Chapter 3. Coexisting Organic Standards: Setting Boundaries, Navigating Multiplicity and Enacting Commonality

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Abstract

While the certification of ‘sustainable’ food products has gained prominence as a way of organising the transition to more sustainable forms of agriculture, little is known about how standards are reproduced through everyday activities and the role of individual actors in this reproduction. I attempt to account for these processes by exploring the dynamics between standards and markets. Using the concepts of market device and the singularisation of products, and based on my empirical study of the reproduction of organic agricultural standards in the UK, I argue that the distributed enactment of standards results in a multiplicity of markets which is characterised by a fragmented common space and boundaries that can only be partially maintained. While this space and these boundaries do allow for the singularisation of products, this requires a number of resource-intensive activities: simplifying issues for consumers, actively playing down differences from consumers and within supply chains, and coordinating mechanisms not embedded in the standards. I conclude that standards do not ‘standardise’ practices but help to organise them: ‘sustainability’ standards shape different forms of agriculture, depending on the local practices and coordinative structures which are mobilised to regulate them.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Although the regulation of food has a long history, the independent certification of properties falling outside regulatory control is a much more recent phenomenon. Mostly, these properties are specified by standards developed by organisations that present themselves as advocates of more sustainable practices and lifestyles (e.g. fairtrade, organic). Standards in this category – and the labels associated with them – have emerged as an additional mechanism to coordinate practices of different actors: consumers are encouraged to change their patterns of consumption, manufacturers are offered a particular image and access to a premium market if they change their production processes, and producers of raw ingredients are given the opportunity of reaping better rewards for their produce if they alter their farming practices. The positioning of these standards indicates that they are intended to radically alter the way in which food is produced, processed and marketed. As a technology therefore, these voluntary standards are aimed at reshaping economic, social, institutional and cultural relations.

In mainstream discourse on sustainability standards, externally validated compliance with standards is framed as providing a convenient mechanism for organising and governing markets for ‘sustainable’ products and services. Yet this does not mean that in practice standards are neutral and value-free tools for the optimal resolution of technical aspects of sustainable practices. On the contrary, recent studies (e.g. Schmidt and Werle, 1998; Bowker and Star, 2000; Busch, 2000; Timmermans and Berg, 2003) have illustrated how standards incorporate social, political and economic interests, and therefore how, as profoundly social objects, they shape social and material relations. The use of voluntary standards for the creation of a more sustainable form of agriculture (however that may be defined) therefore has implications that stretch far beyond debates comparing the relative merits of one system over another in supposedly ‘objective’ terms. In other words, understanding the conditions under which a system innovation (c.f. Elzen et al., 2004) based on ‘sustainability’ standards functions, requires a detailed look at what these standards do and how this is achieved. This is not so much to do with how the resulting type of agriculture is environmentally, socially or economically more sustainable than a referent system, but with how standards shape social and material relations within their agricultural system and the relations with a referent system. Such analyses have the potential to describe the social, political, organisational and ethical consequences of standardisation and certification of ‘sustainable’ products and practices. They are therefore essential to uncover the potential as well as the limits of voluntary standards for achieving a transition to a more sustainable agriculture.

While there are many accounts, in the social science literature on standards, of how standards are made and maintained, and how they shape economic and organisational connections (e.g. Liebowitz and Margolis, 1995; Brunsson and...
Jacobsson, 2000), few studies consider the effects that standards have on socio-material practices and vice-versa. The ways standards are reproduced through everyday activities and the role of individual actors in this reproduction therefore need to be accounted for.

In this chapter, I address this question through a detailed examination of the way in which organic standards are enacted in the UK. Such studies open up multiple perspectives; my current focus is on the dynamics between standards and markets. The paper is organised as follows. In the next section I suggest that this dynamic can be conceptualised in terms of standards as a market device, a socio-technical arrangement through which a market is constituted. I also suggest that the process of singularisation is useful in conceptualising the construction of boundaries between markets.

