



Earth Common Journal Regular Issue

Everyday Activism

MacEwan University

Volume 4, Number 1, September 2014

International Feature

Understanding Organics at the Grassroots Level: An analysis of Ecuadorian and Canadian perceptions

Jason Bradshaw (writer), Dana Dusterhoft (photographer)*

MacEwan University, Canada

Abstract

There is a growing public concern over the genetic alteration and use of chemicals in conventionally produced agriculture. The perceived risk of such agricultural production has prompted the rising popularity of organic alternatives in both developed and developing nations. These products are defined by their reliance on traditional means that do not require the use of harmful chemicals or pesticides in their production. The organic movement in South America has been defined not only by perceived risks, but also by a desire to preserve traditional ways of life. This is accomplished through grants and funding to indigenous farmers in these regions, allowing them to continue their practice. By interviewing a number of individuals in Ecuador and Canada involved in three levels of the organic process (consumers, distributors, and producers) this study determined common cultural and intercultural conceptions of organic practices. These findings were then related to a number of recommendations for three distinct systems (small-scale farming, free trade, and certification) that are currently relevant to the organic movement.

Introduction

Global Trendsetting

The world is a quickly changing place and, more often than not, other continents are trying to catch up to the trends set by North America. Humankind sees this international influence taking place in a number of fields; be it music, medicine, film, or food. North America has adopted a number of trends from the rest of the world, but the majority of this cultural exchange is tilted in the West's favour. The research conducted for this article presupposes that the organic trend is becoming popular on most continents around the globe. Many cultures throughout the world are experiencing the impact of this movement and are becoming producers as well as consumers. One such continent that has become a world leader in organic exports is South America. Indeed, Raynolds (2008) recognizes that "the rising popularity of organic foods in the global North and their increasing availability in mainstream supermarkets is generating a rapid increase in the volume and range of organic imports" (p.161) and that ". . . almost all Latin American countries now export certified organic foods" (pp.161-162). These two culturally diverse populations are influencing each other's economies and societies through the organic agro-export system. *But, just how are organics perceived on each continent? And how does each culture perceive the organic practices of the other?* This study has collected data from Quito, Ecuador, in South America and Edmonton, Alberta, in Canada to begin understanding organic perceptions at a grassroots level.

The Organic Movement

There is a growing concern among North American consumers regarding genetically modified (GM) crops and contemporary industrial agricultural practices being used around the world. It can be argued that the public has a considerable lack of knowledge about these practices and that this is in part responsible for the increasingly common sentiments of mistrust of modern, or conventional, agriculture.

In North America, a belief that GM crops are dangerous is steadily increasing and organic farming practices are often touted as a solution, even though consumers are often uninformed about organic agriculture as well. This paper does not intend to prove that either farming practice is superior to the other. Indeed, both organic and GM crop systems do have their own unique strengths and weaknesses. What is shown through the research are the common perceptions, misconceptions, and attitudes towards organic practices and their conventional counterparts through the examination of testimonies from three levels of the organic food process: consumers, distributors, and producers. By determining the perception of organics at each level, the research shows whether consumers are receiving

the intended image and relevant facts about organics from a production and distribution level. The study was conducted in two countries, Ecuador and Canada, with differing cultural attitudes towards organics in order to provide a depth of data.

Research Questions

The study aims to answer five research questions relevant to the organic debate and are used to compare and contrast the two countries (Ecuador and Canada).

1. How do South and North Americans perceive organic foods and practices?
2. Are South and North Americans informed about the advantages/disadvantages of organic and industrial agriculture?
3. What misconceptions do South and North Americans have towards agriculture?
4. What beneficial applications do these differing viewpoints have for promoting organic practices?
5. How can the data be utilized to promote a better farming system?

Definition of Terms

Perception is a word that can have vague connotations. Perceptions are the building blocks of an individual's reality and are therefore completely subjective. According to the Oxford Dictionary, perception is "the way in which something is regarded, understood, or interpreted" (2014). This poses some problems when trying to obtain empirical evidence, but a concise definition will serve to create a basis for analyzing perceptions. For this study, perceptions are considered to be a subjective individual viewpoint of the external world. The perceptions analyzed in this study are the impression left on the participants about the organic movement and are examined by how they choose to describe this internal picture.

