

Participatory Guarantee Systems:

Can They Overcome the Challenges of Conventional Certification in the Agri-food Sector?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Quality ‘standards’ have acquired a strategic role in the regulation of agri-food systems. Their implementation increasingly relies on ‘third-party certification’ (TPC), a system whose legitimacy is grounded on the technoscientific principles of independence and objectivity. Driven by market mechanisms, TPC leads to a race to the bottom in practices as well as to conflicts of interest, while its high costs and administrative burdens make it poorly suited to small-scale producers. Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) arise as spaces of citizen co-creation that provide an alternative to this model.

The turn to «quality»

During the ‘Thirty Glorious Years’, governments in several countries supported and oversaw the ‘modernization’ of agriculture and the food industry to ensure a wide supply of affordable products for the population. The economic downturns of the 1970s subsequently paved the way for neoliberal policies that weakened state prerogatives and fostered the growth of oligopolies in the agri-food sector. The rise of the environmental movement, the growing complexity of supply chains, and health scandals simultaneously prompted an increasing number of consumers to seek out foods perceived as healthier, local, fair, and sustainable.

These trends have shifted competition in the market from being primarily price-based to focusing on «quality», leading to increased reliance on voluntary regulatory mechanisms (standards) which now operate alongside traditional binding regulations (treaties, laws, decrees, etc.). Food system actors use standards for multiple strategic purposes: defining ethical production/marketing practices, managing risks, differentiating products...

Third-party certification

A certificate, resulting from the implementation of a quality assurance system, is the most widely used means to prove that a product meets certain standards, typically through a marking label. Third-party certification’ (TPC), based on independent and anonymized audits carried out by a ‘certification body’ (CB), is conventionally regarded as the most reliable among these systems.

Its architecture is intricate: CBs are themselves monitored by ‘accreditation bodies’ (ABs) that verify their competence in certifying compliance with specific standards, and all bodies must be accredited according to ISO/IEC general guides for auditing practices. These activities

are subject to competitive dynamics that create four intertwined markets (for products, certification, accreditation, and standardization) configuring a ‘tripartite standardization regime’ (TSR).

Several factors have contributed to the success of TPC. It allows large retailers to offload their quality assurance responsibilities to CBs and pass the process costs onto suppliers, while enabling states with reduced monitoring capacities to enforce the application of standards (and increasingly, their own regulations). It is also a means for alternative initiatives to expand the reach of their products and for producers to access markets with higher prices.

FLAWS AND CONTRADICTIONS OF THE TRIPARTITE STANDARDIZATION REGIME

The market-driven nature of TPC leads to several issues. CBs and ABs have an incentive in maximizing the number of audits and certifications issued while simultaneously loosening their controls. Moreover, since the same logo is used regardless of the level of compliance, the obtention of the label itself tends to become the primary goal of certification. Finally, competition pushes certification, accreditation, and standardization actors to overlap their areas of activity, blurring the lines that are supposed to keep these processes trustworthy.

On the other hand, this system perpetuates existing inequalities between small- and large-scale producers: the administrative burden, the high fees charged, and the infrastructure needed for its implementation are not proportional to the size of activities. The absence of labelling may then reflect an excessive cost of generating information through TPC rather than a product’s non-compliance with certain standards.

While the TSR has allowed for some harmonization of practices at a global level, it hinders opportunities for cross-learning that can occur in less formal networks, limiting the emergence of sustainable innovations tailored to local conditions.

Self-managed alternatives: participatory guarantee systems

In response to the challenges posed by the TSR, the 1990s saw the emergence of Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGSs). Unlike the TSR, PGSs actively seek the participation of all local stakeholders through horizontal processes based on trust. Members work together to develop a charter or reference framework with standards adapted to their specific reality, relying on local structures that include at least a group of producers (and possibly consumers).

Generally, the PGS approach assumes that peers and those sharing the same social and geographical context are best suited to conduct local-level evaluations. Site visits are thus carried out by other producers, ideally joined by consumers and/or other members. The evaluation committee's feedback, usually co-constructed with the participants of the visits and the evaluated members, is contextualized within the ongoing development of producers' practices and aims to support their transition journey.

AN INCLUSIVE MODEL OF COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT

The PGS mechanism goes beyond merely ensuring compliance with certain standards. Collective dynamics stimulate the exchange of information and experiences, improving mutual understanding among members and facilitating system adjustments to different requirements. Additionally, by creating spaces for discussion and collective action, PGSs contribute to strengthening local capacities, notably serving as platforms for organizing mutual aid groups (collective purchases, joint marketing, access to credit...).

PGSs are considered particularly well-suited for small-scale producers' quality assurance: managed through the voluntary involvement of members and with simplified administrative procedures, they are gener-

ally less expensive and more flexible than TPC. However, these advantages may be offset by the time and resource investment required for active and regular participation in their processes.

For various reasons (distance, reluctance to evaluate...), participation is often a problematic issue. The dynamics of PGSs can thus be affected by an unequal distribution of workload, which then may primarily fall on the employees of partner organizations and a few particularly committed members, distancing PGS from their originally intended objectives.