I argue that the market device fulfils two main functions: the standards construct a boundary between conventional\(^2\) markets and organic markets, but at the same time ensure that organic markets are compatible with one another. I then briefly introduce the settings of organic agriculture in the UK and the empirical basis of this paper. I argue that the distributed enactment of standards results in a multiplicity of markets, which is characterised by a fragmented common space and boundaries that can only be partially maintained. While this space and these boundaries do allow for the singularisation of products, this requires a number of resource-intensive activities: simplifying issues for consumers, actively playing down controversies and internal differences from consumers and within supply chains, and coordinating mechanisms not embedded in the standards. I suggest that standards do not 'standardise' practices, but rather help to organise them – that 'sustainability' standards shape different forms of agriculture depending on the local practices and coordinative structures, which are mobilised to regulate them. Finally, I conclude that while the use of standards constitutes a system innovation for a more sustainable agriculture, standards simultaneously restrict the potential for innovation by limiting the space for other innovations to emerge, and that innovations in constituent practices are no longer possible.

\(^2\) I use the term 'conventional' to refer to farming systems that are based on the use of chemicals and fertilisers – and what is mostly taught as mainstream approaches in agricultural Colleges. Although Belz (2004) refers to this as 'industrialised' agriculture this is not a very accurate term, as organic farming practices have emerged from and draw on industrialised agriculture, in so far as there is a high degree of specialisation and a reliance on technology (even if some forms of technology are eschewed). These characteristics are especially noticeable in the recent emergence of 'intensive' organic systems. I took the term 'conventional' from my respondents, who used it to denote the mainstream farming systems from which the organic sector is distancing itself.
2. STANDARDS AS A MARKET DEVICE

2.1. From quality definition to market device and singularisation

The fundamental difference between markets for ‘sustainable’ and conventional products is the presence of enforced regulations or standards that add a quality to produce. This quality will influence some specific aspects of consumption, but not others: a consumer may prefer to buy an organic carrot for its ‘sustainable’ credentials, but this will not substantially alter the way in which the carrot will be cleaned, chopped, cooked and eaten. Put differently, the effect of an added quality is most prominent in the form of a market segmentation – once a consumer has bought a carrot, organic or otherwise, its trajectory will not differ based on the additional quality.

However, standards do not ‘just’ exist: they are set by certain actors, adopted by others, their adoption is verified by yet another set of actors, and their presence affects how actors within a supply chain relate to ‘qualified’ products and services. This points to two specific processes that form the basis of what standards do: they coordinate elements in a socio-material landscape, the result of which is (or can be) used to differentiate between products. In other words, standards specify some properties of objects and processes, and thereby coordinate technical elements of practices. They qualify these coordinated elements by drawing on a moral economy through which difference from conventional objects and processes is constructed.

Although both processes have been theorised from various sociological, anthropological and economic angles (e.g. Katz and Shapiro, 1985; Brunsson and Jacobsson, 2000; Egan, 2001; Henson and Reardon, 2005), these accounts are limited in that the market is conceptualised as a given entity, i.e. standards supposedly help organise an economic reality. As such, the accounts fail to analyse how markets are reproduced through practice and therefore do not theorise how the dynamics of enacting standards shape (aspects of) markets (for a brief overview of a practice-based approach to markets see for instance Araujo et al., 2008, or for a longer argument for the study of the enactment of markets see MacKenzie, 2009). For the purpose of this chapter I therefore mobilise two concepts, which specifically address the enactment of markets (c.f. Callon, 1998). The concepts of market device and singularisation are powerful tools to analyse how markets are ‘performed’: they draw attention to the ways in which markets are constituted through different sets of practices.

