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Participatory organic certification in Mexico: an alternative approach to maintaining the integrity of the organic label

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Abstract Over the past two decades the growth of the organic sector has been accompanied by a shift away from first party, or peer review, systems of certification and towards third party certification, in which a disinterested party is responsible for the development of organic standards and the verification of producer compliance. This paper explores some of the limitations of the third party certification model and presents the case of Mexico as an example of how an alternative form of participatory certification has emerged. The paper suggests that participatory guarantee systems (PGS) are reflective of the growing "beyond organic" movement, which focuses on reconstructing the local and re-embedding food systems into their socio-ecological contexts. It argues that PGS offers a number of benefits for producers and consumers, particularly in the South, but that it faces a number of challenges as well, such as a lack of formal recognition, social conflicts and dependence on donated resources.

Keywords Certification · Mexico · Organic agriculture · Participatory guarantee systems

Abbreviations

CSA	Community supported agriculture
IFOAM	International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements
ISO	International Standards Organization
NGO	Non governmental organization
NOP	[USDA] National Organic Program
OCIA	Organic Crop Improvement Association
PGS	Participatory guarantee system
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, the rapid growth of the organic sector has been accompanied by changes to organic certification systems. As organic production and consumption have increased in scale, the peer review style certification processes of the 1970s and 1980s have become less viable. As a result, a third party certification model—a process by which certification is provided by an independent agency—has become the norm. In many jurisdictions it is also a legal requirement for use of a label with text that employs the word "organic." In spite of its widespread acceptance, the mainstream third party model of organic certification has been criticized for promoting an input substitution vision of organic agriculture, for being removed from the grassroots level, and for its inaccessibility to many small scale producers.

The critiques levied against mainstream organic certification echo the concerns of those who suggest that, as it has grown in scale, the organic sector has become increasingly "conventionalized" and that it has, in becoming a full-fledged industry, lost its connection to the holistic ideals of the movement's pioneers (see Buck et al. 1997; Guthman 2002, 2004a, b). In response to these concerns, a growing number of initiatives have emerged that define themselves as "beyond organic." These initiatives seek to implement a more alternative and holistic

vision of sustainable food systems than that maintained by the conventionalized organic sector.

This paper suggests that, although to date the literature on the beyond organic movement has been almost entirely focused on the global North, the South is also the site of emerging beyond organic initiatives. Specifically, we argue that the development of alternative systems of organic certification in the South can be viewed as an important element of global attempts to move beyond mainstream organics. The case of Mexico will be used to demonstrate how alternative certification systems have emerged, why they can be considered beyond organic, and what challenges and opportunities they may present.

The article begins by briefly outlining the development of organic certification. It then presents a critique of mainstream organic certification. This critique is followed by an introduction to the concept of beyond organic alternatives, with a focus on the notion of participatory certification. The Mexican Network of Organic Markets, and specifically a local organic market in Chapingo, is then used as a case study to analyze how participatory organic certification is playing out on the ground in terms of both its potential and its limitations. This analysis is based on participant observation and informal interviews conducted by the authors during the course of their work as scholar-activists (González and Nigh 2005) helping to advance the cause of local organic food systems in Mexico.

A brief history of organic certification

In the 1970s and 1980s, organic certification was generally voluntary and self-regulatory. Standards tended to be developed at the grassroots level, with a variety of stakeholders—particularly producers—participating in the process (Michelsen 2001; González and Nigh 2005). These standards were enforced by the producers themselves through systems of peer review, thus the process was known as "first party" certification. In many cases, first party certification combined verification procedures with organic education and extension work (Seppänen and Helenius 2004; González and Nigh 2005).

This form of certification functioned effectively when the organic community was relatively small, and tended to be characterized by short supply chains and the involvement of producers and consumers who were deeply committed to organic ideals. However, as noted above, since the late 1980s, the organic sector has experienced extremely rapid growth. As a result, the motivations for involvement in organic agriculture have become more varied and a close relationship between organic producer and consumer is no longer the norm (Hall and Mogyorody 2001; Guthman 2002; Rigby and Bown 2003). The growing distance between producer and consumer and the increasing importance of economic motivations for organic production, as well as the sheer increase in the scale of the organic sector, meant that by the 1990s first party certification systems were no longer a viable means of maintaining consumer trust in organic goods.

