to these trends, a debate arose worldwide about the “conventionalization” of organic (Darnhofer et al. 2010), i.e., about the threat of organic becoming no more than a slightly modified version of conventional agriculture. The literature that describes and explains conventionalization generally mentions agronomic aspects like input substitution (“organic” inputs for synthetic ones) (Rosset and Altieri 1997), issues of structures, capital repartition and resource substitution (capital for land and labor) (Guthman 2004), market mainstreaming (Jaffee and Howard 2009) or the inability of standards to capture values (De Wit and Verhoog 2007; Darnhofer et al. 2010). The authors generally focus on organic products as they are created from production, food processing or marketing activities.

We shed new light on this debate by analyzing the way the field is institutionalized and regulated through public and private standards (i.e., lists of authorized or/and prohibited practices and inputs for farming and processing being defined as “organic”). In 2012, a total of 110 countries were implementing or developing an organic public regulation and there were at least 121 private

existing organic standards (UNCTAD et al. 2012, p. 62). Notwithstanding their public or private nature, and with very few exceptions, the contemporary organic standards worldwide rely on the same type of conformity assessment systems: third-party certification. In order to create consumer trust and confidence, the conformity of the producer’s practices to the organic standard is controlled by an independent body paid for by the farmer. This body must be accredited by an external authority to ensure their audit competence (Dabbert et al. 2014). This layering of standards, certifications, and accreditations into a cohesive system of rule creation, implementation, and enforcement refers to what is called the tripartite standards regime (TSR) of governance (Loconto and Busch 2010; Busch 2011; Loconto et al. 2012). The concerned rule is a market rule and thus the construction of a TSR is simultaneously the construction of a market for organic products and for organic TSR services, i.e., all types of activities related to standard-setting, certification, and accreditation.

Drawing upon theories of institutions, techno-economic networks, and organizational fields, this article explores and analyzes the contemporary politics at stake within the global organic field. Specifically, we ask: *how is the organic field being institutionalized through a TSR and what are the tangible political effects of this?* We demonstrate that the TSR serves as an institutional frame that directly orients and shapes the debates around organics, which are consequently characterized by a displacement of politics from a debate regarding territorially embedded social, environmental, and ethical principles to a debate over standardizable and auditable topics, respectively referring to fundamentally different—if not antagonistic—sets of values. We also show that, paradoxically, the de facto inclusion of the organic TSR in a broader sustainability TSR tends to further dilute the initial organic political/ethical project. Theoretically, we advance the TSR as a conceptual and analytical framework, which enables us to understand how regulation and market building mechanisms are interdependent and how public and private actors are jointly entangled in such processes.

This work is based on empirical data collected between 2011 and 2015. We conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with actors in the organic field (e.g., officials of IFOAM and member organizations, IOAS, ASI, SAAS, ISEAL, FAO, UNFSS); we were participant observers in 25 international conferences, both related to organic standards (e.g., GOMA conference, SOAAN workshops, IFOAM meetings, BioFach Fairs, Regional Organic Conferences) and to sustainability standards in general (e.g., ISEAL general assemblies, standard-setting committee meetings), and in different specialized email lists. Finally, a range of publicly available standards (e.g., EU Organic, IFOAM Basic standard, ISEAL standards, ISO 17065,

17011, USDA NOP, various national standards), documents and websites were analyzed. In this article, we rely mainly upon European examples for a few reasons: the significance of its market in global trade, the first-leader advantage of its public standard, and the proactive approach used by European donors and accreditors in expanding their reach across the globe.<sup>1</sup>

After a first section dedicated to our analytical framework, the following empirical sections describe standards-setting, certification, and accreditation activities in the global organic field and their evolution over the last three decades. We then discuss our results transversally and underline that the globalization of the organic field through the TSR generates important tensions within the organic movement, and an increasingly blurred frontier between public and private actors' role in these evolutions.

### **The Tripartite Standards Regime heuristic as a layering of market institutions**

The literature underlines the proliferation of voluntary standards in all sectors of economic activity (Marx and Wouters 2014), which is explained by their strategic use by a variety of actors (Mattli and Buthe 2003; Hatanaka et al. 2005; Bartley 2007). Standards enable the state to regulate in a less costly way since the enforcement of regulations is outsourced to private actors (Henson and Reardon 2005; O'Rourke 2006). Firms embrace standards in order to manage supply chain risks, ensure conformity among all suppliers, limit competition and transaction costs, or gain competitive advantages (Ponte and Gibbon 2005; Busch 2007). Civil society actors use standards to advance their interests as consumers or activists (Murray and Reynolds 2000; Djama et al. 2011). Beyond these "interest-based" explanations, an increasing number of studies focus on standard-setting processes. Some see their private nature and their inclusiveness as important conditions to ensure the efficiency and legitimacy of the initiatives (Boström 2006; Glasbergen et al. 2007; Bernstein 2011). Critiques reveal the inequitable access to resources required by diverse actors to defend their positions and underline the influence of some powerful actors, like consultants, in multi-stakeholder processes (Ponte and Cheyns 2013; Fouilleux 2013).

Broadly speaking, these studies focus mostly on standard development organizations' (SDO) activities and do

not pay acute attention to the interdependent dynamics of certification and accreditation actors and activities. Certification and accreditation are most often studied in the audit literature (Power 1997; Courville 2003; Campbell et al. 2011). The audit has power and legitimacy as a governance mechanism as it is perceived to be an objective means to control conformity (to any number of policies, norms, rules, codes of conduct, etc.) based on its three fundamental characteristics: independence, measurement, and verification (Power 1997). Most studies of audits and standards focus on the activities of third-party certification bodies (CBs). These are described as a means to verify conformity and build trust in the standards' system (Courville 2003; Prakash and Gugerty 2010; McDermott 2012). Much of the literature does not question the dominant logics of credibility and impartiality that condition their use. Certification requires interpretation of standards by auditors and thus there is significant variation in how CBs work and what they accept as valid evidence for compliance. This may cause confusion for consumers or permit fraud in the system (Cochoy 2002; Mutersbaugh 2005).

