

## **Certification in the hands of the farmers. The PGS Pilipinas advocacy.**

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### **Author's Background**

Maria Rowena A. Buena works with MASIPAG as Technical Officer. She completed the Organic Agriculture Development Training organized by Grolink and coordinates the activities of PGS Pilipinas.

### **Summary**

*Organic agriculture has been the practice of the small-scale farmers and programs of developmental non-government organizations in the Philippines since the 80's. Its growth and development prompted the government to enact Republic Act 10068 or the Organic Agriculture Act of 2010. The law aims to strengthen organic agriculture in the country, however, Section 17 of the law states that only Third Party certified products can be labelled as organic and this puts long time small-scale organic farmers at a disadvantage.*

*MASIPAG, being the first organization in the Philippines to adapt PGS through the MASIPAG Farmers Guarantee System (MFGS), initiated the development of network of PGS practitioners and advocates which aims to lobby and work for PGS recognition and its subsequent growth for the local market.*

### **Background**

Since the mid-80's organic agriculture became the tool of the small-scale and underprivileged farmers in the Philippines, with support from non-government organizations, farmer organizations were organized and trained to counter the negative effects of Green Revolution. For decades, farmers were able to hone their skills in ecological pest and disease management, conservation of traditional, improved and locally adapted varieties of crops and livestock breeds. Crops are also improved through participatory breeding and soil fertility management practices which uses materials within the farm, and through these practices, organic farmers were able to prove that food production need not be expensive to be viable and profitable.

In the early 2000's, the organic certification in the country started to develop with the NGOs, including MASIPAG, at the forefront. The Center for International Trade and Exposition Mission of the Department of Trade and Industries helped in the establishment of the certification system by partly funding the initial activities of the group.

In 2004, MASIPAG saw the need to develop a pro-farmer system of guaranteeing the organic integrity of their products without spending too much on certification costs. This was strengthened with the participation in the Alternative Certification System Conference organized by IFOAM in Torres, Brazil in the same year. Later that year, the first PGS in the country, the MASIPAG Farmers Guarantee System or MFGS, was put into place.

A year after the MFGS was launched, former President Gloria Arroyo signed Executive Order 481 which aims to support the initiatives of the organic agriculture farmers in the country and in April 2010, Republic Act 10068, also known as the Organic Agriculture Act of 2010 was passed to "promote, propagate and develop further and implement the practice of organic agriculture in the country". It also states that "the government recognizes and supports the central role of the farmers, indigenous peoples and other stakeholders at the grassroots in this program".

Organic farmers as well as NGOs hailed the government for passing the law as it is the first law in the country which supports organic farming and farmers. The OA Act, however, limits the use of the term "organic" to third party certified products only. A brief two-year grace period was given so that non-third party certified products can be certified, and this puts long-time organic small farmers at a disadvantage.

The small-scale organic farmers in the country, who have been practising organic agriculture even without the government support, cannot call their products organic, simply because they cannot pay for the third party certification fee and therefore, cannot have their products certified.

MASIPAG, along with other like-minded NGOs and organic agriculture advocates, believes that at this early stage of the organic industry, recognition of all types of certification system is crucial to include and provide incentive to all organic producers, small, big and corporate and to strengthen not only the export market but more importantly, the domestic market.

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## Main Chapter

### A pro-farmer certification system

The MASIPAG Farmers Guarantee System (MFGS), a type of Participatory Guarantee System (PGS), aimed to give added value to farmers' products and minimize the problems on conventional marketing system in the country which is dominated by traders. It also aims to give farmers a credible, yet inexpensive organic certification system as well as to provide a quality assurance system to the consumers. The program started in 2004, and now is the flat form of the PGS campaign of MASIPAG.

MFGS started with only six (6) farmers organization involved and with only the organic rice standards developed with farmers using MASIPAG's decade-long experience in organic rice production. After 10 years, MFGS now involves sixty (60) farmers organization with the MASIPAG Organic Standards (crops, livestock and processing) accepted as equivalent to the Common Objectives and Requirements of Standards (COROS) of IFOAM and the MFGS itself at the IFOAM PGS platform.

In 2011, a national conference was held to bring together organic agriculture practitioners in the Philippines and come up with strategy to mainstream PGS in the country. LGUs who have declared their respective municipalities as organic and focused on developing organic agriculture and NGOs who are known for their sincere efforts in catering to the needs of poor farmers, and, who at the same time, wish to ensure the quality of organic products were invited. One of the objective of the conference is to come up with a strategy to sustain the growth of organic agriculture in the Philippines and establish a united PGS network in the country which will help develop and prosper the domestic market for organic products.

After the conference, series of PGS orientations and trainings were conducted all over the country which aims to educate the farmers and other stakeholders about PGS and its benefits to small scale farmers. Most of these trainings are in collaboration with the local government units and agencies, NGO partners and organic agriculture advocates, including the academe.

In January 2013, another conference supported by IFOAM was held to present the current status and experiences of local government units, farmers organizations and NGOs in the adoption and implementation of PGS. It also focused on laying the basis for need of PGS in an emerging organic market such as the Philippines. It was also in the conference that the network called PGS Pilipinas was launched.



