

## Mini Review

# Towards an Evolution of Policies Framework for the Quality of Organic Agriculture: The Case of Participatory Guarantee Systems in Italy

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**Abstract**

In the last decades, worldwide Alternative Food Networks are starting to implement Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) for assuring the authenticity of their organic productions. While certainly, third-party certification represents an essential tool guaranteeing the authenticity of organic products, it is less accessible to small-scale producers and lower income consumers. In addition, although regulatory standards and certification models have contributed to the global expansion of the organic foods market, an increasing number of consumers are discontented with the globalization of organic food provision. Consequently, the adoption of alternative quality assurance systems has become an important issue for both producers and consumers. In particular, in Italy "CampiAperti" association represents one of the best-organized network of producers and co-producers which embed PGS principles. The Italian experience offers the chance to claim for a remark on the need for policy adjustments supporting the different productive practices as well as the several experiences of small processors, as also advocated by "Genuino Clandestino" movement. Starting from the analysis of Italian Alternative Food Network "CampiAperti" adopting PGS, the aim is to provide an overview of its potential influencing policymakers according to its practices and needs. Smallholder family farmers, their actions and their innovations in terms of trust building measures that promote fairness and ensure empowerments, could represent an essential driver to food security. Deepening the analysis of Alternative Food Networks adopting PGS and the impact of their actions represents a priority for understanding innovative ideas for shortening the value chains.

**Keywords:** Alternative labelling systems for organic; Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS); Organic Regulation; Italian Alternative Food Networks; Food Security; Social Innovation

**Abbreviations**

AFNs: Alternative Food Networks; EC: European Commission; ICS: Internal Control Systems; IFOAM: International Federation for Organic Agriculture Movements; PGS: Participatory Guarantee Systems

**Introduction**

Organic farming and organic food products are affected by both the most recent trend towards food quality differentiation and ethical consumption and the mainstream focus on food quality assurance and control [1]. Accordingly, within the debate on organic food production, the adoption of processes that ensure the integrity and authenticity of organic products have become a very important issue. In this context, it is interesting to draw attention to those Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) [2,3], which are currently developing alternatives to the mainstream organic third-party certification. In general, third-party certification involves independent, private and officially accredited bodies that review the manufacturing process of a product and determine that organizations, companies, and farmers comply with national organic standards requirements for safety

and quality. This process includes comprehensive material reviews, testing and inspections and it makes no distinctions among organic agri-business industry and smallholder family farmers.

Third-party certification for organic represents certainly a useful tool for consumers in providing guarantees regarding production processes and food quality, nevertheless it is less accessible to small-scale producers and lower income consumers worldwide [4-7]. According to Scialabba [8], legislation in the field of organic agriculture was developed in several countries to facilitate exports to the European Union. In the attempt to cope with costs and bureaucracy related to third-party certification adoption, in several countries groups of small producers have begun to refer to alternative quality assurance systems for their products.

Currently, there are two main alternative guarantee practices, better known as Internal Control Systems (ICS) [9] and Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) [10-17]. These alternative guarantee systems simplify bureaucratic procedures and reduce costs for small producers who are often overwhelmed by the extensive documentation required by third-party certification.

In particular, the proposal and, at the same time, the challenge of PGS scheme is to favour and to facilitate smallholder production in the framework of promoting local food systems that meets agro-ecological principles. In general terms PGS involve the establishment of a collective dimension based on a shared understanding of principles and on a common agreement of responsibility in which social control plays a key role. These models require the involvement of all actors within the process and along the supply chain (from producers to consumers) and they usually take place at the community level. A PGS model aims at minimizing bureaucratic procedures and costs by employing peer-to-peer verification methods and it also embed elements of environmental and social education towards quality improvement for both producers and consumers.

According to IFOAM data, currently there are 73 operational PGS initiatives and 65 under development involving about 47.000 farmers worldwide. The most famous networks adopting PGS are the Brazilian Rede Ecovida de Agroecologia, Certified Naturally Grown (USA), Nature et Progrès (France), Keystone Foundation (India), and Organic Farm NZ (New Zealand). "Some PGS initiatives, such as Nature et Progrès are nearly as old as the first organic agriculture associations" [18]. Latin America is the continent with the greatest awareness of the meaning and value of the participatory approach and shows the highest level of PGS recognition in national legislation (Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Mexico, Paraguay, and Uruguay).

In this framework, several AFNs claim for a policy adjustment according to small producers and consumers' real needs and for a recognition of the action of the networks in protecting tangible and intangible common goods (land, air, energy, landscape, knowledge).

In Italy CampiAperti association represents one of the best organized AFN of producers and co-producers embedding PGS principles. The Italian experience offers the chance to a remark, also by Genuino Clandestino movement, on the need of policy adjustments to the different productive practices as well as to the several experiences of small processors.