Accreditation emerged in Australia and New Zealand in the late 1940s, spread to Europe in the 1970s–80s, and gained widespread acceptance in the 1990s as a means to ensure a higher-level guarantee of certifiers' competence. Since 2000, accreditation is organized internationally through the International Accreditation Forum (IAF), which gathers 68 accreditation bodies (ABs) (a mix of public, semi-public, and private organizations) that accredit certifiers who audit management systems, products, services, and personnel. Their role is to legitimate standards and certifications, to harmonize overlapping ones through mutual recognition agreements between SDOs, and to calibrate CBs (Loconto and Busch 2010). Although ABs play an increasingly important political role through the proliferation of standards and audits, the literature has paid scant attention to their activities.

In sum, the current literature related to standard-setting, certification, and accreditation has not yet fully taken the dynamics and interdependencies of these activities into account, particularly with regard to the role of accreditation (Abbott and Snidal 2001). The literature still regards these activities as interactions between rule-makers and rule-takers (Levi Faur and Starobin 2014) without considering how standards work as market-making devices (Muniesa et al. 2007). To fill this gap, we develop an analytical framework based on an institutionalist approach to markets. We analyze the emergence of the organizational field as the result of an institutionalization of multi-layered markets. By using actor-network theory, we relate these institutional dynamics to the politics of markets and to the cognitive/ideational dimension of the field (Schmidt 2008).

<sup>1</sup> Although the EU has set up its standards 10 years earlier, the US and the EU regulatory regimes are very similar and tend to converge (Winickoff and Klein 2011; Arcuri 2015) and examples from the US might fit our demonstration in a similar way. A comparison between the two cases could certainly be an argument for another paper, but due to space constraints, we focus mainly on the global level from the EU entry point.

## Multi-layered markets and institutionalization

We approach standards as institutions and the work of SDOs as processes of institutionalization (Bartley 2007; Tamm Hallstrom and Boström 2010; Büthe and Mattli 2011), both contributing to the emergence of a related organizational/institutional field (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Dingwerth and Pattberg 2009; Loconto and Fouilleux 2014). Lawrence and Phillips (2004) distinguish two constitutive elements of an organizational field: a set of institutions, including practices, understandings, and rules; and a network of organizations. We echo the classical Northian distinction between institutions as the rules of the game, and the organizations as the players of the game, who, while following the rules, try to amend them in order to accommodate their interests, values, and the technologies in which they invest (North 1990). More specifically, we treat institutions as simultaneously given (as the context within which agents think, speak, and act) and contingent (as the results of agents' thoughts, words, and actions). They serve as both structures that constrain actors and as constructs created and changed by those actors (Schmidt 2008).

Based on the case of ISEAL, Loconto and Fouilleux (2014) showed that the capacity to articulate rules related to standard-setting, certification, and accreditation can be a key political resource for an organization in institutionalizing the sustainability field. In this article, we assume that with the voluntary standard as its core institution, the organic field is crucially structured around and organized by a specific regulatory regime combining socio-technical standards, certifications, and accreditations that can be described through the heuristic of a TSR (Loconto and Busch 2010; Loconto et al. 2012; Hatanaka et al. 2012). As Busch (Busch 2011, p. 221) explains:

TSRs differ from state-based modes of governance in that they are often a cobbled-together network of persons, organizations, and things, rather than being constructed on a formal hierarchy of status relations. TSR may be granted special status by nation-states, or they may be an entirely private form of governance, subject to state laws about contracts, fraud, and so forth, but not the subject of any special legislation.

We propose that a TSR can also be described as a bricolage of multiple layers of markets. We adopt Callon's vision of markets as "collective devices that allow compromises to be reached, not only on the nature of the goods to produce and distribute but also on the value to be given to them" (Callon and Muniesa 2005). Although the emergence of a "market for standards" (Reinecke et al. 2012) and the "political construction of market institutions" through standards (Bartley 2007, p. 299) have already been noted by scholars,

the interactions between standards as rules and standards as market creating devices and their resulting consequences remain underexplored. The TSR markets are diverse. First, there is the market for certified products, in which a number of actors interact in relation to material products which are transformed and/or exchanged, i.e. producers, trade intermediaries, different types of processors, and finally retailers—both specialized shops and supermarkets. Second, the market for certified products directly relies upon some markets for services. Standard-setting concerns selling standards to standard adopters while certification and accreditation consist of selling audits, inspections, and controls. Third, in addition to these three core markets of a TSR, myriad other markets can be described, targeting organic traders, retailers, and processors through a multitude of specialized services (e.g., marketing services, training, web design, facilitation services, networking platforms). Envisaging the TSR as multi-layered markets is what Cleaver (2002, p. 27) would call "institutional bricolage." This refers to a multiplicity of formal and informal market institutions where competition and collaboration interact through a dynamic coexistence.

By introducing the notion of a TSR as the articulation of diverse and variably layered markets, we offer a way to better understand the multiple political dynamics at stake, which is important for how such markets contribute to the institutionalization of the field on at least two dimensions. The first refers to market politics as the political negotiations by powerful actors to "solve the problems of competition and uncertainty" (Fligstein 2001, p. 69) in market relations. This approach focuses on the role of the State in the market, which is described in the private regulation literature as proactive, but hidden. Analytically, this means we pay attention to the public/private relations at each pole of the TSR.