To conceptualise the way in which standards coordinate elements in a socio-material landscape, I draw on the idea of a market device as proposed by Muniesa et al. (2007). These authors see this as a specific form of economic arrangement, i.e. a socio-technical agencement that enacts particular forms of being ‘economic’ (p. 4). In other words, a market device is the arrangement of actors, institutions and objects through which specific objects or processes are
rendered ‘economic’, where Muniesa et al. emphasise the ‘rendering’ rather than what ‘economic’ should mean. They argue that the meaning of ‘economic’ in the context of a particular *agencement* is the outcome of a process of “economization” which is historical, contingent and disputable. Thus, market devices are “…objects, instruments, tools and techniques (i.e., technologies in the largest sense, that enable market activities)” (Muniesa, 2008: 291). For instance, Sjögren and Helgesson (2007) discuss how different pharmaceuticals and treatments are made commensurable, i.e. economised, through the concept of the Quality-Adjusted-Life-Year (QALY). The metrology of the QALY mediates between different pre-existing drug classification schemes and allows policy makers to determine which treatments will be reimbursable. Therefore, the QALY as a market device allows for a comparison, on an economic basis, of differently framed treatments: through a historical, contingent process different treatments have become economic (exchangeable) within the space created by the QALY. Other examples of market devices include pricing equations, which contribute to the construction of financial markets (MacKenzie, 2006), or telephones, which configure how trade takes place in trading rooms of financial institutions (Muniesa, 2008).

2.2. Market device and sustainability standards

Applying the concept of market device to a socio-technical arrangement consisting of standards and the associated complex of actors and objects, implies that, unlike the QALY, sustainability standards introduce an additional quality on the basis of which a completely new set of markets is created. More specifically, an existing market is redefined as ‘conventional’, and in parallel a similar market emerges which is ‘qualified’. The main point is that the presence of standards makes the conventional market fundamentally incompatible with the ‘qualified’ market: conventional products are by definition excluded from the ‘qualified’ market.

Thus, by coordinating a socio-material landscape through classification (Bowker and Star, 2000), standards create markets and simultaneously erect boundaries between those markets and the ‘unqualified’ markets. However, as suggested above, they go further. If a standard governs more than one market (for instance the organic standards govern arable and livestock agriculture as well as aquaculture and processing), all of these ‘qualified’ markets become compatible: products from one market can serve as input for products in other markets (this is similar to what the QALY does). This coordination of markets by the market device stems from the fact that standards specify properties. As the technical properties of objects and practices are thus specified, these objects and practices become compatible – which means that they can circulate in the common space defined by the standards.

The differentiation process is about making the boundary between conventional and ‘qualified’ products visible to consumers and actors within supply chains. It
involves actors such as those setting the standards, those adopting them and those verifying they have been adopted, as they qualify products and processes within what Callon et al. (2002) termed an ‘economy of qualities’. These authors argue that competition in an economy of qualities is structured by the singularity of products and consumers’ attachment to or detachment from goods. Put simply, singularity consists in making something familiar or recognisable. But this process of letting something (a product) stand out requires a basic resemblance with other products: ‘the singularity of a product, which allows its attachment to a particular consumer, is obtained against a background of similitude’ (Callon et al., 2002: 203). Hence, the visible presence of an additional quality, such as a standard or its associated label or logo, helps to make a product singular in a particular way: this product was produced in accordance with additional standards – in the case of ‘sustainable’ products, emerging from moral principles – whereas another, similar product, was not. This implies that the process of singularising products reproduces one or more boundaries and therefore suggests that the socio-technical constellation through which standards and regulations are enacted is an integral part of the creation of parallel markets.

2.3. Organic farming standards: a practice-based approach

Although these concepts do shed some light on how constellation of actors are involved in enacting standards and markets, they do not elaborate on the specific practices through which boundaries are created and maintained between conventional and ‘sustainable’ markets, and compatibility is organised within ‘qualified’ markets. In the next section I therefore describe how these processes function, based on my empirical research on the enactment of organic standards in the UK.

