

Article

We Don't Want to Be Officially Certified! Reasons and Implications of the Participatory Guarantee Systems

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Abstract: Official organic regulation in Europe is based on the third-party certification system to guarantee organic products. Many critics and dissatisfactions have motivated the emergence of other guarantee systems, based on an intense implication of producers and, in some cases, consumers and other local actors, involved in localised agri-food systems. They are called Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS), and are not recognised as valid guarantee systems by the official organic regulation. In the present paper, we analyse the main differences between the PGS and the third party certification system, deepening on their differentiated social and political implications. We conclude that the procedures behind PGS generate numerous positive impacts in the territories related to local producers (and consumers) empowerment and localised agri-food systems drive, while their implications make them not considered as a substitute to third party certification system, unless certain conditions of social consolidated groups and agroecological and food sovereignty perspective of food system take place.

Keywords: localised food systems; organic certification; food democratization; food communities

1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) began regulating the organic sector in 1991. Via a series of public regulations, the production and marketing of organic products were defined, standardised, and subject to inspection throughout the EU. This process has arisen because organic foods have intrinsic properties that cannot be discerned by visual inspection or even consumption.

To assure consumers that food has been organically produced, EU organic regulation has adopted the mechanism of third-party certification. From the beginning, this has been the approach espoused by the International Organization for Standardization. Third-party certification differs from other types of certification because it involves an entity that exists outside the agri-food chain. More specifically, this entity is not involved in processes related to production, transformation, marketing, or consumption [1–3]. Thus, the third-party certifier is an intermediary who links food production to food marketing and/or consumption, whose goal is to ensure certain standards are met along the supply chain. The certification process is based on annual inspections conducted by qualified technical specialists, who verify that production methods respect the established norms. On occasion, these inspections are complemented by analyses intended to detect the use of any prohibited substances.

Under this framework, the certifying body can be either a government agency or a private company. When a public agency is used, the competent public authority itself is tasked with ensuring compliance. When a private company is used, it will be accredited by the competent public authority to properly perform the work. Over the last few decades, food and agricultural certification systems

have become increasingly privatised [4–7]. Many risks can be identified related to this trend, such as a lower reliability of the affected sectors. The quality of the guarantee procedure is at stake when the certification company clients are the own producers it has to evaluate. In addition, the competition for lower prices directly affect the quality of the farm visits and labour conditions of inspectors, and result in a competitive market of private companies with a degree of ambiguity and asymmetry in the agri-food production chain.

A private company that wishes to provide certification services must meet established standards (ISO/IEC Guide 65), which involves certain limitations and conditions related to their functions. For example, no certifying body is allowed to provide consulting services or paid advice related to production regulations. Additionally, the certifying body cannot disseminate any information on the producers it inspects or their production methods, which means that, in cases of non-compliance, the specifics of the evaluation are not made public. The consequence of this state of affairs is that the organic sector displays certain characteristics typical of globalised agri-food systems, namely a concentration of power and the limited participation of important stakeholders, such as producers and consumers, in decision-making [8]. Furthermore, the certification process requires a significant investment on the part of farmers (or the outsourcing of such efforts) and thus entails major additional costs. Consequently, organic certification has gone from being an initiative instigated by farmers to distinguish themselves within the agricultural market to a complex procedure involving laws, standards, accreditation, inspections, contracts, certificates, stamps, and, most especially, significant commercial interests [9] (p. 4). The result has been additional production costs that penalise small- and medium-scale farmers and that hurt the consumer's pocketbook [10]. Furthermore, farm specialization has been favoured because, from a certification perspective, it is easier to farm monocultures than diverse crops [11]. In addition to the fact that the framework of the certification system results in negative incentives because its procedures involve passing judgment on “non-polluters”. This approach stands in opposition to those taken by other European policies that seek to enhance ecological sustainability, such as the EU Water Framework Directive (Official Journal of the European Union 2000), which has adopted the “polluter pays” principle. Questions can also be raised regarding the certification target. As the system certifies specific products rather than farmers and their general practices, it encourages organic production to remain a niche market instead of promoting attitudes that enhance overall sustainability [10]. Likewise, third-party certification discourages the application of continuous improvement processes, in terms of sustainable practices and designs, associated with the agroecological transition [12–14]. The logic of an exam, to be passed or failed under fixed criteria, ultimately stunts sustainability improvement in the organic sector (once you pass it, further improvements are not encouraged).