The Oxford Canadian Dictionary (2005) defines *organic* as "(1) of or relating to plants or animals, (2) of, relating to, or affecting a bodily organ or organs, (3) produced or involving production without the use of chemicals etc., (4) [of a compound etc.] containing carbon, (5) [of the parts of a whole] fitting together harmoniously, and (6) designating continuous or natural development" (p.583). A number of these definitions of organic can fit within the framework of organic as it relates to the study. Foremost, organic can be considered food (produce or livestock) produced without the use of harmful chemicals or fertilizers. This was an understanding expressed by nearly every participant within the study and is the definition of the word for many people, in general. Organics can also be considered as grown or 'developed' in a natural way. Most organic production uses as few industrial agricultural techniques as possible, and instead there is a reliance on a larger workforce and traditional agricultural practices. Finally, organic symbolizes harmonious

relationships between systems. It is buyers' and producers' ideologies that organic food and production cause less stress to the environment and fewer detrimental effects to the human body.

The term *conventional* appears numerous times throughout this study, and is used synonymously with industrial or modern when referring to production techniques. These terms all refer to agricultural practices that cannot be defined as organic in nature. This includes (but is not limited to) the use of chemical pesticides, chemical fertilizers, genetically modified seeds, and the use of feedlots. Basically, any practices that are considered harmful or cruel in terms of food production are labelled as conventional, industrial, or modern.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study encountered various limitations in its execution. Though the sample was diverse, compared to past research in this area, it was still limited in a number of ways. Data was collected from one South American city (Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador) and from one North American city (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada) and their surrounding areas. This provided a substantive cultural contrast. However, the sample could be broadened to include other South and North American locales in order to provide a greater sample population. Likewise, the sample of intended targets was minimal, meaning two to three participants for each of the three target sample groups. This was due to time constraints while in South America, where the research was restricted to a 10-day timespan.

All participants in the study were either in favour of organics, or not opposed to organic foods and practices. This variable was essential to the research. The bias that participants showed towards organic alternatives had a minimal effect on the research study. Bias is required in order to obtain data that is relevant to the research questions posed. This study does not propose that organic or conventional systems are superior to each other. Rather, it presents information on individual perceptions of organics and aims to present findings of general public opinion.

While in Ecuador, some interviews required a translator. Though English language proficiency at the Universidad San Francisco de Quito was sufficient, English language accessibility presented challenges for some of the participants when providing responses during the interviews. There are a number of validity issues that can arise when having a translator relay the conversation between researcher and participant: Different languages construct different cultural realities, different languages have subtle differences in meaning, different languages sometimes do not share words with a translatable equivalent, and that translators may have biases and manipulate participant responses for their own means (Kapborg & Bertero, 2002, pp. 52-54). This is an aspect of intercultural research

that is challenging in which to avoid or control. The researcher can only place his confidence in the translator, acknowledge that these limitations exist, and work to maintain the validity of the research.

Literature Review

In order to understand the broader use of organics throughout the world, various scholarly resources were reviewed with respect to North, South, and Latin American locations and in relation to this study. The following provides an overview of scholars who have studied organics within different perspectives.

Raynolds (2008) stated that nearly every Latin American country exports some type of organic product. Her study focused on the organic export 'boom' currently occurring in the Dominican Republic, considered the largest exporter of organics in Latin America. Her article provided a comparison of organic practices being utilized in another South American country, as well as tables of information on organic production across a number of Latin American countries. Raynolds elaborated on the small-scale peasant farming practices within the Dominican Republic that easily lent themselves to organic production. The low-input farming techniques employed by these individuals made use of a number of natural alternatives, due to financial limitations. This concept of local small-scale farming was mentioned by a number of the study's participant's as well, and is an important aspect of the organic movement. The study also delved into some of the commercialization and commoditisation that organic products are currently undergoing. Indeed, she noted that "Once defined according to alternative social and environmental standards, organic quality appears increasingly to be defined by conventional market criteria" (p. 177), and that as these products become more mainstream they will become increasingly shaped by such commercial market pressures (p. 177). Consumers are demanding an organic alternative, but they also want this alternative to appear as physically perfect as the conventional produce that they are accustomed to finding in a conventional supermarket. This consumer demand is placing an increased demand on organic farmers and pushing them towards more large-scale rather than small-scale farming techniques, by demanding an increased workforce and technologies not normally associated with small-scale organic productions.