My study explored how organic standards are reproduced through coordinated sets of local socio-material practices by different relevant groups of actors, therefore focusing on a number of arrangements of everyday activities, objects and knowledge required to make the organic standards ‘come alive’. The following account is a brief sketch of one of these arrangements, and is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eighteen key informants: organic farmers, agricultural consultants, researchers and policy makers from the organic sector. I furthermore interviewed and observed the daily work of twenty

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3 One might suggest extending the analytical framework of this chapter by drawing on the work of Neil Fligstein, whose neo-institutional framework would introduce the dimension of standards drawing on key institutions (governance structures, concepts of control, rules of exchange, and stability and change of markets). This would allow us to account for the way in which levels of collective reputation shape the economic dimension of standards, and the way in which principles underpinning the standards shape multiple conceptions of quality. While I acknowledge that this could be a valuable addition to the paper, I have not incorporated these suggestions as the intersection of Fligstein’s neo-institutionalism and the performative framework of Callon et al.’s economic sociology would introduce numerous tensions, the resolution of which would extend significantly beyond the scope of the current paper.
employees (inspectors, certification officers and technical managers) of one of the four certification bodies operating throughout the UK, and witnessed the inspection of a licensee, a seed processor. The final source was documentary evidence in the form of publicly available policy and research documents. The interviews lasted between an hour and three hours, and were fully transcribed. Transcripts, field notes and documents were then analysed to derive common themes.

In what follows, at least two relevant groups affected by organic standards are noticeably absent: retailers and consumers, who were not part of my study. Yet they obviously have an important role to play in shaping organic markets: retailers provide a limited shelf space through which all sorts of conventional, organic and otherwise (morally) singularised products reach the consumer, and consumers relate to these products in differentiated ways. Both groups of actors are involved in the shaping of organic markets: retailers by offering (limited) choice and consumers by choosing between varyingly singularised products. For both groups, the presence of the label or logo through which a product is singularised as organic – and the public debate through which the label is shaped – is the starting point to decide what to offer and what to choose. In fact, generally speaking their decisions are of crucial importance for the economic viability of a singularised sector and for individual producers in this sector. However, they only play a marginal role in the construction of difference between conventional and singularised ‘sustainable’ products: retailers may emphasise this difference in marketing products, and consumers attach subjective meanings to these differently singularised products which may or may not coincide with the differences constructed by the actor who set the standard (see for instance Eden et al., 2008a, b), but both processes presume the presence of a perceptible difference—a logo or label on a product. The focus of this chapter is to explore how this difference is constituted in relation to the markets that are performed through it.

3. CULTIVATING EXCLUSION: ORGANIC FARMING IN THE UK

“But for an inspector coming along is it easy to verify which one is which and which variety, physically do they look different?” (MvdK)

“No. No, they look identical, except that maybe the organic [grain] will have more weed seeds in it, in the sample, and the non-organic will be a cleaner sample, maybe. Having said that all the crops go through a cleaner so by the end of it, it should be fairly similar.” (Farm manager)

From the moment a crop is harvested and cleaned, there are few ways, if any, of distinguishing whether it was grown organically: it is impossible for consumers, and even for processors in a supply chain, to assess how a product was grown.
Thus, the visible application of the label ‘organic’ is the only way through which products can be singularised on retailers’ shelves and throughout supply chains.

3.1. The regulation of organic standards in the UK

In order to protect consumers from fraud and malpractice, use of the term ‘organic’ has been regulated by law. Although there were a number of standards for organic farming in operation in the 1970s and 1980s, these were administered by private bodies and therefore had no legal status. The first European regulation was issued in 1991, which defined the term and the basic conditions for organic agriculture. So farming according to organic standards is both voluntary and regulated: in principle it is a producer’s own choice whether to produce organically or not (although constraints like commercial pressures may not always make this a voluntary choice), but once the decision is taken to do so, the production processes are governed by standards embedded in regulations.

In the EU member states, the EU regulation is to be administered by a Ministry (usually of agriculture), which is ultimately responsible for the appropriate implementation of the organic standards within a country. However, the day-to-day processes involved in verifying compliance of farming practices with the standards are mostly delegated to an independent organisation, which has the authority to issue certificates for compliant producers. On the basis of this certificate, licensees can label their products ‘organic’.

