



PARTICIPATORY GUARANTEE SYSTEMS



Case studies from

BRAZIL

INDIA

NEW ZEALAND

USA



PARTICIPATORY GUARANTEE SYSTEMS

4 Case Studies

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PARTICIPATORY GUARANTEE SYSTEMS TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	6
INTRODUCTION	9
<i>1. KEYSTONE FOUNDATION, INDIA</i>	<i>13</i>
'BUILDING A LOCAL GUARANTEE FOR INDIGENOUS PRODUCE'	
History and development of Keystone	14
Why a Participatory Guarantee System?	14
Developing a new approach	15
The Keystone guarantee system	16
Scope of activities	16
Creating trust: Inspection integrated with ecological monitoring	17
Structure and management of Keystone	17
The certification process	18
Important documents	20
Standards and norms	20
The quality sign of Keystone	20
Transparency	20
Funding and economic sustainability	20
Legal status	20
Recognition	21
Other areas of support for small farmers	21
Conclusion and future perspectives	22
Contact	22

2. ORGANIC FARM NEW ZEALAND **23** **'A FARMER'S PEER ASSESSMENT'**

History and development of Organic Farm New Zealand	23
Why a Participatory Guarantee System?	23
Developing a new approach	24
The Organic Farm New Zealand guarantee system	25
Scope of activities	25
Creating trust: A peer review system	25
Structure and management of OFNZ	26
The certification process	27
Important documents	29
Standards and norms	30
The quality sign of Organic Farm NZ	30
Transparency	30
Funding and economic sustainability	30
Legal status	31
Recognition	31
Other areas of support for small farmers	31
Conclusion and future perspectives	31
Contact	32

3. ECOVIDA AGROECOLOGY NETWORK, BRAZIL **33** **'DEVELOPING CREDIBILITY'**

History and development of Ecovida Agroecology Network	34
Why a Participatory Guarantee System?	34
Developing a new approach	35
The Ecovida Agroecology Network guarantee system	36
Scope of activities	36
Creating trust: Developing credibility through established relations	36
Structure and management of Ecovida Agroecology Network	36
The certification process	38
Important documents	41
Standards and norms	42
The quality sign of Ecovida	42
Transparency	42
Funding and economic sustainability	42
Legal status	42

Recognition	43
Other Areas of support for small farmers	43
Conclusion and future perspectives	43
Contact	44
4. CERTIFIED NATURALLY GROWN - USA	45
'PGS ON THE WWW'	
History and development of 'Certified Naturally Grown'	45
Why a Participatory Guarantee System?	45
Developing a new approach	46
The Certified Naturally Grown guarantee system	47
Scope of activities	47
Creating trust: Online application and interactive self-evaluation	47
Structure and management	49
Important Documents	50
Standards, Norms and References	51
Quality Sign and Certificate	51
Transparency	52
Funding and Economic Sustainability	52
Legal status	52
Recognition	52
Other areas of support for small farmers	53
Conclusion and future perspectives	53
Growth and potential	53
Conclusion	54
Contact	55

FOREWORD

Keystone Foundation in Tamil Nadu, India, **Organic Farm New Zealand**, **The Ecovida Agroecology Network** in south Brazil and **Certified Naturally Grown** in the USA represent four organizations who have developed guarantee systems with different approaches than the normally prevailing ‘Third-party’ certification. These organizations all work with farmers and organic farming in the broadest sense, trying to elaborate guarantee systems appropriate to the local cultural and ecological conditions and traditions, emphasizing the social and environmental aspects that are important for sustainable livelihoods.

Critics of organic certification systems argue that the mounting costs and inflexibility of the certification process create serious barriers to small-holder and family farmers being able to be certified as organic. These four different examples of Participatory Guarantee Systems, and the long work behind them, show that certification of organic products is not something that can be a one-fit-all system, nor can the current certification be considered a ready and forever perfect package or recipe to guarantee the quality and integrity of farming systems. Just like organic farming is sprung from local conditions and designed to be appropriate to local cultural and ecological contexts and values, these four examples are sprung from the history and development of organic agriculture in their regions. Thus they have developed in accordance with the needs of the main users of certification: the farmers and the consumers. Although totally different situations, they all have the deepest aim to make the guarantee system a tool for improving local socio-ecological conditions, encouraging small-scale production and processing, and for developing local market initiatives where local customers can identify the organic products and trust their organic origin and integrity.

Despite the historical, social, economical and ecological differences, the work of these organisations has several common characteristics. Trust is created through open information and peer reviews built around transparency and social control. Participation of those involved in the norm setting and certification process, contributes to education and empowerment, values emphasized in all four examples. Procedures are relatively simple. It is intended to have minimal bureaucracy in order to maintain low costs to farmers and reduced time spent in filling out forms.

In April 2004, Participatory Guarantee Systems was for the first time on the agenda at a global level. A workshop co-organized by MAELA (the Latin American Organic Agriculture Movement), IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements) and Centro Ecológico in Torres, Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil, presented and analyzed a wide range of existing and functioning initiatives with different approaches to certification from around the world. As a result a strategy was elaborated to further explore the potential of these different systems. The first task was to provide a concept document that describes what these different systems

have in common. These systems are now described as Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS). The PGS Concept document describes the principles and goals of PGS and can be found via the IFOAM web page.

Another activity asked for by the participants, was a description of a few well chosen examples working with PGS in different parts of the world and with different backgrounds and contexts.

This presentation of four different Participatory Guarantee Systems is one step in the process to get to know, analyze and evaluate these different approaches to certification. This booklet is not a complete guide in how to set up a PGS with all its components. Nevertheless, we hope it will serve as a source of ideas and inspiration to those who are thinking of treading a similar path.

INTRODUCTION

PARTICIPATORY GUARANTEE SYSTEMS – SHARED VISION, SHARED IDEALS

There are dozens of Participatory Guarantee Systems serving farmers and consumers around the world. Although details of methodology and process vary, the consistency of core principles across countries and continents is remarkable. The elements and characteristics outlined here demonstrate our shared vision but are not meant to concretely direct existing or future PGS programs towards conformity or “normalization.” The very life-blood of these programs lies in the fact that they are created by the very farmers and consumers that they serve. As such, they are adopted and specific to the individual communities, geographies, politics and markets of their origin. This document of Key Elements and Key Characteristics is then respectfully presented only to highlight those elements that do remain consistent across PGS systems –the Shared Vision and Shared Ideals that have brought them together.

PGS Philosophy grows from Organic Philosophy

Participatory Guarantee Systems subscribe to the same ideals that guided yesterday’s pioneering organic farmers. PGS programs require a fundamentally ecological approach to agriculture that uses no synthetic chemical pesticides, fertilizers or GMO’s, and further sustains farmers and workers in a cradle of long-term economic sustainability and social justice. The primarily local and direct market focus of PGS programs encourages community building, environmental protection and support to local economies in general.

Fundamental Values

Participatory Guarantee Systems share a common goal with third-party certification systems in providing a credible guarantee for consumers seeking organic produce. The difference is in approach. As the name suggests, direct participation of farmers and even consumers in the guarantee process, is not only encouraged but may be required. Such involvement is entirely realistic in the context of the small farms and local, direct markets that PGS systems are most likely to serve. Active participation on the part of the stakeholders results in greater empowerment but also greater responsibility. This requires PGS programs to place a high priority on knowledge and capacity building –not only for producers but for consumers as well. This direct involvement allows PGS programs to be less onerous in terms of paperwork and record-keeping requirements –an important element, since PGS systems seek to be absolutely inclusive in bringing small farmers into an organic system of production. In stark contrast to existing certification programs that start with the idea that farmers must prove they are in compliance to be certified, PGS programs use an integrity based approach that starts with a foundation of trust. It builds from there with an unparalleled transparency and openness, maintained in an environment that minimizes hierarchies and administrative levels.

Basic Elements

1. Shared Vision

A fundamental strength of the Participatory Guarantee System lies in the conscious shared vision that farmers and consumers have in the core principles guiding the program. While PGS programs may vary in the level of actual participation, they thrive because of the active awareness of why, how, and not least of all WHO is being served.

2. Participatory

Participatory guarantee systems are based on a methodology presupposing intense involvement by those interested in the production and consumption of these products. Principles and rules for organic production are conceived and applied with the contribution of all stakeholders – producers, consultants and consumers. The credibility of the production quality is a consequence of participation.

3. Transparency

All stakeholders, including farmers, must be aware of exactly how the guarantee mechanism generally works, the process and how decisions are made. This does not mean that every detail is known by everyone but rather a basic understanding of how the system functions. People should be aware about the criteria of how decision on organic status is made, especially the reason why some farm cannot be considered organic for the time being. This implies that there must be some written documents available about the PGS and the documents are made available to all interested parties.

Privacy and commercially sensitive information of producers gathered during the operation of PGS must be treated with confidentiality. But such confidentiality should not be used to compromise the transparency principle. This may seem in conflict with transparency but a line must be drawn between privacy and commercially sensitive information, on the one hand, and access to information for the purpose of transparency.

4. Trust - “integrity based approach”

The advocates of PGS hold to the idea that farmers can be trusted and the organic certification system should be an expression of this trust. It should reflect a community’s capacity to demonstrate this trust through the application of their different social and cultural control mechanisms, providing the necessary oversight to ensure the organic integrity of their organic farmers. Thus, a variety of culturally specific (local) quantitative and qualitative mechanisms for demonstrating and measuring organic integrity are recognized and celebrated. These are integral to the guarantee process.

5. Learning Process

The intent of most PGS has been to provide more than a certificate, also aiming to provide the tools and mechanisms for supporting sustainable community and organic development where the livelihoods and status of farmers can be enhanced.

It is important that the process of guarantee contributes to the construction of knowledge nets that are built by all the actors involved in the production and consumption of the organic product. The effective involvement of farmers, consultants and consumers on the elaboration and verification of the principles and rules not only leads to the generation of credibility of the organic product, but also to a permanent process of learning which develops capacities in the communities involved.

6. Horizontality

Horizontality means sharing of power. The verification of the organic quality of a product or process is not concentrated in the hands of few. Ideally, all involved in the participatory guarantee process have the same level of responsibility and capacity to establish the organic quality of a product or process.

Key Features

Norms conceived by the stakeholders through a democratic and participatory process, but always in accordance with the commonly understood sense of what constitutes an organic product. The norms should stimulate creativity, which is a characteristic of organic farmers, instead of inhibit it.

Grassroots Organization - The organic integrity should be perceived as a result of a social dynamic, based on an active organization of all stakeholders.

Suitable to smallholder agriculture: The participatory nature and horizontal structure of the systems allow for more appropriate and less costly mechanisms to generate credibility. It actually highlights, celebrates and encourages consumers to seek out smallholders.

Principles and values that enhance the livelihoods and well being of farming families and promote organic agriculture.

Documented management systems and procedures – There may be minimal paperwork required of farmers but there will be ways in which they are expected to demonstrate their organic commitment and integrity, these ways should be documented by the PGS.

Mechanisms to verify farmer's compliance to the established norms, which are able to stimulate participation, organization, and which allow a learning process for all the stakeholders.

Mechanisms for supporting farmers to produce organic products and be recognized as organic farmers, to include field advisors, newsletters, farm visits, web sites etc.

A bottom-line document, for example a **farmer's pledge** stating his/her agreement with the established norms.

Seals or labels providing evidence of organic status.

Clear and previously defined consequences for farmers not complying with standards, actions recorded in a data base or made public in some way.