As a result, throughout the 1990s, major organic certification organizations such as the Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA) and Naturland began to shift to third party certification, in which a disinterested—and presumably objective—third party became responsible for both developing organic standards and verifying producer compliance (González and Nigh 2005; Mutersbaugh 2005). In conjunction with a move to third party verification procedures, certification organizations also stopped integrating organic inspection with the delivery of extension and education because it was believed that providing advice to farmers would create a conflict of interest for inspectors (González and Nigh 2005). Today, in a growing number of countries, legislation governing the organic sector mandates third party certification; and in some cases, accreditation by the International Standards Organization (ISO) as well, for those wishing to use the organic label.

Critique of mainstream organic certification

An input substitution model of organics

One criticism of mainstream organic certification is that the definition of organics created to serve regulatory purposes tends to break down the organic paradigm into its component parts and, in the process, fails to capture the essence of the organic ideal (Allen and Kovach 2000; Kaltoft 2001). Rigby and Bown (2003, p. 5) explain, "standards are far more able to refer to prohibited inputs than to deal with precise criteria for the assessment of whether producers are acting in a manner which is socially just or ecologically responsible." Thus, standards associated with regulation offer essentially an input substitution model of organic agriculture that does little or nothing to foster ideals such as prohibiting the entry of large agribusiness into the market, protecting small scale family farms, ensuring fair treatment of workers, limiting the extent of monocrop production, or favoring local production and consumption networks. As a result, mainstream certification systems leave the organic sector vulnerable to the aforementioned process of conventionalization.

Beyond simply leaving the door open for conventionalization, mainstream certification systems have also been criticized for their potential to actively suppress the broader ideological aspects of the organic movement, which may be seen as threatening to the dominant structures of

industrial capitalist society (Goodman 2000; Vos 2000; Kaltoft 2001; Guthman 2004a, b). For example, Tovey (1997, p. 33) argues that when governments seek to institutionalize organic agriculture through the creation of standards they "wrench the production practices free from [the ideological content of the movement] and slot them into a different context in which they do not in fact fit at all easily." The result of this sort of process is, according to Kaltoft (2001, p. 152), that

> The original radical view of nature, including a view of nature as subjective, leaving the farmer with a moral responsibility for the soil, is abandoned in favor of a modern view of organic farming as a technical means of solving environmental problems … as a more efficient way of controlling nature.

In a discussion of the American system, Allen and Kovach (2000, p. 225) explain that, for those producers who may want to exceed the minimum organic standard, there is no way to differentiate their product and "flat or falling profits that result from competition will tend to force farmers, input-suppliers, processors, and retailers to speed up production, cut costs, and increase the rate of product sales." Mutersbaugh (2005, p. 2039) concurs, noting that "globalized standards tend towards a 'lowest common denominator' minimizing protections in national standards and displacing more comprehensive network-based standards."

Centralization of power

The development of organic standards that are reflective of an input substitution model has not been an uncontested process. Rather, Vos (2000) and Allen and Kovach (2000) note how, in the United States, coalitions of consumers, producers, environmental groups and private certification agencies fought hard to have the country's National Organic Program (NOP) strengthened. However, for the most part, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) was not responsive to the concerns of those parties. Indeed, as Böstrom and Klintman (2006, p. 164) argue, concentration of the responsibility for setting organic standards in the hands of the USDA left little room "for social movements to have an impact on definitions and criteria for organic food and farming." This usurping of power from the grassroots level is problematic, as it leaves many organic actors with low levels of trust in the NOP (Böstrom and Klintman 2006).

It is not only in the United States that the power to set organic standards and verification procedures has been removed from the grassroots. Around the world, the harmonization of organic standards and verification procedures based on ISO requirements has diminished the independence of local networks of organic actors by creating "nonnegotiable" systems (Mutersbaugh 2005, p. 2040). Because the majority of organic certifying agencies and regulatory regimes are based in Europe and North America, this problem is particularly pronounced in the South. As González and Nigh (2005, p. 450) explain, "standards applied to certify smallholder production systems tend to be developed with regard to first world consumer interests and imposed in a top-down fashion by certification agencies and intermediaries, with little or no farmer participation." As a result, mainstream organic certification can be viewed as a means of increasing dependency of Southern countries on the rich nations of the North—a process that Gómez Tovar et al. (1999) refer to as "biocolonialism."

