

A participatory guarantee system for India

India has an internationally accepted Third Party Certification system serving farmers wishing to export their organic products.

However, it is not accessible to majority of the millions of smallholders in the country. How can they still be included in the Organic family?

Much of Indian agriculture is carried out under 'default organic' management, which simply means for financial or other reasons the farmers do not use chemical fertilisers, pesticides or other organically prohibited inputs. The problem is that default organic farmers never made a choice to be organic. Without knowledge of sustainable chemical-free alternatives and the damage that these toxic materials can cause to their land and health, there is no guarantee, no pledge and, in fact, no reason to prevent these farmers from using unsustainable chemical pesticides, fertilisers and GMOs as soon as they become available.

Under the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA), India has developed an internationally accepted Third Party Certification system for the export of organic products, providing a tremendous export opportunity for India's farmers. As India is poised to become the most populous country in the world and with growing consumer concern over pesticide residues, the government also recognised the need to support and encourage organic production for domestic consumption as well – specifically from hundreds of millions of India's small diversified farmers. For most of these farmers (many who are illiter-

ate), Third Party Certification is not seen as practical.

Whereas the US and EU decided to legislatively bar organic farmers for whom Third Party Certification does not fit from declaring themselves as such, in India the Ministry of Agriculture, with assistance from FAO, wanted to explore ways that these farmers could still somehow be included in the 'organic family'. In March 2005 an evaluation of the situation in India began, and movement towards a compliment to Third Party Certification aimed at India's diversified small farmers, focusing on local and domestic markets was pursued. The key features the Ministry looked at matched up very well with the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) model of certification.

In India, the situation is complicated by the fact that to maintain favourable trading status with the EU, India has agreed to be subject to EU regulations regarding organic farmers and the necessity of Third Party Certification. While NGOs and small farmer groups are upset by this, APEDA perceives that the value of favourable trading status with the EU outweighs any (perceived) difficulties small farmers may face. At the present time, no solution has been reached. Pro-PGS groups continue to adamantly state they will not give up use of the word 'organic' while APEDA is

proposing legislation based on the EU model that would bar them from using the word. The remainder of this article will focus only on the development of the PGS programme in India, since only time will tell what solution is reached between the two opposing groups in India.

A national programme /local focus

There were local PGS programmes operating in three states of India, but the Ministry wanted a national scale programme with a system of mutual recognition and support between regional groups. Besides giving greater credibility to the programme as a whole, and making it possible for the regions to share experiences with a common vocabulary, the idea was that it would allow small farmers across the wider network to support each other in cooperative processing and marketing opportunities.

In spring 2006, FAO and the Ministry of Agriculture, in consultation with farmers, NGOs and state government officials, began working on a model PGS programme specific to India. After a national workshop in September 2006, pilot PGS programmes were launched in 14 regions of India. The next national level workshop is planned for March 2007, where experiences from these 14 groups will be integrated into a somewhat broader (though still limited) launch.

Key features of the Indian PGS programme

The Indian Participatory Guarantee System was initiated as a compliment to the Third Party Certification programme and is not meant to supplant it. It was built for small farmers selling into domestic, primarily local markets, and this specificity is seen as crucial to its success. There are no false illusions that the Indian PGS

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will provide a 'universal solution' to providing a credible organic guarantee any more so than Third Party Certification has or has not proven a universal fit.

Key features include:

Providing a credible guarantee: The Indian public has a high level of mistrust of most bureaucratic and even business operations in India, believing that high levels of corruption and bribery are common. Rightly or wrongly this perception is fuelled by the media. By including both farmers and consumers in the certification process, and maintaining extremely high levels of transparency in every aspect of the certification process, the Indian PGS programme hopes to provide a more credible guarantee to consumers who have grown mistrustful of closed decision-making processes.

Less paperwork: The PGS programme in India had to address two problems in regards to paperwork. The first, of course, is the low literacy rates; but second, and equally important, is the fact that the small farmers targeted by the PGS programme produce for a mix of home use and diverse markets including direct and barter sales. Receipts and written contracts are rarely used. The idea of a paper trail, which has validity in regards to larger farms and contract based sales, has limited practical (or more importantly credible) value as a compliance mechanism under these circumstances.

Low cost: The involvement of farmers (and consumers where possible) in the certification process drastically reduces direct costs. The reduction of paperwork and record-keeping further reduce both direct and indirect costs.

Training and field days: Required trainings and field days ensure that

farmers wanting to be listed as PGS organic understand what they are agreeing to. Besides an initial training, attendance at field days at key times during the growing season (initial planting, key pest pressure times and harvest times) reinforce organic concepts and provide a space for farmers to teach, and learn from each other, solutions to the challenges faced at those times.

Organic pledge: Farmers have to make a public declaration to uphold and maintain the principles of organic agriculture. This may be through a verbal ceremony instead of in writing.