1. KEYSTONE FOUNDATION, INDIA

‘BUILDING A LOCAL GUARANTEE FOR INDIGENOUS PRODUCE’

MATHEW JOHN

The example of Keystone is about working with tribal communities, and the special challenges and difficulties the environmental and cultural aspects in Tamil Nadu, India, imply. It shows primarily the extent of how important it is to find ways and methods which are adequate to the surrounding reality. It also shows that if we are serious in our promotion of organic agriculture we need to understand and respect diversity and start all activities together with the people who are most involved, and also most affected by the systems we construct, the farmers and the consumers.

The guarantee system promulgated by Keystone was an attempt to bridge the gap between the customers and the community. The initial attempt was to provide certification through existing systems. However, the costs, especially in relation to the volume of produce of each farmer as well as the poor understanding of biodiversity systems brought it to a complete halt. The existing system also did not appreciate the holistic nature of such farming systems and hence it became necessary to provide an alternative.

Keystone, is a non-governmental organization that is involved in providing organic guarantee and marketing support to indigenous communities in the Nilgiris, a hill district in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, India. It has been working in these hills since 1995. Improving market access has been central to the activities of the organization and goes hand in hand with the development activities. The land holdings of these communities are very close to the forested areas at middle elevations of 800-1000 meters. The area is in the humid/semi humid tropics. Traditional forests have been depleted though some of these remaining patches of forest still contain good vegetation and the local communities live in harmony with the forest, collecting non-timber forest produce (NTFP) like wild nutmeg, cinnamon, pepper, honey and herbal plants.

Keystone presently works with indigenous communities on 18 products (both food and non-food) and over 50 different items which are variations or combinations of the main products. Some of these are honey, coffee, pepper, Indian gooseberry, lime, herbs, spices, etc. and different processed products like flavoured items, pickles, marmalades, candy, mouth fresheners, etc. The marketing is through the two shops owned by Keystone and also through a network of dealers and distributors in and around the state of Tamil Nadu. The emphasis is on building local markets so that the local population gets to appreciate such produce – nearly 60% of the turnover is achieved in the district itself.

History and development of Keystone

Why a Participatory Guarantee System?

Keystone began work with indigenous communities in 1995 with an aim to work in the field of environment conservation and livelihood enhancement of indigenous communities. One of the primary concerns has been to provide support to the community on the marketing front for organic produce. This was because:

- low prices are offered to the indigenous people from traders/middlemen
- there are unfair practices in terms of weights and measures
- they do not have a good bargaining power and have to sell their produce in a matter of days/weeks
- they were dealing with forest produce, which had a direct relevance to conservation of natural resources
- incentive needed to be given to 'organically' produced homestead products

In this environmental and cultural scenario, initiating a new effort of building an enterprise based on organic guarantees seemed a risk. It was a new concept in the area to discuss about organic issues and products from indigenous communities. Most people did not equate tribal products with quality and consistency. This was in itself a barrier to be broken. There were some indications of awareness about organic products when consumers queried and raised issues, but it was still far from becoming a movement.

However, many people felt that the commercial aspect was an area that was best left to entrepreneurs, and NGOs should address 'socially relevant issues' only. Also, at the time of initiating the effort, the market seemed to be very local, and therefore very limited. What transpired was that the same local market was more appreciative of the local products and hence a tremendous encouragement.

For the past few years, Keystone had been looking at better avenues for marketing of tribal organic produce. There had been some success in the local market and for some products. However, when it had come to expanding the markets on a larger scale there have been shortcomings. One of the reasons, apart from others (quantities, packing materials, etc.), was the lack of a 'label' which would convince the consumer about the qualities of the product (organic) as well as the process of production (fair trade).

At the time of establishing the enterprise, one of the primary concerns of the organization was to **increase the prices/returns** that come in to the communities. These groups had become dependent on middlemen and traders to move their produce. The shift for the indigenous community was from the barter system that existed earlier to the cash economy. In the barter economy, forest produce like honey, roots and other items would be traded for grains, milk, implements, etc – hence each product, apart from tradition and cultural linkages, had a functional value. With the cash economy, this entire chain was broken and control went out of their hands.

The second challenge was to **improve the quality**. Since it was an item of barter and local consumption, the quality parameters got determined at a very local and basic level. To package and market the product to a wider audience many parameters had to be redefined. This had backward linkages to 'sustainable methods of harvesting' and nature conservation.

For organic certification, discussions were held with certifying agencies but problems of cost, accessibility, understanding, etc. were an issue. The customers needed to be convinced that the produce was organically grown but the problems which confronted certification agencies, still remained:

- costs too high in proportion to value of products sold
- fields spread out and in different places
- no documentation
- ownership may not be watertight - land may be community lands

Such issues seemed to create more hurdles than they answered and a number of questions presented themselves. What are the kinds of products that could be looked at, what kind of standards were to be set? On what basis? If different from world standards, why? Is there scientific basis/rationale to the standards? If need for expanding markets, would this mark stand ground? How can the standards take into account these small groups whose economic viability is very critical in such ventures? How can the guarantee processes be handled in such a manner that there is complete transparency and understanding between producers and buyers?

A number of discussions began with friends and within the organization as to how to address these aspects of quality and organic certification. Since this was not becoming a reality through certification agencies, it was finally thought that in active participation with other groups, there would be a creation of a simple system which would basically inform and guarantee the customer about the quality and its credibility as well as many other aspects that were of concern.

Developing a new approach

Many cups of coffee and much brainstorming later, in 1998 an internal monitoring system was designed to check the quality of products. One aim was to launch a label which attempted to provide information to the consumer about the 'eco-friendliness' of the product. The four main features were:

- raw material
- processing
- packaging and distribution
- consumption & disposal

Though this did not specifically look at the organic aspects it was an attempt to control the entire process and put in place a system of checks and balances to improve the quality of products.

As a first attempt, a mark was put on the labels of the products along with a small explanation. This was thought to be a way to educate the customer about the various issues that were of concern. Also, this mark would be promoted as a sort of umbrella brand for many different organizations selling products. This would also help in saving costs. Though this differentiated label attracted a lot of queries, it somehow did not engage or interest the customer too much. The customer was looking for a simple guarantee either from a recognized body or from the local organization - not a mark from a third party which they had no idea of. Thus, the mark slowly came off the labels.

We then provided a guarantee statement on the label saying that this product was 'organic' and that this assurance was provided by the organization as well as the farmer. This statement very transparently put the onus on the organization which represented the public face, to determine the genuineness of the product. The process began in a very simple and informal manner and the basic core continues in the same manner even today.

Keystone began its effort with purchase of wild products like honey and bees wax – in 1999, it launched its first 'Green Shop' in the local town. By 2001, the second shop in a neighboring town opened up and hopefully, by 2006, another shop should come up.

The Keystone guarantee system

Scope of activities

What is crucial is that apart from cultivated products, the majority of the products are wild produce, harvested from the forests. It makes it all the more crucial that the 'organic aspect' takes care to monitor harvesting methods, sustainability of the crops, etc.

The monitoring of **wild produce** is done through an extensive process of resource monitoring – this is done to ensure the sustainability of the produce where parameters like diversity, availability, health, regeneration, distribution and population are monitored.

Cultivated produce has been tackled in a very different manner. Keystone works with each individual farmer as part of a land development program. The integrated program aims to:

- revive traditional crops
- provide food security
- improve health & nutrition
- give access to land

Whether collecting wild produce or cultivating produce on their own land, all farmers are from the indigenous community and possess very small individual landholdings of less than a hectare.

Creating trust: Inspection integrated with ecological monitoring

The guarantee system works on the basic premise of trust. These communities live in clusters of hamlets where each of their activities is completely in the realm of public knowledge.



Harvesting wild honey

This trust has been complimented by a very simple system of inspection at the village level by Keystone. Since the staff of Keystone work on various projects with the community members, the exercise becomes an integrated part of the work. It is important to know that the term `inspection` is understood in a positive sense where discussions are held with individual farmers on how to improve the conditions of their farms. This system has been working very well for the past few years.

Thus, the system includes:

- an informal peer vigil of each other's farms through a traditional system of sharing labour
- a discussion and inspection by Keystone staff
- review of the forms at the Keystone office

Structure and management of Keystone

Since the organization is primarily a rural development organization with a strong emphasis on the economic support that it provides to the indigenous communities, the responsibility lies with Keystone. Currently, there are 3 villages from which products are being guaranteed. The villages vary in size from around 17 households in one to around 45 households in the larger village.

The management of the process rests with Keystone which oversees the visits and the filling in of the documentation. This process is reviewed at the office so that if there are any details that have been missed out or issues that have to be dealt with so that the entire village as a unit is compliant.

Keystone is the organization which is providing support for market access, but a key factor in the monitoring is that Keystone does not work only from an `organic` perspective – it tries to establish a more holistic perspective where issues of access to land, health of the forest, continuous dialogue with the forest department, food security, soil and moisture conservation, livelihood dependency, stake in resources, etc. are understood and accepted by the communities.

The certification process

For **wild produce** the process is as follows:

As the first step, Keystone identifies the areas from where produce is being gathered and what produce is of interest for marketing. Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRA) are done with the communities where they mark out the forest areas, map the territories they cover, the products they collect, quantities and during which seasons. This PRA exercises have been carried out in 16 villages covering roughly 800 families. This is now being followed up by laying permanent plots in forest areas which will be monitored along with the community.

This monitoring helps in reducing destructive harvesting as the communities become more aware of the consequences. It helps in designing tools or improving traditional technologies. Thus, ecological monitoring becomes an instrument to help maintain and improve their livelihoods.

A typical example is honey and bees wax. Each batch of honey that is brought in, has documentation regarding the group of honey hunters, the water content, the area from where it has been collected, whether it is from a tree or a cliff, the height at which the combs were found, the primary nectar sources, the number of colonies that were harvested and colonies left (if any). Based on this data, maps have been made which depict the honey zones and the main cliffs or trees. Some of these cliffs or areas have been designated as 'god cliffs', which, in a sense, helps to maintain the gene pools.

If honey is brought in through any new person, the honey is not accepted immediately – it is lab tested for adulteration, heating and freshness – then, the antecedents of the honey hunters is checked through the network of honey hunters before it is accepted. Such a strict and rigorous check ensures that only members of the indigenous community who are skilled in the activity are beneficiaries. These aspects are verified by Keystone staff that carry out the tests in an in-house lab. After this verification, the products are accepted.

For **cultivated produce**, the following steps take place:

Again, since Keystone is the support agency for marketing, it identifies villages where the entire village area can be classified as organic, and where the communities are willing to continue their practices. Village meetings are held with the entire community, explaining the concepts. After the community agrees, the following steps are undertaken.

Through PRA and agriculture biodiversity mapping the lands are marked and their status and land use established. Details of village history, former land use, water sources, habitat details and trade practices, collected. Information on extent of land in different settlements, acreage owned by individuals, crops and output per unit of land, is also collected.

Then the traditions and beliefs followed by the tribals in millet cultivation and the relation of forest with agriculture are documented. The reason for this is that existing practices, with the exception of slash and burn, form the best entry point for further improvement, as they are often related to organic agriculture approaches and techniques. They include mixed cropping,

intercropping with vegetables, techniques of seed preservation/selection and rotational cropping. Two levels of data are collected from the villagers. The first level is the primary data about the farmer and the farm – this is a one time effort and is updated only when required. Since Keystone works with each of these farmers on their land, the produce that is brought for marketing is already known – the crops and the quantities.

