

Participatory Guarantee Systems: issues and capabilities in Italy

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Abstract

Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) involve both producers and consumers into the organic foods certification process. PGS allow to reduce costs and bureaucracy required to producers, but need a high level of participation of consumers. PGS are widely used in developing countries, but also in developed ones some experiences have been done. In Italy, farmers have a rising interest for PGS and experimental activities are ongoing. The aims of the present work are to review the state of art of PGS in Italy and to try to understand the room of development of this scheme. In particular, we focused our attention on the producers perspective. Three case studies, representative of the Italian context, were analyzed. The study has to be considered a preliminary step of a most comprehensive work about alternative certification schemes.

Introduction

According to the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM, 2008), Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) are “locally focused quality assurance systems. They certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange”. PGS place their trust in direct participation of farmers and even consumers in the certification process. They are both alternative and complementary to the third-party certification, considered highly complex and expensive (Triantafyllidis *et al.*, 2013). On the contrary, PGS are appropriate to smallholder agriculture, because allow more fair and less costly mechanisms of certification. The main objective of PGS is to provide a trust system for direct marketing of organic products to local consumers. Today, about 40 PGS initiatives have been established worldwide (FiLB- IFOAM, 2012). Latin America and India are the leaders, considering the number of farmers involved and the level of recognition achieved (FiLB- IFOAM, 2012). Consumers involved in PGS certification are often organized in networks like Solidarity Purchasing Group (SPG) or Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) (Brown, Miller, 2008) that adopt solidarity or *bem vivir* consumption (Montagniri, Regiani, 2010). Although PGS are not admitted in EU system, some informal experiences are underway, especially in France (see Nature & Progrès) and Spain. Also in Italy some project are ongoing.

Main objectives

- Have a first state of art of PGS in Italy, considering done, ongoing and starting experiences.
- Understand the coherence of the PGS models to the IFOAM principles.
- Find possible success strategies for PGS in Italy.

Methodologies

In order to analyze Italian PGS framework, we started from the national level and then we focused on some regional cases. The target were farmers, the supply side. The analysis included several phases, that required different methods. Phases and methods are the following:

- **Desk analysis:** investigation of the national situation and selection of three representative cases Umbrian GODO (Organized Group Demand and Supply) DES (District of Solidarity Economics) Como- Monza- Varese; GAS (Solidarity Purchasing Group) Mugello.
- **Survey:** deep analysis of the chosen cases (Farmers, Coordinators); interviews with national and international experts (IFOAM).
- **Coherence analysis:** congruence with basic elements of PGS model (shared vision, participation, transparency, trust, learning process, horizontality) .
- **SWOT analysis** (Learned *et al.*, 1965) for both the local and national levels.

Results

Desk analysis

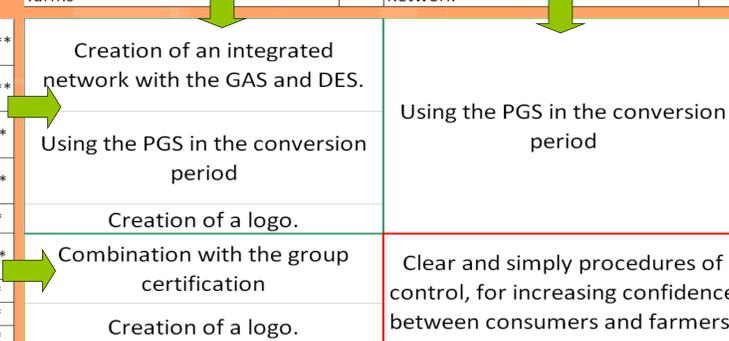
The references points to locate projects and experimentations about PGS in Italy are: IFOAM, AIAB (Italian Association of Organic Farming) and GAS network. The framework is in rapid movement: **twelve** Italian Regions are involved in PGS projects and several farmers expressed a great interest on the matter. All the PGS experiments developed their own protocol for certifying. However, there is not an unique scheme, which is desirable. The three different case studies are very well-defined and deeply different one from each others. The case of GODO is an already closed experiment, the DES one is a starting project, while GAS Mugello is a well developed PGS, created with a bottom-up approach.



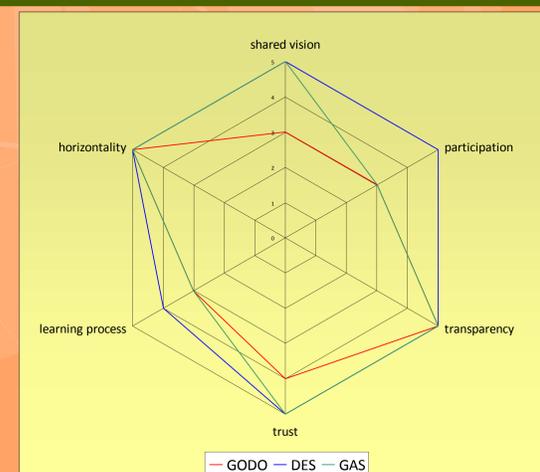
External Factors	Opportunities	Threats
Potential reference models in France (Nature & Progress) and Spain	****	
Possible synergies with both GAS and DES Networks	****	
Complementarity with both third part and group certification	***	
Enhancement of local crops and / or autochthonous breeds and varieties	***	
Specific projects approved and funded	**	
Absence of official recognition for European farmers at EU levels		***
Diffidence of the consumers		**
Absence of a unique structure of certification		**
Trade-off between PGS and group certification		**

IFOAM identifies six basic elements for identifying a PGS: shared vision, participation, transparency, learning process and horizontality. Compared to these six condition, all the three case studies considered have reached medium or good rate. The intrinsic characteristics of the experiences determinate the different rate values.

Internal Factors			
Strengths		Weaknesses	
Reduction certification costs (simpler and less bureaucracy) and simplification for processed goods.	****	High indirect costs for consumers	****
Great interest express by farmers, even if they are not already involved in any project.	****	Time consuming (all stakeholders)	****
Presence of a producers national network (Genuino Clandestino), also based on PGS.	**	Required great participation and knowledge by consumers	****
Suitable also for micro and small farms	***	Absence of a consumers national network	***



Coherence analysis



SWOT Analysis

The SWOT analysis is valid for the national level. The strategies identified highlight the importance of integration between supplies and demand sides. Connections with GAS and DES networks are fundamental for the success of PGS. Combination with standard certification are also important, both considering the use of PGS in conversion periods and the integration with existing schemes. Creation of logos, as happens in France, may help the diffusion of PGS.

Conclusion

PGS in Italy are still an emerging phenomenon. They success, in particular, when they are part of a bigger solidarity background, as DES. In this context the concept of “Guarantee” appears a more flexible idea in comparison to a rigid “Certification” scheme, which does not include also “grey” situations. On the other side, often PGS exceed the mere organic certification because they could include standards on fair working condition, ethical financing, fiscal accuracy, and so on. Moreover, participation of consumers in the guarantee process may lead to achieve the “fair price”, which is considered a great potentialities by farmers. However, renovation of certification schemes is necessary in order to improve the organic sector and PGS may represent an opportunity both for producers and consumers.

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