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Insights into participatory guarantee systems (PGS) in Latin America: A Paraguayan case study

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Abstract

In the global south, Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) have gained increasing importance as a mechanism to provide organic quality assurance for smallholder farmers producing for the domestic markets. PGS are local conformity assessment systems that guarantee organic integrity through participation and ownership of the stakeholders and thus offer a localised alternative to third-party organic certification systems and conventional agri-food value chains. We used semi-structured interviews (n=26), farmer surveys (n=26) and participant observations (n=3) to firstly, understand the structure of the Paraguayan PGS initiative PyOrgánico, secondly, to explore what kind of participation takes place, how, for what and by whom, thirdly, to uncover how the organic PGS control system is organised. Furthermore, we conducted a Social Network Analysis (SNA) amongst PyOrgánico stakeholders to explore how knowledge exchange regarding organic certification and organic production occurs. Our results indicate that, in contrast to the proclaimed characteristics of PGS, PyOrgánico's organisation is spearheaded by an NGO responsible for the management and the implementation of the control system of the PGS. Opposing the key characteristic of horizontality argued amongst PGS initiatives stakeholders, PyOrgánico farmers are partitioned within subgroups of the PGS and have little participation possibilities either within the initiative or in the PGS control system. Farmers' incentives in participating in the PGS was primarily linked to 'learning', 'exchange and sharing' and 'reaching a common goal'. Yet, results from the SNA show how only few actors, mostly members of the NGO distribute information to PGS farmers. Knowledge exchange regarding organic production and organic certification amongst PGS farmers was not observed across the PGS subgroups, and could only barely be observed amongst farmers within each subgroup. With the rising interest in organic agriculture by farmers and consumers in the global south, this research provides insight into characteristics of mechanisms within a PGS, and uncovers challenges of alternative food networks attempting to transform domestic agri-food value chains in Paraguay.

Keywords: Alternative food networks, farmer organisations, Latin America