Finally, the need to comply with ISO standards has played a large part in the move to third party verification procedures and the related elimination of extension assistance from the certification process. This move addressed the issue of lack of accountability characteristic of earlier peer review systems (Guthman 2004a, b). However, Mutersbaugh (2005) notes that some certification agency personnel believe the loss of a peer review system, particularly one in which organic inspectors are able to offer extension advice, has created a kind of "schizophrenia" within certification agencies because the naturally complementary processes of verification and education have been forcibly separated.

Inaccessibility to small scale, low income producers

An additional criticism of mainstream organic certification is that it makes the organic label inaccessible to small scale, low income producers (Raynolds 2000; Mutersbaugh 2002, 2005; IFAD 2003). Indeed, in order to achieve certification from mainstream agencies, producers must go through a lengthy, expensive, and highly bureaucratic process. This process may last as long as 3 years, during which time producers do not receive price premiums, but must pay the costs of certification (Raynolds 2000). The lack of harmonized standards increases these costs because producers must be certified by multiple agencies if they wish to sell in multiple markets (Gómez Tovar et al. 1999; Raynolds 2000). In addition, the extensive bureaucracy associated with certification, which has increased significantly as a result of the need to comply with ISO standards, can be difficult for producers to navigate, and in many cases it is a significant challenge to provide agencies with the required documentation. This problem is so pronounced that Mutersbaugh (2005, p. 2040) argues that mainstream certification systems "create a barrier so formidable that all of the rent income earned by market entry is spent in scaling the barrier." As a result, many small scale low

income producers may farm organically without official recognition, reaping ecological benefits, but few social or economic ones (IFAD 2003).

Moving beyond organic

In response to some of the problems associated with mainstream organic certification, and with the mainstream organic sector as a whole, a growing number of initiatives are emerging that seek to go "beyond organic" in the endeavor to develop sustainable food systems. These initiatives include a rebirth of farmers' markets and farm gate sales, the proliferation of community supported agriculture (CSA) and organic produce delivery programs, and the development of a number of alternative labeling strategies that include a variety of ecological and/or social criteria (see Allen et al. 2003; Renting et al. 2003; Guthman et al. 2006; Howard and Allen 2006; Moore 2006; Seyfang 2007; Friedmann 2007). Beyond organic projects tend to focus on "reconstructing the local" (Allen et al. 2003, p. 61) and on re-embedding the economic relations of food markets into their socio-ecological contexts (see Sage 2003; Guthman et al. 2006; Moore 2006; Seyfang 2007). To date, the discussion of these initiatives has been focused on Europe and North America, while the global South has generally only been included within the context of an analysis of fair trade networks (see Raynolds 2000; Getz and Shreck 2006). However, in addition to the increasing popularity of fair trade certification, the South has also been the site of the emergence of an alternative organic certification movement that could be considered part of the beyond organic paradigm.

Participatory organic certification

Commonly referred to as participatory guarantee systems (PGS), this alternative traces its roots to the first party organic certification systems of the 1970s and 1980s (Fonseca 2004). As noted earlier, these systems were generally discarded during the 1990s; however, in recent years the concept has become increasingly popular, particularly in Latin America and other parts of the South. In 2004 Brazil hosted the first international workshop on PGS (co-organized by IFOAM and the Latin American and Caribbean Agroecological Movement). Today the PGS concept is officially recognized by many non governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as by a number of national governments, as a viable alternative to mainstream organic certification. In 2008, IFOAM's PGS task force defined the concept generally, stating that PGS are "locally focused quality assurance systems [that] certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange" (IFOAM 2007a).

One of the pillars of PGS is that, like early organic certification systems, PGS encourages, and indeed relies upon, the active participation of a wide variety of stakeholders, including producers, consumers and trained agronomists, all of whom are meant to take part in the development and implementation of organic standards and verification procedures (ECOVIDA 2004; IFOAM 2007b). Also similar to historical first party systems, the PGS process is designed to include an element of education for both producers and consumers. As such, it reunites the goals of certifying organic producers and also assisting them in maintaining and improving their organic production, goals which were divorced when organizations like OCIA moved to third party certification.

This return to a more peer review style of organic certification is not consistent, however, with ISO standards. As a result, PGS is not currently viable for the certified organic export industry. However the PGS movement is consciously not geared to the organic export market. Rather, it focuses on local production-certification-consumption networks designed to help support small scale producers, encourage local economic development, make organic products available at prices that are fair for both producers and consumers, and facilitate food security and sovereignty (ECOVIDA 2004; IFOAM 2007b).