It is necessary to examine how a product that defines itself as natural can also be a commodity. Upon further observation, it appears counterintuitive that a product that is constantly promoted and excessively labeled could also be considered completely natural. One way to take the commoditisation process into account with organics is to dissect it into two distinct phases: "(i) a day-to-day process that transforms an agricultural product harvested in a field into a primary commodity traded on world markets (testing, sorting,

grading), and (ii) a historical process that created the institutions necessary for the existence of primary commodities as a specific category of goods (Daviron & Vagneron, 2011, p. 92). As described by Daviron and Vagneron, organic products can be viewed as currently undergoing a transformation by shaping the institutions necessary for the alternative food to become an accepted commodity. Within this framework, the commoditisation of organic foods can be seen as an inevitable evolution, be it for good or bad. Daviron and Vagneron provided a historic approach to commoditisation of agricultural goods and commented many times on organic foods placed within this framework. Their research provided important information regarding future recommendations on how organics could and should be organized within the current agro-business model.

Certification plays a significant role in organic production within most countries around the world. These certification systems are separate from state-sanctioned rules, and can be considered more of a “private voluntary” initiative (Raynolds, 2012, p.496). Certification and regulations are not universal and so it is common for countries to have disparate standards for organic goods and practices. This causes some difficulty in the import and export of organic goods and it certainly factors into trade between South and North America. Raynolds’s (2012) article was useful when analyzing the role that certification plays in the recommendations section of this study. Certification alters individual perceptions by removing the emphasis on the physical quality of goods and placing more focus on the ethical and ecological values related to their production (p. 497). It is important to understand how certification affects organic practices within countries, when importing or exporting goods, and when dealing with small-scale farms and the fair trade system.

In their 2010 article, Darnhofer et al., examined concepts relating to the conventionalism of organics. Conventionalism, according to the study, is a hypothesis about the tendency of organic farming to become more akin to modern conventional agriculture, in technological, societal, and economical terms (p. 68). The content in this article was used in the creation of the instrument for this current study, as well as provided a sense of what some participants’ attitudes may be. It was relevant in determining if the conventionalism hypothesis is at play in the public mind and if it can be represented by the data analyzed.

Methodology

Introduction

Typically, the main thesis or research questions guide the direction of the methodology, and that was the case for this study. Through careful deliberation, a

methodology was selected which would best describe the perception of organics from both a Quitoian and Edmontonian viewpoint.

Method

The research for this study was situated within a qualitative method. Perceptions present a challenge to quantify, therefore a content analysis of concepts and ideologies found throughout the participant responses aided in creating the data. There are a number of validity issues that arose when using qualitative interview as the basis for this research. To avoid such issues, a number of tenets for conducting objective qualitative research were taken from Brod, Tesler, and Christensen's research (2009): Data collection and analysis are not linear but are interrelated and concurrent, concepts are the basic units of analysis, personal factors about the participant influence their concepts, concepts that are related to the same phenomenon are grouped to form categories, and analysis is achieved by constantly comparing similarities and differences found within the data (p. 1265). These tenets were used in such a way as to keep the research as objective as possible and provide a means by which to analyze and interpret the qualitative data collected. This was accomplished by first determining key concepts through recollection and analysis of participant transcripts, as per the first tenet—data collection and analysis are interrelated and concurrent. These key concepts formed the basis of a content analysis of the transcripts, in order to determine how many participant responses referred to them. The concepts were then put into categories based on the nature of their content. Finally, an analysis of similarities and differences between cultural responses are discussed in the results and conclusions section of the article.

Design

The study conducted various one-on-one in-depth interviews with participants in Quito, Ecuador and Edmonton, Alberta. The interviews were between 15 to 40 minutes in length, were recorded, and later transcribed. The transcripts were used in a follow up content analysis that identified key concepts and categories expressed by all participants.

Instrument

There were seven interview questions answered by all participants, in Quito and Edmonton. The questions were designed for all three target populations (consumers, distributors, and producers) in both cultures. These questions created a starting point for deeper conversation and personal reflection. The last question enabled participants to make personal observations about the organic movement. The interview questions were as follows:

#	Interview Questions
1	What would be your definition of organic foods and practices?
2	Do you think that having access to organic foods is important, here in Quito/Edmonton and around the world?
3	What do you think the advantages of organic practices are?
4	What do you think the advantages of conventional practices are?
5	Do you think that the organic trend is moving towards more conventional practices?
6	How do you think South American organic practices compare to North American organic practices?
7	Is there anything else you would like to add about organics?

