National Standards for Organic Certification in Bolivia

By Christina Keys

As a student in the International Rural Planning and Development MSc program at the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada, I have become increasingly interested in studying food planning and policy as related to organic agriculture. However, as the APA Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning mentions, there has been a lack of focus by planners on food planning and policy. I am hoping that my thesis research will contribute to the body of literature on planning for organic agriculture by examining the implementation of the new Bolivian national standard for organic certification. Currently, I am conducting field research based out of La Paz, Bolivia.

In Bolivia, the organic movement is entering a new historical phase. The left-of-centre government of Evo Morales now plays an important role in the development of the organic sector, from the municipal to the federal levels. In November 2006, a law passed that aims to regulate organic agriculture through a national standard for organic certification. Some experts have suggested that, with the development of the organic standard, the state is taking responsibility for both high certification costs for farmers and the high cost of organic food for domestic consumers while preventing the private sector from profiting at the expense of Bolivian farmers and consumers. According to the Association of Ecological Farmer Organizations of Bolivia (AOPEB), Bolivia currently exports US$ 25 million worth of certified organic produce annually, mainly quinoa, coffee, cocoa, Brazil nuts, amaranth, and soya. In total, Bolivia has almost 900,000 acres (364,100 hectares) of certified organic land. The principle markets include the European Union, the United States, and Japan.

The new national organic standard is one of several recent and important agricultural policies initiated in Bolivia by the Morales government. Other policies also emphasize the positive role that organic agriculture, or agroecological practices in general, may play in Bolivian development. For example, both the new national development plan and the organic standard law include a shift in the government’s approach to agricultural technology, as they recognize the inherent value of indigenous production techniques. They understand small-scale techniques to have a sustainable and ecological focus, as they have been designed for local environmental conditions. This is a fundamental shift away from previous Bolivian agricultural policies.

Many involved in Bolivian organics and in the development of the new national standard are very hopeful about its potential effects on the organic agricultural sector. However, successful implementation will be a very difficult process, as experienced by other developing countries. My thesis research will identify the problems that must be addressed in order to achieve

Mount Illimani overlooks the Bolivian altiplano. Photo courtesy of C. Keys.
successful implementation of the standard. Experts have examined related issues in other developing as well as developed countries. Some find that the development and implementation of domestic standards are essential to promote organic agriculture. Others argue that most national standards are developed and implemented with corporate interests in mind and thus fail to promote organic agriculture. Whether the Bolivian standard will fall prey to corporate interests is yet to be determined. So far, the development of the standard has attracted much needed political attention to organic agriculture and to important issues faced by organic and transitioning farmers in Bolivia.

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Llamas and alpacas are an essential component of Bolivia’s altiplano (Spanish for high plain) farming systems, which also includes quinoa, potatoes, and various beans. Photo courtesy of C. Keys.