

Organic Agriculture and Participatory Guarantee Systems Marketing and Support for Organic Smallholders

Organic agriculture is a production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local conditions, rather than the use of inputs with adverse effects. Organic agriculture combines tradition, innovation and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and a good quality of life for all involved.

Any system of agriculture based on the Principles of Organic Agriculture can be regarded as “Organic Agriculture”.

A part from third party, ISO certification there are other methods of organic quality assurance for the marketplace including internationally recognized Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) which serve thousands of farmers and consumers around the world.



More than a Certification System

Participatory Guarantee Systems are based on recognized and publicly available standards for organic practice. Often they are based on the IFOAM Basic Standards and include reference to social justice norms. To verify that farmers are consistently maintaining the standards, systemized processes are in place. Participatory Guarantee Systems support and encourage producer groups to work together and to improve their farming practices through the sharing of knowledge and experiences.

Transparency & Horizontality

Participatory Guarantee Systems have transparent, systemized decision-making processes and aim to share the responsibility for the organic guarantee. The guarantee system is created by the very farmers and consumers it serves, encouraging and sometimes requiring direct participation of farmers and consumers. Trust is created through open information and peer reviews.

Regionally Appropriate

Participatory Guarantee Systems are specific to individual communities, geographic areas, cultural environments, and markets. They involve less administration and lower costs than export focused third party certification.

Support to Local Economies

Participatory Guarantee Systems can be used as a tool for improving local socio-economic and ecological conditions by encouraging small-scale production and product processing. In local markets they help smallholders to have their products recognized as organic. Networks between consumers and smallholders are enhanced and the impetus for smallholders to expand their production base is reinforced.



Third Party Certification may not fit all Circumstances

- Organic production that relies only on export markets is vulnerable to external changes in the global market and is confronted with increasing competitiveness.
- In developing countries the potential for domestic organic markets is usually immense. Participatory Guarantee Systems provide a mechanism for smallholders who produce relatively low volumes of different crops to sell their cash crops as verifiably organic.
- Third party organic certification used mainly for export could be considered 'overdone' for local direct marketing purposes and is too much of a cost burden for small-scale farmers.



What Policy Makers and Regional NGOs can do to Support PGS Initiatives:

- Facilitate the development of local markets for organically produced foodstuffs, building on Participatory Guarantee Systems as a credible and affordable method of organic quality assurance.
- Reduce the burden of bureaucratic paperwork and administrative processes on consumer-farmers' groups starting local markets based on Participatory Guarantee Systems.
- Encourage diverse production by avoiding a strong focus on cash crop monocultures, fostering and safeguarding local agro-biodiversity.
- Bolster peer-support approaches between farmers, by organizing themselves within a Participatory Guarantee System, to achieve food security and food sovereignty, as well as a fair price.
- Encourage public awareness of local agriculture and facilitate access to urban markets for local/regional farmers.
- Revitalize the inclusion of social justice norms and practices as an essential part of organic production systems.
- Allow flexibility in legislation for the use of the word "organic" under verifiable systems.

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IFOAM Head Office

Charles-de-Gaulle-Str. 5
53113 Bonn, Germany

Phone: +49 - 228 - 92650 - 10

Fax: +49 - 228 - 92650 - 99

Email: HeadOffice@ifoam.org
www.ifoam.org

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IFOAM'S MISSION IS LEADING, UNITING AND ASSISTING THE ORGANIC MOVEMENT IN ITS FULL DIVERSITY.

OUR GOAL IS THE WORLDWIDE ADOPTION OF ECOLOGICALLY, SOCIALLY AND ECONOMICALLY SOUND SYSTEMS THAT ARE BASED ON THE PRINCIPLES OF ORGANIC AGRICULTURE.