Table 1: Interview Questions. This figure lists the 7 research questions asked to participants.

The questions succeeded in initiating participant conversation. Researcher interaction was minimal in order to ensure unbiased participant responses. Question 7 allowed participants to talk about their personal perceptions of organics and the production system. Only one participant did provide a response to question 7.

Study Sample

A number of participants from Quito, Ecuador in South America and from Edmonton, Canada in North America were interviewed for the study. The sample group was also organized into three distinct populations: 1) consumers, 2) distributors, and 3) producers. Consumers were chosen randomly from the student population at the Universidad San Francisco de Quito; whereas, consumers in Edmonton were selected by virtue of being organic purchasers in Edmonton. This selection process did not affect the outcome of the study, as most participants were familiar with or had made organic purchases in the past. Distributors were the broadest category in the study sample and the group included restaurant owners, retailers, and individuals involved in organic not-for-profits. Any participant involved with transferring organic foods from pasture to plate was considered relevant to this sample population. The remaining group, producers, were comprised of organic farmers. These producers were involved not only in food, but also in aesthetic products like organically grown flowers. Organically produced flowers play a large role in the Ecuadorian economy and the organic techniques used by these farmers are comparable to organically produced food.

Originally, the study had allotted for a maximum of three participants from each population in each country, making for a total of 18 participants. However, several factors prevented the researchers from attaining the maximum participant number: time

restriction and participant availability were the factors that affected data gathering processes. The study was able to obtain six interviews in both Quito and Edmonton, and at least one participant from each target population in each country.

Results and Conclusions

Ecuadorian Perceptions

Many foods produced by small household farms and sold in markets are organic. A majority of Ecuadorian participants held the concept of small-scale agriculture being synonymous with organic practices, much as the Canadian participants. All but one participant acknowledged this concept in one form or another. This deviation from the responses acknowledged that small-scale Ecuadorian farms and crops produced on family holdings do follow a number of organic practices, but may at times use chemical fertilizers and pesticides to increase their yield. As noted in later conclusions, this aspect of Ecuadorian culture may be the need to obtain food, regardless of its organic nature or potential health hazards.

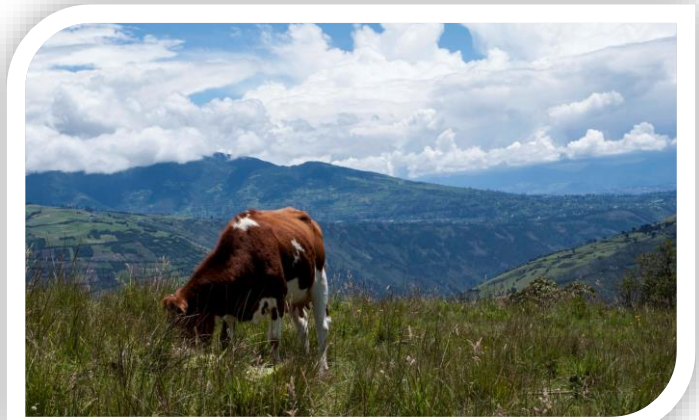


Fig. 1: Small, hillside farms in Ecuador. (Dana Dusterhoft, photographer)

North Americans have more access to purchasing organics. Every participant from Quito expressed the concept that North American consumers have readier access to organic goods. This is due in large part to how relatively new the organic market is in South America, although they have been major producers for the western world for quite some time. Few major South American supermarket chains offer organic alternatives, be it from a lack of consumer interest in the product or a perceived lack of interest by grocery outlets.

Commercialization of organics is potentially beneficial. This final concept expressed by many of the participants from Quito, Ecuador played directly into the prior conclusion. Ecuadorians do perceive food sold in small markets and from small-scale farms to be organic in nature, yet they expressed a desire to purchase commercial organics from large grocery outlets. It can be argued that the labelling of organic goods holds

somewhat of a romantic vision in this small sampling of South American participants. All participants expressed the desire to be able to buy prepackaged goods labeled as organic, which is a relatively new practice in the region. It may be an idealized vision that South Americans have of North American culture that they wish to emulate—by being able to make these commercial organic purchases. It is also quite possible that buying something labeled organic has some type of cognitive resonance in the consumer, providing positive feelings and a way to show to others that they are concerned about their health. Regardless, it is evident from participant responses that commercial organic products would see gains if they were introduced to South American markets.