The second level is the farm management records. These are filled in by Keystone staff and are checked for consistency at the office by a Coordinator. Any issues that are to be dealt in terms of information, collection or compliance are discussed with the staff visiting the farm.

This same principle is now being allowed with other organizations who are either farmer groups or NGOs or even individuals. These organizations have been working on issues of organic agriculture but have had difficulty in marketing the products. Members of Keystone visit these organizations and discuss with the staff and some villagers. This support across geographical areas provides an excellent support for the organic initiatives. Previously, the produce from these organic farms would have been mixed up in the conventional market. Thus, for many producers, apart from the effort on their own lands, they perceived no economic benefit.



Figure 1: The certification process of Keystone

Important documents

VILLAGE MAPS

PRA MAPS OF DOMAIN AREAS OF COLLECTION AND HARVESTING

PRIMARY FARMER DATA SHEETS

FARM MANAGEMENT RECORDS

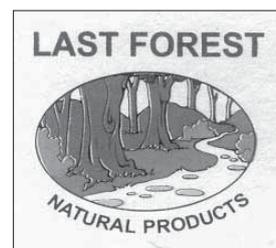
Over the last year, to make the process of documentation easy, a brief data sheet has been prepared. This data sheet is in a bi-lingual form – English and the local language, Tamil. A person from the community, who works as a staff at Keystone, now fills up the details. She fills up a data sheet every six months to verify if any new activities have taken place on the farms.

Standards and norms

Keystone uses the standards set out by the Government of India through the National Standards for Organic Production (NSOP). Keystone has not set out yet its own set of production norms and standards but plans to develop them later.

The quality sign of Keystone

In 2001, the above logo was created – “Last Forest Natural Products”. This brand puts together the spirit of what the different types of products offer.



Transparency

All the documents including maps are available for scrutiny by anyone.

Since these goods are marketed through Keystone’s support, Keystone cannot take the risk of guaranteeing produce which would reflect on its credibility.

Funding and economic sustainability

Presently, there is no separate requirement for funds as it is being met through Keystone’s own project expenses. Since the farms that are inspected and visited are in areas where the Keystone staff visit for other regular programs, there are no extra costs.

However, once there is an increase in the number of farms, or when other groups, individuals would like to gain recognition under PGS, a new system would be required where more people are involved, either as volunteers or paid through donations.

Legal status

Keystone is itself registered as a Non Governmental Organization (NGO) since 1993. There is no separate entity registered to deal with certification matters. The logo is owned by Keystone and its trademark registration is pending with the authorities.

Recognition

Keystone has no formal recognition as a certification provider. There is no requirement for a certifier to be mandatorily registered with the Indian government.

Other areas of support for small farmers

Though Keystone guarantees the produce for the market, the effort to work on traditional land holdings has been to find alternatives to monoculture plantations which have destroyed the ecology of the area. Traditional crops, coffee and spices were re-introduced to increase biodiversity and to decrease the dependence of tribals on adjacent external plantations for wages.

This has meant land cleaning and raising nurseries, soil and moisture conservation measures and promotion of seed banks and most food crops, like millets and beans, are grown and consumed in the village. This immediately meets the twin objectives of providing enough of healthy and nutritious food in the house for at least 3-5 months. Only surplus crops like coffee, pepper and spices are encouraged to be brought to the market.

These efforts also ensure that in a mountainous terrain, soil erosion is reduced, springs run for longer periods, soil is enriched and the biomass increased. Importantly, the diversity of crops ensures stability of income and livelihood. The specific and distinct features of work towards organic agriculture are:

- village seed banks: to conserve and increase local varieties of food crops including millet (finger-, proso-, little- and fox tail millet) and other seeds such as Amaranthus species, maize, mustard and beans.
- Soil and moisture conservation: digging of trenches, construction of stone and vegetative bunds have rejuvenated the land
- Establishing nurseries as a basis for growing coffee and other cash crops
- Buy-back mechanism: This component has been included because it was considered important – it supports income options. It encourages the farmers and acts as an incentive – they are free to market their produce anywhere, if they get better prices.



Conclusion and future perspectives

Building an effort with tribal communities has been a difficult task. It took many months to convince them about traditional crops and to make a beginning. It would be foolish to think that 'organic' would anywhere be on the priority list. Thus to make the activity more long lasting, it has taken tremendous effort to give them better prices, improve quality and involve the community in understanding organic certification – the values it stands for and how it not only benefits them but also the environment.

Keystone is committed to make this system work at both the local and national level and would like to present it as a case for accreditation by other certifying bodies.

What is positive is the fact that some non-governmental organizations across the country are making small efforts to be involved in the building of marketing of rural and indigenous products which helps in the overall development of the market.

Today, there is a growing awareness about organic products among consumers. Though the intricacies might not be understood, there is enough information with the customers to ask probing questions and clarify doubts.

The challenge consists in being able to integrate the information from the different levels, and make the process more and more transparent and participatory.

Contact

KEYSTONE FOUNDATION

Groves Hill Road, PB 35

Kotagiri 643 217

Nilgiris District

India

Ph/Fax: +91-4266-272277, 272977

mathew@keystone-foundation.org

www.keystone-foundation.org

AUTHOR OF THE CASE STUDY

MATHEW JOHN is one of the founding Directors of Keystone Foundation, a non-governmental organization, which works on issues of natural resources and rural development with indigenous communities in the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve. His interest is in building alternative systems for enterprise development and organic certification for small growers & forest gatherers. He works with a network of organizations to help build a platform for organic and fairly traded produce for local markets

ABBREVIATIONS

NTFP – Non-timber forest products

NSOP – National Standards for Organic Production

2. ORGANIC FARM NEW ZEALAND

‘A FARMER’S PEER ASSESSMENT’

CHRIS MAY

Organic Farm New Zealand, OFNZ, was created to fill a need for farmers who had increasingly felt isolated, frustrated and disadvantaged because the existing certification systems could not deliver a service at an affordable price. The question though was not one of just affordability there was also the issue that many believed that certifiers should provide support for the organic sector as a whole. For many the established certification system was a system that had lost its soul, it had become focused on export certification and left behind the local market suppliers many of whom had been foundation supporters of the organization.

The concept of OFNZ reignited amongst many; a flame of hope, that certification could be more than just a label, with the process itself becoming a tool for focusing community development and encouraging new organic farmers.

OFNZ began the process of providing organic certification for farmers in 2002. In 2003 OFNZ was registered as an Incorporated Society. In March 2005 there were 185 registered certified OFNZ farmers producing for the domestic market on a local, regional and national level.

There is a wide range of product certified by OFNZ which includes fruit and vegetables, nursery plants, eggs, seeds and some livestock and some processing units.

There is no restriction on the types of products that can be certified but for the processing of products a specialist ‘inspector’ may be required as the expertise for such an inspection might rest outside the skills of the pod members.

History and development of Organic Farm New Zealand

Why a Participatory Guarantee System?

The idea for developing a certification system specifically aimed at what some people describe as small-holders or small-scale farmers had been under discussion in New Zealand for several years. Various group schemes for these farmers had been tried by one of the established certifiers, with limited success, mostly because their existing service and systems were too difficult to modify to make the cost of their service affordable.

Approximately 1500 farmers in New Zealand claimed to be producing organic products but did not have certification in 2000. Many of the retailers selling organic products purchased from these uncertified farmers on trust, visiting the properties themselves in order to ascertain the organic status of each property. At the same time these retailers were increasingly under

pressure from consumers to demonstrate the organic integrity of the product with some sort of certification. The dilemma for both the farmers and the retailers was that demand for organic product was high, and because of cost, the certification for these farmers appeared to be out of reach.

Developing a new approach

In 2000 a group of persons representing various interest groups in the organic sector came together from around New Zealand to discuss the organic certification. At the heart of the discussions was the issue of uncertified organic farmers. This initial stakeholder meeting provided the impetus and mandate for the Soil and Health Association, one of the key stakeholders, to continue to encourage dialogue and cooperation between the various other stakeholders interest groups. A concept document was prepared based around the idea of developing a local market certification scheme aimed at meeting the specific needs and capacity of the many farmers who deemed the existing, export focused certification system too expensive.

The document scoped the idea that organic certification could:

- be regionally controlled and community focused
- be cheaper to attain
- be nationally accepted
- have high level of organic integrity

After some strong political lobbying by the Green Party on behalf of the organic sector, the NZ Ministry of Agriculture released funding to support what was called the ‘Small-scale producers organic program’. The research process was managed by the Soil and Health Association NZ Inc.

Steps in the research project process included:

1. A series of workshops in 5 (plus) locations around NZ in diverse (remote rural and semi urban etc) communities. The workshops included representation from different regional groups who had begun or had already developed a local certification scheme. One such scheme had been operating independently for 10 years. The intention of these workshops was to draw upon the collective experience of a wide range of people to identify the constraints and various options for organic certification, to design a certification that might work, and then trial the model developed from these ideas.
2. As the meetings and workshops progressed a certification model evolved to become a people centered certification system, focused around peer assessment and supported by a paper trial and support documents. In this way a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) was born.

3. The model was trialed and modified appropriately through the ‘hands-on’ trial and error of the different procedures. In particular, the peer assessment process was simplified in order that the system is more easily implemented.
4. A consumer survey to test consumer awareness and expectations of certification labeling and their possible reactions to a new certification label, was included in the project process. This survey tested consumer awareness of various certification labels and their possible reaction to a new organic label.
5. In 2003 OFNZ was registered as an incorporated society owned by its producer members. The process of review is ongoing.
6. Organic Farm NZ Inc now has over 185 certified small-holder farmers and it continues to grow.

The Organic Farm New Zealand guarantee system

Scope of activities

OFNZ is focused on providing a certification for farmers who supply the domestic market both at the local, regional and national levels. Most likely farmers who are working within the OFNZ system would be described as small-scale producers to farmers. However the stakeholders who took part in the design and development of the OFNZ system held strongly to the view that being described as farmers or small-scale producers was unnecessary and demeaning and they neither would they accept the idea that income thresholds being used to determine their status.

Creating trust: A peer review system

OFNZ can be described as a PGS because the farmers who participated in the development of OFNZ designed a system in which they all actively participate as part of the peer review process and also in various management roles in the overall organization at the regional and national level.

The farmers held strongly to the principle that they can be trusted to ‘be organic’ and if that trust needs to be measured by another party, their integrity is better measured by their peers and community. The rationale is based on the idea that their peers have both a direct and indirect vigilance over each others farming activities on an ongoing basis. The peer review system reflects this principle.

There was also the need to develop a system that is affordable. The farmers may have limited incomes but they can contribute their own time, in this way the peer assessment became a logical way for producers to contribute to the certification process and reduce their costs.

The peer assessment system that was developed, involves all the pod (farmers group) members in a peer assessment process including on-farm inspections of each others farms.

Overall the process includes:

- a peer assessment and review between the farmers as part of the pod ‘inspection’ process
- a review of the certification managers work by a certification committee
- an audit of both the certification manager and pod work by an auditor
- the National Coordinating Committee, NCC, also has a role in the oversight process

Peer assessment is regarded a vital function of the overall system. The dynamic of this process, within the pods, is very interesting as some individuals can get carried away with their own ideas of what is organic when they visit a farm and loose site of the objective. To mitigate against the distracting effect that over enthusiastic individuals might have on the peer review, the process has been carefully scripted to be focused around a Peer Review Checklist that is completed by a pod member as part of the peer review process. The checklist aims to focus the process and encourage an atmosphere of peer review not a police like interrogation. The process also allows for the exchange of ideas, encouraging a two way ‘learning process’.