Related to the focus on local markets, the element of trust is integral to PGS initiatives because they cannot rely on the objectivity generally assumed to characterize third party verification systems. Some means of building trust include face-to-face interactions between producers and consumers, and attempts to make certification bureaucracy as transparent as possible (Fonseca 2004; IFOAM 2007b). The experience of a participatory farmers' market in Ireland demonstrates that trust built through the "opening out" of producers to consumers (and vice versa) was, in many instances, more important to consumers than a label from an organic certifier (Moore 2006). In the case of PGS, the product receives some stamp of approval, thus personal trust is not the sole guarantor of a product's organic integrity; however, it is an important element of any non third party verification system.

Mainstream and participatory organic certification in Mexico

Since 1996, the amount of Mexican land devoted to organic crops has grown on average by 33% annually, employment in the sector by 23%, and income generated by 26%. As a result of this rapid growth, by 2007 over 83,000 Mexican producers were cultivating more than 300,000 ha

organically; which generated more than 270 million U.S. dollars in income (Willer and Yussefi 2007). Approximately half of this production is accounted for by coffee, followed by herbs, vegetables, cacao, and other fruit crops. The vast majority—some 85%—is destined for export (Gómez Cruz et al. 2006). Fifty percent of the organic producers are Indigenous and 98% are small scale, meaning they farm 30 ha or less. The average size of these farms is just 3.3 ha; however, it is this group that accounts for 84% of the organic land cultivated and generates 69% of the organic sector's earnings (Gómez Cruz et al. 2006).

For these producers, the costs and bureaucracy associated with mainstream organic certification can be overwhelming. In order to address this problem, many have formed cooperatives and established internal systems of control. Within these systems, only a small sample of a producer organization's land is verified by a third party; consequently, the costs of certification are shared (Mutersbaugh 2002).

This alternative is intended to reduce certification costs; however, in many cases, the costs in terms of time, financial, and material resources required to establish and maintain internal control systems, can be even greater than the costs of mainstream organic certification (Gómez Tovar et al. 2005). Another option for some organic farmers is to receive assistance from NGOs (or, in the case of Chiapas, from the state government) that can help them pay for certification (Gómez Cruz et al. 2006). However, in spite of these efforts, the high price and extensive documentation required for certification from Certimex, IMO Control, Naturland, or other agencies active in the country leaves this certification option out of reach for many Mexican producers. As a result, approximately one quarter of the organic land in Mexico included in the information provided earlier is not certified.

While organic certification has always been essential for accessing the lucrative export market for organic products, with the passing of a new law governing the Mexican organic sector in 2006, certification is now a legal requirement for using the organic label both for export and for sale within the country. This new regulation could have been potentially devastating for small scale organic producers who do not certify but still want to differentiate their product in the marketplace; however, as a result of heavy lobbying by the Mexican Network of Organic Markets (one of the primary promoters of small scale, local organic production and consumption in Mexico), article 24 of the new law recognizes PGS as a viable option, with the stipulation that products are offered for sale in local (domestic) markets only. The inclusion of PGS in the organic legislation was seen as a major victory for the local organic movement in Mexico; however, the law has yet to be fully implemented, and there is some concern that the lawyers and legislators involved in the process may lack sufficient understanding of PGS to ensure its successful incorporation into the legislative framework.

Participatory certification in action: the case of the local organic market in Chapingo

As noted above, the Mexican Network of Organic Markets (also known simply as the Network) has been a key player in the Mexican organic movement, and has worked to develop local networks of organic production and consumption in Mexico. Founded in 2004 with just four markets, this network currently represents 17 fully-functioning local organic markets across the country, as well as a growing number of market initiatives that are in the process of formation. These markets are not just points of sale, but rather community spaces that seek to support local food security through the provision of safe food at fair prices, improve local ecology by encouraging organic production, build a sense of community through direct sale and cultural activities, and educate the public about environmental and social issues related to food systems.

The vast majority of producers who participate in these markets are small scale and, while a few have achieved mainstream organic certification (primarily those selling coffee), most have not. As a result, the Network has made developing PGS a high priority. For example, taking advantage of funding from the Falls Brook Centre—a Canadian NGO—the Network has organized exchange visits between markets to build capacity for implementing PGS. In addition, the topic of certification has been a focus of several national meetings of the Network, and three special workshops on PGS have been held for Network members.