However, despite these shortcomings, third-party certification remains the only type of guarantee system that is recognised by the EU. Other types of guarantee systems exist within the EU and are being used by farmers who are committed to ecologically sustainable practices, but they are not officially recognised. That is the case of the so called Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) [15]. These alternative procedures around organic food guarantee invite to us to set out two questions. (1) Why are these alternative quality assurance systems being actively developed if they are not officially recognised? (2) How do these unofficial certification systems differ from the official certification system in their characteristics and political implications?

2. Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS)

IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements) defines PGS as “locally focused quality assurance systems that certify producers based on the active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks, and knowledge exchange” [16].

PGS were inspired by the first-party organic certification systems that were common in the 1970s and 1980s [17] before the advent of policy-based regulations. In the 1990s, PGS were supplanted by third-party certification in most of the world. However, PGS remain connected to the ideals of the

movement's pioneers [18,19], who defined their practices as "beyond organic" and who had a more holistic vision of sustainable food systems than the vision manifest in governmental regulations [20].

The underlying principles of PGS differ greatly from those of ISO-established third-party certification systems. First, there are no independent inspectors who intervene at various time points between production and consumption. Instead, all stakeholders involved (i.e., producers, consumers, technicians, and/or any other related parties) jointly define certification standards and help evaluate compliance. Second, this active participation directly results in transparency, as everybody is aware of the confidence building process results. The stakeholders are constantly supposed to be aware of and participate in farm performance, decision-making, and the establishment of standards [9]. Their confidence building procedure must be clearly defined, and all documentation generated by the guarantee procedure must be universally accessible [21]. Third, quality assurance is framed by local society and local culture (in terms of both criteria and visions related to food production and in terms of local actors implied and organizational local structures) [21]. Here, self-management is defined as producer honesty and respect for nature, health, and consumers. Fourth, horizontality is supposed to be a pillar, as all stakeholders participate in decision-making, carry out actions, and take responsibility for assessing the quality of organic products and production processes [9].

In recent years, PGS have increased in popularity, particularly since 2004. That was the year the first international conference on alternative certification took place in Brazil. By the end of 2014, there were around 140 PGS registered in 55 countries [15]; Brazil had the most. Indeed, in general, Latin American countries were the first to develop such systems [20], although some economically developed countries did so as well. The central role played by Latin America in developing PGS was not a matter of chance. Under the different regulatory schemes governing organic production in Latin American countries, PGS were recognised as certification tools and were granted the same status as third-party certifying bodies (with their accompanying labels). Moreover, the region hosted several international meetings, such as the Latin American Forum on PGS, held in 2009 and modelled on the 2004 meeting in Brazil. That conference helped shape PGS in six countries (Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Uruguay, Mexico, and Costa Rica). Its objective, in addition to facilitating technical and political discussions focused on PGS, was to encourage mutual recognition of different systems.

Other PGS-focused international workshops and conferences followed. Among them was the noteworthy International Conference on Advancing PGS, held in Vietnam in September 2013 [22]. National conferences have also taken place in countries such as China, South Africa, Lao PDR, the Philippines, Burma, and Spain. In certain countries, such as Mexico [23] and Brazil [24,25], civil society has actively and successfully lobbied the government to include PGS-based certification in national regulations related to organic production.

However, a more intriguing topic is the use of PGS in countries that do not legally recognise them as certification tools. Such is the case for countries belonging to the EU. We suggest that this trend has important social and political implications because any organic producers who do not obtain third-party certification will not be officially recognised and will therefore face major limitations as they seek to develop their businesses, whether in terms of marketing (they will be excluded from all officially organic certified supply chains, for instance) or in terms of public support (they will be excluded from public organic food procurement programs, for instance).