**Figure 1. PGS Conference participants with IFOAM President, Andre Leu in 2013**

### PGS Pilipinas

PGS Pilipinas is a network of PGS practitioners and advocates in the Philippines. Most of the member organizations are NGOs working with farmers organization practising sustainable and organic agriculture operating at a national scale. These NGOs are also those who have been advocating OA long before the law has been passed and saw that its provisions will not serve most of the farmers in the country. It also includes advocates from the academe and consumers.

PGS Pilipinas aims to bridge the gap between the farmers and local consumers, and further develop the domestic market by helping farmers avail inexpensive certification and strengthen the production systems. Since the national government looks at organic products as premium and export product with targets geared towards the fulfilment of the requirements of the export market and none for the local and domestic market.



**Figure 2. PGS guaranteed products and logo of Quezon PGS.**

PGS Pilipinas also aims to work for PGS recognition. During the conference in 2013, the group presented a resolution for the extension of implementation of Section 17 of the Organic Act to the National Organic Agriculture Board (NOAB). The NOAB is the policy-making body of the organic agriculture program of the Department of Agriculture (DA) and in May 2013, the Secretary of DA issued DA Administrative Order No. 08, Series of 2013, entitled: *Amendment to Rules 15.1 and 17.1 of the Implementing Rules and Regulations of Republic Act (RA) 10068 otherwise known as "The Organic Agriculture Act of 2010"*. The administrative order states that the period for voluntary compliance to third party certification, which ended in April 2013, will be extended up to April 1, 2016. During this period, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> party and PGS side by side with 3<sup>rd</sup> party certification shall be recognized and the Bureau of Agriculture of Fisheries and Product Standards (BAFPS) of DA shall ensure that all regulations and institutional modifications necessary for the implementation of the said provision will be put in place.

Along with the extension is the continuous expansion of PGS practitioners in the country. After three years of continuous orientation, training and installation of PGS in the farmers organization and groups, there are now more than ten (10) municipalities and three (3) provinces with PGS orientation and trainings in addition to the NGO members of PGS Pilipinas.

Table 1 shows the rapid expansion of PGS in the Philippines with increasing number of stakeholders, including the local government units and agencies. This also reflects the farmers', NGOs and LGUs' clamour for a pro-farmer certification system.

**Table 1. Municipalities, provinces and NGOs with PGS activities**

Municipalities/Provinces/ Organizations, scope of operation	Scope of operation	PGS Activities conducted	Contact Person
MASIPAG	Philippines	Orientations, trainings, installation	Dr. Charito P. Medina,
Quezon Province	4 municipalities	Orientations, trainings, installation	Carmen Cabling,
Nueva Vizcaya Province	4 municipalities	Orientations, trainings, installation	August Lunag,
Bohol Province		Orientation	Fe Curato
Camarines Sur	4 municipalities	Orientation	Dante Bismonte
Surigao del Norte	4 municipalities	Orientation	Ruby Lagahit
Igbaras, Iloilo		Orientation	Elias Sandig,
Dumingag, Zamboanga del Sur	14 baranggays	Orientation, trainings and installation	Mayor Jun Pacalioga
Agusan del Sur	1 farmer federation	Orientation	Social Action Center Butuan

Davao City		Orientations, trainings, installation	Anita Morales
Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM)	Philippines	Orientations, trainings, installation	Joselito Gonzales
Palawan Center for Appropriate Rural Technologies (PCART)	Palawan province	Orientation, training	Laurence Padilla, biofarm@gmail.com
Sibol ng Agham at Teknolohiya (SIBAT)	Philippines	Orientation	Vicky Corpus, sibat@sibat.org
Food Bowl Market	Quezon City	Orientation, training	Ramon Padilla

### **Towards a change in policy**

At the policy level, PGS Pilipinas was able to lobby for the passage of amendment of RA 10068 through BAYAN MUNA Representative to the Lower House, Teddy Casiño who filed House Bill 5635 during the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress. Part of the explanatory notes for the amendment is that “criticism towards the seemingly exclusive rights given to private certifying bodies inhibits the growth of organic agriculture as it deters small farmers from going organic. The high cost to get certified, in order to carry the “organic” label discriminates against our small farmers and indigenous peoples who have long traditions of raising and producing organic goods. Denying them to label what is essentially an organic product as such is also detrimental to their livelihood”.

And that the HB 5645 “recognizes the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) in the certification and labelling of organic products and encourages the appropriate agencies to develop and strengthen such alternative certification mechanisms”. The bill will be re-filed at the opening of the new session of the Congress this year.

### **Core messages and conclusions**

MASIPAG and PGS Pilipinas believes that the word “organic” should not be restricted to only those who can afford to pay for expensive third party certification. The Organic Act of 2010 of the Philippines should be flexible enough to accommodate the growing number of organic agriculture practitioners especially the small farmers who have been practicing organic agriculture even before the passage of the law. Failing to recognize this will further marginalize the small farmers, who must be encouraged instead to practice organic and sustainable agriculture. By bringing more farmers into PGS programs, the needs of small-scale farmers and local, low-income consumers are both met.

RA 10068 should be amended as soon as possible so that farmers may call their products organic without the fear of being prosecuted. At this early stage of organic agriculture development in the country, the government should exhaust all the possible means of helping the organic producers and not tie the farmers with the restrictions of certification. Subsidies for certification should be re-allocated for the development of all organic farmers and strengthening of the domestic market.

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