

Abstract

Over the past two decades, the rapid growth of the organic sector has resulted in an increasing interest in alternative ways of guaranteeing the organic quality of food. The mainstream approach to certification, the so-called third party certification (TPC), aims at providing consumers with a guarantee on the integrity of organic food ensured by an independent body. However, it is mostly inaccessible to small-scale producers and poorer consumers, who are not able to afford its costs and the heavy administrative burden. As a result, groups of smallholders and consumers around the world have developed alternative certification systems, commonly referred to as Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS), which are based on trust mechanisms and rely primarily on local markets and direct selling relations.

The aim of this research is twofold. Firstly, we investigate if and how PGS can be a valid alternative to TPC and an effective tool for the development of local markets for organic products. Secondly, we study the development of PGS in the specific case of Kenya, considering their potential costs and benefits for farmers and communities as well as the main challenges and opportunities for their further upscaling. To answer to these questions, we analyzed the available economic and social literature on PGS and their evolution in Kenya and East Africa, we interviewed key actors involved in the local organic movement and we examined the practical implementation of a PGS developed by a group of Ogiek beekeepers in the Mau forest catchment. In doing so, we conducted a number of semi-structured interviews and a focus group with farmers and other stakeholders to investigate the objectives, operation modalities and expected impacts of the PGS.

The analysis shows that the participatory and dynamic nature of PGS provides a credible guarantee for the organic quality of food through the engagement of a variety of actors, a strong focus on capacity building and accountability of members, the application of different social and cultural control mechanisms, and a rich and transparent exchange of information. Furthermore, PGS contribute to expand local organic markets, encouraging a closer interaction between producers and consumers and guaranteeing a fair return to producers. Moreover, participation in a PGS empowers farmers by basing their activities on long-term social processes and fostering collective action.

The development of participatory certification in Kenya and East Africa, although still at a young stage, appears promising due to the existence of a large informal organic sector, a growing domestic demand and a favourable institutional framework that recognizes PGS as a valid assurance system, which grants the use of a common regional organic mark. The growth of PGS experiences in Kenya is currently driven by local organic movements and organizations, which actively promote and support farmers' participation in PGS as a strategy to develop the local organic markets, enhance farmers' capacities

and market orientation and strengthen their organizations through collective marketing schemes. However, due to the tiny size of the local market and limited awareness on organic approaches, PGS implementation still struggles with limited levels of participation of stakeholders other than the producers, and it heavily relies on the support of local organizations and NGOs. PGS development is further hampered by the absence of public policies supporting organic and agro-ecological approaches.

The findings of the case study indicate that the PGS certification is perceived by producers and practitioners as a process that builds on and strengthens the group activities and organization, contributing to the development of stronger social networks and resulting in better community relationships, higher knowledge opportunities, and improvement in smallholders' bargaining power. The decision of the group to start a PGS process fulfil their need for recognition of the intrinsic quality of their product, which in turn is linked to the ambition of expanding their market network. The provision of effective training and extension support and the establishment of stable and direct market linkages, together with the group's common goal in beekeeping practices and environmental conservation, are at the basis of the success of the PGS experience. The findings also reveal the importance of developing an integrated and grass-roots approach, which prioritizes the indigenous knowledge and participation of farmers and synergistically addresses social, economic and environmental sustainability objectives.

Overall, the results suggest that, with the major challenges faced by the agricultural sector in Kenya related to low productivity, food insecurity and natural resources depletion, the expansion of the PGS model has the potential of promoting organic agriculture uptake, livelihood improvements through market access, and empowerment of small-scale farmers.

Key words: organic food, quality control, participatory guarantee systems (PGS), Kenya, East Africa, honey