	Ecuadorian		Concepts
	Edmonton	Quito	Total %
Small-Scale Organic Farming	-	4	67%
North American Access	-	5	83%
Commercialization Beneficial	-	4	67%

Table 2: Concepts expressed by Ecuadorian participants. Participant percentage that mentioned concepts above.

Canadian Perceptions

Many foods produced by small household farms and sold in markets are organic. There is a deep underlying current in the organic consumer's psyche that bigger is not always better. A majority of the Canadian participants expressed ideas relating to the organic nature of foods produced by small-scale farms. Large operations are often associated by consumers with industrial feed-lots and conventional practices. Many times, the terms *small-scale* and *local* were used interchangeably by participants in conjunction with the term *organic*. There were, however, a few participants who deviated from the concept, expressing that they did not always believe that small-scale farms used completely organic practices. These deviations were in relation to the household farms found in the Andes that did not always avoid chemical fertilizers and pesticides if it meant a better yield. Regardless, every participant did agree that this type of agriculture was conducive to organic foods, aesthetic organic products, and organic practices.

South Americans are not as concerned with where their food comes from. Many participants from both countries expressed this concept. A majority of South Americans felt that people in their country were not concerned with where their food came from or how it was made, they simply strove to gain access to food. This concept can be directly

related to interview question 6 (see table. 1) and although approximately half of the Canadian participants were not directly aware of South American organic practices, they did attempt to provide a comment on them. Most of these responses from Edmonton participants indicated their perceptions that South Americans were not as concerned as North Americans when it came to purchasing organics. Many of the participants from both cultures accounted this to financial income or education level, which also factored into additional conclusions.

Commercialization of organics is potentially harmful. There is a recurring attitude of cynicism among Canadian participants when it comes to organic foods and agricultural practices in general. This attitude is echoed through the conclusions and results with respect to the Edmonton participants. Healthy cynicism is a valuable trait, especially when concerning an individual's wellbeing. With many large corporations being in direct competition with organic producers, their media may not always be projecting the most accurate picture of the food system. That this attitude is not expressed nearly as much by Ecuadorian participants can be attributed to a number of factors: the relative education level of consumers from both continents, media practices in both countries, and differing societal values and norms. Canadians have been a major constituent and part of industrial agriculture for some time and have easy access to information about conventional practices. Consumers who are drawn towards buying organic are disenchanted by the current conventional means of agricultural production—including their marketing and promotion techniques. This being the case, when consumers see organic products following a similar path as conventional products have employed, it creates an aversive reaction. These Canadian consumers do not want organic products that look like pre-packaged conventional goods; they want products and packaging that are congruent with an organic lifestyle. Therefore, the commercialization of an organic product could potentially harm the sales of that product.

	Canadian	Concepts	
	Edmonton	Quito	Total %
Small-Scale Organic Farming	5	-	100%
South American Disinterest	3	-	60%
Commercialization Harmful	3	-	60%

Table 3: Concepts expressed by Canadian participants. Participant percentage that mentioned concepts above.

Organic Purchases

Organic purchases are influenced by financial income. This was a concept expressed by participants from both Edmonton and Quito, and one that many people are probably familiar with. It is commonly accepted, and true, that organic products tend to be more expensive than industrially produced prepackaged goods. This was attributed by two of the Edmonton participants who pointed out the fact that organic production required more input and a larger workforce, and that the producers were therefore unable to avoid the markup. There was a general consensus between Edmonton participants that the increased cost for organics was justified due to the additional health benefits which are commonly associated with organic foods, as well as the detrimental effects that are associated with conventionally produced foods. Many consumers believed that industrially produced foods contained chemicals that are harmful, while organic foods are free of such contaminants.

Quitonian participants tended to agree that the purchase of organics was influenced by financial income as well. But rather than believing that consumers should sacrifice money for their health, Ecuadorian participants realized that many people in their country do not have the funds available to make such a decision. This was discussed by a majority of the participants from Quito and showed a contrasted, yet similar, view of organics between the two nations.

