



This project received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation program under Grant Agreement n° 727848.



Participatory guarantee systems (pgss) for the valorization and authenticity assurance of supply chains for ancient grains

In recent years, we have seen growing interest on an international level for alternative certification strategies for organic products. In particular, Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGSs) simplify the bureaucratic procedures for small organic producers, who are often overwhelmed by the considerable documentation required by third-party certification.

Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGSs)

On the international scene, third-party certification has asserted itself as the prevailing model to ensure the quality of organic production. It consists of operations on the part of an independent and accredited agency to carry out controls on companies and to certify that they are producing organically. This type of certification comes at an economic and logistic cost with respect to the amount of time that must be devoted to the lengthy documentation that must be provided to gain certified status.

PGSs, by contrast, 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.” [1] These approaches simplify the bureaucratic procedures for small producers, who are often unable to manage the great quantity of documentation for third-party certification. In addition, PGSs reduce costs, thereby avoiding the involvement of private and/or foreign certifying agencies and eliminating intermediaries.

The alternative character of participatory guarantees has often been associated to that of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), both with regard to their shared distance from standardized systems of production, distribution and certification of industrial food products and because both have become exponents of new forms of political associationism and market governance. In fact, within AFNs food production and consumption are closely linked in spatial, economic and social terms. In the same way, PGSs operate locally within agricultural communities, engaging in direct sale strategies. Their success is based on three main factors:

1. simplification: reduction of bureaucratic procedures and intermediaries;
2. access: availability of organic products in local markets at more affordable prices than those of organic products sold through large-scale supply chains and specialized shops;
3. local development, promotion and valorization of local and regional products [2,3].

In addition, PGSs focus on issues that are not taken into consideration by current norms regarding organic production, such as respect for working standards, animal wellbeing, the enhancement of rural communities, the rights of small agricultural producers, etc.

PGSs and the supply chains of ancient grains

One of the case studies conducted by CERERE, the “Montespertoli Ancient Grain Association,” showed how authenticity assurance of organic production was guaranteed both by third-party certification and PGSs. The latter employ a mechanism through which associates reciprocally control the integrity of biological production of network members. The association organizes at least one annual visit to each of its members to ascertain compliance with the requirements of organic agriculture. These visits are open to the public and to all those

who wish to take part (including consumers); the findings are recorded and signed by at least three members of the association's board.

This control system, based on the active participation of all stakeholders, is quite efficient in the local context of Montespertoli, thanks to the group's small size (42 members, including farmers, millers and bread makers), to the trust of the participants in the work of fellow members, and to the mechanisms for building its reputation outside the production chain. Nevertheless, over time the association has seen low participation on the part of members in the control processes required by the PGSs, mainly because of time considerations and for their voluntary character. Giving up the PGS model, however, would lead to the abandonment of the association on the part of various farmers; to prevent this from happening, the associates decided to move toward a more structured arrangement of the PGS model, which at the moment resolves problems for those farmers who follow organic methods in cereal production, but not for those involved in other types of production.

PGSs as a model of social innovation

PGSs represent a model of social innovation able to give voice to the needs of farmers [4] and to foreground the specific characteristics of local contexts, which national and/or European regulations are often unable to account for. Indeed, the development of PGSs facilitates various social processes which on the one hand favor social inclusion and cohesion by strengthening relations of trust among the associates of agriculture networks, and on the other create a virtuous circle in which the rules of the network and shared knowledge of the local context encourage implementation of an efficient system of guarantees.



Figure 1. Participants involved in a visit to a farm business.

References

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