

The potential of PGS to intensify knowledge exchange

By Cornelia Kirchner, IFOAM Program and Value Chain Coordinator



PGS are generally perceived as providing an accessible and low-cost alternative certification tool that enables farmers to gain access to local markets. It is however often overlooked that PGSs actually carry much more potential. In fact, PGS have shown¹ to perform as a platform

to strengthen traditional social processes between farmers and within communities. In some cases the participation in social processes through PGS, is even more important to farmers than other PGS benefits such as obtaining market access or certification. One example of a social process towards which PGS positively contributes is the exchange of knowledge between farmers. Facilitating knowledge exchange can be a challenging task. It requires various elements, of which trust is the most fundamental one: Farmers will only share their ideas and experience with other farmers if they trust each other. Also important is the availability of tools, and opportunities to meet and exchange knowledge.

In order to explore knowledge exchange practices in PGS initiatives, IFOAM – Organics International conducted a study in 2014. This study was based on a review of previous studies and on questionnaires sent to PGS stakeholders, identifying the tools facilitating knowledge exchange that are provided by and used in PGS, as well as the type of knowledge that is exchanged. The results published as a paper and presented at the OWC 2014 in Turkey.

PGS incorporate many components that contribute to a favorable environment for knowledge exchange. Trust, horizontality, a shared vision and transparency represent key elements of PGS that create an environment in which stakeholders do not feel like competitors, but rather show an attitude of support towards each other.

PGS also creates many opportunities for farmers to share knowledge. Regular peer reviews or farm inspections carried out by farmers were identified by the study as the most valuable tool for knowledge exchange in PGS. During the peer reviews farmers discuss problems and challenges, and share advice. Being on the farm while taking the time to have a closer look at the applied techniques allows the identification of good practices, as well as weaknesses and possible improvements. A farmer from the Maendeleo Farmer Group, Tanzania, described:

“When other farmers visit my farm, I feel like I have something special, and I feel very happy. I always share the knowledge I have.”

A well-designed evaluation sheet used during the inspection encourages such exchanges.

In most PGS initiatives, farmers hold regular meetings within the local groups. These can be related to specific activities, like the election of representatives for the PGS councils, the development of a marketing plan, or they can be informal gatherings to socialize. All these function as

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¹ Global Comparative Study on Interactions between Traditional social processes and PGS, published by IFOAM in 2014.

opportunities for farmers to exchange knowledge. Other examples mentioned in the study are regular trainings or workshops, farmer field schools, online/digital platforms and PGS manuals.

The most common kind of knowledge shared between farmers in a PGS refers to organic farming practices, including traditional knowledge and innovations. It was found that PGS might also function as a key tool in preserving traditional knowledge or re-establishing almost-forgotten practices. Farmers in a PGS also share their skills and knowledge on practical issues like marketing and food processing, or practical information like suppliers of farm inputs and recipes.

Although farmers normally share information with in the local groups in their initiatives, PGS have the potential to integrate a wider range of stakeholders in this process. Consumers, NGO staff, traders, government officials, students and representatives from the media are examples of other stakeholders who are frequently involved in PGS, carrying out various roles, and who thus participate in knowledge sharing.

The conclusion is that PGS contribute to intensifying knowledge between farmers, increasing awareness of Organic Agriculture and of the benefits of organic practices, not only among farmers, but also beyond the local groups.

Building consumer loyalty

By Julie Nakalanda Matovu (Founder and coordinator of Freshveggies PGS, from Kampala, Uganda)

A functional PGS is a one that has a fair representation of all key players in its system. These may include producers, local leaders, supporting institutions (that provide technical support) and consumers. While it is very important to ensure the functionality of the producer network through establishment of internal controls, the consumers are a very key component of a Participatory Guarantee System.



Freshveggies products and their label.



Julie Nakalanda Matovu

At Freshveggies PGS, in Central Uganda, where our PGS initiative has created its own clientele, it is still our obligation to ensure that we keep them in the know of what is happening on our farms. These are people from the elite community who are more than happy to get organic supplies from a local producers' community. They may have very little knowledge of what farming is, or even what Organic Agriculture specifically entails.

As we endeavor to grow the organic sector, developing a committed and loyal clientele is paramount. One may wonder: how do you keep a loyal consumer base, and keep it growing? We have been using social media to keep consumers updated of what is happening on the farm. When we plant, we share; when the drought affects us, we share; when we are in full blossom, we share. We even try to educate them about the natural interactions on the farm through short video clips or photos. This keeps them very interested, they tend to want to learn more.

This also generates positive discussion and a learning platform that strengthens our producer-consumer ties. They share this with their colleagues and, the next thing you see is an email or phone call about a new client. We also conducted an evaluation at the beginning of this year, as one way of getting feedback and improving service delivery. We hope this will help us grow and enable as to possibly scale up.

The rise of organics in the Pacific

By Rebecca Reider, *The New Zealand Herald*

Excerpt from article originally published by *The New Zealand Herald*

To read the full article, please [click here](#).



Pacific Island peoples are starting to reach high-level niche markets across the oceans with certified organic products. In Auckland, this might look like a packet of imported dried organic bananas in a child's lunchbox; but on the islander end, the results have been life-changing for many families.

For many Pacific islanders, organic farming feels like an obvious choice. "Organics really touches people in the Pacific. Everyone really relates to it as the way our grandfathers used to farm," says Karen Mapusua. Mapusua is one half of the staff of the Fiji-based POETCom, the Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community that works to unify the efforts of Pacific island organic growers.