Structure and management of OFNZ

Regional Groups: The heart of the OFNZ organization rests with the Regional Groups which are responsible for the day to day management of the Organic Farm NZ system in their region. Currently there are 12 such groups around New Zealand. The groups vary in size from around 10 farmers in the smallest to 50 farmers in the biggest group.

Underlying the way the roles and responsibilities of the regional groups have been designed, is the founding principle that, as far as possible, the certification process should be regionalized, and that the farmers should own and control the organization.

Each regional group is required to have persons responsible for the basic administration and certification of their group as well as a certification committee. The certification process is managed by a certification manager who is responsible for reviewing all documentation and facilitating the reporting process to a certification committee as well as coordinating with the ‘auditor’. The auditor is an appropriately qualified person from a near by region who is required to randomly check the regional groups certification process. The certification committee is responsible for the decisions for awarding certificates.

The regional group system is maintained through regular meetings of the members who are responsible collectively for key decisions. These include the election of officers and appointment of key persons such as the certification manager, fee setting, promotional work and the like.

National Coordinating Committee (NCC). The NCC is elected by the regional group members. The role is voluntary and the main responsibility of the committee members is to provide a level of oversight to the OFNZ system that is external to the regional groups. They also co-ordinate activities that require a national versus a regional perspective. The responsibilities of the NCC are documented in the OFNZ Operations Manual and they include facilitating the training of certification managers, printing the certificates and facilitating random audits of the regional groups as and if required.

The NCC also serves as a contact point for potential new members and also for the overall promotion of the system. The NCC has formed a strategic alliance with an organic NGO (Soil and Health Association). Soil and Health has been established in New Zealand since 1941 and is a prominent and important in NZ for the promotion and facilitation of organic activities. Soil and Health has been contracted by OFNZ to provide the head office, as well as the first point of contact for new applicants and to promote OFNZ activities in their quarterly magazine.



Figure 1: The structure of Organic Farm NZ Inc

The certification process

When a farmer makes an application to the regional group to start the certification process they are required to complete management plan and application form. Guidance for completing this process usually comes from a small-holder who has already been certified by OFNZ, they can be a neighbor or a friend. These forms are reviewed by the certification manager and once the documentation has been approved the applicant is allocated to a pod (farmer group). The aim is to have the farms that are located as close together as possible, ideally as neighbors but in the early development stage of OFNZ this is not always possible and as result pod members may not always be neighbors.

Each pod has its own coordinator (elected by the pod members) who is responsible for coordinating the registration and peer review procedures. The coordinator's role is rotated annually within the pod. The ideal pod size seems to be around 4-8 farmers. All pod members must be present for each of the peer reviews, on each of the properties in their pod. In general it seems that a pod can review 4 properties in a day, thus a pod of 8 persons takes 2 days to complete. The structure of the pod also offers farmers the chance to exchange ideas through informal meetings.

A certification manager is appointed by each regional group. This is the most specialized role in the system requiring a sound knowledge of the standards and operating systems, this person may or may not be a farmer. Where necessary the certification manager would be trained by an experienced person usually from a near by Regional Group.

Once the peer assessment process has been completed by the pod members, the certification manager reviews the documentation provided including the Peer Review Checklist, and compiles a report for each property. Should any non-compliance issues be identified the certification manager will work with the pod co-coordinator and where necessary the pod members, to ensure that the issues are dealt with in order to become compliant with the standards. Typically the usual issues relate to off-farm inputs and clarification as to their organic status. Should product residue tests be required that costs of these must be met by the individual farmer.

Once the certification manager is satisfied that all documentation and the process as a whole has been completed, the outcomes for each pod and small-holder are presented to the regional body certification committee. The role of the certification committee is to review the work of the certification manager and the certification process and approve the awarding of the certificates.

The final step in this process is for a random audit of the process by an external auditor. The purpose of the audit is to provide a check on the process to test whether the work of the regional body has been consistent with the OFNZ rules and procedures. Should problems, such as incomplete process or paperwork be identified by the auditor then these 'issues' would be followed up by the certification manager and reported to the members of the regional group. This additional level of audit was introduced at the suggestion of other certifiers who indicated that for them to be able to 'recognize' products certified by OFNZ there needed to be a 'third party' audit somewhere in the system. Initially they proposed that they would do this audit however, the cost of such a service is too high and offers no advantages to most of the OFNZ farmers.

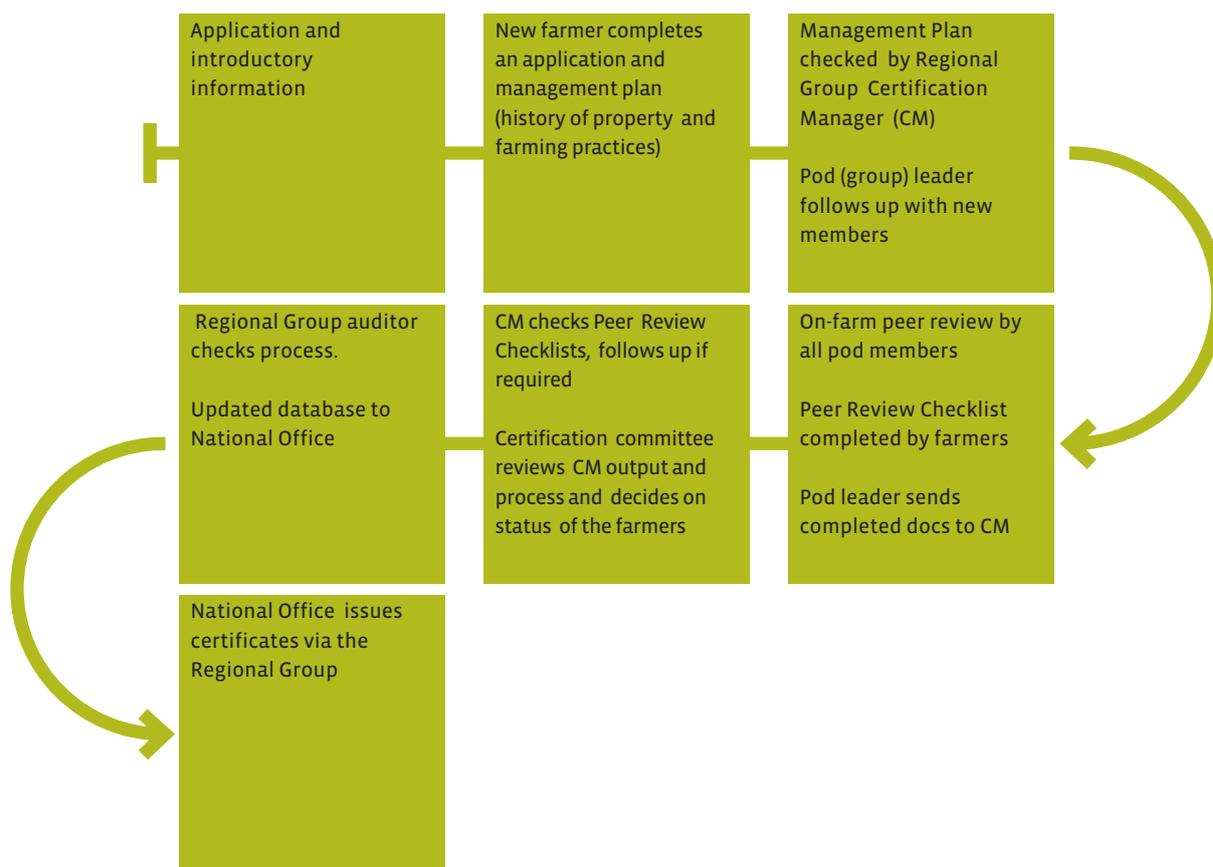


Figure 2: The certification process of OFNZ

Important documents

OFNZ PRODUCTION STANDARDS – the standards outline the principles and production rules for producing organic products.

OFNZ COMPLIANCE REQUIREMENTS – describe the rules and requirements for small-holder farmers meeting the standards.

OFNZ APPLICATION AND REGISTRATION FORMS, including a management plan template. The Management Plan and the Peer Review Checklist are set out with similar headings to simplify cross-referencing between the two documents.

OFNZ OPERATIONS MANUAL which describes the structure and roles and responsibilities of each of the key roles in the NCC and Regional Groups.

PEER REVIEW CHECKLIST template – the checklist is completed for each pod member as part of the peer review process.

PODAUDIT template – used as a report format by the certification manager to detail the outcomes of each peer review.

Standards and norms

Organic Farm NZ has its own set of production standards and norms. The standards are based upon the Biogro Standards (an IFOAM accredited certifier in NZ) and the New Zealand National Organic Standard.

The OFNZ compliance criteria are unique to OFNZ and are described in the OFNZ Compliance Requirements document.

The quality sign of Organic Farm NZ

Opposite is an example of the OFNZ logo displaying the name of a region (Otago) and the farmer's registration number (OT-002-2002).



Through his or her number a farmer can be tracked through the OFNZ web site.

Each farm/farmer who is certified receives his/her own certificate which he/she can use to display at the sales stall or shop, or a copy may be sent with a consignment of products to a buyer.

Transparency

The process and the documents used at all stages of the certification cycle are available for public scrutiny as and when required. Each pod member must be able to see the appropriate records of their fellow pod members as required for the peer review process and described in the OFNZ Compliance Requirements. Matters that are commercially confidential are held on file and can only be released with the owners consent. Under the Official Information Act in NZ the public can apply to see any documentation, apart from that which is covered by commercial confidentiality.

Funding and economic sustainability

The research and some of the initial establishment costs were funded by the New Zealand Government via the Ministry of Agriculture but since the initial development stage OFNZ has been self-funded by its members. Each regional group sets its own fees which include an annual 'donation' to the NCC. The level of the fees depends on the various activities carried out by each regional group and the amount of volunteer work that is on offer. Some of the regional groups have gained funding from local bodies and development agencies to help establish their management systems.

Because of the volunteer nature of many of the roles in OFNZ the issue of funding may only become an issue if a regional group reaches a size that these jobs become a burden and need to be paid for. This threshold does not appear to have been reached in any of the regions. However, there is always the danger where an organization relies on volunteers, these persons can tire of the giving their time and if there are no replacements the system breaks down.

Legal status

Organic Farm New Zealand Inc was registered as an Incorporated Society in 2003 by the farmers who are now the OFNZ members. This means it is a registered with government as a non-profit organization. The logo and the intellectual property are owned by the members of OFNZ.

Recognition

By authorities: OFNZ has no formal recognition as a certification provider, nor is this required by NZ Law. There is no regulatory process that requires any certifier to be registered with the NZ Government.

By other certifiers: There have been discussions between OFNZ and other certifiers to establish baseline criteria for the mutual recognition of product status and pathways for producers who might choose to move from one certification to another. There is a now framework of general agreement between the parties with each situation to be dealt with on a case by case basis.

By consumers and product sellers: Care was taken in the development stages of OFNZ to include product wholesalers and retailers in the development process, their input also created commitment to support the system once it became operational. The OFNZ logo is endorsed and displayed at most retail outlets around NZ.

Other areas of support for small farmers

Promotion is mostly carried out by the regional groups to promote OFNZ in their region at local markets or fairs. Retailers and wholesale operators who are selling OFNZ certified products also play their role by displaying the OFNZ logo in their shops and by talking to their customers about the system. The Soil and Health Association also promotes Organic Farm NZ via their quarterly magazine.