### **CampiAperti network and Genuino Clandestino movement**

The birth of CampiAperti network dates back to 1990s when a group of organic farmers and some critical consumers set up in Bologna the Food Sovereignty Committee. This group of people were critical of the industrial production models and met to rethink agricultural paradigms in a perspective in support of agriculture as a political action and reaction. The first strategy of the group involved direct selling to consumers allowing the reduction of transaction costs. Producers obtain a higher price by decreasing intermediaries typical of large-scale retail and, contextually, consumers can purchase organic, genuine, fresh and "zero food miles" food at affordable prices. Furthermore, the group of farmers adopted the participatory guarantee to ensure quality and authenticity of their products and to make them recognizable to consumers. Each member of the group must agree with a set of rules including the following:

- Subscribe the association Charter of Principles;
- Comply with the norms of the European Regulation on organic production;

- Fill in the producer form (then posted on the Internet for anytime public access);
- Sign accountability to association rules;
- Agree the farmer-to-farmer inspections system;
- Subscribe the rules of the markets.

Although the majority of farmers of the group was (and still nowadays is) certified by official third-party bodies, there are many critical factors which have determined the development and the success of participatory guarantee systems. First of all, PGS model developed within CampiAperti network proves to be more affordable and less reliant on paperwork as well as more flexible and constantly updated to small farmers' actual needs. Furthermore, PGS program of CampiAperti is tailored for smallholder farmers producing food for their local communities and it is based on transparency, trust, and direct relationships. Finally, its proposal aims to foster local networks that strengthen farming community through mutual support, respecting organic models, biodiversity, workers' rights and a widespread access to organic products. PGS model of CampiAperti puts direct relationships first rather than bureaucracy of third-party certification and participants declare that "the relationship among people enhances the products value".

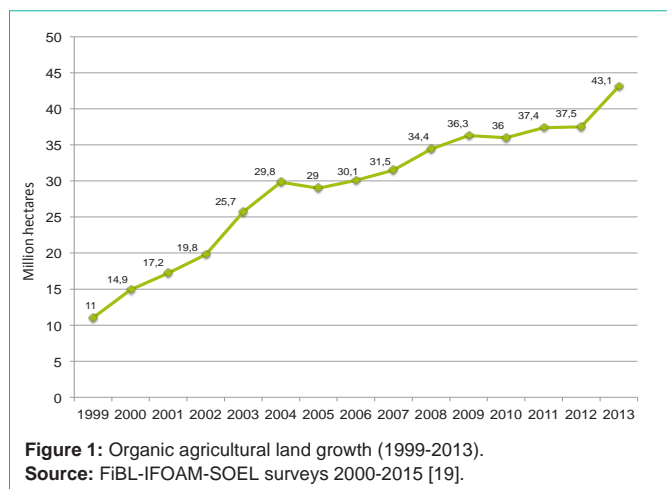
Over the years, parallel to the increasing interest in healthy and organic food rose contextually the number of critical consumers and the informal group of Food Sovereignty Committee decided to found CampiAperti Association. Currently, 82 farmers (fruit and vegetable producers, breeders, cheeses and dairy products producers, beekeepers, herbalists) join the association activities respecting the rules.

On the other hand, Genuino Clandestino is an expression of the ideas arose within CampiAperti but to date it has adopted its own action strategies. Genuino Clandestino is a communication campaign founded in 2010 for the free processing of farm products by small processors. "Genuine" because the raw material used is organic, fresh, healthy and "zero food miles"; "Clandestino" because the Regulation (EC) 852/2004 on food hygiene makes it illegal to sell. This regulation indeed requires the obligation to provision of laboratories that meet certain standards (size, equipment etc.) with making no distinctions between the food processing industry and small family businesses. Genuino Clandestino campaign has become a national movement resulting in a national Italian network. Currently 28 associations representatives of almost all Italian regions join the network. However, the participatory guarantee, assumes a key role also for the members of Genuino Clandestino within the dynamics of the local economy.

## **Discussion**

### **Policies adjustment**

Nowadays, according to Huber et al. [19] there are 74 countries worldwide that have fully implemented organic rules and regulations. Over the years, organic policies implementation has undoubtedly contributed to the growth of organic agricultural land (Figure 1). Compared with 1999, indeed, the organic agricultural land almost quadrupled (Figure 1).



Contextually, from the consumption point of view, several studies worldwide have found that groups of consumers are willing to pay price premiums for organic products [20-29]. Nevertheless, an increasing number of consumers are discontented with the globalization of organic food provision [30] and organic food label is not very trustworthy among consumers [31-34].

In this context, it is interesting to draw attention to those movements that are trying to find an alternative to the standardized policies on organic agriculture.