3. Methods

To analyse this alternative guarantee systems face to the third party certification, we studied the case of Spain. In this country, in the last 4 years, two national meetings were self-organised between 2014 and 2016 that focused on the different types of existing autonomous PGS; the goal was to discuss their experiences and shared challenges, especially related to their unofficial recognition. These two meetings results are one of the inputs of the present work, whose details are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Spanish PGS national meetings as inputs for the research.

Meeting Details	Participant PGS	Research Inputs
I Spanish PGS initiatives meeting. Valencia, November 2014.	La Reverde Cádiz SPG—Bo Xarxa Llauradora Ecovalle—FACPE, Andalucía A Gavela, Pontevedra Basherri Sarea, Guipúzcoa Ecollaures, Valencia Ecored, Aragón Vecinos campesinos, Murcia	Meeting called minutes
II Spanish PGS meeting. Vigo, June 2016.	La Reverde Cádiz Ecovalle, Granada FACPE, Andalucía A Gavela, Pontevedra EcoRed, Aragón Vecinos campesinos, Murcia ASAP Castilla y León	Participating PGS inputs on their guarantee operating modes

This article was also the result of extensive research and utilised first-hand accounts provided by different PGS that have been operating in Spain since 2010. In Table 2, we describe the different PGS studied and the techniques used. As a result of this broad-ranging work, we can describe the comprehensive framework of these PGS, which offer a clear alternative to the EU's official system of organic certification.

Table 2. PGS initiatives studied.

Initiative Name	Place	Participants Profile	Field Work Develop
Asociación de productoras ecológicas La Balanza	Andalusia	Producers	Two collective workshops on the definition of the confidence building operating mode and the criteria to be guaranteed. Participatory observation in two PGS field visits
Ecocarpio	Andalusia	Producers and consumers	Four collective workshops on the definition of the confidence building operating mode and the criteria to be guaranteed.
Red catalana de Campesinos agroecológicos—la Xarxeta	Catalonia	Producers	Twelve semi structured interviews; three collective workshops on the definition of the confidence building operating mode and the criteria to be guaranteed.
Ecollaures	Valence country	Producers	Two semi structured interviews; one collective workshop on the PGS operating mode
Aiguaclara	Valence country	Producers and consumers	1 semi structured interview

After the inputs were obtained through this fieldwork and documents reviewed, this study focused on several key issues. First, we analysed the main differences in the characteristics and repercussions of PGS versus those of third-party certification by evaluating their key procedures. Second, we discussed the limitations of PGS, namely the extent to which they provide a true alternative to third-party certification in the organic sector, by analysing the challenges inherent to the management methods employed by such guarantee systems. The discussion framework was an analysis on the political questions and challenges that PGS pose with regards to third-party certification, and, as a consequence, in relation to official organic production in the EU.

4. How Participatory Guarantee Systems Work

The basis for PGS is a jointly established definition of the term “organic production” or, in other words, each PGS decides which criteria it wishes to emphasise in its quality assurance system. This first step for all PGS is one of the most difficult because it requires a collectively constructed vision of what is meant by Agroecology or sustainable production (all the PGS studied identify themselves under the umbrella of Agroecology and Food Sovereignty frameworks). The chosen criteria or standards then require determining how quality will be assured, namely the verification procedures used to ascertain that producers, production methods and exchanges are in compliance with PGS-defined standards.

A key characteristic shared by the PGS we studied is the existence of multilevel criteria, that we can identify in three different levels. First, there are threshold criteria that can be viewed as red lines that cannot be crossed under any circumstances (e.g., the use of agrochemicals or genetically modified organisms). Second, regulatory criteria that are also mandatory, but farms are given a time within which they can adapt their current practices so as to achieve compliance. The PGS we studied considered that, by establishing this multilevel set of criteria, the guarantee system could work as a driving force to promote agroecological transition processes [10,14]. This perspective, after PGS participants, contrasts with that underlying third-party certification, which translate the guarantee process into a final exam that one passes or fails [11].