Organic Farm NZ is also represented on the national organic sector working group Organic Aotearoa New Zealand (OANZ). This group has just been established and aims to coordinate and promote organic interests at the national level. Membership of the OANZ includes certifiers, NGO's and organic industry representatives.

Conclusion and future perspectives

The idea of peer assessment where farmers share their time to review each others' organic farming activities has captured a great deal of support, but also a number of critics who refuse to believe that such a system has the same level of integrity as third party certification. While this debate continues, it is the OFNZ producers themselves who provide the evidence that such a system works effectively with a high level of integrity. Many argue, that this system of social control far exceeds the level of accountability provided by a third party, one time inspection per year system.

Thus, when we look at OFNZ and its role as a system for guaranteeing the integrity of organic products, there is satisfaction in the idea that the system works and has the support of many

stakeholders in the organic sector. But like all organizations there are challenges to be overcome. These challenges include finding ways to quickly increase the number of farmers engaged in the system, building the capacity within the regional groups to carry out relatively specialized tasks such as the certification manager's role and maintaining the infrastructure in the smaller regional groups. There is also the challenge of finding ways to streamline the OFNZ process and to avoid the tendency and the trend to make systems more complex, in particular the amount of paperwork farmers are expected to work with.

The ongoing recipe for success for OFNZ lies in their working with the wider organic movement to promote the credibility of its system and to ensure that the participatory processes that underpin the way the system works are honored and strengthened.

Contact

SOIL AND HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF NZ INC

P O Box 36-170 Northcote

Auckland 9

New Zealand

info@organicnz.pl.net

biomays@clear.net.nz

AUTHOR OF THE CASE STUDY

CHRISTOPHER MAY is managing director of Bioglobal Consultancy Ltd and with his partner JENNY MAY were contracted by the Soil and Health Association to research and develop the OFNZ system. They have worked in the organic sector for more than 25 years. In the early 80's they were co-founders of BIOGRO NZ. Their work includes certification related activities as well as community development and facilitating sustainable livelihoods for small-holders in the Pacific region and Vietnam.

ABBREVIATIONS

OFNZ – Organic Farm New Zealand

NCC - National Coordinating Committee

3. ECOVIDA AGROECOLOGY NETWORK, BRAZIL

‘DEVELOPING CREDIBILITY’

LAÉRCIO MEIRELLES & LUIZ CARLOS REBELATTO DOS SANTOS

The guarantee system of Ecovida Agroecology Network in Southeast Brazil is defined as a process to develop credibility through commitment and participation between farmers, technicians and consumers with the common interest in assuring the final quality of the product and the production process. This process results from a social dynamic where ecological smallholders and their organizations, agroecology consultancy organizations (NGOs) and others sympathetic to agroecology are involved. The network functions with defined principles and aims a) to strengthen agroecology in its amplest aspects, b) to generate and spread information among its participants, c) to create legal mechanisms of credibility and d) to create mechanisms for the processes of guarantee developed by its members.

The Ecovida Agroecology Network in fact existed before its formal creation in November 1998. Many of the groups of Ecovida worked as far back as 20 years ago, developing alternatives to the disastrous effects of the Green Revolution. All from the beginning a new ethical paradigm was promoted, where respect for the environment and local culture, solidarity and cooperation are fundamental for production, processing and commercialization. This concept was called Agroecology. The current model for the Ecovida Participatory Certification took shape in relation to the introduction of the Normative Instruction (NI 07/99) of the Ministry of Agriculture in 1999. With its high certification costs, and methods inadequate to the reality of the peasant and small holder agriculture, the NI did not in a satisfactory way enhance Agroecology.

Presently Ecovida encompasses 180 municipalities and approximately 2,400 families of farmers (around 12,000 persons) organized in 270 groups, associations and cooperatives. They also include 30 NGOs and 10 ecological consumers' cooperatives as well as several professionals' partnerships and supporting organizations. They are all organised in 21 regional nuclei (see maps below) in different stages of organization.

All kinds of agriculture products are cultivated and sold by the Ecovida members, for example vegetables, cereals, fruits, juice, fruit-jelly, honey, milk, eggs and meat. In 2003 the sales amount was 13 750 000 USD; 27 % of the sales was to free markets, 20 % for export, 19 % to the institutional market and 34 % for other markets like supermarkets, shops, agro industries etc.

History and development of Ecovida Agroecology Network

Why a Participatory Guarantee System?

In 1994 for the first time the Ministry of Agriculture (MAPA) invited a group of people and organizations involved with organic production to discuss a specific legislation to regulate this sector. Disagreements about some points prevented setting up a common path, it was not possible to achieve consensus, and only in 1997 the discussion was taken up again. After several meetings during about two years, in May 1999 MAPA issued a Normative Instruction (NI 07/99) defining the organic production system, and determining that for an organic product to be commercialized it must be certified.

One of the main points of disagreement among the stakeholders in the Brazilian organic agriculture movement was certification, the obligation itself as well as the mandatory method of certification. On the one hand, the importance and even the necessity of a legislation to support and promote organic agriculture in Brazil were widely accepted. On the other hand, a group of stakeholders perceived certification as unnecessary, or at least could happen on a voluntary basis. Some argued for different ways to guarantee quality, mainly from the experience of direct relationship between producers and consumers to develop credibility. One example was the work developed by Cooperativa Ecológica Coolméia (Coolméia Ecological Cooperative) in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul. Others claimed that certification should be compulsory and carried out through audit/ inspection.

With the aim to create a common proposal, the certification was foreseen in the normative, but it would be performed according to the regional characteristics, i.e., methodologically appropriate to the local/regional context. Item 9.2 of the NI 07 reads: “The certification companies will adopt schemes more adequate to the regions where they perform their work”. This consensus decision allowed the development of different certification mechanisms or systems, for example the certification through audit and the one that is based on developing credibility.

Apart from the concepts and issues related to the certification of organic products, the NI 07/99 determined the creation of National and State Committees of Organic Production with equal number of members from government and civil society. The committees aim is to implement the NI through accreditation of certifying companies, control and monitor the work done and promote organic agriculture. The National Committee and some State Committees were formed and initiated their work. The accreditation of Certifying Companies (CCs) that sought legal authorization to work in Brazil was one of their main tasks. Therefore, in 2002 the National Committee issued the Normative Instruction 06, initially elaborated by the State Committee of São Paulo proposing the accreditation criteria.

This again triggered disagreement between several Brazilian organizations. The NI 06 was so confused and bureaucratic that among more than 20 CCs working in Brazil, maybe 2 or 3 would be able to comply with the criteria. Moreover it was a mixture between norms from IFOAM and ISO and proposed exclusively inspection mechanisms for certification, unlike the NI 07/99.

During the National Meeting of Agroecology held in June 2002 in Rio de Janeiro, several organizations manifested disagreement with the process of organic regulation in Brazil, emphasizing that it had been conducted incorrectly and without consensus. Moreover, they pointed out that if implemented as proposed, it would cause problems especially to small organizations, excluding them in the process. As a result the Organic Agriculture Group (OAG) was created with the participation of several public and civil society organizations, with the goal of constructing a legal basis for organic agriculture through bringing back the principle of consensus and support to small initiatives of production, organization or certification.

The main activities if the OAG were to 1) prevent the implementation of the NI 06, 2) propose the text which would be the base for Law N.10831 from December 2003; and 3) start a process of debate and capacity building through local and regional workshops titled 'constructing the participatory certification network in Brazil'. Today, the OAG still carries on its work and its main action is to contribute in the process of enforcing the Law N.10831.

Developing a new approach

Given the influence that organic agriculture legislation would have in the daily life of organizations and households, the OAG concentrated its efforts on the construction of a law bill to ensure that it reflected reality and was adequate to Brazilian organic agriculture. From then on the challenge was to bring back consensus and the elaboration of the legal text. Again certification was the reason for clashes. Big and more specialized certifying companies were proposing a mandatory certification system, and small certifying companies and organizations such as the ECOVIDA network were postulating a voluntary certification scheme, considering the context experienced in Brazil, in Latin American countries, and in other developing countries. The context of organic agriculture in Brazil and in the world led the ones working in the OAG to perceive a significant difference, or even conflict, between smallholder organic agriculture and large scale organic agriculture.

The Brazilian law presents two important aspects which makes it different from most other legislations on the issue. The first aspect is that it does not demand certification in cases of direct trade carried out by organized small farmers and under social control. The second aspect is that it allows the development of different certification systems seeking to guarantee the organic quality of products.

These two aspects are indeed progress. Even though certification is not optional, the law includes almost all organic agriculture actors in Brazil. It allows for the development of better systems in the future, and does not prevent the development of the organic agriculture sector in Brazil. This experience has been the base for other countries in the construction of their legal references, especially when it refers to strengthening the internal market of organic products.

The Ecovida Agroecology Network guarantee system

Scope of activities

Open air markets are the commercialization initiatives most stimulated by the network, but members of Ecovida also export and sell their products in the institutional market and other spaces. Cantinas of public schools, hospitals and official institutions are excellent marketing alternatives to increase agroecology among smallholders. Most of what is exported is additionally certified by another internationally recognized certification body.

Creating trust: Developing credibility through established relations

The concept of ‘development of credibility’ has always been central to the Ecovida Agroecology Network model. It occurs through formal and informal relations between producers and consumers and/or through grassroots organizations and networks relations, and is undertaken in a decentralized way, respecting local characteristics. It aims to strengthen agroecology as well as to ensure the quality of products through a network identity that can be recognized through the brand and label Ecovida.

The Ecovida concept integrates some characteristics with fundamental importance for this new form of organization:

- **Necessity and possibility of mutual recognition and support** among groups and organizations of ecological smallholders, and agroecology consultancy organizations
- **Organizations (groups, associations, and NGOs) in a horizontal network**, without hierarchies and oriented by principles and with the objectives to promote agroecology
- **Processes of guarantee developed by participatory mechanisms**, i.e. the responsibility to guarantee the quality of the production should be shared by producers, technicians, and consumers
- **Brand and label for marketing that represents the network**. The brand would characterize the process and would be used in advertisement materials (t-shirts, caps, journals, magazines, folders, banners, etc.); pedagogical material (books, booklets, reports, DVDs, etc.). The label would be used in the products to reflect its quality.

Structure and management of Ecovida Agroecology Network

The network is formed by regional nuclei compounded by the network members of a given geographic region (Figure 2). The nuclei promote exchange of information, credibility and products. It is an informal network without legal representation. An association was created to be responsible for the certification in the legal spheres when it is needed – the Ecovida Association of Participatory Certification. Initially, the role of the association is to formalize, organize and respond officially to the participatory process developed by regional nuclei.