The second dimension extends the vision of "markets as politics" (Fligstein 1996) by addressing the ideas and values at stake. We identify these analytically through the approach of identifying enrolments and alliances. Indeed, a TSR can be described as a techno-economic network, i.e., "a coordinated set of heterogeneous actors which interact more or less successfully to develop, produce, distribute, and diffuse methods for generating goods and services" (Callon 1991, p. 133). By interconnecting the activities of standardization, accreditation, and certification, the TSR shapes the organizational field by setting out the limits of what is considered to be auditable, certifiable, creditable, standardizable. The associations, interdependencies, and irreversibility's that are created when these activities are combined rely upon the enrollment of intermediaries and their entanglement in the network (Callon 1991; Rip 2010) so that a system of market-focused governance based on standards can persist over time.



Thus, the TSR contributes to the institutionalization of the field by “mak[ing] a series of links predictable, limit[ing] fluctuations, align[ing] actors and intermediaries, and cut[ting] down the number of translations and the amount of information put into circulation” (Callon 1991, p. 151). The latter assertion helps us to explain the linkage to the conventionalization debate. By cutting down the information put into circulation, the TSR strongly influences the cognitive and ideational horizon of the field, i.e., the scope of the debate within it (Hoffman 1999). We provide evidence in this paper to demonstrate that with voluntary standards as the core institution of the field and its internal dynamics responding to the influence of the multi-layered markets of the TSR, the scope of this debate (i.e., the number and variety of ideas in circulation within the field) tends to be constricted to (international) market-compatible questions and framings.

Based on this analytical frame, the three following empirical sections describe the three poles of the organic agriculture TSR and their evolution over the last three decades within the EU and at the global level. For standards-setting, certification, and accreditation, we describe how the corresponding markets for services and products were constructed over time and the role of the different actors in their evolution and the politics involved.

### **Standard-setting: developing markets for products and for auditable standards**

The role of standard-setting in the TSR is the construction of the ideational boundaries of the field and their codification into rules that govern practices. Within this section, we examine two core standard-setting activities within the organic organizational field that have developed over the past two decades. We trace movements in the harmonization of standards as an example of how simplifying the definition of organic across geo-political boundaries has strengthened the field by expanding markets for organic products. Concurrently, the increasing external competition from the “sustainability” field in the market for standards has further developed the ideational boundary of the organic field.

### **From community-shared value-oriented principles to globalized auditable standards**

In the nascent period of organic farming, confidence and inter-personal trust were the main modes of social interaction among the actors within the organic field (Freyer and Bingen 2014). The few existing organic “standards” (Demeter since 1928 and Soil Association since 1967) were written more in the form of recommendations than

standards, putting emphasis on farming principles. Soon after its creation in 1972 by five national organic farming associations (British, French, Swedish, American, and South African), the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) established the first global standard in 1980. At the time, this standard was focused, almost exclusively, on “Northern” countries. Rather than a regulatory tool, the standard was seen as a common definition of organic farming. This consisted of seven main objectives including: “to work as much as possible within a closed system, and draw upon local resources”; “to maintain the long-term fertility of soils”; or “to give livestock conditions of life that conform to their physiological needs and to humanitarian principles” (Schmid 2007, p.165). Beyond these aspirations, much was left undefined, which allowed organic actors to interpret and transfer these ideals into practices.

Beginning in the 1980s, however, organic farming went through a process of progressive formalization. From being a means to embody and share values, the standards then evolved into a list of auditable criteria. A crucial advancement in this formalization process was first taken at the European level, with the adoption of the first EU organic regulation in 1991, which established third-party certification as the only recognized procedure to implement the rule. Beginning in 2008, these certifiers were required to be accredited (see accreditation section). Following the EU, other “Northern” countries defined their own public standards: Canada (COS) in 1998, Japan (JAS) in 1999, and the US (NOP) in 2000.

With the development of organic markets in the northern countries, the market for exporting organic tropical products has also grown, and standards have been implemented in Southern countries. Since the 2000s, the number of public organic standards has doubled. As noted above, 110 countries have an active or draft organic regulation and there are at least 121 private organic standards (UNCTAD et al. 2012). Most of these standards belong to the “IFOAM Family of Standards.”<sup>2</sup> This standards-based approach is complemented by a discursive set of four principles that are meant to motivate organic farming (“health, ecology fairness, and care”). Through this multiplication of standards, the organic movement has become a truly global phenomenon, as the evolution of IFOAM membership<sup>3</sup> reflects: IFOAM had 93 members in 1993, among which

<sup>2</sup> The IFOAM Family of Standards are supposed to have a “sound and credible criterion to ensure organic integrity of products” (IFOAM website, accessed 26 November 2014).

<sup>3</sup> IFOAM is an umbrella structure representing the actors of the organic field (farmers, processors, certifiers, consultants, etc.). The only condition to be a voting member in this organization is to have the main part of its activities in the organic sector (Geier 2007).

80 % came from OECD countries,<sup>4</sup> and 724 members in 2003, where 41 % came from non-OECD countries (Coleman and Reed 2007). In 2014 there were 807 members with 44.5 % of them from non-OECD countries.<sup>5</sup>

### Harmonization of standards: expanding the market for organic products

As a consequence of the multiplication of organic standards worldwide, the debate in the organic field during the last decade was marked by a singular characteristic: the need to harmonize organic standards. Actors use a two-fold justification; the first relates to consumer protection: harmonization can reduce consumer confusion. The second is a producer promotion argument, where multiple certifications cause increased costs to farmers.