Organic purchases are influenced by the consumer's level of education. Again, participants expressed this concept from each continent, but it tended to be voiced more often by those from Quito, Ecuador. In Edmonton, participants repeatedly pointed to a failure in the education system to inform students about the benefits and drawbacks of certain food purchases. There was a large disconnect noted between food production and food purchasing habits, which was directly linked to the information disseminated in a school setting.

The Ecuadorian perception of this concept was fairly similar. A lack of education about food practices was considered to be a culprit in influencing purchasing habits, though not as strongly as financial income. It should be noted though that these two aspects of organic purchases, financial income and educational level, are deeply entwined. Although there was a general notion that consumers were uninformed about their purchases, it was remarked hopefully upon by a number of the Ecuadorian participants that buying from smaller markets and producing one's own food was a viable organic option.

Everyone cares about his or her own health, but consumers are sometimes unable to make a healthy choice because of the two prior conclusions. It was agreed upon unanimously among all participants that consumers care about their health. The largest indicator of this finding was the responses received from question 2 (see Table 1) of the interview set. Repeatedly, participants from both Ecuador and Canada stated that everyone is entitled to the choice between organic and conventional alternatives. This concept does, in fact, support the idea that organics are the healthier choice. It is only through a lack of financial income or a lack of education that consumers are at times unable to make such a decision.

	Organic Concepts		Total %
	Edmonton	Quito	
Financial Income	4	4	72.7%
Education Level	4	5	81.8%
Consumer Health	5	6	100%

Table 4: Organic concepts expressed by participants. Participant percentage that mentioned concepts above.

Commercialization

Organic foods are seen as the lesser of two evils. There were some discrepancies between the Ecuadorian and Canadian participants with regard to this conclusion. The majority of Ecuadorian participants, that were native to the region, expressed very positive opinions about organic foods. They believed that these foods were in fact beneficial for health and tended to taste better. These participants held no perceptions of organic foods being anything other than good for the human body.

Canadian participants tended, on average, to have a more cynical view of the benefits offered by organics. They felt that organic farming practices did not differ much from conventional ones. Participants in the distributor population were quite knowledgeable of the practices and requirements of producing organics in North America and realized that organic production only required a certain percentage of organic input. For example, organic cattle only require about half of their feed to be organically produced by Canadian regulations. Most consumers were aware of this fact and it is reflected in their wariness about calling something completely organic. As such, participants from both countries agreed that organics were a better choice than conventionally produced products.

Commercialization of organic goods affects consumer perceptions of the product. The cultural responses to this question were significant. Edmonton participants, in the consumer population, found that excessive labelling and promotion of organic food

devalued it in some way. By creating an organic product that looks like any other conventional product, it fuels mistrust. Again, these participants were cynical of the label's claims and thought that the constant reminder that a product was organic was in some way hiding its true, perhaps conventional, nature.

In opposition, Ecuadorian participants actually desired more access to commercially produced organics. Very few supermarkets carried organic alternatives and it was remarked on more than once that that was an advantage that Canadian consumers had—access to a large number of organic choices in North American supermarkets and access to exclusively organic grocery outlets. Participants had positive things to say about locally produced products sold in small markets, but the consumer lacked the opportunity to purchase commercialized organic food. This contrast shows that these two cultures do have different perceptions towards organics, which can most likely be attributed to economic and social factors found within each nation.

Consumers do not believe that all products labelled organic are truly organic. This is a concept that was mentioned numerous times by Canadian participants. There is an undeniable, underlying cynicism towards organic marketing that can be found throughout this sample population. There have been reports of large corporations in the past that have been caught fraudulently labelling products as organic and in turn fuelling consumer mistrust. There has been a recent case in British Columbia, Canada of just such a betrayal of consumer trust. The Mediterranean Bakery was selling bread labelled organic, while they were fully aware it was not so. Even after the discovery of this blatant disregard of proper labelling the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) did not charge the Canadian bakery, but instead had them switch their ingredients to meet organic regulations (Clancy, 2014, para.1). Practically all participants from Edmonton mentioned in one way or another that just because a product is labelled organic does not necessarily make it so—depending on the individual's definition of the word. This is something that reaches beyond the heads of many companies that market an organic brand. Organic is a very subjective term to the individuals who purchase food within this system, and these consumer desires usually parallel with other health movements like gluten-free or vegan diets. It is difficult, if not impossible, for an organic brand to meet the standards of every consumer in this niche market. If claims about the organic nature of a product are not substantiated by the ingredients, it can severely compromise the sale of the product.

