

The Campinas and Region Natural Agriculture Association's Participatory Guarantee System: a case study in Brazil

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Abstract

The research aimed to review the context in which the Brazilian regulation of organic agriculture was conceived and to conduct a study of the first PGS (Participatory Guarantee System) registered in Brazil. Such PGS is part of the Campinas and Region Natural Agriculture, located in the state of San Paolo. The research sought to understand the farmers' objectives and motivations for adopting the PGS and their experiences within this social control mechanism. The participants in this research identified as main advantages of the PGS: extended experience sharing, participatory decision-making and collective strategies for purchase and marketing. Those previously certified by third party systems unanimously declared that the PGS proved to be more stringent and reliable as an organic conformity assessment system. However, the farmers also highlighted that paperwork required by the government from PGSs has increased and that indirect costs continue to be the main challenges that they face.

Introduction

The Law 10.831 of 2003, pertaining to Brazilian regulation of organic agriculture was the result of an intense one decade debate including social movements, PGS supporters, third party certifiers, intellectuals, government members and other sectors of civil society. Consequently, Brazil was the first to include PGSs (Participatory Guarantee Systems) as an alternative to third party certification among the organic conformity assessment systems permitted to issue the official seal for marketing of organic products within the national territory. This work presents an historical overview of this law-conceiving process and a case study of an association that decided to convert its non-profit third party certification department to a PGS in 2010. The Campinas and Region Natural Agriculture Association's PGS nowadays certifies sixty producers, corresponding to 435 hectares of organic farming in the states of San Paolo and Minas Gerais.

Material and methods

A comprehensive analysis of the context in which the Brazilian Law of Organic Agriculture was conceived has been possible through literature review and the analysis of reports from meetings of the Organic Agriculture Group (GAO by its acronym in Portuguese). GAO was responsible for the final version of the Law 10.831 and among its members there were social movements and PGS proponents, third party certifiers, intellectuals, government members and other sectors from civil society. In addition, a semi-structured interview with one of GAO's members was conducted.

For the ANC's study, the methodology included six months field work based on the participatory observation methodology in one of the accredited farms, local organic markets, peers and verification visits and PGS's meetings. Additionally, twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with participant farmers.

The first phase of the field research occurred from June 2013 until December 2013. These six months field work took place in one of the properties certified by the PGS being studied. During this period the researcher took part in activities such as soil preparation, planting, cropping, processing, packing and labelling of the products. The researcher attended ten local organic open air markets organized by the SPG being studied where such products were marketed. In parallel and since the beginning of 2013 the researcher attended eight of the SPG monthly meetings, two peer visits and one verification visit.

Based on the qualitative criteria of social and economic diversity ten out of the sixty participant producers were selected for semi-structured interviews. The PGS is divided into fourteen regional groups and these first ten interviewed were each selected from a different group. However, as the interviews were carried on the need of ten other interviews emerged as the first block of interviews revealed fundamental differences among traditional and Neo-Rural (GIULIANI, 1990) farmers in terms of their comments on their PGS experiences. The script for the interviews was designed to identify family background, reasons for converting

to organic agriculture (if the case) and for adopting the PGS. Also farmers who had already been certified through third party systems were interviewed to draw a comparison between the two systems. The interviews also focused on the main advantages, disadvantages, challenges and demands pointed out by the farmers relative to the studied PGS.

Results

The Brazilian Law for Organic Agriculture

The literature review indicates that the international and especially the European debate on the regulation of organic agriculture had an important influence on the current Brazilian legislation. The main procedures required by both regulations are similar and based on the ISO 65 guide standards. However, as will be shown later, there was a remarkable openness in the Brazilian case in terms of discussion with the civil society arising from the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply,

The demand for ecological products increased in Brazil after the United Nations, ECO -92, that was held in Rio de Janeiro, 1992 (Santos, 2005). The national media started then to emphasize expose's concerning the use of agrochemicals and the consequent harm to nature and human health. However, a decade earlier many social networks of consumers, farmers, students, researches and other interested persons had been organized through local participatory systems to warrant the origin of its ecological products (Fonseca, 2005). Such guarantee was given more through the social strength of relationships than by specific control mechanisms (official norms, for instance) and the more the consumer was interested in the production process the higher their level of interaction with the farmer and understanding of the challenges involved in organic farming.