At the EU level, the argument that too many schemes create barriers to trade among member states led to the 1991 regulation. When a major reform took place in 2007, it was again based on the argument that more harmonization was needed in order to promote exchanges among EU countries: the reform mainly aimed to decrease the number of exemptions allowed to individual member states, and to reduce the divergences among member states in the implementation of the rules (Gibbon and Ponte 2008). The 2014 proposal to reform the EU organic regulation remains on the same path: it forwards the argument of the necessary reduction of divergences in the implementation of the EU rules among member states.

At the global level, the argument is even more prevalent. With the core discourses of avoiding barriers to trade and facilitating market access for developing countries, international discussions about organics are clearly focused on issues of trade. Harmonization was first supposed to happen through the Codex Alimentarius—the joint FAO/WHO<sup>6</sup> program for food standards, which began developing guidelines for the production, processing, labeling, and marketing of organically produced foods in 1991. In 1999 the plant production guidelines and in 2001 the guideline for animal production were approved.<sup>7</sup> However, given that the main importing countries rely first on national legislation for importing organic products, the Codex does not play a concrete harmonization role. Instead, harmonization

occurs through three other mechanisms. First, bilateral agreements between countries with public organic standards are signed so to favor organic exchanges and to reduce barriers to trade. The EU also signed equivalency agreements with Australia (1996), Argentina, Israel, and Switzerland (1998), New Zealand (2002), Costa-Rica (2003), India (2006), Tunisia (2009), Japan (2010), Canada (2011), and the US (2012). The second mechanism is through the promotion of regional standards. “Models of public–private cooperation and regionalization [are] considered as potential pathways for global solutions to the challenge of an increasing and divergent number of organic standards and conformity assessment requirements” (UNCTAD et al. 2012, p. 9). FAO, UNCTAD, and IFOAM sponsor organic “regional harmonization initiatives” and hail them as big achievements. For example, an East African Organic Product Standard was set up in 2007 and endorsed by the East African Community. It was developed through collaboration between UNCTAD, UNEP, IFOAM, Grolink,<sup>8</sup> and local public and private actors. Likewise, the Pacific Organic Standard was developed by IFAD and IFOAM and was endorsed by the governments of the member countries of the Pacific Community in 2008.

Finally, harmonization for the purpose of increased trade is pursued through collaboration among international organizations at the trans-national level, often with references made to the World Trade Organization and its sanitary and phytosanitary measures and technical barriers to trade agreement. IFOAM, FAO and UNCTAD collaborate “to address and reduce barriers to trade of organic products resulting from the global proliferation of organic standards and technical regulations” (UNCTAD et al. 2012, p. iii). This partnership began with the organization of an International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF). The ITF resulted in the definition of a set of tools and recommendations dedicated to assessing the equivalence of the existing organic standards around the world and their certification performance requirements. Subsequently the Global Organic Market Access (GOMA) project was launched in 2009, and ended in 2012, with the theme: “Let the good products flow!” We see the same discourses used in the “IFOAM Family of standards,” promoted by IFOAM since 2010 as a set of harmonized, “auditable,” and trade facilitating standards.

### The problem of sustainability: increased competition in the market for standards

An important evolution in the debates about organic standards occurred during the last decade. This is directly related to the now de facto inclusion of organic within the

<sup>4</sup> OECD is the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, which gathers the economically most advanced countries in the world. Non-OECD countries are mostly developing countries.

<sup>5</sup> IFOAM website, accessed 13 June 2014.

<sup>6</sup> World Health Organization.

<sup>7</sup> The standard-setting process was highly influenced by the content of the EU regulation. The discussions were focused on scientific details and legal aspects (lists of additives, proportions, claims, etc.) rather than on the philosophy of organic farming.

<sup>8</sup> Grolink is a Swedish consultancy specialized in organic farming.

broader community of “sustainability standards.” Standards like Rainforest Alliance, UTZ Certified, or even GlobalGAP increasingly point to sustainability arguments in their legitimating discourses (Fouilleux 2012). On the supermarkets shelves, organic certified products are increasingly challenged by other certified products that carry environmental and social claims and labels. However, these “sustainability standards” not only threaten the market share or political legitimacy of organic standards, they also push organic actors to redefine some of their practices and the type of indicators they use.

This phenomenon is illustrated by the recent Sustainable Organic Agriculture Action Network (SOAAN) project that was developed by IFOAM, with the financial support of Migros,<sup>9</sup> between 2011 and 2013. The main output was a *Best practice guideline for agriculture and value chains, public version 1.0—November 2013*. The format and content are reminiscent of sustainability standards (i.e., a guideline as a list of detailed “add-on” modules—gender and equity, land rights, GHG emissions, water, investment, accountability, etc.—and the label “version 1.0”). This is but one example of the acculturation of the organic movement to new practices brought to it by the sustainability standards community, such as the notion of multiple versions of the standards. It also illustrates the pressure that the organic movement feels to take a stance within the sustainability community. Specifically, the guideline is presented as “the contribution by the organic movement to the global discussion on sustainable agriculture” (IFOAM 2013, p. 3).

Another illustration of the pressure to conform, are the recent attempts to benchmark organic standards to other types of standards. At a meta-standard level, new instruments were developed as Codes of Best Practice in order to gain procedural consistency between sustainability standards (Loconto and Fouilleux 2014). Specifically, IFOAM and UNCTAD conducted a side-by-side comparison of organics and GLOBALGAP and came to the conclusion that: “to address those issues covered by GLOBALGAP<sup>10</sup> but not the EU Organic Agriculture Regulation, the paper suggests creating an add-on module on hygiene, contamination and social/labor issues for certified organic products to facilitate market entry where GLOBALGAP is required” (UNCTAD 2009, p. 1). This idea of benchmarking and

enhancing interoperability among voluntary sustainability standards (including their harmonization and equivalence), is a central feature of the work of the recently launched UN Forum for Sustainability Standards.<sup>11</sup>

In sum, despite a continued values-based discourse that is embedded in IFOAM’s four principles (health, ecology, fairness, and care) and the inclusion of new items through sustainability discourses, these examples illustrate the narrowing of the organic debate, from an early focus on specific social and environmental territorially embedded ethics and values to questions of standards and market efficiencies. They also illustrate a trend towards the *sustainabilization* of organics.