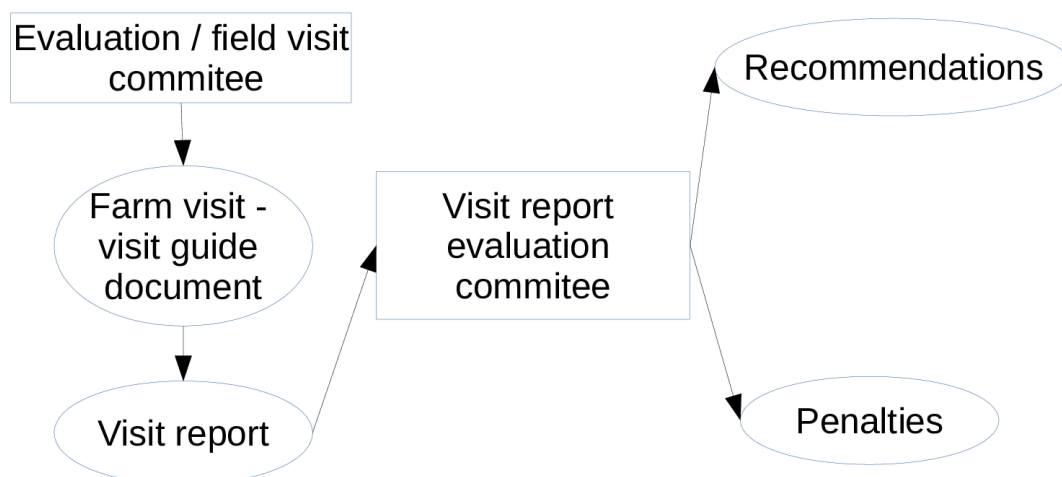
Finally, in some cases, the PGS includes a third level representing the “ideal” criteria, which are treated as desirable practices that will be rewarded with praise and recognition from the members and the community implied in the PGS (i.e., animal traction and pure local varieties).

The second step is for PGS to define their decision-making procedures. In all cases, the basic procedure is monthly general assemblies, during which specific tasks are assigned to specific committees. Committees composition varies across time under a rotation logic. Thanks to rotating assignments, everyone participates in each of the PGS' committees at some point in time. This approach displays horizontality, because anyone can perform any role, regardless of whether it requires more or less technical training and regardless of the amount of time a person has been member of the PGS.

The third step is to define the quality assurance (also named as confidence building) procedure. In all cases, collective visits to member farms are a key element. The results of these visits greatly influence the assessment of producer agroecological practices and overall approaches. However, and after the participants interviewed, these visits are more than just a means of monitoring production; they provide a valuable opportunity for peers to learn from each other and exchange experiences as well as for producers (and consumers when they also take part of the PGS) to engage in discussions. As remarked in the first PGS meeting, the monitoring process results in collective learning, which is an added value in comparison to the individual test carried out by an expert in the third party model.

In the two PGS meetings, most of the PGS presented guarantee procedures that utilise two distinct committees (which means two filters in the confidence building procedure): one that is responsible for visiting the target farm and a second one that evaluates the report of the visit, taking also into account past visits reports (e.g., changes in practices and/or the degree of compliance with past recommendations). After the participants discussions, this double step system pursues several objectives. First, it reduces the mistakes that could be committed by a single evaluator. Second, it guarantees a collective process of decision-making and responsibility assumption. Thirdly, it dilutes conflicts or personal favouritisms effects on the guarantee process. A simplified scheme of a generic Participatory Guarantee System is displayed in Scheme 1.

The exact names of these committees vary among PGS. The committee responsible for the farm visits is usually known as the visit group, whereas the one evaluating the visit report is often referred to as the evaluation committee or the quality-assessment committee.