As already stated, Genuino Clandestino campaign claims for a policy adjustment to the actual needs of family businesses by referring to regulations in force on food processing such as the Decree of the Autonomous Province of Bozen, which provides the possibility to use the home kitchen for “processing food products, if the processing of products takes place at a different time from the private use”. Nevertheless, in Italy policymakers are starting discussing some actions in order to protect family farmers and their production paradigms.

Emilia-Romagna Region has intervened on the emerging needs of family farmers and of critical consumers and in July 2014 issued the Regional Law n.19 “Standards for the promotion and support of solidarity economy”. This regulation recognizes and defends the application of solidarity economy experiences providing also the definitions of a wide range of activities and topics linked to solidarity economy businesses (Solidarity Economy Network, Solidarity Economy Districts, Ethical Purchasing Groups, Time Bank, Ethical Finance, Short Food Supply Chains, etc.).

Table 1 shows three definitions of Proximity Peasant Agriculture, Common Goods, and Participatory Guarantee Local Systems, which

**Table 1:** Definitions within RL 19/2014.

Concept	Definition
<i>Proximity Peasant Agriculture</i> (par. 3f)	Activities carried out by small farmers with diversified production obtained respecting nature, environment and health.
<i>Common Goods</i> (par. 3h)	Tangible and intangible assets for which must be guaranteed the access right and usability by the public; they are protected and managed through a social relations system based on cooperation and participation.
<i>Participatory Guarantee Local Systems</i> (par. 3i)	Systems and protocols that ensure environmental and social sustainability of production, respecting nature and its cycles, animal welfare, biodiversity, land and its traditions, the workers' rights. They are designed and managed by the active participation of producers, consumers and all other stakeholders and are based on trust, solidarity networks and knowledge exchange.

**Source:** Emilia-Romagna Region, Regional Law 23 July 2014, n.19.

allow a remark in practical terms on the meaning of CampiAperti action.

“Proximity peasant agriculture”, as it is defined by Emilia-Romagna Region, has been practiced by organic farmers of CampiAperti for a decade. It requires, as a mandatory rule for those farmers who want to join the network, to sell solely products from their own farm – in addition to the requirement of organic method of production. Furthermore, as already seen, the action of CampiAperti relies on a “participatory guarantee local systems”. Emilia-Romagna Region recognized the actions and the strategies of CampiAperti network in preserving and protecting the so-called “common goods”. As a result, in 2015 the Municipality of Bologna has assigned to CampiAperti, through an agreement of cooperation, a public market area in the city centre where farmers (officially certified and/or guaranteed by PGS) are allowed to sell directly to consumers their products.

### Conclusion

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest on alternative certification and distribution strategies of organic products. Purchasing patterns of ethical and quality products are indeed often connected to alternative distribution strategies. These strategies describe the methods used by producers in order to meet citizens/consumers without the intervention of third parties. This evidence represents a cultural revolution in eating habits in which farmers and consumers assume the role of key factors. As seen, the mainstream third-party certification for guaranteeing the authenticity of organic products is often less accessible to small-scale producers and lower income consumers. Furthermore, third-party certification implies “a shift of the credence attribute from the producer to the certifier” [35] and several scholars have demonstrated consumer scepticism on organic food label [31-34]. In this sense PGS can contribute reducing consumer distrust by involving information, knowledge sharing, as well as participation and active involvement of stakeholders.

Participatory Guarantee Systems were adopted worldwide during the last decades and in several countries these practices are officially recognized within the national organic regulation.

In Italy policymakers have started discussing about what actions are to be taken in order to protect family farmers and their production paradigms. As seen, Regulation n.19/2014 of Emilia-Romagna Region recognizes and defends the application of solidarity economy experiences. This regulation enhances the importance of peasant agriculture and its practices and it also recognizes the participatory guarantee as a model that ensures environmental and social sustainability, animal welfare and workers’ rights alike.

CampiAperti association has played a crucial role: its action over

the years has shown a great potential in influencing policymakers according to the best practices and the needs of the network. In this perspective, PGS model developed within CampiAperti network is strongly linked to two issues which are gaining particular attention in recent years: food security and social innovation. From one side the participation in PGS has meant the creation of opportunities for knowledge and resources exchange between farmers of CampiAperti. This has contributed to education and farmers' capacity building, improving both quality and quantity of organic productions. From the other, PGS development has facilitated several social processes that enabled social inclusion, farmer empowerment, and mutual support; both among smallholders and consumers. In this sense, PGS scheme developed within CampiAperti represents a valuable example of social innovation since it embraces a new approach that solves social needs.

Deepening the research on participatory movements is crucial not only because the European Union is currently contemplating new regulations and initiatives related to sustainable food labelling and to organic regulation, but also according to the increasing consumer demand for sustainable food products and practices, the global recession and finally because of the pressure from environmental issues.

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