### **Certification: in search of new markets for certification**

The main role of certification in a TSR is to provide a guarantee that actors comply with standards. It is in this way that the values and criteria that are laid out in standards are enforced (Henson and Humphrey 2010). We trace these values by showing how markets for certifications are expanding and “sustainabilizing.”

### **From first and second-party to the hegemony of third-party certification**

The most common model of certification is “third-party,” where certifiers are private actors, independent from the SDO; they are paid by the farmers to control their practices, and release a certificate of conformity to the standard. However, the origin of organic lies with the use of other models of certification, now referred to as “first-” (where private individuals or groups self-declare their compliance with a standard) and “second-party” certification (where an organization to which the controlled entity belongs provides the assurance).

Indeed, the first European experiments relied upon groups of farmers who conducted self-control and peer-reviews (Freyer and Bingen 2014). Control processes were not always strictly formalized because they were not seen as a priority; instead, the main issue for the movement at its beginning was to diffuse the organic knowledge, techniques, and advice. In France for example, Nature and Progrès was created in 1964 as an activist association (among many others at that time). They set their first standard in 1972, and in 1978 they created an association of independent advisors in organic agriculture (ACAB). In

<sup>9</sup> Migros is a Swiss retailer, well known in the mainstream agriculture community for its advocacy for more sustainable practices in the name of consumers.

<sup>10</sup> Although initially food safety oriented, Global Gap now presents itself as a sustainability standard and includes social and environmental aspects: “We’re a global organization with a crucial objective: safe, sustainable agriculture worldwide” ([http://www.globalgap.org/uk\\_en/who-we-are/about-us/](http://www.globalgap.org/uk_en/who-we-are/about-us/)). Global GAP is a subscriber member to the ISEAL Alliance.

<sup>11</sup> Internal communication, 14 November 2014. See: <http://unfss.org/work-areas/working-groups/working-group-on-enhancing-interoperability-of-vss/>

1981, ACAB began to organize the audits for Nature et Progrès. In 1988/89, the certification function was assigned by various SDOs (Nature et Progrès, FNAB, BioBourgogne) to new types of organizations. These were mixed commissions of authorization and control that consisted of producers, experts, and consumers (Nature et Progrès 2011; Garcia-Papet 2012). In legal terms, it is only in 1988, with the creation of a national commission to sanction standards by the State that audits became mandatory. Nonetheless, first- and second-party controls were still allowed. Beginning in 1989, in line with the adoption of the EU norm 45011, third-party certification became obligatory. The Europeanization of national organic rules signaled the institutionalization of third-party certification.

Since then, the dominant form of certification in global organic markets is third-party, and a range of third-party CBs around the world are now in the business of assuring compliance (Hatanaka and Busch 2008). The number of private certification bodies working in the field of organics grew by 50 % in the recent decade: in 2012, there were a total of 549 certification bodies based in 85 countries (UNCTAD et al. 2012). Hatanaka and Busch (Hatanaka et al. 2005) argue that the objectives of third-party certification are shaped by the marketing strategies and economic interests of supermarkets. While this interest certainly remains, we observe a change in the certification landscape of the organic field, whereby certifiers are increasingly becoming strategic actors themselves in pursuit of markets. Many of the large CBs are dynamic businesses that have diversified their portfolio of products and services. It is increasingly common to find them active in standards' development, certification, and inspection audits (Djama et al. 2011; Loconto et al. 2012).

With the global expansion of organic markets in the 1990s, the debate arose about how to certify the hundreds of thousands of small-scale producers in developing countries efficiently. IFOAM thus worked with its members to standardize requirements for internal control systems (ICS), which were accepted by the EU in 2003. This system of group certification is based on an internal quality system, whereby an ICS manager creates internal standards and practices risk assessment. Farmers in the group must be aware of organic practices, but it is the manager of the ICS who conducts the audits. The third-party auditor checks on the proper functioning of the ICS and conducts field visits only to a sample of the group members' farms. Thus, third-party certification is made a bit more "flexible." In most cases, such systems are implemented and financed by the buyers (exporters/importers) directly.

Finally, participatory guarantee systems (PGS) must be mentioned. This recent re-emergence of the original second-party certification model directly challenges third-party certification, which is denounced as too costly for

small-scale producers and not applicable to local agro-ecological and socio-technical conditions. After decades of focusing on third-party certification, IFOAM began to advocate for PGS in 2009. PGS are now found in 38 countries, and endorsed by the State in Bolivia, Brazil, and India. However, PGS are not recognized by the main importers of organic products and thus they are used mainly for domestic markets and remain marginal on a global scale.

### Transformation of the market for organic certification

With the explosion of the market for organic products and the legal imposition of third-party certification in the 1990s, the market for organic certification has gone through a deep transformation. First, it was marked by an intense professionalization. Former associations and informal groups either disappeared or were transformed into enterprises offering third-party certification services.<sup>12</sup> Second, with the reputation of organic certification as a lucrative activity, multinational CBs with no previous experience in the organic field, like SGS or Bureau Veritas, have entered the organic certification market. Due to their economic strength, they increase competition for the pre-existing CBs in the field (Garcia-Papet 2012). Third, a reverse evolution is also taking place, where organic CBs are progressively expanding their activities beyond the boundaries of the field. In this way they are weakening the link with the initial organic political project, as the case of Ecocert illustrates.