Peer appraisals instead of professional Third Party inspections: To reduce costs there are no external inspections. Instead, to promote interchanges between farmers leading to capacity building and mutual support, as with other PGS programmes, a system of open, formalised and scripted group appraisals is carried out by at least three farmers from the local group. Consumers, members of the local Panchayat (a national system of local governance) and local religious leaders are invited and may even be required as regionally appropriate. At least one member of the inspection team has to be literate. The scripted nature of the appraisal is necessary with minimally trained inspectors to ensure complete physical checks of the farm and equally importantly, to verbally re-confirm that the farmer understands organic growing practices and what they are committing to.

Social control as a compliance mechanism: The use of the local farmers in peer appraisals as well as required attendance at meetings of the local group of farmers means that considerable social control is exerted

on the farmers to stick to organic principles. Random Pesticide Residue Testing of organic products is coordinated at the national level. Positive test results may mean the suspension of the entire local group. This encourages farmers to help each other with organic solutions to problems, rather than looking the other way when neighbours might otherwise stray. It also encourages local groups to proactively report inadvertent and purposeful non-compliances of individual farmers. Guidelines to sanctions are made on a regional level but final decisions are made on the local village level, with the focus on being supportive to bring the farmers back into the 'organic fold', especially with inadvertent defaults.

Empowers the small farmer through increased marketing opportunities: Individual Third Party Certification is too expensive and too difficult for virtually all of India's small farmers. The other Third Party option, Group Certification schemes using Internal Control System (ICS), are an excellent option for those that are seeking international markets, especially for export-oriented crops, since they drastically reduce the cost of certification. But for many small farmers this is not the case. When selling into diversified local markets, the aforementioned issues with paperwork, as well as the common point of sale requirement and the fact that to control costs most ICS farmers get certification of just one particular commodity crop and do not end up with a 'whole farm' certification, all mean that farmers are frustrated in getting recognition for their other organic products in the domestic market. PGS organic farmers receive individual 'whole farm' certification. It is important to note that local PGS groups can form a solid base for a

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Third Party ICS. In fact, organised groups of local farmers are more likely to realise and be able to take advantage of international marketing opportunities if they are able to navigate the paperwork requirements necessary.

Works within existing structures already supporting Indian farmers:

There are a number of existing initiatives and support programmes for India's small farmers, including Farmers' Field Schools and Farmer Cooperative Societies, and it was seen as critical that the PGS be able to easily integrate with such pre-existing structures rather than require the creation of new programmes.

Subtext of training and support built into the system: Because of their direct involvement in the certification process, farmers naturally invest more in supporting and advising each other in order to maintain the integrity of the group as a whole. The PGS reliance on peer appraisals further facilitates the sharing of information, creating a grassroots support network that the farmers actively turn to when they have problems. In other countries, the minimum number of farmers present at peer appraisals may be exceeded by farmers interested in seeing creative solutions to problems they all face. This provides an immediate source of technical and moral support for farmers that might otherwise see no other option than to use prohibited substances. Local groups can also easily coordinate variety trials and evaluate different growing techniques to find what is most effective in their locale.

Inclusive of new and in-conversion organic farmers: New organic farmers that embrace organic growing practices but who are not yet farming

land that is free of prohibited materials for the prescribed 36 months are the ones most in need of the supportive network and capacity building that a Participatory Guarantee System provides. Although they do not have access to full certification, they are welcomed as active members of the local group and receive recognition of their status as in-conversion farmers.

Millions of acres, millions of farms

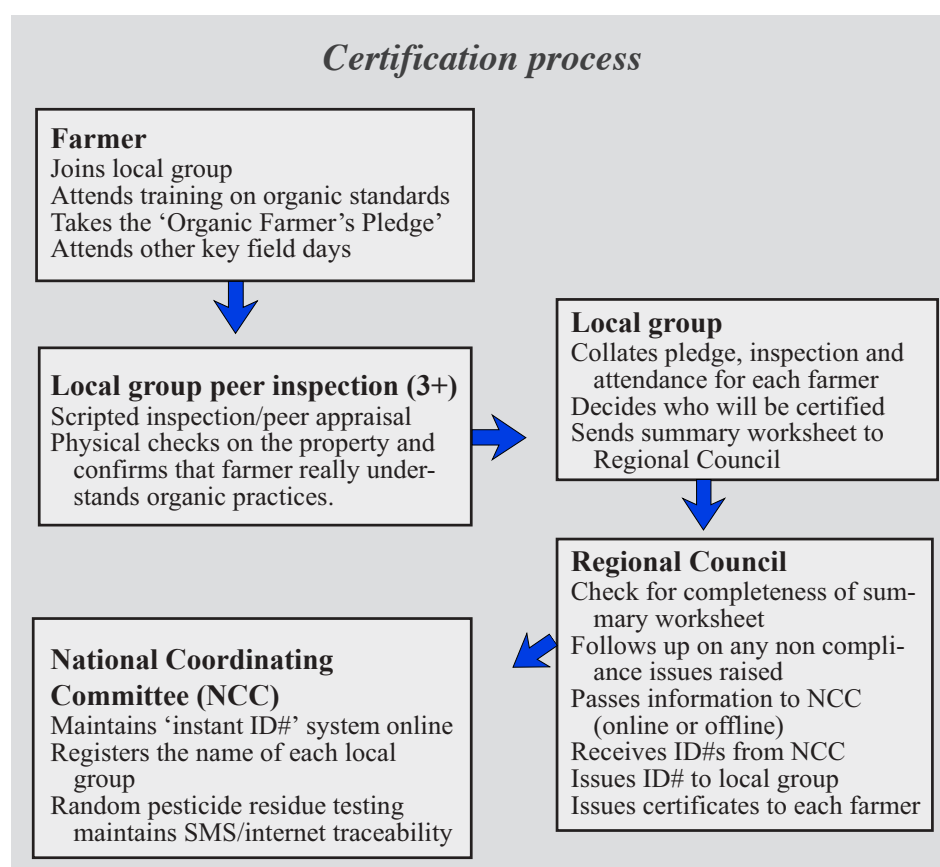
A central goal of the PGS programme in India is to bring much greater numbers of farmers into a system of committed organic production. If credible whole farm Third Party Certification is difficult for small illiterate farmers to implement, it is even more difficult for the certification agencies! It takes considerable time, expense and training to review applications and conduct external audits even on larger