Due to specific historical processes, the administration of organic farming standards in the UK is based on a market approach. While the origins of the organic movement go back more than a century, the first formal set of standards was issued in 1967. The Soil Association, founded in the UK in 1946, issued these standards to help farmers to apply the organic principles as set out by its founders. Over time, the standards developed and became more extensive as more and more elements of farming practice were prescribed. In parallel, the Soil Association became an advocacy organisation in the public domain, which led a number of farmers to split off and establish their own organisation to support and administer the standards (Organic Farmers and Growers). Over time, more organisations emerged offering standards and certification services to members. By the time the first set of European regulations were drafted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, largely informed by the consensus between the UK standard bodies about what the minimum organic standards should be, a number of different schemes already existed in the UK, the continuation of which was accommodated in the EU regulations.

At present, the ministry in charge (DEFRA) has formally devolved the day-to-day administration of the standards not to one but to a number of different private schemes. As such, DEFRA oversees private schemes by authorising them, and provides the resources through which they coordinate common interpretations.
of the standards. The unique aspect of this arrangement is not so much the fact that there are different certification bodies, but that each body is allowed to add its own standards to the minimum. In other words, DEFRA requires each of the eight schemes in operation to administer the European regulation as the legal minimum, but beyond that each scheme can stipulate additional standards against which practices will be assessed. Most notably, two schemes, the Soil Association and the Biodynamic Agricultural Association, have additional standards which are regarded as more stringent than the legal minimum. Some of these additional standards are prominently marketed in the public domain with claims that these schemes for instance provide better animal welfare and restrict the presence of GMOs even further.

3.2. The many textual versions of a standard

As such, there are multiple versions of the organic standards. They share the basis of the EU regulations, but beyond that vary in their interpretation of how organic agriculture should be practised. Therefore, producers have access to different channels through which they can singularise their products: as Soil Association organic, Biodynamic (Demeter) organic, or ‘plain’ organic. Being certified, for example, by the Soil Association may require compliance with standards exceeding the legal minimum, but in return provide additional benefits in the market due to the Soil Association’s stance on animal welfare. This suggests that the certification bodies are in competition with each other over what their respective versions of the standards offer producers. Yet for most farmers this seems less relevant than other factors:

“I honestly think that most farmers are making choices based on what they know their neighbours to be doing, or in some cases looking at the cost of the certification scheme rather than a detailed consideration, what the differences and standards are. I think the standards are too long and complicated for most farmers to spend a lot of time making contrasts, so if their neighbour says something they’ll go with it or if their adviser says something they’ll go with that.” (Researcher)

For producers in the smaller nations of the UK, social identity is an additional dimension involved in the choice of a scheme: this researcher added that, over the last few years, farmers in Wales and Scotland had chosen a regional scheme specifically because the scheme is operated for Welsh or Scottish producers.

But social networks and the cost of the schemes are not the only deciding factors. My respondents described how, in general, farmers navigate a complex world full of general and specific farming practices, regulations, European and UK agricultural policy measures, standards, and markets for products as well as services. In attempting to coordinate some of these elements and to manage their implications for the characteristics of individual farms, farmers, consultants,
contractors, managers and NGOs take on varying roles and provide a wide range of services to one another. Farmers can buy services ranging from technical expertise and agronomy to marketing support, and from equipment and manpower to administrative services. In this field, certification bodies, dedicated sector organisations, trade associations and mainstream service providers are competing on different levels of activity and with different levels of competence. To help producers manage some of these complexities, some of the organic schemes offer additional services that are offered alongside organic certification, such as general farm assurance/management schemes and access to advice. This is attractive for farmers, as in a combined scheme multiple certificates are assessed during a single inspection, thereby reducing the number of inspections. For one of my respondents this was enough of an advantage to remain licensed with a certification body while being dissatisfied with the organisation’s failure to support her on certain organic matters.