Ecocert was created in 1991 out of the ACAB association, which we described above as a historically engaged activist in the French organic movement. It obtained its first authorization as an "Organic inspection body" from the State in 1992, and its first "accreditation" in 1996. Ecocert began as a small, mission-oriented certifier, who worked only in organic certification. Over the past 20 years, Ecocert has become a multinational CB. With 23 offices and subsidiaries, Ecocert operates in over 80 countries. Moreover, Ecocert is no longer only an organic certifier. Since the mid-2000s it has diversified its certification markets through a rising number of accreditations and authorizations. Ecocert now certifies standards like Ecological and organic textiles, IFS Food, GLOBALG.A.P., ISO 14001, 9001 and 26000, PEFC (Program for the Endorsement of Forest Certifications), and VCS (Verified Carbon Standard). In addition, since 2002 Ecocert has become a standard-setter by developing its own range of

<sup>12</sup> Some association-based certifiers are still active but they are generally more territorially rooted and still defend a mission-based vision of their activities in the organic field (Garcia-Papet 2012).



standards for gardens, restaurants, spas, and cleaning products.<sup>13</sup> Ecocert is not an outlier, but rather part of a trend in the industry. For example, the Institute for Market ecology (IMO), a Swiss certifier that also grew out of the organic movement, has followed a similar path. IMO now provides certification and inspection services for over 70 different standards, including their own “Fair for Life” standard.

A major trend in this market consists of a diversification towards CBs offering a variety of standards, a phenomenon described as “one-stop-shops for certification” (Djama et al. 2011). In the organic movement, a number of actors denounce the fact that certifiers are decreasingly “mission-driven” actors and increasingly purely “profit-driven” entities. A debate is on-going within IFOAM on this issue and some actors argue that only certifiers with more than 50 % of their activities in organic farming should be allowed to apply for IFOAM-accreditation. The IFOAM World Board has opposed to this option based on a business-oriented argument:

Certification bodies should be free to engage in the various certification schemes required to sustain their business. Nowadays, organic operators often need multiple certifications (e.g., organic + Global GAP + Rainforest Alliance + Fair Trade) and it is only rational that they can access all those from one single certification body (...) Having such a requirement for 50 % organic activity would make it impossible for CBs who want to start an organic activity to become IFOAM/IOAS Accredited, which we believe would be counter-productive in terms of increasing access to credible organic certification. (IFOAM 2014, p. 5)

To defend their business model, CBs argue that their multiple-certification approach offers a way to reduce costs for small farmers faced with an increasing obligation to hold multiple certifications (e.g., fair trade and organic, organic and GlobalGAP, etc.). In both cases, the debate is shaped by the market for certification.

### **Accreditation: public/private tensions and global inconsistencies**

Within a TSR, accreditation provides the means to ensure the credibility of third-party CBs. In practice, this means compliance with the ISO 17065 standard for conformity assessment bodies with the organic standard specification.

<sup>13</sup> In 2005, Ecocert created the “Filiiale Ecopass” (“Ecocert Environment” since 2012), specialized in environmental certification for firms and cooperatives, and a “Filiiale Ecocert Greenlife” in 2008, specialized in inspections and certification for eco-products (e.g., cosmetics, textiles, detergents, air deodorizers).

Within the organic agriculture field there are two main systems of accreditation. One is embedded in national and supra-national legal systems and performed by national ABs belonging to the IAF. The other is strictly private and performed by a specialized organization, the International Organic Accreditation Service (IOAS).

The first system is fully controlled by the State. In the EU, accreditation is ruled by the Regulation (EC) No 765/2008, which standardizes the requirements for accreditation and market surveillance. In this document, the EU defines accreditation as a not-for-profit activity that can be carried out by public or private actors and stipulates national monopolies for ABs. The argument for such monopolies is that competition between ABs would distract these bodies from their primary mission of serving as the state-sanctioned authority in the conformity assessment chain.<sup>14</sup>

However, while this regulation was created to reduce competition between ABs within Europe, we see increasing tensions as European ABs begin to compete in accreditation markets outside of Europe. The EU import regime for organic has two paths; either there is an equivalency agreement with the exporting countries (cf. the bilateral negotiations mentioned in the standard-setting section) whereby the products certified by accredited certifiers in third-countries can enter the European market without these CBs needing an EU accreditation. Or, when there is no bilateral agreement with the exporting country, third-party certifiers must set standards based on the EU rules (“checklists” in the EU jargon), and submit those standards to the European Commission for approval.<sup>15</sup>

Such a regime has various implications. First, European ABs expand their market presence within third-country markets, by using the public authority that they exercise in the EU to become “accreditors for the world.” For example the German national AB (DAkkS) accredits Biolatina (Peru), Argencert (Argentina), COAE and ECOA (Egypt), CertiMex (Mexico), and Indocert (India). Second, to work around these EU legal restrictions, there is a tendency for accredited multi-national CBs to subcontract inspection services to local CBs. These activities are criticized as a loss of control by “credible” CBs over the audit activities. Third, as CBs develop their checklists that harmonize the national, private, and public standards needed in international markets, they become EU-sanctioned standard-setters who adapt public standards for the private market. Finally, the checklist system becomes a system of “shadow accreditation” by the EC, which becomes a central actor

<sup>14</sup> Regulation (EC) No 765/2008 paragraphs 14 and 19.

<sup>15</sup> Among the list of 48 EU recognized CBs in May 2014, there are seven American, five Italian, three Argentinean, three German, and three Indian (EU website, 13 June 2014).

for overseeing certification activities in third-countries. For example, on the Turkish certifier ETKO's website, they present their EC approval as an "EU accreditation."<sup>16</sup> The current revision of the EU Organic Regulation proposes eliminating the equivalency provisions, which would extend even further the reach of the EU standard and its embedded TSR.