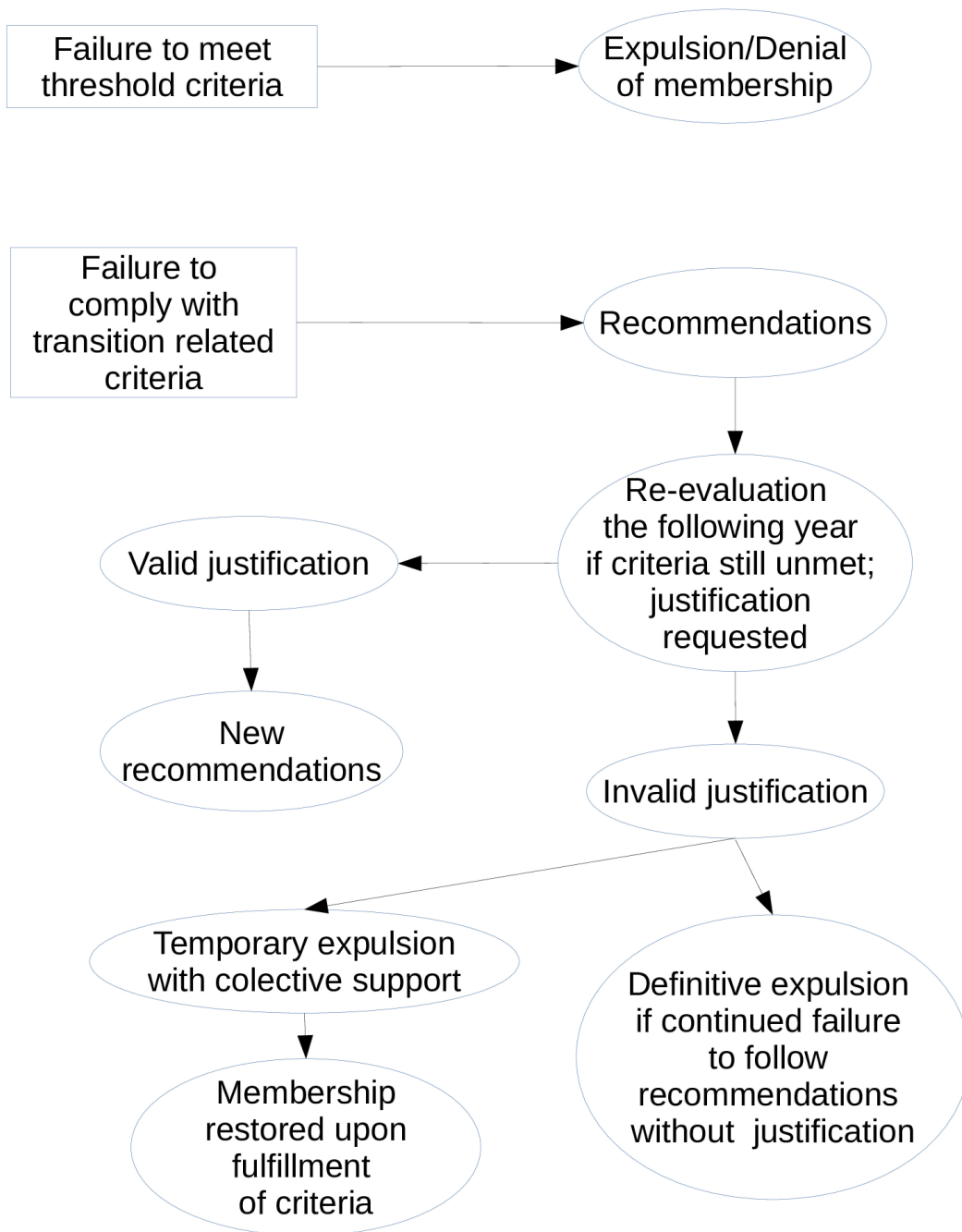
Scheme 1. General make-up of a generic PGS.