Therefore, in 1994 the Brazilian Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply started to mediate the debate about organic regulation. It was during this time that the first third party international organic certification bodies started to operate in Brazil. At the time, many large scale producers supported the need for a national regulation and defended exclusive third party certification as in Europe. Family farming and peasant movements also believed that an organic regulation would surely stimulate ecological production in the country, however criticized third party certification as the only alternative to assure organic quality.

As the negotiations were carried on, the main third party organizations started to push for exclusive third party certification and a proposal of normative practically identical to the ISO 65 was launched in 2002 by the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply. Later in the same year, social movements gathered in the 1st National Meeting of Agroecology and the National Articulation of Agroecology (ANA by its acronym in Portuguese) organized a group called Organic Agriculture Group (GAO by its acronym in Portuguese) in order to present a counter version of the normative. GAO gathered representatives from PGSs and third party certifiers. The group, with the support of the Ministry of Agrarian Development, conducted an exhaustive research on the certification bodies operating in Brazil. At the time, three PGSs were already operating in Brazil: Rede Ecovida (in the south region of Brazil), Rede Xique-xique (in the northeast) and OAS Acre (in the Amazon Region). Such PGSs became the reference for the regulation concerning PGSs in Brazil.

The final version of the current Law 10.831/2003 for Organic Agriculture and the subsequent normative instruction from 2009 concerning control mechanisms for organic assurance were the first national regulations to include PGSs as alternatives to third party certification. Both PGSs and third party certifiers are audited, accredited and authorized by the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply to perform inspections on the production units. The farmers certified by PGS or third party certifiers are allowed to use the organic seal and are included in the Brazilian System of Organic Conformity (SiSorg), which is a national record coordinated by the same Ministry. Another important innovation was the inclusion of Social Control Organizations (OCSs) as registered groups of organic farmers that are released from using the organic seal under the twin conditions that they are family farmers and sell only through direct sales at organic fairs. The OCS production units are not subjected to conformity inspections from the Ministry and the design of the control mechanism is let to the OCS' criteria, but are however submitted to the Ministry for later approval. One characteristic of SPGs and OCS in Brazil is that these models were developed to be locally based and promote civil participation by building bonds of trust and continuous knowledge exchange through a wide and growing agroecological network.

Another interesting fact is that due to GAO's influence, the Brazilian organic law was written based on the wide concept of Agroecology and its final version highlights several elements such as the cultural integrity of rural communities, social equity, the economic value of family farming and respect for natural resources. It also recognizes different farming styles as organic: biodynamic, organic, natural agriculture, permaculture, agroforestry, regeneration systems and others. Such wideness resulted in a great variety of ecological farming systems all officially recognized as "organic" in terms of the current legislation. Therefore the law recognizes at the same time systems guided by the principles set out by Agroecology and those which are based exclusively on chemical inputs replacement. (Abreu et al, 2009).

The Campinas and Region Natural Agriculture Association's Participatory Guarantee System

ANC was founded in 1991 as a non-profit civil organization by producers who decided to address themselves to meet the growing demand for an ecological market in the region. Since 1994 ANC had a non-profit third party certification department but in 2010 its members decided to adopt the PGS instead.

However, only eight out of the total of sixty associates were accredited by ANC at the time. The others came from already existing international or national third party certifiers or then started their conversion processes as they intended to join the PGS.

All those interviewed were previously accredited by a third party certifier and have unanimously declared that the PGS has turned out to be more severe in terms of assessment and control. According to the farmers, the peer and verification visits to their properties happen more often under the PGS and that they are more closely examined about their procedures by other farmers than they were by technicians from external certifiers. They have also pointed out that the participants assume collective responsibility for the credibility of a member and if a failure to conform to standard occurs all the producers might lose their accreditations. Due to this solidarity of responsibility the farmers believe that they have become more committed to and engaged with organic procedures since they have joined the PGS.