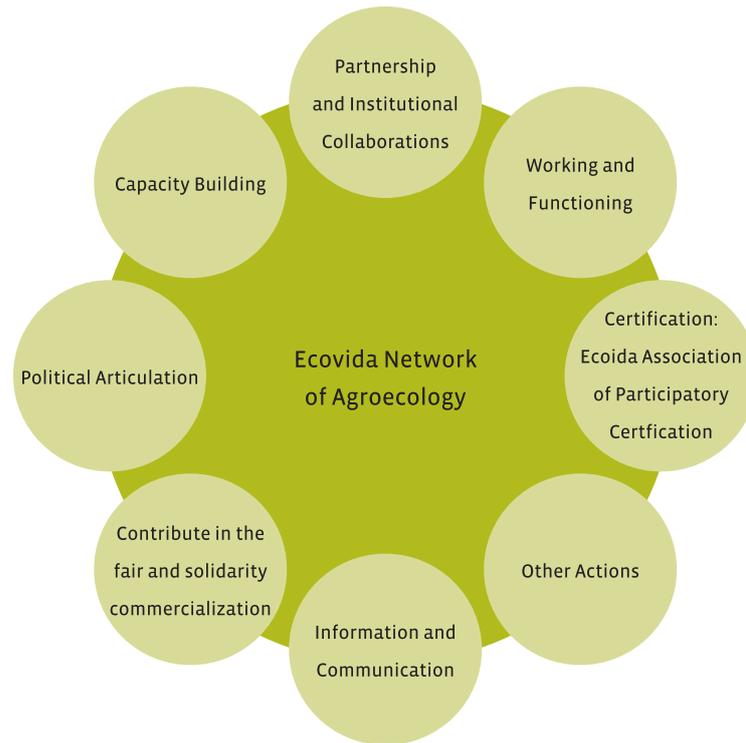


Figure 1: The Ecovida Network develops a series of activities

There are more than 70 definitions of sustainable development. The term is used by any person or organization with distinct interests and aims. Ecovida assumes that sustainable development is not possible without an agricultural system which encompasses environmental, social, and economic sustainability. The Ecovida network also believes that it is possible to connect farmers and consumers and construct a market where the payment for the activities and agricultural products will be fair, without exploiting producers or consumers.

Thus Ecovida is working according to the following principles:

- Agroecology as the basis for sustainable development
- To work with smallholders and their organizations
- To be oriented by its own normative for functioning and for production
- To work in the construction of a market which is fair and based on solidarity
- To guarantee the quality through participatory certification

The objectives of the activities are:

- To develop and multiply agroecological initiatives
- To stimulate the associative initiatives in the production and consumption of ecological products
- To generate and provide information for individuals and organizations
- To connect farmers and consumers for mutual support
- To have a brand and a label expressing the process, the commitment, and the quality
- To foment the interchange, the rescue and the valorization of popular knowledge.

The certification process

The Participatory Certification Network (PCN) is officially responsible for the guarantee process. Initially, the role of the association is to formalize, organize and respond officially for the participatory process developed by regional nuclei. The guarantee process of Ecovida builds on some important mechanisms:

TRUST is the basis of the process and presupposes that farmers, technicians, and consumers perform their actions in a responsible and trustful way, with the aim to improve Agroecology. The capacity and consciousness of these actors are the necessary conditions to attest and improve the quality of ecological products.

PARTICIPATION. The principles and norms are put into practice and verified with the effective participation of farmers and their organizations, technicians, local and regional consultancy organizations, and consumers. Such work is not limited to the 'highly skilled' technicians.

DECENTRALIZATION which respects and prioritizes local initiatives and organizations, their peculiarities and own capacity to assume the main tasks and responsibilities in the certification and to guarantee the quality. There are several advantages, like knowledge of the local reality, reduction of costs, and direct contact to follow up the work.

EXTERNAL CONTROL guarantees the participation of individuals and organizations that are not directly involved in the production which is to be certified. The certification is done by the ethical commission established in the community group or in the Regional Nucleus.

NO THIRD PARTY INSPECTION. PCN schemes don't require a third party organism to guarantee the quality of the product. This is possible because the PCN has several built-in mechanisms which enable to simultaneously check the compliance with the rules and the improvement of the production:

- Grassroots organizations – all Ecovida certified farmers participate in a group or an association
- Proximity to consumers – through direct selling or visits to the production units
- Technical assistance – from consultancy organizations or technicians
- Internal control – periodically performed by other members of the group
- External control – performed by an ethical council formed by people not connected with the unit of production or the organization to be certified

It is within each regional nucleus that the PCN is developed. The certification is mutually recognized among other nuclei which form the Ecovida network. This allows the circulation of information and goods among the nuclei, increasing the credibility inside and outside the Network, feeding constantly the whole process.

For farmers the PCN is one further step in the participation in the Ecovida Network. This means that an organization can participate in the Network without being certified, but never be certified without being a member of the network. Table 3 summarizes the process in the PCN.

The first level of certification is the farmer and his/her family's pledge. The work done by the household is backed by the group to which he or she belongs, through the group's ethical commission. The group, in its turn, has its work backed by the regional nucleus to which it is associated, through



co-responsibility and through the Nucleus Ethical Council (Figure 3). The products coming from this nucleus are supported by all the other nuclei, which have the same production norms and platform of work which permits a mutual legitimization through the Ecovida Network of Agroecology.

The monitoring is performed yearly. The ethical council uses the conversion plan or farm plan as an instrument to evaluate the continuous use of the label.

Where there is suspicion that the rules and agreements are not respected, the ethical council is asked to evaluate and report. In case of misconduct the following procedures are adopted:

- Immediate cease of the certificate and the use of the label
- Orientation to modify procedures of production or processing according to the report of the Ethical Council
- The unit can regain the certificate by requesting to the regional nucleus and proving the compliance with norms and required changes
- Re-incidents will be evaluated by the regional nucleus

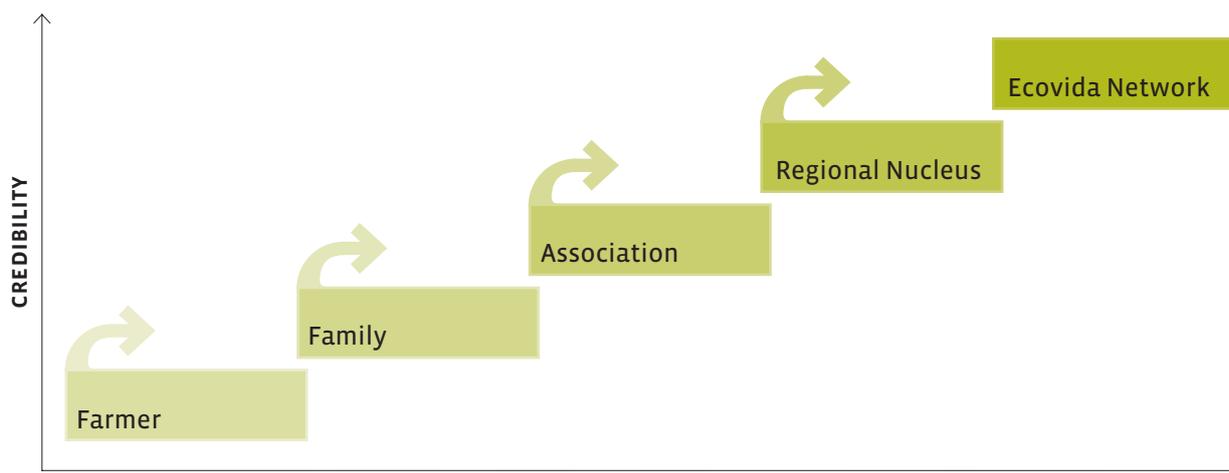


Figure 3: Development of credibility of the ecological product on the Ecovida Agroecology Network

STEPS	INFORMATION
1. Be a member of the Ecovida	The group joins the Ecovida Network through the nucleus
2. Request of certification to the regional Nucleus	The nucleus must have a working Ethical Council
3. Fill in the form to require the certification	For each production unit it is necessary to fill in a form with information about the production process.
4. Address to the ethical council	According to the internal dynamic of the group the forms are addressed to the council for analysis.
5. Analysis of the forms by the ethical council	The council may require more information if it is needed to better understand the production process.
6. Visit (inspection) to the production unit	The number of units visited should be equivalent to the number of members of each group.
7. Report of the ethical council	Approval or rejection. The necessary improvements are pointed out.
8. Consent of certification by the nucleus	The nucleus approves the certification and authorizes the use of the label. The nucleus can emit certificates and declarations for the members.

Table 2: Necessary minimum steps established by the network for a farmer to obtain the Ecovida label. Each nucleus can improve or make them more specific

Important documents

FORM to require certification with a conversion plan

REPORT from each member of the ethical council that have participated in the visit

REPORT from the Ethical council

CERTIFICATE of the nucleus approving the certification

Standards and norms

In the beginning there was no systematized process for the entire network, only the experience of initiatives implemented in different regions, under distinct realities. But after some time the need was felt to formulate minimum norms for the entire network to generate an identity in the process of Ecovida Association of Participatory Certification, PCN. Therefore, during the meetings held by the groups, by the nuclei and by the whole Network common criteria for the organization and functioning of the Network were developed as well as the general norms for production and certification. These are condensed in a booklet published by the Ecovida Network called “Booklet for Capacity Building in Participatory Certification of Ecological Products”. [There are also annexes based on the IFOAM norms to fit the Normative Instruction N.07/99]

The quality sign of Ecovida

Being a member of Ecovida presupposes a commitment with agroecology. However, membership does not automatically allow the use of the Ecovida label. To use the label it is necessary to go through the certification process. Certification takes place at the request of a group of farmers who are interested in adopting the Ecovida label.

The label can be put on the products. A certificate can be utilized a) on the stalls of ecological open air markets (if all products sold on the stall are ecological), b) on the farm (if the whole farm is ecological); c) for the entire open air market (if it is 100% ecological), d) in the agro-processing industry (if it processes only ecological products). Where the stall, the farm, the market or the agro-industry is not 100% ecological, it is only allowed to use the label on each specific ecological product.



Transparency

A fundamental characteristic of participatory certification is its connection to the base, i.e. with the groups and smallholders organizations and with consumers' organizations. The participation of the greatest possible number of actors will permit a better understanding and practice of the whole process. The more dynamic and organized the group is, the easier it is to work and to develop credibility. Information is promptly available and is not confidential in the process of certification and guarantee of quality.

Funding and economic sustainability

The financial resources of the network come from a) the annual fees of its members (R\$ 12.00 for households and R\$ 36.00 for organizations); b) institutional projects of NGOs; c) the Federal Government and d) volunteer work.

Legal status

Ecovida Agroecology Network is an informal network without legal representation.

Recognition

By the authorities: Ecovida is recognized by the local, state and federal government. When a project is planned the legal status of one of the Ecovida member organizations is used.

By other certifiers: Some certifiers accept the Ecovida registers as an internal control, others don't accept the PCN because it does not have legal status, and others do not accept it because they don't accept the PCN system.

By consumers and others: Consumers accept the PCN system because Ecovida stimulates direct trade which increases the recognition of the quality sign, but in Brazil it is also true that the awareness of consumers is still low.

Other Areas of support for small farmers

The Ecovida participatory certification is adequate to the reality and characteristics of smallholders' agriculture because it stimulates organization and cooperation as well as small initiatives for food processing and commercialization. The system allows a simpler handling of information about the farm and processing practices.

The participatory certification can be an important educative and pedagogical process, because it is performed by individuals and organizations that are close to local reality, which know the situation better and can contribute to improvement and necessary changes. It is important that the certification contribute to increasing the understanding of all actors that participate in the development of agroecology. Only then can we have certification as a helping tool to multiply the number of agroecological initiatives and the supply of healthy products.

Conclusion and future perspectives

There are some internal and external limits and challenges for the Ecovida Network, and also the development of its participatory certification process since both of them are interconnected.

A concern in the internal work is the affiliation of organizations which are new in the work of agroecology. Some of them want to use the logo to sell their products, but cannot be accepted because they are not yet fully converted. In Brazil there is no government support during the conversion period, which makes conversion difficult. Another concern is the difficulty to create more specific norms, adequate and appropriate to tropical and subtropical realities or to agro forestry systems. This work also includes appropriation and verification of the norms by farmers, technicians, and consumers. A third concern is how to economically support the work of the NGOs in the leading process. It's a challenge to be a mixed network composed of farmers, technicians and consumers.

