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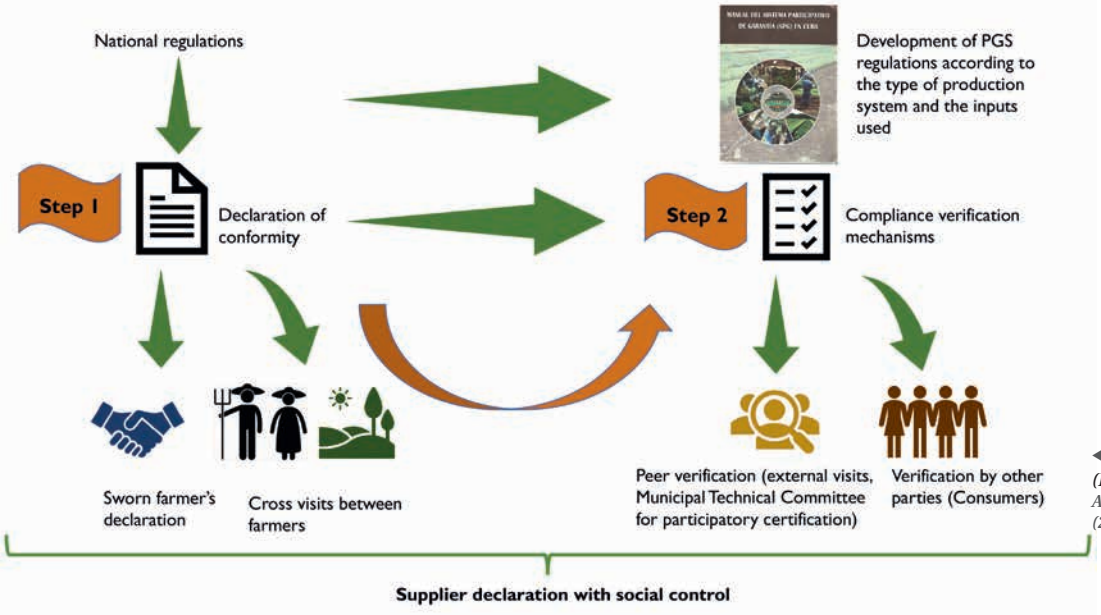
Participatory guarantee systems

A cheap and fair way to reward farmers for their efforts and agroecology adoption

Participatory guarantee systems (PGS) provide an alternative to third-party certification. They are cheap and easy to implement and represent locally relevant quality assurance initiatives that emphasize stakeholder participation, including producers and consumers, and are ideal for smallholder farmers worldwide. We explore how the PGS scheme can work in a country like Cuba* where agroecology and low input agriculture have been strongly supported by the government over last 30 years. Agroecology is pivotal to agricultural production in the country but, unless food is purchased directly from farmers or local markets, consumers have no way of knowing whether their produce purchases are from uniform intensive high-input farms or diversified low-input agroecological farms. We worked together with the Institute for Fundamental Research in Tropical Agriculture (INIFAT) of the Cuban Ministry of Agriculture. INIFAT is also leading the Cuba's Urban, Suburban and Family Agriculture Program' where most agroecological production is happening. The idea was to support farmers living and working in buffer and transition zones of two UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Reserves (MAB) in Cuba by adding value (through certification) to their high-quality products for the local and tourist markets. MAB farm produce supplying organic markets included mango, coconut, avocado, guava, sweet and sour orange, lemon, banana, sweet potato, tomato, cucumber, pineapple, cowpea, common beans and cassava. During the testing phase, six farmers from one MAB were trained for PGS application. Previous research demonstrated that farmers in the reserves play an important role in agrobiodiversity and traditional knowledge conservation, while also providing ecosystem services. All of this information is lost once the products leave the farm on a state truck that collects from both organic and conventional farms, and everything is mixed to serve the state food distributions system. **PGS development in Cuba is an attempt to empower smallholder farmers by recognizing and promoting their efforts in the use of agroecological practices, as well as their role as biodiversity custodians and providing a guarantee to consumers**.

* In the framework of a UNEP-GEF-funded project.



◀ *The participatory guarantee system (PGS) developed in Cuba. Adapted from Vega León & Gavilanes Díaz (2016)*

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Scaling agroecological transitions

Supporting institutional market innovations

A diverse range of market innovations link agroecological farmers and consumers in the Global South. Supporting the underlying institutional innovations and collective knowledge building are necessary for scaling agroecological transitions and intervening at the food system level[3]. Our research documents and supports the ways by which agricultural and food system actors rethink and organize their involvement in different markets, bolster agroecological changes, and modify the rules that structure market interactions*. It is a matter of qualifying and developing the quality attributes promoted in market exchanges and the institutions that underwrite them (standards, certifications, accreditations).