The participants interviewed have all pointed to the experience sharing and the participatory decision-making processes as the main gains within this kind of system. They declared that constant visits and meetings allow them to share their difficulties and become aware of everyone's problems. In relation to fulfilling all the procedures required the national regulation they declared that the collective search for solutions is essential for the PGS and that they have the chance to learn and take advice from other farmers who have found means to overcome their own challenges related to production and marketing.

The adoption of the PGS also encouraged cooperation among the regional groups for whom direct sale at fairs was an important marketing strategy. In two of the fourteen groups the farmers started to organize common transport for fairs, common leasing of market spaces and also started to alternate their presence on fairs days. Such strategies play an important role in increasing income for these farmers.

As well, the research identified that communication is essential within the regional group and that at least one participant of each regional group should attend a PGS meeting or visit. And it is evident that the more dynamic the group is the more the producers show enthusiasm about the PGS' advantages and the less overloaded a specific member of the group is.

The PGS demands considerable personal time. The PGS's activities proved to be profitable only for those who take advantage from such activities to exchange experiences and knowledge. On the other hand, producers who view the PGS exclusively as a cheaper alternative to third party certification tend to be discouraged in the long-term. Furthermore, in the PGS studied the financial cost can be considered to be higher than for third party certification because of money, time and work days spent on traveling for visits, meetings and filling out the required paper work. Also a monthly fee is charged by the Association.

The PGS studied also employed a technician specialized in organic agriculture and does not depend exclusively on volunteer work. This was fundamental to the success of the PGS and the following advantages must be highlighted: producers deal with less paperwork than in other PGSs, the employee coordinates the agendas of peers and verification visits and is responsible for advising, researching and answering questions related to technical issues concerning organic regulation. Furthermore, the Association provides public access to documents through an internet website which is updated by this employee weekly. On this website interviews and meeting reports, annual management plans of each property, the profile of

each producer and many other documents are available to the public. This is fundamental to guarantee the principles of transparency and traceability related to PGSs.

A significant difference concerning the producers' social backgrounds was revealed during the interviews and the PGS meetings. Two major social groups were identified: traditional producers and Neo-Rurals. One of the main challenges identified for the PGS perpetuation is related to conflicts that emerge from such diversity. Traditional farmers have always lived on their properties and have less formal educational background than Neo-Rural farmers that have left urban life and moved to the countryside. Traditional farmers believe technical procedures should be discussed in more straightforward language so they can feel more confident to share their ideas during the meetings. They also often insist that more gatherings should take place on the farms so they can point out and see for themselves the problems that the farmers have been facing on production and share even more experiences. Also traditional farmers have identified paperwork as a bigger challenge than did the Neo-Rurals. They also believe organic regulation is written in a too complex way and changes rapidly, consequently they said they are constantly worried about failing to comply with standards due to the lack of information.

The Brazilian System of Organic Conformity Assessment requires detailed registers of qualitative and quantitative information regarding the management of the properties and commercial transactions. However essential for control it is a challenge for farmers who have little time and are not used to bureaucratic paper work to keep such records constantly updated.

Discussion

Participatory Guarantee Systems empower local organic networks if they are not designed exclusively as control mechanisms. The study shows that the studied PGS was an important tool for strengthening ecological based family farming in the region and that it stimulates local sociability through the constant collective search for solutions. The studied PGS has also revealed a great diversity of producers' profiles. Farmers can share their practices while visiting other organic properties and discuss organic procedures at meetings. The participants consider such system more reliable than external accreditation due to its shared responsibility. Therefore, PGSs can be considered a resistance space for organic family farming in regions mainly occupied by agribusiness and conventional monoculture such as the countryside of Brazil in which the PGS studied is located.

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