Preliminary results of the global comparative study on interactions between PGS and social processes

HERVE BOUAGNIMBECK[1], ROBERTO UGAS[2], JANNET VILLANUEVA[3]

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Abstract

Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) are viable organic verification systems. This paper evaluates the interactions between PGS and social processes (e.g. seed management) and identifies how they can play a trigger role to improve livelihoods of rural communities worldwide and particularly in the Peruvian Andes. It draws from in-depth interviews with 84 PGS farmers from eight selected PGS initiatives in India, the Philippines, South Africa, Peru, Mexico, Brazil and France, as well as 24 stakeholders involved in the development of PGS. Preliminary results show that PGS is an important platform for the development of social processes and that social processes positively impact PGS initiatives, thereby improving their sustainability. The results also demonstrate so far that the entry into PGS offers farmers and farm families a range of benefits such as: improved social bonds; farmer empowerment; better market access and regular sales; increased farm incomes; enhanced food security.

Introduction

PGS are locally focused quality assurance systems, alternative and complementary to third party certification. They certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge building and exchange (IFOAM 2008).
Currently, over 49,000 small operators are involved in PGS. 50 PGS initiatives are now established on all continents, and more than 60 initiatives are under development (Castro 2014). In order to further develop PGS as a tool for improving livelihoods of rural communities, particularly in the Peruvian Andes, this study evaluates the interactions between PGS and social processes such as seed management and collective marketing etc. It is hypothesized that if PGS initiatives base their activities on long lasting social processes and are well connected to markets, they achieve more sustainable impact on livelihoods improvement. The main research questions are:

1. How do PGS and social processes interact?
2. What are the benefits of PGS on the communities where PGS initiatives are operational?
3. Which main factors favor the sustainability of the PGS?

Research methods

The research questions were explored using a participatory rapid appraisal method based mainly on qualitative studies. In a consultation with key individuals and organizations involved in the development of PGS, as well as with members of the IFOAM PGS Committee, successful PGS initiatives and their relevant social processes were identified. In a second step, in-depth case studies were conducted with members of eight selected PGS initiatives that are using social processes: Keystone Foundation, India; Green Foundation, India; Association of Sustainable Agriculture Practitioners of Palimbang (ASAPP), a member of the Farmer-Scientist Partnership for Development (MASIPAG), Philippines; Asociacion Nacional de Productores Ecologicos (ANPE) / Instituto de Desarrollo y Medio Ambiente (IDMA), Peru; Nuclei of Alto Uruguai and Planalto from Rede Ecovida de Agroecologia (Ecovida), Brazil; Red Mexicana de Tianguis y Mercados Orgánicos (REDAC), Mexico; Bryanston Organic & Natural Market (BONM), South Africa; COMAC Lozère, a member of Nature et Progrès, France. These in-depth studies were conducted as facilitated self-assessment processes in which the selected PGS initiative can learn how to further improve. At least 6 farmers were interviewed per case. The selection criteria for interviewed farmers included at least three years of participation in the PGS; gender; location and landholding/activities.

[1]International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), Bonn, Germany, www.ifoam.org, Email: h.bouagnimbeck@ifoam.org.
[2] Universidad Nacional Agraria La Molina UNALM, Lima, Peru
[3] AGROECO Project, Lima, Peru and the PGS Committee of IFOAM

Preliminary Results

Main social processes identified and their interactions with PGS

The preliminary results of this study show that PGS is an important platform for the development of social processes. While there is indication that social processes were in place before a PGS developed in some cases, PGS nevertheless has either contributed to strengthening such pre-existing processes and/or stimulated the development of new social processes, which are now recognized as important by the respondents in their relation with PGS and livelihoods improvement. Table 1 shows the main social processes identified among the surveyed PGS. According to this table, the main social processes identified are:

- collective marketing and sharing information, techniques and traditional knowledge, both identified in all cases;
- collective seed management and conservation, particularly relevant for PGS in Asia; small scale saving systems, which are relevant for PGS in Asia and Latin America.
- socialized pricing and collective work or *Bayanihan,* specific to the Philippines.

The study shows these social processes positively impact PGS initiatives in different ways, thereby improving the sustainability of the PGS. The most relevant social processes cited by farmers in this regard are in order of importance 1) sharing information, techniques and traditional knowledge and 2) collective marketing.