The second system of organic accreditation is performed by a private transnational AB. IOAS, a US based non-profit organization, provides ISO/IEC 17065 accreditation for third-party CBs according to the 2010 IFOAM "auditable standard." IOAS is part of the IFOAM Organic Guarantee Scheme that establishes equivalence between private and public organic production standards. The IOAS was created by IFOAM in 1997 as a legitimate way to conform to the widespread idea encoded in ISO 17065 that in order to be credible, accreditation should be delivered by an organization independent from the standard-setter. The creation of IOAS was also a means to provide standardized accreditation around the world according to IFOAM norms, i.e., to "establish a mechanism for building trust amongst the various certification bodies" (Katto-Andrighetto 2012, p. 18), and a response to IFOAM's concerns over the growing number of government regulations for Organic, i.e., as a way to defend the "rights and role of the private sector" in the global organic field. This accreditation system has generated tensions with the European authorities. National ABs have threatened to sue some concerned actors.<sup>17</sup> Despite attempts by IOAS to become a member of the IAF since its creation, their membership request has been systematically denied, because of the EU position that ABs must be legally mandated to represent the state in accreditation services.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, in Canada the state delegates accreditation to IOAS for its public organic standard.

Finally, the same trend of "sustainabilization" can be observed in accreditation pole of the TSR. Initially rooted in the organic movement, IOAS seeks to expand their markets beyond the boundaries of the organic field. They now deliver accreditations for an increasing number of sustainability standards like Rainforest Alliance (a direct competitor to the organic standard), organic textiles (Textile Exchange, Global Organic Textile Standard), and organic cosmetics (NATRUE, COSMOS Organic). In its arrangement with the American National Standards Institute, IOAS conducts accreditation audits for food safety

standards such as GlobalGAP and the British Retailers Consortium standard. Indeed, it seems that the ability of both national and international accreditors to offer a range of accreditation services in markets outside of their countries of origin is fundamental to how they spread the reach of the organic TSR. This extended reach of the TSR is seen by some actors within the organic field as a direct threat to the political project of organic. An IFOAM staff member crystalized this in his statement that: "We sold our soul to the devil long ago with certification. [...] We had to buy into this system, the ISO system, as a way of legitimization [...] but there are too many conflicts of interests."

## Discussion

The first point that emerges from our analysis is that the multi-layered market structure of the TSR has a conventionalization effect on the organic sector (Jaffee and Howard 2009; De Wit and Verhoog 2007; Darnhofer et al. 2010). As we described, the early 1980s were still characterized mostly by private standards, existing mainly in Northern countries. They codified general principles and were used not as a means to assess conformity, but rather as means to give farmers (accompanied by pioneering scientists) an identity and to diffuse specific values inside and outside of the movement. The 1990s, however, marked a turning point. In parallel to a stronger involvement of governments (e.g., EU, US), standards and conformity control institutions and procedures were increasingly formalized and codified. The standards were rewritten for inspection bodies, making them more detailed and auditable, and there was a boom in the certification and accreditation businesses. As a result, actors of the organic field focused their attention on the harmonization of standards and conformity assessment procedures. Paradoxically, such a search for increased collaboration was used to both consolidate markets and create competition between actors in each of the TSR poles. This competition regime of governance has had the effect of limiting the political debates to predominantly trade and market-compatible options. In other words, the conventionalization of organic is not only occurring because farmers are fudging practices, engaging in parallel non-organic production or because the standards are co-opted by powerful interests (Jaffee and Howard 2009; De Wit and Verhoog 2007; Darnhofer et al. 2010; Mutersbaugh 2005); but also because the structures of the TSR constrain the direction in which both the debate and the acceptable activities are able to go

Second, harmonization efforts also served the dual purpose of expanding the markets for both organic products and auditable standards to new geographic spaces, with the consequence of "exporting" (political scientists would call it "transferring") the associated neoliberal politics to the

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.etko.org/Akreditasyon.aspx>, accessed 13 June 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with IOAS and Accreditation Services International (ASI), Bonn, Germany 30 June 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Despite these tensions, IOAS is approved by the EU to conduct accreditation assessments in third-countries (e.g., they accredit CBs for ISO 17065 plus EU organic in New-Zealand, India, Turkey, Brazil, USA, and Canada).

Global South. The development of organic standards in tropical farming systems by importers and development agencies has increased the markets for both organic products and organic TSR services dramatically. In these countries, organic agriculture is now known mainly through an embedded TSR where European (and American) service providers dominate (Willer and Lernoud 2015). Contrary to the situation in the Global North, where the organic movement was initially deeply socially rooted and territorially embedded, organic farming in the Global South has developed primarily as an export-oriented commercial model. In Africa particularly, it is supported and developed as a business opportunity and its promoters are very weakly—if at all—related to the peasant movement. For example, at the recent 3rd African Conference on Organic Agriculture, which took place in October 2015 in Lagos, Nigeria, only 44 farmers out of more than 200 participants were present and there was no formal representation of the main African peasants' organizations (e.g., ROPPA).

Thirdly, our results show that the development of the organic TSR as an embedded component of a broader “sustainability field” (Dingwerth and Pattberg 2009; Loconto and Fouilleux 2014), which promotes the TSR model of techno-politics, also plays a role in the conventionalization trend of organics. At the standardization pole of the TSR, the mushrooming of so-called “sustainability standards,” most of them being potential competitors for organics on the vast voluntary standards market, has pushed the organic movement to address new issues not formerly included in their political project and by following global meta-standards. Sustainability also opens new market opportunities. At the certification and accreditation poles, the operators are no longer specialized in organics; rather they sell a number of other voluntary standards, codes, certifications and accreditations in sometimes quite unrelated spheres of activity. A “mission-drift” is taking place, whereby the business of auditing (with its profit-driven motive) is diluting the business of expanding the market for organic products (with its attached moral economy and political project) (Jaffee and Howard 2009).

