



Introduction to Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) in South Africa

Introduction

Participatory Guarantee Systems are locally focused assurance systems that enable market access for smallholder organic farmers. They share relationships shaped by collaboration and community shaped by narrative.

IFOAM-Organics International, an international body promoting organic agriculture worldwide, recognised the need to support assurance systems suited to smallholder agriculture and local markets. They articulated the basic elements and key features of existing smallholder farmer organisations worldwide that were working in a participatory way with consumers and local markets and classified these assurance systems as Participatory Guarantee Systems.

"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." IFOAM – Organics International

Excerpt from the mission of IFOAM – Organics International's PGS Committee:

"The PGS Committee will develop, facilitate and encourage Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) around the world. While we work to identify and synthesize key elements and characteristics of a PGS, we will maintain a fundamentally open and inclusive attitude to the many and various ways a PGS can function."

More information on PGS may be found here:

<https://www.saoso.org/about-pgs>

https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/573628_838c0b42ec6542e2b58c7a4cbb21341e.pdf

<https://www.ifoam.bio/en/organic-policy-guarantee/participatory-guarantee-systems-pgs>

IFOAM-Organics International's position on organic agriculture as well as their definition forms the basis for PGS.

The IFOAM–Organics International definition:

“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.”

- a. Principle of health: Organic Agriculture should sustain and enhance the health of soil, plant, animal, human and planet as one and indivisible.
- b. Principle of ecology: Organic Agriculture should be based on living ecological systems and cycles, work with them, emulate them and help sustain them.
- c. Principle of fairness: Organic Agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities
- d. Principle of care: Organic Agriculture should be managed in a precautionary and responsible manner to protect the health and well-being of current and future generations and the environment.

“Participatory Guarantee Systems subscribe to the same ideals that guided yesterday's pioneering organic farmers. PGS programmes require a fundamentally ecological approach to agriculture that uses no synthetic chemical pesticides, fertilizers or GMOs, and further sustains farmers and workers in a cradle of long-term economic sustainability and social justice. The primarily local and direct market focus of PGS programmes encourages community building, environmental protection and support to local economies.” IFOAM - Organics International.

PGS reflect the spirit of the [declaration of the Forum for Food Sovereignty](#), Nyéléni, Mali, 2007

“Food sovereignty is the right of all peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems. It puts the aspirations of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of

markets and corporations. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the right to use and manage lands territories, water, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those that produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations.”

PGS Mission

To position PGS as a reliable and transparent organic assurance system for farmers and consumers in order to secure a sustainable role for smallholder farmers in the organic sector, introduce emerging organic farmers to the benefits of a Participatory Guarantee System and further develop an understanding and commitment to organic agriculture among all stakeholders - farmers, local markets and customers, throughout South Africa. Independent retailer participants (short supply chain) are committed to enabling smallholder organic farmers’ market access through a fair pricing model and continually strive to align their policies to reflect their commitment to community, the environment and future generations.

PGS operates according to the basic elements and key features of PGS as adopted by IFOAM-Organics International. These guidelines and key features are summarised as follows:

**The Principle
Of Health.**

**The Principle
Of Ecology.**

**The Principle
Of Fairness.**

**The Principle
Of Care.**

Basic principles of a Participatory Guarantee System (IFOAM–Organics International)

Basic Elements

- **Shared Vision** – the members of the PGS share a common goal and collectively embrace the principles of organic agriculture.
- **Participatory** – the members participate in the development and management of the process and procedures of the PGS which is “owned” and controlled by the collective.
- **Transparency** – the system is open to public and peer scrutiny at all levels.
- **Trust** – “integrity based approach” – trust and integrity form the basis of the system.
- **Learning Process** – the assessments and the process focus on skills and knowledge exchange.
- **Horizontality** – the group has a flat organisational structure, it is developed and managed by peers and not by a top-heavy management. All are responsible, all are accountable.

Key Features

- Grassroots Organization
- Suitable to smallholder agriculture
- Principles and values that enhance the livelihoods of farming families and promote organic agriculture.
- Mechanisms for supporting farmers to produce organic products and be recognized as organic farmers
- Norms conceived by the stakeholders through a democratic and participatory process
- Documented management systems and procedures
- Mechanisms to verify farmer’s compliance to the established norms
- A bottom-line document, e.g. a farmer’s pledge stating agreement with the established norms.
- Seals or labels providing evidence of organic status.
- Clear and previously defined consequences for non-compliance

The advantages of PGS:

- It is transparent, open to public scrutiny and peer-driven.
- It is extremely cost effective.
- The administration and “red tape” is streamlined and simplified to suit small-scale producers.
- Because all farmers/producers are part of the process, PGS also becomes a support and “skills transference” system, where farmers/producers and consumers can share information, offer advice, and identify customer needs.
- It is important to note that PGS is essentially an assurance system for local markets. In order for all stakeholders to participate, farmers should be located in close proximity to each other and their markets.
- Stakeholders develop mechanisms and define processes that support the principles of PGS and therefore PGS reflect the culture of communities and geography of the area.

Standards and labelling

PGS groups base their operation on the PGS principles as described by IFOAM-Organics International, and may use as the terms of reference, a recognised locally developed standard, the South African Organic Sector Organisation (SAOSO) [Standard for Organic Production and Processing](#), approved for inclusion in the IFOAM Family of Standards.

The SAOSO Standard for Organic Production and Processing recognizes PGS as an alternative assurance system to third-party certification. PGS groups who have farmer/producer members wanting to make use of the SAOSO Organic logo may apply to SAOSO, and in collaboration with PGS South Africa, be approved to use the “PGS Endorsed” logo if their standards are aligned to this standard. In this way, third-party certification and “PGS Endorsed” can operate together for the benefit of the sector, its supporters and consumers. This does not exclude PGS members in a group from developing their own “norms and standards through a democratic and participatory process” (see key features). The SAOSO Standard for Organic Production and Processing is used as the terms of reference for the

“*Basic Production Principles*” which are published as a simplified and accessible document, in effect translating the standard into a format suitable for PGS stakeholders.

PGS South Africa

PGS South Africa (PGSSA) is a non-profit voluntary association of farmers, producers, local markets, independent retailers and consumers. Their objective is to support the establishment of Participatory Guarantee Systems in South Africa; to facilitate market access for local organic growers; and to create an environment where consumers are assured of the integrity of organic products. PGS groups that are members of PGSSA may elect a representative to sit on the PGSSA committee.

Conclusion

The horizontal structure and self-determination qualities of PGS are well suited to supporting food sovereignty, for example seed exchanges and farmer collaboration on supply chain logistics. PGS is not only an assurance system, but is also a forum and vehicle for change. Its focus on knowledge sharing and development supports the sustainable utilisation of our planet’s resources.