The respondents pointed out to a number of ways in which PGS processes and tools have contributed to intensifying this exchange, such as: (i) visits to the production unit that are considered as an opportunity to discuss farming challenges with peers and relevant stakeholders (e.g. consumers) and seek advice; and (ii) regular meetings of the group that stimulate farmers' participation and information exchange through collective discussions over common challenges and solutions. This builds and improves group dynamics, which are essential for PGS.

Table 1: Main social processes identified

	Keystone Foundation	Green Foundation	ASAPP	ANPE / IDMA	Ecovida	REDAC	BONM	COMAC Lozère
Sharing information / techniques	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Collective marketing	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Collective seed management and conservation	x	x	x	x	x			
Small-scale saving	x	x		x	x			
Collective work / *Bayanihan*			x					
Socialized pricing			x					

x: relevant empty cells: not relevant or was not specifically mentioned

Collective marketing initiatives have developed within PGS or were strengthened following the entry into PGS. Therefore, PGS enables farmers access to specific markets, reduces costs related to the organization for the market and helps reach consumers on a larger scale, which contributes to the sustainability of the PGS in return.

Collective seed management and conservation processes, such as trial farms or Community Seed Banks, contribute to the continuity of organic agriculture practices with regard to the availability of locally suitable organic seeds. Also, they strengthen social bonds and positively impact the way the members of the PGS interact.

Small-scale savings systems (e.g. common fund or collective savings systems) are a good tool to guarantee the financial sustainability of the PGS, by covering common expenses, while improving farmers' livelihoods through better access to credit.

Collective work or *Bayanihan* is a communal system of labor traditionally used in different parts of the Philippines where people come together to work on each other's projects – either as pure reciprocal labor or sometimes for a portion of the harvest. According to respondents, *Bayanihan* not only reduces the need to purchase labor and capital but also increases trust, thus leading to better relationships within the group and a more efficient running of the PGS.
Socialized pricing enables Philippine farmers to command the price of their produce to make them affordable to members of the organization and consumers. This enhances relationships among PGS members and increases the availability of guaranteed organic rice in the community.

Benefits associated with the entry into PGS
The study found that the entry into PGS offers farmers and their families a range of economic, environmental and social benefits, thus improving their livelihoods. The main benefits as perceived by surveyed farmers are:
1. Improved social bonds: PGS promotes personal relationships based on trust and leads to sharing of knowledge and best organic practices, thereby leading to empowered social organizations at the local level.
2. Lower costs of production: For many farmers, the entry into PGS is associated with adoption of organic practices. This results in lower costs of farming, as organic farming involves the use of affordable inputs that are generally produced on the farm rather than externally purchased (such as seeds and synthetic pesticides).
3. Better market access and regular sales: PGS facilitates the establishment of collective marketing initiatives and diversification of marketing channels, promoting increased volume of the offer and product diversity, thus helping farmers access specific direct and regular markets and further increase their profit margins.
4. Enhanced food security: The setting up of kitchen gardens by farmers and their increased cultivation of indigenous seeds, which are suited to local agro-climatic zones, contributes to increased yields, diversity and nutrient content of meals. In addition to increased diversification, the access to different markets leads farmers to improve the productivity of both their cash and subsistence food crops, thereby improving households' nutritional requirements and their ability to feed themselves.
5. Better management of natural resources: By acting as platforms for farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing and exchange, PGS contributes to traditional knowledge maintenance and dissemination and empower farmers to make use of locally available inputs and breeds, therefore contributing to improved natural resource management in the communities.

Common challenges

The most common challenges, as reported by the respondents are: involving consumers in PGS; gaining recognition and financial and technical support from authorities; long distance or difficult access between the members of the group, as well as from farm to market; low understanding of PGS among farmers involved in the initiative; low participation of some farmers in the PGS.

Final results

The final detailed research report will be available March 2014 and will include guidance on conditions under which a PGS is likely to become successful and recommendations for farmers, policy makers, researchers and the organic movement.
These factors could assist people and organizations designing and establishing PGS around the world, even if their situation might be different and require the development of a PGS that is specific to their region or community.

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