farms selling into more established markets. To do this for millions of very small farmers, all who need facilitation in regards to paperwork and who are selling into diverse and practically untraceable market streams, a different approach is needed.

There are currently 11 accredited third party certifiers in India. Even if that number was doubled, and then doubled again, the number of farms that could be certified in a given year would still be a fraction of 1% of the number of farms in India already operating organically. The PGS programme offers a way of certifying farms that are especially time consuming to certify under a Third Party system.

Conclusions

PGS and Third Party certification are not parallel, but complimentary sys-



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tems of certification. The use of both within India will bring the greatest number of farmers into a system of committed organic production.

Working at a grassroots level with the direct involvement of farmers and consumers, PGS certification of millions of farmers can take place relatively quickly; providing safe clean healthy produce to millions of Indian families not likely to gain access to Third Party certified products.

At the same time, the number of farmers seeking Third Party certification will increase rapidly as the pool of committed organic producers grows and looks to explore export opportunities requiring Third Party certification. The two accredited APEDA certifiers approached during the development of the PGS programme already expressed interest in working with local PGS groups to educate farmers as to how they could become certified organic under an ICS. Likewise, they were interested in some of the PGS elements to strengthen the validity of their own group certification efforts.

PGS programmes adhere to the strictest organic standards, but the compliance mechanisms used are specific to small diversified farmers selling into local and domestic markets. Certification schemes based on paperwork and isolated inspections do not provide a credible guarantee for tight-knit groups of illiterate small farmers selling to diversified local markets where record keeping and receipts are rarely used. As such, Participatory Guarantee Systems offer a needed and complimentary system of organic guarantee that builds the organic movement, educates farmers and consumers and provides domestic and local market access to organic products. ■

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Washington State Department of Agriculture Organic Food Program

The Washington State Department of Agriculture's Organic Certification Program, which started nearly 20 years ago, was the first government organic certification programme in the US. Below is an account of its establishment.

Washington State is in the northwestern corner of the United States. Agriculture in western Washington includes dairies, soft fruit such as raspberries and blueberries, potatoes, vegetable seed crops and direct market vegetable operations. In eastern Washington the farms tend to be larger. Crops include apples, cherries, grapes, potatoes, sweetcorn, wheat, hops, mint, beans, and barley. The growth in organic and sustainable agriculture in Washington State has been phenomenal. The state's organic food industry has grown a hundredfold since 1988. Farmers' markets are thriving and provide a gathering place that improves the quality of life of the community as well as providing economic wellbeing for many small farms. Community supported agriculture (box schemes) supports dozens of farms throughout the state. Domestic and export markets have expanded and provide markets for hundreds of organic farms. The Washington State Department of Agriculture's Organic Certification Program, started nearly 20 years ago, has been an integral component in the development of organic agriculture in Washington State.

Beginnings

In 1987 the Washington State legislature authorised the establishment of a

government organic certification programme, which was the first in the United States. The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) Organic Food Program certified 63 organic farms in the first year. These farms were relatively small with total organic sales in 1988 being \$2.5 million.

The WSDA Organic Certification Program evolved out of the Tilth Producers certification programme. Tilth Producers certified organic farms from 1977 to 1987, but for a variety of reasons wanted to transfer certification work and authority to the state. WSDA worked with Tilth and the organic community in a spirit of open communication. The agency wisely allowed the organic community to direct the development of the WSDA organic programme. WSDA established an Organic Advisory Board that met often to direct the programme. Assistance from California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) and Oregon Tilth (a farmers' association operating certification programmes in California and Oregon) was also critical at this time. Members of Tilth Producers believed that government could play a positive role in the development of organic agriculture. At the same time they held a healthy skepticism of WSDA's commitment to organic agriculture. Lead-