Ecuadorians did voice similar opinions about the nature of organic labelling, but this is a culture with very little exposure to mainstream, commercially available organic products. A limited number of participants expressed this concept much like their Canadian counterparts, and this is not surprising. As was shown earlier, many participants

from Quito desired a readier access to organic products and have not had the time or experience necessary with purchasing organics in order to build up any degree of apprehension towards the process.

	Commercial	Concepts	
	Edmonton	Quito	Total %
Lesser of Two Evils	3	3	55%
Commoditisation of Organics	4	2	55%
Not Truly Organic	4	2	55%

Table 5: Commercial concepts expressed by participants. Participant percentage that mentioned concepts above.

Recommendations

The conclusions and results should not be surprising to those who are somewhat familiar with the current organic movement. The qualitative interviews did shed some light on consumer, distributor, and producer perceptions on the processes and systems involved in promoting organics and organic practices. In this section, this study examines some of the benefits of each, drawbacks of each, and proposes areas of future research.

Small-Scale Farms



Fig. 2: Small-scale organic farm in Alberta, Canada. (Dana Dusterhoft, photographer)

As was noted in the conclusions, small-scale farms are often seen as a source of organic goods and practices. Though not all participants agreed, the majority felt that this was the case (see Tables 2 & 3). Reynolds (2008) acknowledged this perception as well, and attributed it to a competitive advantage in organics thanks to “(1) the ability to tap unpaid family labor in meeting high organic labor demands, and (2) the

difficulties of large-scale monocropping under organic conditions” (p. 177). *Small-scale farms* tend to move towards more natural or organic practices, due to the structure and size of their business. These farms do not have access to the funds necessary to produce

large quantities of food by conventional or industrial means, and so organic production is not always so much a choice as a necessity. This can often be seen in the rural regions of Ecuador. Small household farms use a variety of environmentally sound practices that are comparable to organic practices, simply because these producers did not have the money necessary to purchase harmful pesticides or synthetic fertilizers.

As such, it was noted by some participants that blindly accepting all food from small-scale production as organic was unwise. One Ecuadorian participant remarked that even though these small-scale household operations tended to use organic practices, they would not hesitate to use pesticides or herbicides as well if it meant increasing the yield. Consumers can never be sure of what a product might contain without the proper certification or labelling. Alternately, the commercialization and commoditisation of organics in North America is altering how small-scale farms operate. The growing demand is pushing these small organic producers to acquire larger operations, or large transnational corporations who have accepted the profitability of organics are buying these small-scale operations out (Daviron & Vagneron, 2011, p. 100). Asking consumers the following question is important: *At what point do growing small-scale operations cease to be considered organic?*

Participants in every sample population interviewed viewed small-scale or local farming practices favourably. The small numbers of producers that this study interviewed were very proud of their organic practices and products, but not all small-scale operations are striving to sell a commercial product (like small household farms in Ecuador). As demand grows in South America for organic alternatives there will be a desire for certification and labelling on organic products, which are currently not available in small village markets. Research into areas of certification for these smaller operations in Ecuador is very important and could boost the popularity of organic practices in the region. Additional research into North American perceptions of small-scale versus large-scale operations could benefit this study as well. Large multinational corporations using multiple small-scale farms and techniques that are comparable to conventional ones may not be considered organic by consumers. Although these operations are following the same certification guidelines as smaller players, there is an underlying sense in the organic consumer base that these large corporations do not follow the ethical standards that they would attribute to the production of organic goods.

Certification

As was mentioned earlier, organic certification programs differ from nation to nation and are not even present in some countries. Most often for an imported product to be labeled organic by an importing country it must first undergo an equivalency test to meet that country's organic standards. For example, imported goods cannot be labelled organic

in Canada until they meet the organic certification standards set down by the CFIA. This certification process is usually carried out by CFIA approved agencies who operate abroad (Humphreys, 2012, para. 9). Certification helps build a standard of organic product that all producers must adhere to and creates consistency in the organic market. It is an important aspect of the organic movement, especially in major organic importers like North America and Europe. Certification is not a new concept to these nations. It has been around for decades in a variety of agricultural sectors. Organic and environment standards, however, differ from these older procedures by being leaders in sustainable initiatives and the support they receive from the key actors in the value chain—manufacturers, retailers, and banks (Daviron & Vagneron, 2011, pp. 91-92). These organic certification initiatives are receiving support from a number of ventures, as most businesses are now seeing the value in promoting both organic and sustainable brands.

