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THE ROLE OF PARTICIPATORY GUARANTEE SYSTEMS FOR FOOD SECURITY

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A RATIONALE FOR PARTICIPATORY GUARANTEE SYSTEMS

The primary tool for assuring quality of organic products and preventing fraud, and also for promoting commerce, is third party organic certification, which aims to regulate and facilitate the sale of organic products to consumers. Certification plays a role along the entire supply chain and is used by organic producers to identify products that are approved for use in certified production (Fabiansson, 2014), while also serving as product assurance for consumers (Sethuraman and Naidu, 2008). Although third party certification systems play an important role in organic production and trade, they are not always suitable for small-scale operators and local market channels. Third party certification can act as a barrier to entry for smallholder producers looking to access organic markets because of the high costs involved (Lundberg and Moberg, 2009), the paperwork and bureaucracy required (IFAD, 2003) and complex norms (Nelson, 2015). To address these challenges, some farmers have sought alternative certification systems that are better adapted to specific local contexts. One such alternative for conformity assessment is to use participatory guarantee systems (PGS), which rely on the participation of multiple stakeholders to guarantee the organic integrity of products.

WHAT PGS ARE AND HOW THEY WORK

Participatory guarantee systems are locally focused quality assurance systems that certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders. They are viable organic verification systems that offer an alternative and are complementary to third party certification and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks, knowledge building and exchange (IFOAM, 2011). With their relatively low associated costs and lower burden of paperwork, PGS are particularly appropriate for local markets and organized smallholder farmers (Nelson et al, 2010). PGS are also context-specific, with each responding to the particular challenges and conditions faced by producers, consumers and other stakeholders in the organic sector of a specific place. Although this means that every PGS initiative is locally-adapted and to some extent unique, they all share a number of key elements and features. These include a shared vision; active participation of multiple stakeholders; transparency of process; trust as a foundational element; conceptualizing certification as a learning process; and horizontality, meaning that all members share equally in the rights and responsibilities related to how the system is established and maintained (IFOAM, 2011).

A typical PGS initiative involves producers and other stakeholders such as consumers, the staff of NGOs, universities and extension services, government representatives, and consultants (Nelson et al, 2010). Producers, and sometimes other stakeholders, are typically organized in local groups that are collectively responsible for ensuring that all the participating producers adhere to PGS standards and processes. The usual practice is that each farmer receives an annual site visit from this locally based group. Results of the farm visit are summarized in a report, which provides the basis for the decision made by the group regarding the extent to which a producer is in compliance (or not) with the agreed organic standards. Summaries of the documentation and certification decisions are usually then communicated to a higher level, for example a regional or national council representing PGS stakeholders. These higher-level councils or organizations are generally responsible for the overall oversight and administration of the PGS program, and they often represent the PGS in communications with external stakeholders such as the government and IFOAM (Castro, 2014). In some cases, they endorse certification decisions made by the local groups, while in others they grant approval for local-level authorities to use the PGS label independently.



PGS AND SOCIAL PROCESSES

Participatory guarantee systems are more than just a low-cost mechanism for organic certification. They are also a means of facilitating social processes that enable inclusion, farmer empowerment and mutual support; both among farmers and between farmers and consumers. The social processes include the networking involved in gaining PGS accreditation and a range of parallel processes that both support, and are supported by, the PGS. Some of the most important and consistent findings of research on PGS relate to these parallel social processes (including the collective use of knowledge and resources) and the contribution they make to the unity and sustainability of PGS groups. Participation in social processes has been shown to help foster the mutual trust and strong personal relationships that are a key factor in the long-term success of PGS. In addition to contributing to the stability and success of the PGS, social processes also provide direct and indirect benefits to participating farmers.

The trust-based relationships play an important role in providing organic farmers a sense of community that might otherwise be lacking. Experience gained by PGS initiatives around the world has shown that participation in PGS creates opportunities and favorable environments for peer learning and for sharing of knowledge and resources between farmers (Kirchner, 2014). This enables farmers to build capacity that can help them improve the quality and quantity of their organic production over time. One manifestation of social processes that is frequently observed in the context of PGS is the organization of collective use of resources, sometimes known as self-help groups, which are important to the success of many PGS. Self-help groups have become an entry point into many PGS communities at a grassroots level and provide a platform for various intervention activities, such as:

- Collective buying, which reduces costs.
- Joint marketing, which is essential to the expansion of market opportunities.
- Establishing seedbanks, which gives farmers access to varieties suited to local conditions.
- Supporting collective logistics in transportation for farmers who are often geographically isolated.
- Enabling farming households to access affordable credit for agricultural and other purposes (Home et al. in review).