These points suggest that social, political, economic and operational considerations seem to be more important for farmers than the technical details of what each set of standards offers over and above EU regulations. Therefore, rather than there being a market for standards, there is a market for services surrounding certification. The standards are not in direct competition but can coexist as each certification scheme provides a slightly different package. EU regulations provide the common basis around which the different schemes can connect (a point I will return to below), but other than that each individual set of standards is dominant in its own package.

3.3. Enacting standards in practice

This is not to suggest, however, that interpretations of how organic agriculture should be practised are not relevant. According to a consultant, farmers who actively choose between different certification bodies do so on the basis of their ‘ethical’ stance towards organic farming. He suggested that where organic principles guide a farmer’s choice, he/she is likely to choose higher standards, but where organic is a means for a farmer to access a market, he/she is likely to choose lower standards, especially if he/she does not supply to consumers directly. This was echoed by a number of respondents:

“So there’s a tension there between producers who are driven by the organic principles and who use the standards as a way of supporting and being able to achieve those principles; and producers who are just looking to access the market and the standards are a necessary hurdle to get over but they’re not particularly worried about going any further.” (Researcher)

4 Certification officers and inspectors are prohibited from giving advice to licensees. However, the Soil Association has a dedicated advisory team, which is organisationally separate from its licensing activities.
“So, you have [...] the people who really take the principles to heart and say the true road is the only one we should go. You’ve got the Soil Association, who are a bit below that. They certainly go far beyond the minimum standards but they still see the practical issues. Then you’ve got a few people, you’ve got another, you then grade down through that to people who are looking at it very much more on a commercial basis” (Policy maker)

This suggests that the ways in which standards are enacted differ. In other words, whereas for commercially minded producers compliance with standards is a means to market, for producers for whom there is an ideal organic system to work towards, the standards provide guidance on how to get to that point. As such, this leads to the enactment of different ‘organics’. But while these producers still draw on the same sets of standards, there are other ways in which different ‘organics’ are enacted:

“That provides quite an interesting issue for debate at the moment as to who owns the organic idea. Is organic just defined by the standards and the regulations? Is there any other concept of organic that is separate from that? There is a group which will say ‘we are uncomfortable with the way organic is now reflected in standards, but we believe it should be more than those’ ... People talk about ‘beyond organic’ as a sort of phrase. ... It seems to me this division between certified organic and other more radical ideas is a matter of degree rather than a fundamental split but that’s one of the debates that’s ongoing.” (Researcher)

“... there’s quite a lot of Eastern European, Eurasian organic arable production that is very dubious in terms of the certification and I don’t mean that in terms of ‘oh well, it’s conventionally produced and they just falsify documentation and sell it as organic’. There is quite a lot of evidence that natural grass load is being ploughed in order to produce cereals ... [but] it isn’t what I would consider to be organic in terms of there’s no fertility building, there’s no rotation of the land ... I see that as an exploitation of natural resource which doesn’t for me fit very comfortably with the organic principle.” (Merchant)

Thus, there is a multiplicity of ‘organics’—they “are more than one but less than many” (Mol, 2002: 55). Some versions are codified by standards, but there are also ‘organics’ which are enacted at a distance from the standards. Yet when relating to consumers, most differences between varying standards and approaches to implementing them are played down so as not to confuse consumers (although some specific differences in codified ‘organics’ are emphasised towards consumers, e.g. Soil Association welfare standards):

“Yes, which is where the danger is, that the consumer doesn’t care about the plethora of standard bodies, it just wants to buy organic food and it thinks it’s all
Many respondents made similar comments, which suggests that competing over standards is difficult: most differences between schemes need to be played down when reaching out to consumers.

