

Organic Tips of the Month

What is a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS)?

Organic producers around the world have been developing methods to guarantee the organic integrity of their products for years. Today, what are generally referred to as Third-Party Certification systems have become the dominant means of Organic Guarantee for world trade and producers have a number of respected and accredited Third-Party Organic Certification agencies to choose from.

While Third-Party Certification is an essential component to world trade, there are downsides to the system. The inherent expense and paperwork required in a multi-level system discourages most small organic producers from being certified at all. This limits local and domestic trade as well as access to organic products. Worse yet, it limits the growth of the Organic Movement as a whole.

Although many small hold farmers practice organic farming methods already, they cannot access the official organic market because their organic certification costs are too high for them to afford and procedures too complicated. In addition small hold farmers produce in small quantities than large farmers and cannot capitalize on economies of scale. They also tend to have diversified agriculture systems that produce a range of crops instead of a single one and this further complicates the process of organic certification. In order to overcome the problems posed by institutional organic systems, the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) is designed to declare products as organic. The PGS involves a network of small hold farmer groups and small scale agro-processing industries together with alternative marketing and distribution channels such as cooperative stores and fairs.

The idea of PGS is that instead of having an external certifier and therefore a high, additional cost, a network of groups of farmers organizes itself to define the organic standard and practices, inspect each other and verify compliance with organic principles. The system requires a great amount of coordination and time; however, the important aspect is that the small hold farmers are able to become certified because the financial costs are lower. In fact, certification often becomes a benefit as farmers receive training and capacity building from the inspection process.