However, certification does tend to have its drawbacks as well, which were also commented on by some of the participants in this study. One such drawback as noted both by participants and by Daviron & Vegneron (2011) was that “by reintroducing market relations and supplier substitutability, sustainability standards and the associated certification practices tend towards re-commoditisation” (p. 92). This reflects the participant’s concept of commercialization discussed in the results and conclusions (see fig. 6). Commoditisation of organic goods can potentially harm the way consumers view them, and certification pushes the organic system towards a commercial and even conventional image. It should also be noted that without a universal organic standard, imports and exports of the products are subject to a great deal of scrutiny. What may be acceptable in one nation may not meet another’s standard for organic. This poses some serious limitations on the trade and distribution of organic products around the world.

The certification of organics is a necessary process, in order to produce quality goods under ideal working conditions. It benefits consumers by allowing them to make informed purchases, distributors by allowing them to choose which products to sell, and producers by providing a structure for their production techniques and giving them access to national organic markets. But the bureaucracy involved severely impedes the import, export, and internal functions of the organic process. An analysis of consumer perceptions of organic certification in both North and South America would aid in this research, as well as an analysis of what a potential global organic standard might look like.

Fair Trade

Another system related to organics that many participants commented on was fair trade. This system is viewed favorably, as it “. . . incorporates environmental and occupational health and safety standards and has far greater legitimacy since it involves

more detailed regulations and rigorous third-party auditing” (Raynolds, 2012, p. 505). Fair trade is seen as reaching out to smaller operations and producers, and as an equitable way to purchase goods in the global market place. The regulations and standards set by the system ensure that individuals working in these operations are receiving their fair share of the profits. Participants viewed fair trade favourably in both Edmonton and Quito and thought of fair trade products as not only agricultural, but also as a means to procure organic goods.

One major issue that arises from fair trade is the bureaucracy that steeps the whole system. The layers of certification involved are time consuming and fairly expensive (Canadian Organic Growers, 2011, online). Fair trade aims to promote smaller businesses on a global scale and improve working conditions for the employees. Although, when foreign producers must exert tremendous effort to obtain the certification, it seems to contradict the very nature of the system and instead reinforces competition from larger plantations that can afford certification (Raynolds, 2012, p. 507). The commoditisation of these organic and foreign goods produced by small businesses is harming the fair trade system. These large multinational corporations are aware that “organic and fair-trade labels are a powerful instrument of product differentiation and hence play a crucial role in capturing market share” (Daviron & Vagneron, 2011, p. 101). Fair trade retail outlets can be found all over North America and consumers expect the products to live up to an ethical standard.

Areas for future research implied by fair trade systems do not differ much from small-scale farming. From Ecuadorian participant responses and observations, small organic producers stand to benefit from more controlled and regulated certification and fair trade agreements. These benefits deserve to be examined in length in order to promote organics in the country and abroad. North American consumer perceptions of fair trade are also important to this research. Though not always of an organic nature, fair trade products do encompass the moral and ethical standards of production that organic buyers expect. Another area for future research, suggested by the results, would be to examine how employee standards factor into the organic consumers purchasing habits.

Additional Observations

The organic movement has been in motion for some time in North America and is currently beginning to take hold over a large portion of the globe. Revenues from organic products have seen a modest increase every year, and fair trade markets have seen an increase in Europe and North America from US \$.5 billion in 2001 to nearly \$6 billion in 2010 (Raynolds, 2012, p. 500). Ethical and moral standards for production and employee treatment are becoming an important aspect in consumer purchasing habits. As such,

companies, organizations, and governments stand to gain from insights into consumer perceptions—from all nations of the world. The organic movement, and consumers' definition of organic, is vague and not well understood at the time and it is not the intention of this study to offer any. The term is subjective, but through an analysis of consumer, distributor, and producer perceptions the research aims to give a broad overview of how organics are currently being perceived by individuals in two different countries. Continued research into this area is of utmost importance as the preference for organic alternatives steadily grows across the world.

**Writer: Jason Bradshaw is a student in the Bachelor of Communication Studies program at MacEwan University. Photographer: Dana Dusterboft is a recent graduate of the Design Studies program at MacEwan University.*

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