Thus, boundaries within the organic sector are played down so as to protect it from losing consumers to schemes perceived to be less ambiguous (such as free-range). Contrastingly, the boundaries between conventional agriculture and this essentially homogenised image of organic agriculture are emphasised by concealing certain aspects of authorised practices. Some respondents gave specific examples of this: the fact that animal feed rations could be partly non-organic (due to shortages in organic supply), and the ways in which conventional marketing mechanisms (which, to some, did not always reflect organic principles) had become part of organic trade in response to supermarket pressure. The merchant concerned with the marketing mechanisms suggested that all actors in the organic sector had “become part of the conspiracy” so as not to “undermine what the organic brand is”. He suggested that disentangling organic products from their ‘conventional’ (and essentially anti-organic) market structures would be near impossible as this would inevitably lead to the disqualification of a substantial range of products, which would damage consumer confidence in organic agriculture. In contrast, the consultant who talked at length about the feed issue suggested that the organic sector would need to inform consumers about the way in which the current standards allowed non-organic elements in organic production systems – mainly to pre-empt negative publicity which would damage the organic sector. He described current practice as ‘near organic’ and argued that the separation between organic and conventional should be complete rather than partial. These points seem to suggest that the spread of ‘organics’ depends on a coherent term even if the enactment of these organics in local practices is very different.

3.4. The organisational fabric of transactions

At this point it is important to note that qualification and specification through the standards do not constitute ‘qualified’ markets, which are completely independent from their conventional counterparts. In fact, there are still strong interactions between them. For instance, the price fluctuations of organic cereals over the past five years have followed the fluctuations of conventional cereals. Various respondents indicated that although there are a number of specialised merchants who trade only organic produce, large quantities of organic produce are marketed by large traders who trade mostly conventional produce and for whom organic is a niche market. This implies that while in principle and from a technical standpoint the standards constitute specific markets, the organisation of trade in these markets strongly links conventional and organic markets.
The differences between multiple ‘organics’ within supply chains need to be managed on a more practical level. Moreover, there is not one single organic market, but many different markets that need to be made compatible. As such, the different organics need to be managed throughout supply chains. The EU regulations form the basis for this, and my respondents indicated that actors regard certified organic ingredients as unproblematic within the supply chain. In other words, trade within supply chains is managed on a practical level by reverting to the legal minimum – all products are singularised as ‘plain’ organic. Therefore, the regulations coordinate between different organics by providing common standards through which different, partly overlapping markets become compatible. However, as the Soil Association and Biodynamic standards are in some areas higher than the EU minimum, there are issues of equivalence for some products. For example, if a product is to be sold as Soil Association certified, all ingredients must be in line with Soil Association standards – including the chicken or egg coming from a producer licensed by a different certification body. This is resolved by an abbreviated checklist of items, which other certification bodies need to have checked while inspecting their licensees. There are sometimes tensions around this process, but it seems that differences in ‘organics’ have been negotiated away at least as far as the supply chain is concerned.

But the coordination provided by the regulations is not complete: while the practical trajectory of crops and products is made possible by regulations and equivalence checks, this does not mean the associated markets are coordinated. For example, some respondents commented on how there is a disparity between the supply and demand of organic cereals and protein crops for the dairy and beef industry. They suggested that the organic dairy and beef sectors grew rapidly, but that the arable sector was not able to grow accordingly\(^5\). As a result, non-organic protein and cereal crops were allowed to be used as livestock feed, making it harder for organic producers to find a market for their crops. One consultant argued that this had ‘stunted’ the development of the organic cereal sector. He suggested that if the growth of the markets had been coordinated, this would have resulted in a more balanced organic sector – although the sector as a whole would have grown slower. This suggests that the common space delineated by the diverse organic markets – the organic sector – is fragmented beyond their disparities in size and growth. Several respondents described how they attempted to provide coordination mechanisms so as to help producers navigate this fragmented space.

For instance, to address the opacity that characterises organic market transactions, a marketing organisation is trying to coordinate market transactions so that there is more transparency in the supply chain and so that farmers can make a reasonable profit while leaving others in the chain with equally reasonable profits. To improve the quality of advisory services available to farmers, a group of consultants is trying to coordinate the level of advice that

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\(^5\) Converting cattle-based enterprises to organic is fairly easy, especially compared to converting arable operations.
farmers can obtain by setting standards for advice on organic farming. Consultancies host events to coordinate the sharing and exchange of knowledge between farmers and consultants. The certification bodies are coordinating the interpretation of common standards so as to maintain the integrity of the standards and ensure that farmers are inspected in a comparable way. DEFRA is trying to coordinate the administration and implementation of standards, and the ways in which the organic sector is supported. The two main research centres for organic agriculture are trying to coordinate research being conducted and the way in which information and knowledge are disseminated, as well as trying to coordinate discussion groups among farmers so that knowledge is shared.