Participation in the collective actions of self-help groups (that have their own social processes) reinforces the social inclusion, farmer empowerment, and mutual support between producers and consumers that are inherent in PGS. Given that PGS are commonly composed of people living in close proximity and sharing the same ideals, support can be delivered in a way that is tailored to their individual needs. For example, monitoring use and repayment of credit is easier, with less need for coercion (Home et al., in review).

PGS CONTRIBUTIONS TO FOOD SECURITY

By increasing market access and, more specifically, making an organic label and associated price premiums more accessible to small-scale producers, PGS often lead to at least some increase in income for participating farmers. Increased income directly contributes to improvements in food security because many farmers still rely heavily on purchased foods to meet their household needs.

The capacity building for organic production that occurs through the social processes associated with PGS also contributes to food security in that it enables farmers to increase the scale, diversity and quality of their production. Thus, PGS can make it easier for them to meet more of their households' nutritional needs through subsistence production. Enhanced self-sufficiency not only helps farmers increase the quantity of food available but, because the production tends to use agro-ecological best practices, the quality of the food is also high. The social processes associated with participation in PGS also foster this improved self-sufficiency by empowering the participating farmers. Examples of farmer empowerment include facilitating their access to credit and/or to seedbanks with locally-suited varieties; by supporting collective buying, joint marketing, and knowledge-sharing; and by including them as active participants in the certification process (Nelson et al, 2015). Collectively, these empowerment benefits enhance the farmers' ability to produce a surplus to their own food needs, and thus contribute to food security.

PGS can also increase the food security of community members not directly engaged in production because they increase market access for organic products sold at fair prices, and support the development and strengthening of local markets, (Nelson et al, 2015). This is especially the case in communities where access to safe, high quality, nutritious foods may be limited by low incomes.



RECOMMENDATION: SUPPORTING PGS CAN FACILITATE THE POTENTIAL FOR AGROECOLOGY TO FEED THE WORLD

PGS initiatives have the potential to build capacity for organic production based on agroecological ideals and to develop equitable markets for the goods produced. By strengthening both the supply and demand sides of the organic market, PGS make it easier for that market to feed more people. With this in mind, we recommend encouraging the use of PGS through both financial and in-kind investments, as well as policy and other structural support. PGS are typically driven by a small group of people, or sometimes by an individual, who take the initiative to establish a system at the local level. Providing support to such people, who adopt the role of the change agents, will encourage the spread of PGS, which in turn will increase trust in the system.

PGS initiatives will be more sustainable if they base their activities on long lasting social processes and are well connected to consumers, markets, regulation bodies, governments, and the communities in which they operate. A key to the success of the social processes of PGS, and therefore to the success of PGS in general, is the trust built by involvement of consumers in PGS certification. This is in agreement with the observation by Nelson et al (2010) that PGS are particularly suited to local markets in which consumers have some understanding of the local conditions.

Lack of governmental support has often been cited as a problem in establishing and maintaining PGS. PGS proponents call for increased advocacy efforts and greater involvement in local politics to gain more political support, such as local government involvement in projects for the further development of PGS in a region. Examples of advocacy might include pressing a city to provide adequate space for a farmers' market, or lobbying for government-level facilitation of agroecology in the form of policies offering preferential treatment for those who produce quality food and who also protect natural resources (Home et al., in review). Fundamental to the sustainability of PGS is its formal recognition as a legitimate quality assurance system, which may require ongoing negotiation with local, regional and national governments as well as with organic regulation bodies. A number of countries, including Mexico and Brazil, have included PGS in their national organic regulatory frameworks. Other countries interested in promoting the use of PGS could look to them for examples of how PGS can be included effectively in their legislation governing the organic sector. Recommendations and various scenarios for the role that governments can take in the support of PGS can be found in the IFOAM PGS Policy Brief: How governments can support Participatory Guarantee Systems (IFOAM, 2015).





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