One of the markets that has been a leader in the development of PGS is the *Tianguis Orgánico Chapingo* (trans. Chapingo Organic Market). Founded in 2003, this market certifies and sells more than 300 products, including fruits and vegetables (e.g., broccoli, lettuce, mushrooms, blackberries, plums); herbs; meats (i.e., turkey, chicken and beef); dairy products (e.g., milk, cheese, yogurt, cream); eggs; breads and other baked goods; honey; coffee; processed foods (e.g., syrups, oils, salsas, jams); biodegradable cleaning and beauty products; and artisanal crafts and jewelry.

One reason that the Chapingo market has been able to move more quickly than other markets in the development and implementation of PGS is that it has very close ties to the University of Chapingo—Mexico's principle agricultural university. This institution has provided support to the market in a number of areas, such as the provision of a market building and administrative resources. It has also played an integral role in the development of PGS. For

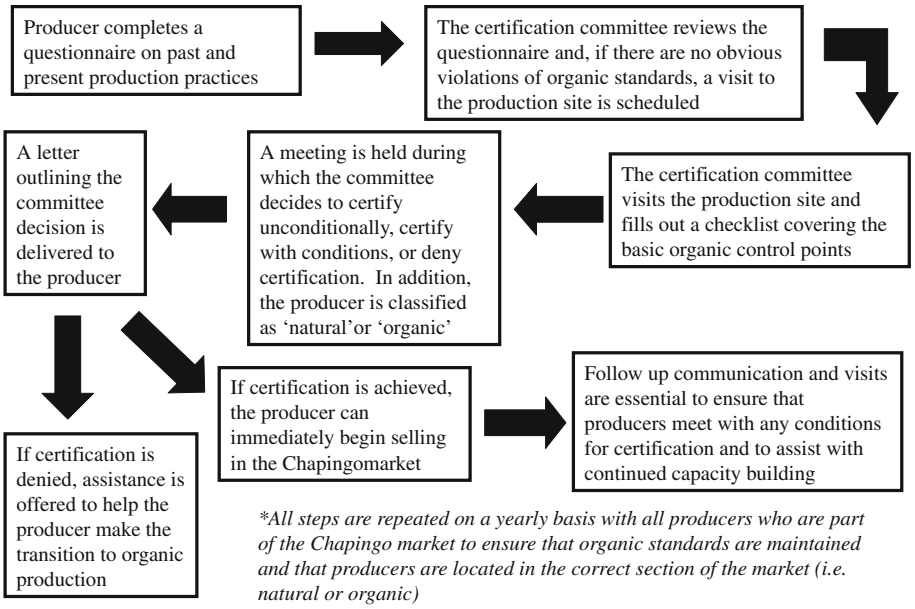

Fig. 1 Steps to achieving participatory organic certification in Chapingo.* *Source*: Original figure created by authors

example, a university professor who is also a professional organic certifier for agencies such as Certimex and OCIA has provided invaluable leadership, and has been essential in helping Chapingo's participatory certification committee learn about organic standards and how to conduct certification visits. In addition, the group that organizes the certification system is based out of the university. A staff person organizes farm visits and meetings, a university van is used for transportation, and approximately half of the group is made up of university staff and students. This support is all offered without charges or fees, which is extremely important because producers do not pay for the certification.

It is the aforementioned group—known as the certification committee—that forms the basis for PGS. In Chapingo, the committee has approximately 14 volunteer members (although the number fluctuates). As of yet, the structure for choosing members is informal. Anyone involved in the market, either as a producer, consumer, or organizer, is invited welcome to join. The group tries to maintain a balance of numbers of producers and consumers and, to date, has been successful. One of the future projects for the group will be to develop clearer standards for determining how committee members are selected.

The first step for a producer wishing to achieve participatory certification and enter the market is to complete a questionnaire outlining past and present production practices (see Fig. 1). There are three types of questionnaires—one for crop production, one for animal production, and one for processed goods. The surveys may be obtained by visiting the market or by contacting the market coordinators. Upon completion, the questionnaire is reviewed in a meeting of the certification committee. If no obvious barriers to certification are evident, a farm map, daily activity log, and sales log are requested, and a visit to the farm or processing site is scheduled.