Can certification truly evolve?

PGSs and the TSR convey different philosophies regarding the governance of agri-food systems. The TSR blends the two traditional arenas of societal value formation (democratic institutions and markets) in a new kind of compound where individual purchasing choices replace political debates as the central strategy through which citizens integrate their consumption concerns.

This model thus contributes to achieving the technocratic goals of neoliberal ideology by presenting the self-regulating market as the ultimate democratic forum, an idea encapsulated by the notion of the 'sovereign consumer' according to which '...the market is a democracy in which every penny gives the right to cast a ballot' (Ludwig von Mises). However, the claimed neutrality of this system masks a subordination of general causes to private interests.

Vis-à-vis the risk of abandoning politics to the markets, PGSs aim to transform quality assurance systems into deliberative 'hybrid forums' where all local actors involved in agri-food systems can discuss and define frameworks that reflect their priorities and values, integrating both citizens and 'experts' on the issues addressed.

CHALLENGES OF SCALE AND RECOGNITION

The expansion capacity of PGSs in the context of globalized supply chains appears to face some limitations. The 'interpersonal' trust on which they rely develops through direct and regular interactions linked to geographical proximity. Without these conditions, trust can only be established by mobilizing 'institutional' mechanisms (standardized procedures, surveillance systems...) typical of TSR, which risk compromising the nature of the PGS model. Relocalizing agri-food systems is therefore essential for their success and broader adoption.

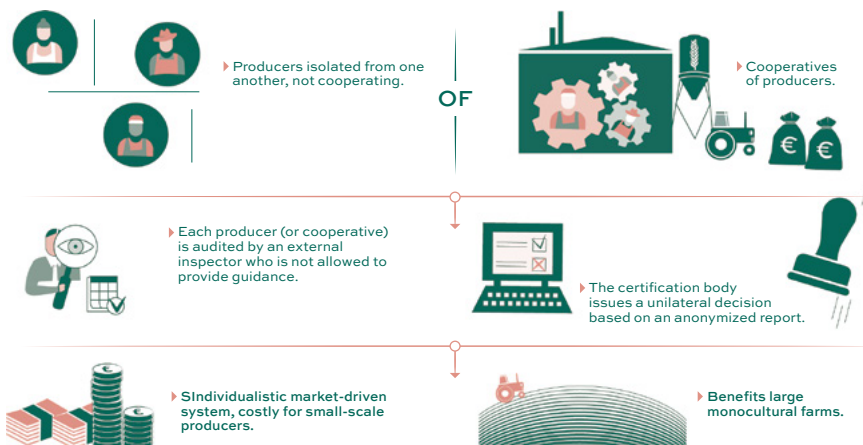
The lack of public recognition complicates PGS access to public support and fuels perceptions of lower reliability among consumers. Only 16 countries include them in their legislation, with notable absences from major organic product importers (EU and the United States). Agroecology, with its non-dogmatic principles and broad international recognition, provides SPGs a unifying and legitimizing normative framework that has already proven its relevance and adaptability for the evaluation of innovations and production systems.



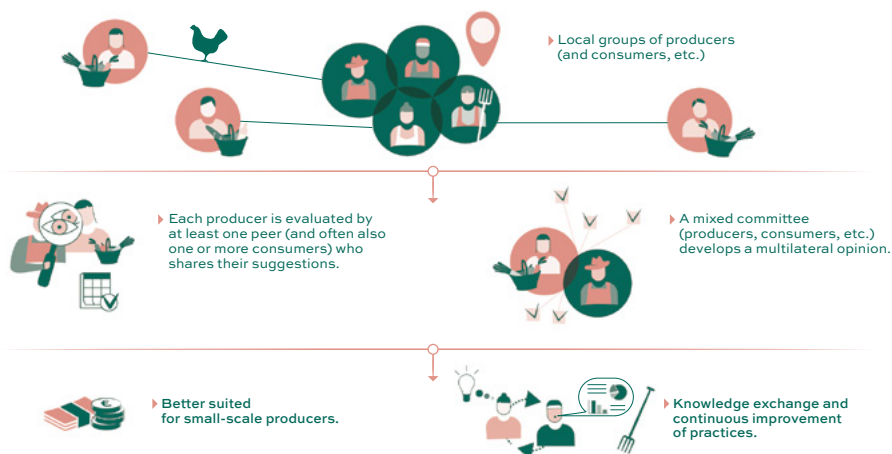
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Inspection on a cattle farm.

Conventional Third Party Certification (TPC)



Peer Certification: Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS)



The Phosphore Collection is a collaboration between the NGOs Autre Terre, Humundi and Iles de Paix.

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The Phosphore collection is a series of studies launched by the SIA collective (Humundi, Iles de Paix, Autre Terre) on the challenges of food systems. It is characterised by the analysis of contested issues that drive the decision-making arenas of food systems. It seeks to understand the reading grids that underlie political discourses, the competing arguments and their scientific validity. Each issue is intended to provide an overview of a debate, and aims to equip readers in the controversy.



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