The external limits felt at the moment are how to establish reciprocity with other certifiers and how to gain recognition of the process by large-scale market, e.g. supermarkets and export.

A future challenge is to continue to get well organized at grassroots level. From the structural perspective, it is crucial to write and implement projects to bring financial resources for the organization of regional nuclei, for farmers and consumers organizations, and to support the conversion of production systems. It is also important to include a greater number of agroecology initiatives, such as production, processing commercialization, consumption or consultancy.

The PGS of Ecovida demands a continued external process. There is a need to spread the model of participatory certification to other networks in a broader way, outside the scope of Ecovida. The enforcement of the organic agriculture bill will require continuous follow up from Ecovida and other organic actors so that it will continue to enhance the importance of PGS.

The development and growth of an alternative market for organic products which offers social inclusion, benefits for stakeholders and values such as transparency, solidarity, complementarities and integration between consumer and producer, is an ongoing goal.

To overcome these limits and challenges is the task of Ecovida Network at this moment. It is important to stress that our action must strengthen Agroecology, through increasing the number of producers and the amount of products offered, and also to make possible wide access of consumers to the organic products. The future exchange of experiences and a closer relationship with similar initiatives, nationally and internationally, will be an interesting and necessary part of this task.

Contact

Rua Souza Dutra 714 ap. 304 – Estreito
 Florianópolis/SC – CEP: 88.070-605
 Tel. +55 (48) 334 3176 (office) 248 9728 (home)

AUTHORS

LAERCIO MEIRELLES is an agronomist and coordinator of Ipê Ecological Centre, an NGO that has been working with assistance and education in Ecological Agriculture since 1985, centro.litoral@terra.com.br [HYPERLINK www.centroecologico.org.br](http://www.centroecologico.org.br)

LUIZ CARLOS REBELATTO dos Santos is an agronomist and coordinator of the project: Participatory Certification – An adequate certification method for ecological familiar agriculture in the South of Brazil, member of Centre of Promotion and Studies for Group Agriculture, an NGO that has been working with studies and assistance in Familiar Agriculture since 1990, l Luiz@ecovida.org.br

ABBREVIATIONS

MAPA – Ministry of Agriculture
 NI 07/99 - Normative Instruction N° 07 Year 1999.
 NI 06/02 - Normative Instruction N° 06 Year 2002.
 CC - Certifying Companies
 PCN – Participatory Certification Network

4. CERTIFIED NATURALLY GROWN, USA

‘PGS ON THE WWW’

RON KHOSLA

Certified Naturally Grown (CNG) was created as an alternative to the USDA National Organic Program, which was scheduled to take effect in October, 2002. The CNG concept received quite a bit of national publicity and quickly expanded to become a national program. What is perhaps most unique about the Certified Naturally Grown program is that it is administered almost entirely online via the internet.

CNG started as a grassroots regional marketing label created by and run for small, direct market organic farmers in the Hudson Valley Region of New York State in July of 2002. By May of 2005, 350 farmers in the US had registered as ‘Certified Naturally Grown’ and PGS programs in the UK, Ireland and now Canada are also using, or planning on using, the online management software created to administer the program.

Certified Naturally Grown certifies fresh fruits and vegetables, herbs, flowers, bedding plants and limited livestock operations. Honey is under a pilot program. There are no CNG processors and no plans to include processors at this time although many farms sell their own jams, soap, cheese, etc made from their own produce.

History and development of ‘Certified Naturally Grown’

Why a Participatory Guarantee System?

Although no national studies were conducted, an unofficial June 2002 phone survey conducted with the assistance of three Cornell Cooperative Extension offices found that 80% of the commercial organic farms in the Mid-Hudson Valley region of New York State were not planning to become USDA Certified Organic due to a variety of concerns. Certified Naturally Grown developed into what is now termed a “Participatory Guarantee System” as a result of trying to address those concerns.

The program wasn’t intentionally started as a ‘PGS’. The term didn’t even exist then. It was started because there was considerable despair over how these farms could now legally describe their growing practices to customers. Farmers expressed frustration with the “USDA/Agribusiness takeover” of the organic label that they perceived was uniquely linked and identified with small family farms. The loss of free use of the word organic led to much discussion all over the country of alternative names like “Morganic” and “Authentic”. Alternative systems of certification that took into account the concerns small farmers had with the USDA organic program were discussed extensively in all regions of the country. Those concerns included:

- High Cost of Certification – both in terms of direct fees to the certifiers and in terms of indirect costs of more complex paperwork and record keeping.
- Philosophical concern over joining what was perceived to be a government and agribusiness industry takeover’ of what was originally a ‘small farmer label’
- Frustration of working with certification agencies that seemed to be in more of an antagonistic relationship with farmers, rather than a supportive one. ‘Guilty until proven innocent’ was a commonly voiced complaint.
- Perception of weakened and compromised standards with ‘agribusiness loopholes’ as well as a fear that organic had lost it’s focus on ‘true sustainability’
- Marketing Fears – That ‘Organic’ would quickly be dominated by huge agribusiness companies that would flood the market with cheap organic produce... desire for a new label that highlighted the local/small family farm nature of the produce.

Developing a new approach

An alternative certification program that took these concerns into account began to take shape over several months. It was decided that the program would only be open to small family farms that sold their farm products ‘locally and directly’. This could happen through farm stands, farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture Projects (CSA) and directly to restaurants or small local food cooperatives, as well as through natural food stores that highlighted locally grown produce. To keep cost down, inspections would be handled by grower-peers on a volunteer basis. To reduce hierarchies and replace the overhead of a review board, a web-based system would allow transparent viewing of all aspects of each farm’s certification process – in effect giving the whole world an open window into exactly why each individual farm had been certified.

With assistance from Cornell Extension of Ulster County, the first informational website of the concept was created. It publicized the goals of the program, a summary of acceptable growing practices in harmony with generally accepted international organic principles, a three-page online application and a notarized affidavit along with the plan for peer inspections. No central organization was in charge of the process at this point. It grew very ‘organically’ with many people contributing and changing pieces. Every change was added to the public web site, and then new contributors would respond with additional changes. The Sierra Club is a national environmental conservation organization in the US. The board of the local Sierra Club group contributed extensive changes in wording and approach, and (unofficially) ended up representing a ‘consumer’ perspective.

Email, phone and physical mail requests for cooperation, review and feedback were sent to sustainable agriculture organizations in New York State, as well as a few selected individuals and organizations in other states.



Ideas, improvements and help for the grassroots program came in, as well as active and vociferous criticism for the very idea of an alternative to the USDA National Organic Program (NOP) due to fears that it would confuse the general public. Still, several people involved with NOP certification agencies appreciated the idea and actively contributed to developing the concept. The Mid-Hudson Sierra Club group continued to provide a “consumer perception” of the program as it changed.

An open meeting to gather further input and feedback was held at the August 2002 Northeast Regional NOFA (North East Organic Farmer’s Association) conference. Much of the way the program is now run was finalized at this meeting, including replacing the original CNG program standards with the USDA NOP standards. This meeting included people from several states in the Northeast and the CNG program was officially declared to be national. The idea that it would only be a ‘Locally Grown’ label stuck, though. The label would be national, but it would still only certify farmers that sold their produce locally.

An informal meeting with Richard Mathews, Program Manager of the USDA NOP, to explain the CNG concept and get an unofficial comment about the legality of using the USDA Standards took place in September 2002. The response was surprisingly supportive and even encouraging, with a warning that USDA organic program standards could be used, only so long as it was made explicitly clear that Certified Naturally Grown was in no way affiliated or associated with the USDA National Organic Program.

The press Certified Naturally Grown received was unanimously positive. The concept of a label that certified not just organic but specifically only LOCAL small farmers was an attractive one for local reporters to write about, and dozens of articles appeared all over the country. CNG was also featured on two nationally syndicated radio talk shows.

The Certified Naturally Grown guarantee system

Scope of activities

Certified Naturally Grown is unique in that it provides certification only to small farmers that primarily sell their farm products LOCALLY and DIRECTLY through farm stands, farmers’ markets, CSA’s, direct to restaurants or even to locally focused natural food stores or cooperatives that highlight the local nature of the produce they sell.

Creating trust: Online application and interactive self-evaluation

The interactive online application is the key administrative feature of the Certified Naturally Grown application process. The online application is used in part to collect data on the farm and operation, but even more importantly, it is meant to provide a process that leads the farmer through an interactive self-evaluation of their growing practices to make sure that they understand exactly what they are committing to.

The online application program is designed to give instant feedback to applicants as to acceptable and non-acceptable growing practices in a much more effective fashion than just having the applicants read over the growing practices and click on a single “I agree” check box at the bottom. By systematically requiring them to read through multiple statements and actively choose or type their answer, every farmer must seriously consider and review the statements and declarations they are making.

A custom program accepts, reviews and distributes new member applications to the appropriate human reviewers, connects farm members to each other both regionally and individually for peer inspection purposes and offers consumers complete transparency into any particular farm member’s certification documents.

Inspections take place at an appropriate time during the growing season, and all farmers applying for CNG Certification state their agreement to complete an inspection on another CNG farm. Farmers may not ‘trade’ inspections so it takes three farms in a region to complete an inspection circle. Farmer ‘A’ inspects Farmer ‘B’, ‘B’ inspects Farmer ‘C’, and then ‘C’ inspects Farmer ‘A’. Farmer ‘A’ and ‘B’ can not inspect each other.

Even with 350 registered farmers, due to the large geographic area covered, in many cases farmers are simply too spread out to complete their inspection requirements. As a result, in 2004, CNG trialed a variety of inspection alternatives including extension agents, Produce Managers, other (non-CNG) Organic farmers, Sierra Club groups, and even farm customers. A new inspection form with detailed instructions and ‘questions to ask’ was created to guide even non-farmers through a meaningful inspection process and the feedback from the trials was extremely positive. Farmer-to-Farmer peer inspections remain the ideal, but these seem to be a practical alternative for isolated farmers in the meantime.

The USDA organic program does not have any provision for ‘transitional’ or ‘in-conversion’ certification. As a result, there is some pressure on new organic farmers to try and speed up the certification process by exaggerating the last date prohibited substances were applied so that they can meet the 36 month requirement. CNG includes ‘Transitional’ status for farmers who follow all organic norms and practices, but used prohibited materials sometime in the last 36 months prior to the start of the certification process. This flexibility encourages honesty, but also encourages farmers who have been considering switching from conventional to organic production to actually do so. One USDA accredited organic certifier says they actively encourage CNG as a ‘transitional’ label for farmers that will become USDA certified with their organization at a later date.



Figure 1: Steps to becoming Certified Naturally Grown via the World Wide Web

Structure and management

A computer programmer involved with the State of Virginia's organic program took over the internet aspects of Certified Naturally Grown, improving the website and automating the initial review of the online applications and farmer communications, for example linking and tracking farmer-to-farmer inspections. Other farmers became involved to add a livestock and honey program. The program continued to be run on a grassroots basis, with no paid staff, no official organization and no required fees.

