



Participatory Guarantee System in Southern India

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Short title: Participatory Guarantee Systems for organic agriculture, India

Key Message: Participatory Guarantee Systems as an alternate organic certification mechanism find a balance between the provisioning capacity of the forest and increasing the income of locals and farmers in Southern India

Suggested citation: TEEBcase by R. Jordan and M. John (2010) Participatory Guarantee Systems for organic agriculture, India, available at: TEEBweb.org.



Picture 1: Implementation of organic agriculture
Courtesy: Keystone



Picture 2: A farmer at work
Courtesy: Keystone

1. What is the problem?

The Nilgiris is a mountain area, tucked away in the state of Tamil Nadu in South India and is known for its rich biodiversity and dense native forests. The climatic conditions and soils of this district greatly support agriculture and the cultivation of medicinal plants, exotic fruits and cut flowers throughout the year. Tea and coffee plantations also dominate the region along with commercial vegetable cultivation. In the last three decades however, a significant increase in unsustainable harvesting methods, coupled with an extensive cropping system and the excessive use of chemicals, have resulted in the damage of this delicate ecosystem and has also depleted the vegetation and biodiversity of this region (Selvaraj, Ramamoorthy, and Mohandaa, IFOAM 2009b).

The implementation of organic management schemes and a financially viable verification model to demonstrate the organic status of the products, has proved to be a way of protecting the provisioning capacity of the forest and increasing the income of locals and farmers in this region. The internationally accepted system of “Third-Party” Organic

Certification is a dominant means of organic guarantee for world trade. However, this organic certification method, which is based on providing an audit trail through every step of production, from purchase of seed to sale of the crop or product is a very expensive process, both in direct costs (Individual Organic Certification on small farms may cost more per acre than the sale of the crops) and in terms of time (Khosla 2006).

2. What has been the response to these problems?

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 2009a).

PGS is recognized and promoted as the alternative and scientific method of organic farm certification by both, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Federation of Organic Farming Movements (IFOAM). The Government of India supports PGS through the National Centre of Organic Farming (NCOF). The PGS Organic India Council has approved the PGS scheme through ten different Facilitation Councils i.e. IIRD (Institute for Rural Integrated Development), OFAI (Organic Farming Association of India), Keystone Foundation, DDS (Deccan Development Society), Chetana Vikas, CCD (Covenant Centre for Development), Timbaktu Collective, Grassroots, Thanal and GREEN Foundation (OFAI 2008, OFAI 2009).

Keystone Foundation is a non-governmental organization that has been helping the local Nilgiris people since 1995 to protect their environment and enhance their livelihood. Keystone developed a Participatory Guarantee System adapted to the local market, in order to provide an affordable model of certification with integrated ecological monitoring and capacity building functions (Keystone Foundation 2009). PGS complements the organic movement as it is set up and managed by the very farmers and consumers that it serves. As there is no universal model of PGS, each variant is adapted and specific to the individual communities, geographies, politics and markets of their origin.

The PGS system implemented by Keystone in the Nilgiris is based on active participation of stakeholders and is built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange. The PGS system consists of a social network and is administered by three organizational groups. They are the *Local Groups* that conduct peer reviews of its members and decide which farmers are to be certified, the *Regional Council*, which provides capacity building, facilitates, monitors and recognizes local groups, and the *PGS Organic India Council*, which is responsible for the approval of new Regional Councils and the reviewing and upgrading of the PGS program (IFOAM 2008 & IFOAM 2009c).

In terms of cultivated produce, Keystone works with each individual farmer to revive traditional crops, provide food security, and improve health and nutrition, livelihoods and access to land. This system strives to find alternatives to monoculture plantations, which have proved to be destructive to the Nilgiris ecosystem. In addition, Keystone also facilitates continuous dialogue with the forest department. Keystone Foundation has helped the local community establish a number of 'green shops' in the area, and set up village seed banks. For example, Green Shops in Tamil Nadu are located at Coonoor, Kotagiri and Ooty sell local organic products such as honey, oil, tea, soaps, coffee powder, incense etc. These shops have shown a total sale of Rs. 15,88,816, Rs. 8,84,340 and Rs. 16,31,114 respectively in 2009 (Keystone Foundation 2009).

What policy uptake resulted from examining the ecosystem services?

Although Keystone has not yet developed its own PGS standards, it currently follows the 15 “Basic Organic Standards”, which are in harmony with the National Standards for Organic Production (NSOP) set by the Government of India and the International Federation of Agriculture Movement (IFOAM) 2005 standards. Based on Indian National Standards for Organic Products, synthetic chemical fertilizers, synthetic chemical pesticides and GMO’s are prohibited. Only organic fertilizers may be used and botanical pesticides are allowed. Additionally, bags and containers used to harvest and transport organic products must be clean and clearly labeled ‘organic only’. Farmers must also take an Organic Pledge and successfully complete a peer-appraisal of at least one other farm and have had a successful peer review of their own farm. The PGS in India is based on a horizontal network of the National Coordinating Committee, the Regional Group, the Local Group and finally the Farm Family (Khosla 2006).

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Acknowledgement: Sasha Rodricks (sasharodricks@gmail.com) for compiling the case and Ajay Rastogi (ajayras@gmail.com) for reviewing the case



Picture 3: The PGS social network
Courtesy: Keystone



Picture 4: The cultivated areas
Courtesy: Keystone