This visit is intentionally not referred to as an "inspection" because it is meant to be an interactive experience that is educational for all those involved. Indeed, when making visits to new farms, a member of the committee usually makes an introductory statement regarding the ideals of PGS. The farm visits are conducted by members of the certification committee and normally last approximately 2 h. In most cases 5–7 people attend the visits; however, all members of the committee are always welcome to participate.

It is important to note that the members of the committee have varying degrees of knowledge about organic standards and production practices; however, everyone is encouraged to actively participate in the visits with the understanding that they will gradually develop their abilities. There is currently a tendency to rely on the expertise of the trained organic inspector; however, an effort is being made to decrease dependence on this person in order to strengthen the committee as a whole. As part of the effort to build the capacity of all members, the committee organizes training workshops on an ongoing basis; however, it is also recognized that active participation during visits is one of the most effective ways to develop certification skills.

During the farm visits, committee members consult a checklist that includes basic data about the farm operation (e.g., size of territory, number of crops, etc.) as well as basic organic control points. These key points are: (a) source of seeds; (b) source of water for irrigation; (c) soil management practices; (d) pest and disease management practices; (e) post-harvest management of crops, including

storage and cleaning; and (f) the potential for contamination from neighboring farms. Because PGS seek to reunite the processes of verification with education, the purpose of reviewing organic control points is not simply to identify problems. Rather, the review has much in common with the early certification practices of OCIA, which González and Nigh (2005, p. 451) note were seen as "a *learning opportunity for farmers* in which changes to bring farming practices in line with OCIA standards were an *ongoing, negotiated process*" (italics added).

Generally within a week of the visit the committee meets to review the case and make a decision about certification. These meetings usually last approximately 2 h and the case is discussed until a consensus is reached with regards to whether or not a producer can be certified to sell in the market. The members use the standards of organizations like Certimex, OCIA, IFOAM, NOP, and the European Union as a guideline for what is acceptable organic practice. If, in any given area, a producer meets at least one of the standards and has completed a 36 month transition period during which conventional production practices were discontinued, they are granted organic status within the market and certified unconditionally. For most producers however, certification is contingent on agreement to meet a number of conditions. Two of the most common of these conditions are the development of natural barriers on the borders with neighboring conventional farms, and the composting of manure before application. The committee tries, as far as possible, to work with farmers to help them meet these kinds of conditions or to connect them with extension and education resources that could be of assistance.

If a producer's certification is contingent on the aforementioned conditions they will still be allowed to sell in the market under the "natural" as opposed to organic label. These products are physically separated and sold in different areas of the market. If follow up visits by the committee demonstrate compliance with the conditions, a producer may eventually be moved to the organic section of the market. In the case that a producer is denied certification, clear reasons are outlined and the committee offers to maintain a relationship with the producer and help them make the transition to organic production. In the majority of cases that have come before the Chapingo committee, regardless of the outcome, producers are provided with a list of recommendations for improvement that are not necessarily conditions for certification, but are designed to help them optimize their production practices.

Because transparency and community involvement are integral aspects of the PGS vision, the results of all questionnaires and committee decisions are available to the public. In addition, producers and consumers are encouraged to engage in the kind of face-to-face interaction highlighted by Moore (2006) as a key to trust building. This interaction is facilitated by activities such as free educational workshops held at the weekly market and joint participation on the certification committee. These actions have led to the development of strong relationships of trust, and in some cases friendship, between the buyers and sellers of organic products. These relationships are an important means of supporting PGS because they provide the consumer with an extra sense of security that helps them place their faith in PGS.

Challenges and limitations to participatory certification

Lack of institutional recognition

Primarily because of its use of peer review style verification procedures and the integration of certification and extension education, PGS does not meet the standards of the ISO—standards which have been incorporated into most major mainstream organic certification agencies and organic legislative standards. As a result, PGS faces a lack of formal recognition at the institutional level—on the part of both mainstream certification bodies and governments (Meirelles 2003; Fonseca 2004). As such, the organic label, with the important consumer recognition that it carries, can be entirely off limits for those using PGS in places where it is not legally recognized.[1]

In the Mexican case, the inclusion of PGS within the legal framework governing organics is extremely important because it allows producers working within participatory certification systems to continue labeling their production as organic. However, to date legal recognition of PGS is limited to few countries, such as Bolivia, Brazil and Costa Rica. In addition, in the Mexican case, the legal details regarding recognition of PGS remain unclear, thus creating concern about the extent to which recognition will be manifest when the law becomes fully implemented.