...cont'd

▶ *Clean vegetable producers from Moc Châu (Vietnam) preparing their orders, 2018. © E. Biénabe*

The recognition and dissemination of agroecological practices occurs through the institutionalization of new standards via the socialization and promotion of links between product quality and production systems(1). Successful scaling combines:

1. local experience involving actors from production areas in quality or origin labeling processes, e.g. geographical indications (Rooibos, South Africa(2)) or other territorial certifications (clean vegetables from Moc Châu, Vietnam) with the collective body playing a key role as guarantor in the distinction and quality building process(3)
2. networking between innovative areas and organizations via NGOs, projects and/or public actors, such as AGRECO** (Brazil), whose scaling occurred via a public family farming support program and the involvement of a network of qualified people
3. an increase in State policy support, with complementarity between research and NGOs in testing and explaining the mechanisms, such as the establishment and recognition of participatory guarantee systems (PGS) in Morocco, or the creation by Ecovida** of solidarity-based processing channels between three Brazilian States, whose political impact contributed to the institutionalization of PGS in the Brazilian Organic Law regarding organic agriculture(4).

* "Defining who has the right to participate in the market, what goods are included in the trading, how the trade should be conducted and the specific rights and obligations of each economic operator." (Niederle and Gelain, 2013)

** AGRECO: an agroecological farmers' association of Encostas da Serra Geral (Brazil).

Ecovida: a network of men and women agroecological farmers and NGOs.

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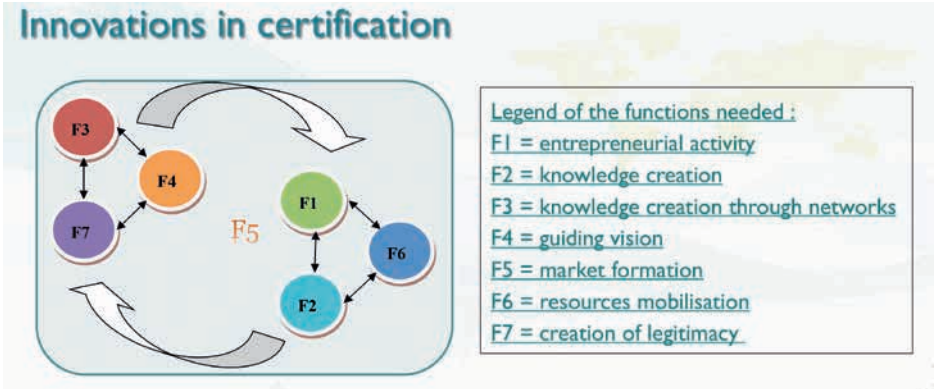
Participatory guarantee systems that reconnect consumers and producers

Participatory guarantee systems (PGS) are increasingly important institutional innovations that link agroecological production with responsible consumption. While today's dominant models of assurance for sustainable agriculture allocate oversight authority to third-party certifiers or standard-setters, PGS "certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange."(1) PGS focus on the democratization of knowledge whereby oversight systems for compliance with standards are created by producers, public-sector officials, food service actors, experts and consumers. Together they ensure that the techniques are adopted and that the audit is a learning process for all actors involved.(2) PGS provide a direct guarantee—through the formation of local markets—for sustainably produced food. PGS thus ensure the scaling-out of agroecological innovations as they typically emerge from farmer-led initiatives to co-create knowledge, and through alliances with consumer-led diverse economies.

The purpose of PGS is to assure actors' responsibility for producing food sustainably. This method dates back to organic agriculture experiments conducted in USA, France, Japan and Brazil in the 1960s. Participatory audits were one of the original ways of controlling organic agriculture techniques before the third-party certification model became dominant in policy and practice.(3) These pioneers felt that—to be in line with the environmental ethics of organic farming—farmers' expertise had to be trusted when verifying their practices. This certification approach eroded in the 1980s as organic farming was gradually mainstreamed into national legislation and international trade systems. However, PGS re-emerged in the 2000s, reaching 76 countries worldwide by 2019. Most of these countries were located in the Global South, where PGS arose to offset the dominant standard-setting paradigm adopted by non-governmental and corporate actors in the Global North via third-party certification. The latter was considered too costly for many small-scale producers and not applicable to local agroecological and socio-technical conditions. **As of 2021, 11 countries and one regional intergovernmental organization have included PGS as a legitimate form of certification for agroecological or organic products in domestic markets, i.e., Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, French Polynesia, India, Madagascar, Mexico, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Philippines and the East African Community (Kilimo Hai standard).**



▲ *PGS innovation mechanism.* © *A. Loconto*

▼ *Quezon PGS Certification Committee Meeting, Lucena, Philippines. 7 March 2019.* © *A. Loconto*

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