Although not all of these coordination attempts are aimed at the same level, their presence implies that the actors involved want to provide some kind of coordination or control in areas related to the standards but where the standards do not reach. In other words, there are a number of actors that (with different levels of success) employ coordination mechanisms so as to structure various aspects of organic farming: social (e.g. research centres), economic (e.g. marketing organisation), technical (e.g. consultancy) and political (e.g. certification bodies) – beyond the coordination mechanisms embedded in the standards.

4. CONCLUSION: ENACTING STANDARDS, MULTIPLE ORGANICS

The findings of my research illustrate some of the ways in which standards as a market device enable market activities: enacting standards has direct implications for how markets are constituted. It is clear that from a theoretical perspective standards could be considered a very strong market device in that they make ‘qualified’ products fundamentally incompatible with ‘unqualified’ products. However, as the empirical case shows, enacting a market for ‘sustainable’ products through standards is not quite as straightforward. The multi-sited reproduction of different versions of the standards results in a multiplicity of organic markets—a horizontally and vertically segmented array of markets and practices which require additional coordination mechanisms so as to maintain their compatibility—and indeed a multiplicity of enacted ‘organics’. While the market device is based on a supposedly unified set of standards, the resulting boundaries with other markets, and the constructed compatibility among ‘qualified’ markets, are homogenised only to a limited extent. In other words, the distributed enactment of standards results in a multiplicity of markets, which is characterised by a fragmented common space and boundaries that can be maintained only partially. This space and these boundaries do allow for the singularisation of products, but to do so require a number of additional activities to be performed by various actors: simplifying issues for consumers, actively playing down controversies and internal differences from consumers and within supply chains, and providing coordination mechanisms not
embedded in the standards. A crucial aspect, here, is the need to remove or suppress the multiplicity of organic standards at the final stage of marketing as part of a ‘totalising’ strategy to format market exchanges (Araujo et al., 2010: 236) so that ‘organic’ can be constructed as a homogeneous entity, which provides clear and distinct benefits.

This raises some important points about the enactment of ‘sustainability’ criteria of food and farmed commodities through the use of voluntary standards and their certification. The reproduction of organic standards is necessarily distributed due to the specific practices that constitute them and that are performed by different actors: farming in particular ways, inspecting and certifying licensees, coordinating activities, setting standards, trading produce, advising producers, playing down certain issues while emphasising others, etc. As such, the resulting multiplicity of ways in which different ‘organics’ are enacted is unavoidable. I therefore argue that standards do not ‘homogenise’ practices or create uniformity, but rather that they may help organise local, socio-material practices: in their capacity as market devices, ‘sustainability’ standards can shape different forms of agriculture – or more precisely a related set of agricultural systems – depending on the local practices and coordinative structures which are mobilised to regulate them.

This implies that the use of standards constitutes a system innovation for shaping a more ‘sustainable’ agriculture, insofar as standards provide a device through which many actors, objects and practices are mobilised to enact a version of agriculture that is ‘qualified’ on the basis of a moral economy. In other words, the standards allow for the mobilisation of an entire sociotechnical arrangement to reshape practices and objects according to a set of principles. At the same time, they close down innovation spaces: there is only a limited number of differently singularised ranges of products that can be accommodated on retailers’ shelves, and as such successfully singularised versions of ‘sustainable’ agriculture reduce the space for other innovations to mobilise their own arrangements. Constituent practices are moreover constrained in how they can be performed; the number of interpretations of how to ‘do’ farming has been drastically reduced. Instead, innovation has turned into tinkering: finding local solutions to particular practical problems that the standards pose.

**References**