It is important to note that IFOAM has recently given official recognition to PGS (IFOAM 2007a). This decision has the potential to add credibility to the growing PGS movement. This credibility is important, in part because of the benefits of using the organic label, but also as a means of securing resources to expand PGS efforts. The struggle for formal or institutional recognition may be particularly difficult however, because mainstream certification bodies

[1] Howard and Allen (2006) note that in California, where the organic label is legally bound through NOP to meet third party certification standards, a group is currently working to develop a locally-based beyond organic label that would function using a peer review style certification system. This example demonstrates not only that PGS has relevance beyond the South, but also that there is potential to make it work even in places where it is not a recognized element of organic legislation.

have a vested interest in controlling the use of the organic label. Indeed, as Seyfang (2007, p. 118) argues, it is possible for "policy regimes and social institutions [to] limit the scope of alternative systems of provisioning to provide sustainable consumption opportunities" largely because they threaten dominant power and institutional structures.

Social and personal conflict

In his analysis of internal control systems for certification of small scale organized organic producers in Mexico, Mutersbaugh (2002, p. 1178) notes that the ability

> to judge another producer as a poor or good farmer in a manner that affects the market price of his or her product, to demand that specific horticultural activities be undertaken during the coming year, and even, perhaps, to deny certification … certainly goes beyond traditionally accepted interventions.

He also notes that conflicts often arise in situations where the organic certification of one producer is dependent on the practices of another. Although PGS does not function in precisely the same manner as internal control systems, by agreeing to the peer review style process producers surrender a certain amount of autonomy to fellow producers and community members. In addition, in Chapingo, the detection of problems with any one producer's organic practices has the potential to call into question the integrity of the entire local market if not dealt with immediately.

In Chapingo, there was evidence that these issues could sometimes lead to conflict. In particular, for producers, concerns about one's own eventual evaluation by the certification committee could affect judgment in other peer evaluations. This issue manifested itself in two ways. In some cases, producers were very easy on their peers in the hopes of receiving an easy evaluation themselves. In other cases, feelings of competitiveness and a desire to achieve high standing within the group caused some producers to be overly critical of their peers. This high level of criticism was sometimes related to fears about weakening the credibility of the entire market by being lax in the certification process. These kinds of conflicts were not limited to producers. Rather, interpersonal conflicts and strong differences of opinion amongst all committee members presented a significant challenge in Chapingo, and the ideals of equal participation, horizontality, cooperation and consensus building were often difficult to effectively put into practice. Michelsen (2001) notes that these kinds of issues are typical of self-regulatory organic systems, as all members of these systems will tend to be biased in some way.

In addition, Getz and Shreck (2006) argue that access to the organic market in Mexico can be a highly desirable "prize" for producers. They note that this is problematic in part because it can create divisions within a community, and also because it constrains traditional bartering systems in which a producer might sell goods from neighbors at market. In some cases, they found that illicit trade developed as producers with permission to sell at an organic market acted as middlemen for producers without permission. Moving from a mainstream certification model to a participatory one does not necessarily alter this dynamic and, indeed, the problem of producers selling goods for neighbors was evident in Chapingo. In some cases this had to do with a lack of understanding of the market rules, while in other cases it may have been simply an income earning endeavor. In either case, visits to the producers' farms helped to verify whether products being sold at market were legitimately produced by the certified person.

Dependence on donated time and resources

The market in Chapingo is considerably more advanced than many other markets in the Mexican Network of Organic Markets in terms of the development of PGS. One important reason for this is that the typical dependence on volunteer labor is mitigated by labor offered by university staff and students, who in many cases were able to incorporate their involvement in the committee into their academic work. Similarly, the committee benefited from the use of other resources not available in most contexts, such as use of university transportation and office space. However, in spite of these advantages, dependence on donated time and resources was still a problem in Chapingo.