These trends do not go without tensions and conflicts. For example, the issue of certification is increasingly a point for open debate, as this public declaration by an IFOAM world board member at the 2014 Biofach fair illustrates: “We must get out the trap of certification. We have put all our energy in certification those last years and now it is chaos. We must open the debate and work on other things than only certification.”<sup>19</sup> Similar discussions, pitting IFOAM members against each other and the world board itself, took place at the 2014 World Organic Congress in Istanbul. During the meeting the advocates of third

party certification had to face their detractors, who were denouncing their business/sustainability/greenwash orientations, and were instead advocating for the use of PGS as the preferred form of certification. IFOAM's current explanation of PGS is that it is a “complementary” approach to third-party certification.<sup>20</sup> This internal line of fragmentation within the organic movement also appeared through the debate that was generated by the motion presented by the Soil Association to the last IFOAM General Assembly in Istanbul. They proposed that IFOAM re-join ISEAL, the global umbrella organization for voluntary private sustainability standards. The proposal encountered internal opposition because although IFOAM had been a founding member of ISEAL, it quit this organization in 2010 due to concerns over greenwashing (Loconto and Fouilleux 2014). The decision taken by the General Assembly was that IFOAM become a subscriber to ISEAL for 1-year trial period, which demonstrates the uneasy relationship between factions within the sustainability field (Dingwerth and Pattberg 2009).

Finally, the evidence presented in this article demonstrates that the institutionalization of the organic field has evolved in terms of the content and function of standards, where market competition plays a defining role even in collaborative efforts. As Schmid (2007, pp. 159–160) explains, “in the pioneer phase the standards brought organic farmers together, whereas later, the standards seemed to divide them.” By looking through the TSR heuristic, we open the black box of how actors interact to institutionalize the field and thus provide the evidence to support Schmid's statement. Furthermore, our analysis also brings some new elements to the literature addressing the public/private divide in the field of voluntary standards (Verbruggen 2013; Arcuri 2015; Bartley 2011). First, public authorities have an active role in turning organics into a political project of market construction as organic is the only standard in the sustainability field with significant public regulation (Arcuri 2015); we see this with the EU regulation appearing as a crucial driver in the building of the global organic TSR by disseminating both the content of the standards and the rules for certification and accreditation to the rest of the world. We also identify the role of international organizations in diffusing the practices of the TSR and their trade-based corresponding values, particularly in developing countries. Second, facing these public actors we see actors who primarily define themselves as being “non-state” with a blurred and “unspoken” frontier separating them from the more classic “for-profit” private actors (this sense of “being private” is another explanation

<sup>19</sup> Nuremberg, 14 February 2014.

<sup>20</sup> See <http://www.ifoam.bio/en/value-chain/participatory-guarantee-systems-pgs>, accessed 23 October 2015 and interview with IFOAM CEO, 5 October 2015.

for the proximity of some IFOAM member organizations to ISEAL). Nevertheless, farmers' organizations and NGOs that generally consider themselves as the "private" sector when they engage in standard-setting, are now increasingly in competition not only with public actors, but also with certifiers who are becoming standard-setters. Similarly, "non-state" actors who have created international accreditation bodies to serve the needs of organic and sustainability standards are increasingly in competition with professional accreditors delegated by the State.

## Conclusion

In this article we analyzed the institutionalization of organic agriculture over that last three decades through the construction of a TSR. This institutionalization has occurred through the creation of markets for standards, certifications, and accreditations in addition to the primary market for organic products. We show a hybrid governance structure whereby actors with conflicting interests, visions, and political projects compete in the field, but actually tend to converge by the type of institutions that implement and support them (Hargrave and Van de Ven 2006). Despite the conflicts between public and private actors over the control of activities at the three poles of the TSR, they still find themselves engaged in a common activity: the active construction of markets and the facilitation of their expansion. We argue that this layering of markets is part of the institutionalization of the organic agriculture organizational field and that it has some important performative effects. The inclusion of the organic field within a broader field dedicated to sustainability, which is also institutionalized through the TSR model, tends to reinforce this phenomenon by shifting the politics of the organic project. As a set of well-articulated market institutions, the TSR orients and consequently narrows the scope of debate. The discussions become restricted to "marketable" or "market-compatible" dimensions and objects, specifically in terms of what can be standardized and audited and how. In addition, we see that over the past decade the clear separation between organic standard-setting, certification and accreditation activities (theoretically targeted at maintaining the integrity of the institutions within the TSR) is beginning to dissolve through the expansion of markets, leaving the floor to increasingly interdependent forms of activities and responsibilities.

Moreover, the organic case sheds light on the TSR as a stimulating heuristic. The TSR allows us to open the black box of how regulation is actually performed and puts the focus on actors who are often missed in discussions of private regulation and institutionalization at the global level. Such an analytical approach, which is a way to

integrate the institutionalist and the performative approaches to studying markets (Fligstein and Dauter 2006), could help analyzing dynamics in other fields of activity regulated through voluntary standards and many related globalization dynamics. An interesting avenue for future research could explore the activities of those intermediary actors who are providing additional TSR services beyond standard-setting, certification and accreditation, including the plethora of consultants who directly or indirectly make their living thanks to the TSR model of techno-politics. By going from one organization to the other and one pole of the TSR to the other in different institutional fields, they ensure key transnational networking activities and actively participate in the expansion of this model.

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