Getting everyone's organic products to market, however, comes less naturally than the growing. "It's very, very difficult for a smallholder to go directly to the market," Mapusua says. The peoples of small, isolated islands do not have a chance in international commodity markets, where it's all about economies of scale. "For example, we cannot compete with the Philippines on conventional bananas," says Mapusua.

However, through organic production, islanders are now finding their own specialty niches. It's not just about getting a few cents more for an organic product, Mapusua says - organic status literally "creates a livelihood opportunity that wasn't there."

And yet, organic success is not without its bitter ironies. Organic farming, though the most natural way to grow food, can also be incredibly bureaucratic. Pacific islanders are certified organic mostly by Australian and New Zealand authorities who fly in for annual audits.

POETCom is now looking toward the day when Pacific communities can undertake organic certification on their own terms. "We need to have models that suit us," says Karen Mapusua. To that end, POETCom is promoting Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS), in which local islander farmers peer review each others' organic practices.

Through PGS, whole islands are now going organic. In 2013, Fiji's tiny Cicia became the Pacific's first certified organic island. The island of Abaiang in Kiribati, home to 5500 people, has pledged to do the same.

Community members have signed pledges to protect their islands' organic status, and no one is allowed to bring any synthetic agrichemical inputs onto the islands.

Thus, Pacific peoples are starting to affirm organic farming on their own terms.

Continental News:

ASIA

BANGLADESH: A training on PGS was held in Sylhet Sadar, Bangladesh on March 15, 2015. In total, 22 people participated, including farmers and members of community learning centers (CLCs). In the past six months, organic farmers groups involved in the initiative PGS Organic Council Bangladesh, currently under development, started to sell their organic products in the upstream market in Dhaka through a store. They are exploring the possibility of selling these products with a PGS logo. This strategy was discussed during the training and the results will be implemented in the coming months. For more information, please contact Dr. Shaikh Tanveer Hossain.

INDONESIA: PGS Rattan or Participatory Guarantee System Certified Rattan is a project initiated by NTFP-EP Indonesia that aims to apply an appropriate, effective, cost-efficient certification to rattan harvested from rattan gardens by community-based suppliers. It aims to contribute to the overall goal of increasing benefits for rattan producers and promoting sustainable resource management. The integrated approach ties in sustainability market mechanisms and installs premiums for local communities and thus ensures continued sustainability. This is an interesting example of PGS implementation outside of the organic sector. A brochure with details on the project is available for download.

INDIA: The June 2015 issue of LEISA India will focus on linkages between the rural and urban worlds. How are these changing in the process of development? How do family farmers respond to changing urban consumption patterns? How is knowledge about food and farming co-created between rural and urban communities? What is the role of youth and of women? What is the role of technology? Are there examples of successful marketing strategies to promote food from family farms in the cities? What are the experiences, lessons and challenges of collaborative efforts between consumers and producers, in producing healthy food?

This is a good opportunity for PGS initiatives to share their experiences. Articles for the June 2015 issue of LEISA India should be sent to the editors before 1 May 2015, to the following e-mail address: leisaindia@yahoo.co.in

THAILAND: The National Bureau of Agricultural Commodity and Food Standards (ACFS) plans to enforce compulsory labeling for organic products. ACFS have asked for meetings with private sector and NGO representatives, as well as government agencies. A detailed draft is not yet available, but the PGS movement in the country is concerned that this decision could have a negative impact on PGS initiatives. For more information, please contact Vitoon Panyakul.

AFRICA

NIGERIA: PGS certification is now provided by the Association of Organic Agriculture Practitioners of Nigeria (NOAN), after the inauguration of the committee in January, 2014. The committee is made up of practitioners, farmers, consumers and certified organic inspectors. In fact, three farmers' groups and four other farms were certified during the year (see attached document). A total land area of 45.1 ha was certified during the year using the scheme. Currently, 47 producers, 2 institutional farms and 2 corporate farms have obtained certification.

NORTH AMERICA

USA 1: Certified Naturally Grown (CNG) has been enjoying yet more positive media attention in some very well-regarded publications that organic-minded consumers read. Follow the links for some interesting reading:

- Mother Earth News, April/May 2015
Certified Naturally Grown: An Alternative to Certified Organic
- Rodale News, April 2015
Useful (and Useless) Labels in Your Grocery Store
- Organic Authority, April 1, 2015
Is Certified Naturally Grown Just as Good as Organic?
- Civil Eats, February 2015
Alternative Produce Labels: Faux Organic or Just as Good?

USA 2: In response to growing interest in mushroom farming, CNG will be developing standards for mushroom cultivation with assistance from a group of experienced producers sitting on their Mushroom Advisory Council.

Advisory councils are a critical part of the CNG program. They help set the standards for CNG certification, and carefully consider when improvements might be made to CNG's allowed and prohibited practices, products and operations.

LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

BRAZIL: The coordinator of the NGO Centro Ecologico Laércio Meirelles was invited by the French NGO Essor to provide a consultancy on PGS for organic farmers in Maputo, Mozambique, for 15 days in November 2014. As a follow-up, four technicians and two farmers from Mozambique visited Torres, on the north coast of Rio Grande do South, between March 31 and April 6, 2015. During the visit, the guests could see firsthand how the PGS developed by Ecovida Network is implemented. "Now we have a little chain, we are in the early stage and we are starting the participatory certification process", said Emmanuelle Patetsos, from Essor, for whom certification is a way to ensure food quality for the consumer and enhance the farmer. For more information, please contact Centro Ecologico.



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