Indeed, Fonseca (2004) argues that a prominent limitation of PGS is that its functioning is highly dependent on volunteer labor. In Chapingo, the members of the certification committee donated their time to conduct farm visits and to evaluate the outcome of those visits. Thus, although many members were highly committed to PGS ideals and wanted to participate actively, their time was limited by other factors such as work and family responsibilities. This can be particularly problematic for producers, and mirrors the difficulties with internal control systems in which the extra work involved for community inspectors often takes time away from other necessary income earning activities (Mutersbaugh 2002). In addition, although the bureaucracy associated with PGS is minimal, in Chapingo many producers still found it challenging to find time to provide the required documentation (i.e., questionnaire, map, daily activity log and sales log). This problem was exacerbated because there is no cultural tradition of maintaining such records.

In some cases, people volunteering their time for the certification committee found that it became too much of a

burden, and the fact that members would join and then leave created a lack of consistency and continuity. In addition, the lack of training and education was something that the group grappled with on an ongoing basis. Although attempts were made to offer training, progress was limited because people did not always have sufficient time to devote to the process. In Chapingo, the challenges of making a system work with volunteer labor made it difficult to keep up with the demand for certifying new producers who wished to enter the market, and also to consistently monitor the farms of existing market members. This was particularly problematic because deficiencies of supply (both quantity and variety of products) is currently a major limiting factor for the market.

Other organizational challenges existed in part because of the reliance on volunteer labor, but also because the development of PGS is relatively new, thus the movement is struggling to find its feet. In Chapingo the participatory certification committee had yet to publish a document clearly outlining the organic standards it uses as well as the way in which the system functions. ECOVIDA's operations manual (2004) notes that this kind of documentation is essential to the successful functioning of PGS endeavors, and the Chapingo group is aware that it is necessary, particularly in light of incorporating PGS into the country's organic legislation. However, as of yet the publication of a manual has not been achieved primarily because of a lack of time on the part of participants. Related to this problem, because PGS is highly context specific, the standards and procedures of other groups can be used as a basis, but they cannot simply be replicated. As a result, similar to Chapingo, other groups find themselves learning through trial and error and, gradually developing functioning systems.

Conclusions

Largely as a result of its perceived objectivity and accountability, as well as its standardized nature, a mainstream model of third party organic certification has come to be accepted as the standard for the global organic industry. However, this model is subject to a number of limitations that have become evident in many contexts, as illustrated in the case study site of Mexico. Specifically, third party organic certification provides a relatively narrow definition of organic agriculture which tends to be focused on input substitution. The model also diminishes the decision-making capacity of actors at the local, regional, and even national scale; and, perhaps more importantly for Mexico, the high costs and complicated bureaucratic procedures associated with third party certification make it inaccessible to many of the small scale low income producers who dominate the Mexican organic sector, as well as the organic sectors of many countries of the South.

In response to these issues, alternative systems of certification, known as participatory guarantee systems or PGS, are being developed in a number of different locations by a number of different groups. Using Mexico as an example, this paper demonstrated that PGS shares much in common with the kind of beyond organic initiatives that are the subject of increasing attention in the North. For example, PGS focuses on reconstructing the local as a site of power, action and importance; and on re-embedding food systems through the promotion of activities such as community development, socio-ecological education and the building of face-to-face relationships of trust. In addition, as is the case with many (although not all) beyond organic initiatives, PGS seeks to bring an element of social justice into the creation of sustainable food systems, for example by seeking to increase local food security and by attempting to price organic goods in a manner that is fair to producers but not entirely inaccessible to consumers. Because of their many similarities, it is not surprising that the major challenges facing PGS in places like Chapingo, Mexico—such as a lack of sufficient recognition within policy frameworks, social conflict, and dependence on donated resources—are common to other beyond organic projects in the North.

Research conducted on beyond organic initiatives in the North demonstrates that the number of people turning to these alternatives appears to be growing, particularly as the conventionalization of the organic sector becomes more pronounced. Although it is based on research that is preliminary in nature, this paper suggests that the emergence of PGS may be evidence that a similar trend is taking place, albeit perhaps not yet on the same scale, in countries of the South such as Mexico. The significant growth of the Mexican Network of Organic Markets over the past 4 years would seem to support this claim. However, further study is necessary, first of all to evaluate the degree to which this is truly the case. If it is, then it will be important to explore questions related to the viability of PGS as part of the global beyond organic movement. For example, to what degree are consumers trusting of the idea, how exactly will it be incorporated into legislative frameworks, what specific benefits does it offer to producers and consumers, what barriers other than those presented here might hinder further development, and how will the challenges facing PGS be addressed by those seeking to support its development?

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