Most recently, CNG has begun the process of dividing administrative work into regions. The actual certification process isn't changing at all, but now initial reviews of new farmer applications are being automatically distributed to CNG farmer-volunteers in that local region as are the logistics of collecting and uploading regional inspection reports. There are still no required fees, although farmers are encouraged to make a donation, and no paid staff. Distributing the work-load is being done in the hopes of continuing the volunteer/grassroots nature of the organization and minimizing the natural hierarchies that occur if a central support staff were to develop.

Local regions are not pre-defined. Any group of farmers can declare themselves a 'region'. Because of the distributed and real-time nature of the internet, volunteers can opt in and opt out as they wish.

With roughly 350 farmers enrolled in the program from nearly all 50 states, CNG is currently the largest guarantee program in the United States for organic farmers who do not want to be part of the USDA Organic program. The same web based certification-management program is being formally adopted in the UK by the Wholesome Food Association with close to 100 farmers, and under that same label in Ireland. Farmers in Canada are adopting the program under the moniker 'Certified Naturally Grown'.

Currently CNG is managed from a central location on a volunteer basis, but as the program has grown, that is no longer practical. Use of the internet allows non-localized, distributed management of new farm applications and outreach.

In the spring of 2005 farmers comfortable with the internet and email were invited to take on a more active volunteer administrative role including review of online applications, inspection report follow-ups, and answering questions from new farmers, consumers and the press.

The online administration program is still being modified to effectively facilitate this new style of management.

Details of the new Regional Management Strategy

- 1) A farmer anywhere in the country logs on to the internet and fills in an online application (OR mails in a paper application).
- 2) Initial automated review is done by computer immediately for application completeness and obvious discrepancies.
- 3) Regional Volunteer CNG farmers are sent a copy of the farmer's online application to review and vote "Approved/Not Approved/Need more info" with noted reasons.

4a) Rejected farmers receive notice as to why OR are requested to provide more info and return to step 1 to modify their online application.

4b) Approved farmers are listed on the website and an inspection is arranged between that farmer and another local farmer.

*The management program sends out regular email-reminders to volunteers working on application reviews. Only one application is processed at a time by any given volunteer. Reminders cease when review is complete.

*Reminders to complete pending inspections are sent on a regular basis starting in August. Reminders cease when summary inspection reports are received.

Important Documents

GROWING PRACTICES AND STANDARDS FOR VEGETABLE GROWERS: This is based on the USDA National Organic Program growing practices and allowable materials.

GROWING PRACTICES AND STANDARDS FOR LIVESTOCK PRODUCERS: Also based on the USDA National Organic Program, but with a list of exceptions.

GROWING PRACTICES AND STANDARDS FOR HONEY PRODUCTION

GROWER'S APPLICATION (interactive online and print versions). These are designed as much to gather data from the prospective farmer-applicants about their growing practices as they are to lead the grower through a self-evaluation as to whether or not they really do comply with the growing practices. This is done because we found that so many people were not reading the growing practices document in detail. In the online version, the computer provides instant feedback as to whether a practice is acceptable or not.

GROWER'S AFFIDAVIT: A document with the most important growing practice statements listed. Each statement is initialed by the grower and then the full document is signed.

STEP-BY-STEP INSPECTION GUIDE

INSPECTOR'S SUMMARY REPORT

INFORMATIONAL FLYERS for farmers and the general public

Standards, Norms and References

CNG started out with its own simplified organic standard based on a compilation of many existing published organic standards. During a public meeting at the NOFA-New England summer Organic Farming conference, a vote resulted in a switch to using the USDA Organic Program standards, which is what is used today. This was not a unanimous decision, as there are many problems with the USDA organic standard. Using the existing, generally accepted USDA standard, however, allowed CNG to save costs in maintaining a private standard and updated list of allowable and prohibited materials. With this adoption of the NOP standards, CNG growers could find ready-answers to their questions on the internet and from other organic growers, which saves support time. It also simplifies communication to customers and encourages organic and CNG farmers to share ideas and materials.

In the case of livestock, a short list of exceptions have been developed by CNG and are now listed at the start of the CNG Livestock Standard (which otherwise quotes from the USDA Organic Standard).

Quality Sign and Certificate

CNG farmers are given access and encouraged to use the CNG seal on their websites and documentation. Produce labels with the seal are sold at cost in the spring in rolls of 500 (appropriate to the small farmer). A plan to sell produce bags with the label was introduced in spring of 2005 and one of the farm members is arranging this (at cost).



Laminated, postable CNG certificates show not only the farm's certified status but also explain just what that means to consumers that may not be familiar with the Certified Naturally Grown program. Both the CNG Director and the farmer sign the certificate, making it function somewhat as a public 'Farmer's Pledge'. A scan of the certificate follows. The details of the 'pledge' are copied from the certificate below.

Certified Naturally Grown farmers are committed to the following standards and practices:

- Absolutely no use of synthetic chemical insecticides, herbicides, fungicides, or fertilizers on our crops or fields

- Minimal and careful use of even Organically approved soil amendments and sprays
- Care for our soil, water and air quality with crop rotations, cover crops, protective buffer strips and ecologically sustainable farming practices
- No use of chemically treated or Genetically Modified seeds
- Humane treatment of livestock including the use of no hormones or antibiotic-laced feed and consistent access to pasture
- Follow sanitary post-harvest practices including proper transport, storage and the use of only potable water for the washing of produce
- To strive in every way to pass on the land and surrounding environment in an even better condition than it was passed on to us

Transparency

Certified Naturally Grown practices unparalleled transparency both of the certification process as well as of individual farm's practices and even inspection reports. The open transparent approach was taken for philosophical, practical (economic) and marketing/credibility reasons.

In the case of inspection reports, for example, a farm inspector is much more likely to do a thorough inspection job if they know that their name and reputation will be publicly linked to the farm they are inspecting.

Complete transparency also allows the program to do away with the management and overhead of a review committee. Publishing every farm application, grower's affidavits and copies of annual inspection reports onto the internet, in essence allows any concerned consumer to participate in the "farm review."

Funding and Economic Sustainability

Certified Naturally Grown has been entirely funded on a grassroots basis by the growers it represents through free-will donations.

In 2004, donations from farm members averaged out to \$35/farm. About 15% of the farmers in the program made no donation to the program. Many farmers donated only \$10 or \$15 towards program expenses. As the program is now more established and recognized, a required fee structure has been discussed, but if instituted it will remain extremely low, and all future administrative plans for the program continue to center on volunteer work from member farmers, and using the internet to efficiently distribute and manage the work load.

Legal status

Certified Naturally Grown was registered in 2003. Although it is being run as a not-for-profit, official legal status in that regard is still pending.

Recognition

By authorities: There is no law requiring registration as a certifying agent in the US, and there are no official recognitions nor have any been sought. Because Certified Naturally Grown was an unfamiliar term to consumers, endorsements from an existing and recognized group was initially very important.

By other certifiers: Although there has been increasing communication between Certified Naturally Grown and USDA Organic Certification agencies, no formal relationship exists at this time.

By other groups: The most important recognition and endorsement came in the form of the Sierra Club's Atlantic Chapter in January 2003. The Sierra Club is a well recognized and respected national environmental conservation organization in the US and their endorsement of the CNG program provided an enormous boost in stature and credibility. Since then several other national and regional health advocacy, environmental and sustainable agriculture organizations have endorsed the program as well.

Other areas of support for small farmers

CNG was created solely as an alternative quality label; a way to provide organic farmers who didn't want to be USDA Certified, to market and describe their produce legally and simply. However, dozens of questions on farming support arrive each week. What can be done about flea beetle damage? Does anyone know how to control Canadian Thistle? Where's an organic source of strawberry plugs - can I just grow them myself? How? Every year, answering these questions and more importantly empowering CNG Farmers to answer the questions themselves becomes more important!

Therefore CNG supports and encourages the formation of Grower Networks centered around regular meetings. The Mid-Hudson Valley Grower's Network, for example, meets on a monthly basis. Roughly 20 growers from three counties get together at a different member's farm each month for a short twilight tour, potluck dinner and discussion session. Speakers are sometimes invited. Farm tours can also sometimes serve as the basis for inspection reports. An internet list-serve allows network members to communicate with each other, sharing growing advice, problems and ideas. The meetings naturally result in shared seed and supply purchases.

CNG maintains a general list serv/discussion group for all members to quickly deal with production questions as well as questions about the certification process itself.

CNG is also planning on making unique use of the internet-linked CNG Farmer Network to conduct coordinated research on the effectiveness of new (and old) organic techniques proposed by various farmers as solutions. The programming technology is similar to that found on product review websites where many people can write in with a quantitative weighed opinion (i.e. 'On a scale of 1-5'), and qualitative comments. Instead of the review being for a consumer product, it will be used to evaluate solutions to challenges faced by organic farmers.

Conclusion and future perspectives

Growth and potential

With roughly 350 registered farms, Certified Naturally Grown has rapidly become larger than most of the USDA accredited Organic Certification agencies. This has been accomplished primarily through word of mouth and articles in farming publications. CNG farmers have also distributed information or made presentations on the program at farming conferences.

There is no accurate or reliable data on the number of Organic farms in the US that are not USDA Certified. Several unsupported references state that '50% of the Organic farms in the US are not certified', but offer no references as to how or why that number was arrived at, it could be more or less. In the Hudson Valley of New York, based on a 2002 phone survey conducted with help from Cornell Cooperative Extension, only 20% of commercial organic farms were certified or planning on becoming certified in the next year. That number doesn't seem to have changed much, but this shouldn't necessarily be extrapolated to the entire US.

It is probably safe to say that there is a minimum of 7000 non-certified organic farms in the US that currently have no clear way of describing their farming practices and could utilize a Locally Grown Participatory Guarantee label to help position and market their produce in their communities.

Conclusion

Certified Naturally Grown was started as a reaction to the USDA National Organic Program (NOP) and specifically due to small-farmer criticisms and concerns about the NOP's impact on small, direct-market organic farmers.

Today it is very clear that CNG could not exist without USDA Organic. The programs are actually very complimentary. The USDA NOP provides the bureaucracy, hierarchy and overhead necessary to maintain a third party certification program suitable for processors, distributors and wholesalers. Certified Naturally Grown is then free to focus on and promote small farms selling directly to consumers in their own communities. This complimentary relationship has mutual advantages.

A focus on higher ideals, small family farms, and the 'local-only' nature of CNG, offers marketing advantages in addition to reduced paperwork for small growers. Third Party certifiers are relieved of the burden of having to deal with many small growers. Several USDA Organic Certification agencies have confided that small diversified growers are simply 'not worth the trouble.' Certifiers make less money on small growers, and often end up having to do more work.

Most organic farmers find considerable value in some sort of guarantee and support system, but locally-focused direct market farmers often have a hard time justifying the time and expense of a third-party certification system. By adopting a PGS approach to certification, Certified Naturally Grown provides an attractive alternative for these smaller locally-focused farms strengthening and encouraging organic farm production and public consumer awareness of organic farming and more specifically, a community's organic farms.

Contact

CERTIFIED NATURALLY GROWN

205 Huguenot Street

New Paltz, NY 12561

USA

Ph: 845-256-0686

www.naturallygrown.org

info@naturallygrown.org

AUTHOR OF THE CASE STUDY

RON KHOSLA is a founding member and current Director of Certified Naturally Grown. Previously he was the organic certification director for NY-NFA. He and his wife Kathryn run a 230 member Community Supported Agriculture farm in New York State.

ABBREVIATIONS

CNG – Certified Naturally Grown

CSA - Community Supported Agriculture

NOFA - North East Organic Farmer's Association

NOP – National Organic Program

USDA – United States Department of Agriculture