There are cases, however, in which this double filter is not applied. For example, in small PGS (such as those found in highly localised areas and that are tied to a small group of producers who have jointly developed a short supply chain—e.g., La Balanza), the procedure tends to be simplified and both tasks (the visit and the evaluation of the visit) are carried out by a single committee, which is made up of all the PGS' members. Thus, the farm visits, the subsequent evaluations, and the issuance of the final decision are carried out as part of the PGS' monthly assemblies. There are also bigger PGS, in which, with a view to relieving part of the substantial time investment required by members, the work of the evaluation committee is integrated into the monthly assemblies.

In all cases, the final decision issued by PGS can take two forms. First, it can take a positive tack, by offering recommendations for improving practices (following the aim of continuous agroecological transition thrust). Second, it can take a negative tack if: (1) previous recommendations were not followed without a valid reason; (2) threshold criteria were not met; or (3) transition-related criteria were not met within the proscribed time frame without an acceptable justification. In such cases, and depending on the exact results of the evaluation, different penalties may be imposed.

We observed that different penalties were imposed depending upon the degree of a farm's non-compliance. The response varied from the PGS lending help to the farmer to expulsion from the group. Non-compliance has consequences far beyond the imposition of penalties. For instance, it will also result in the loss of access to a collective localised channel for marketing established by the group. The greatest penalty is the loss of the social support network, group-based product marketing, and other associated advantages. The type of decisions that have been identified when evaluating farm compliance can be seen in Scheme 2.

The last element identified in all the PGS participating in the meetings were similar membership application procedures. In general, applicants fill out a form in which they evaluate how well their practices correspond to the PGS' criteria. The application is then considered by the evaluation committee, or the committee/structure that serves this function (it can be the monthly assembly as referred). If the application is approved, then a visit to the applicant's farm is scheduled. This first visit is carried out either by the committee responsible for farm visits or by the entire PGS in the specific cases mentioned above (indeed, in some PGS, even counting on a visit committee, the entire group participates in the first visit so that all members can meet the applicant and observe his/her production methods for themselves). From this point forward, the procedure is equivalent to that used during the annual assessment process, and the basis for the PGS' recommendations is determined from the moment official membership begins.



Scheme 2. PGS decision types when evaluating farms and producers.

5. The Participatory Guarantee System and Third-Party Certification: Two Diametrically Opposed Approaches

All participants of the PGS that assisted the two meetings, as well as all the key informants, expressed their rejection of the third party certification. In the cases they were producers and they combined both systems, the reasons were related to the need of the official label to sell in certain channels or to access to certain public subsidies, but never as a free option. In the following lines (Table 3), we analyse the characteristics of the PGS studied and compare them with those of the official third-party certification system, which allowed us to identify the following key differences and possible reasons for this rejection.

Table 3. Main differences between PGS and the official third-party certification system.

Basic Parameters	Third Party Certification (Based on the ER834/2007)	Participatory Guarantee Systems
Decision making	The decisions on what is evaluated and how are taken at an institutional level and by the certification entity or body. Producers and consumers are passive actors, non decision from then are required	All the decisions on what, how and when are taken at the social network level. Producers and consumers define what they want it to be and how.
Guarantee responsible/s	Certification bodies or entities (public administrations or private enterprises). Always non local technical and institutional figures.	Local social networks of producers and consumers
Bureaucracy required	Complex documents designed at technical bureaus. Public administration and private enterprises assume the task.	Flexible documents designed by the networks. Producers and consumers design how to translate into documents the principles to be evaluated and the procedures.
Costs	Expensive mechanism. Costs related to qualified technical staff (auditors and managers at the certification body); costs related to the maintenance of the certification body structure; costs related to the travel expenses of the technical inspectors to the farms	Cheap procedure. The implication of the members allow to substitute monetary costs by time, which is not remunerated; costs related to travel expenses of the visit group to the farm
Transparency	None. Confidentiality is guaranteed by law. None of the operators informations can be published.	Complete. All the members of the networks know exactly the results of the proceedings.
Non-conformity consequences	The certification is denied. Lost of commercialisation opportunities.	The producer is sent off the network. The person lose not only the guarantee, but the confidence inside the network (social consequences). They lose commercialization channels; support and mutual aid mechanisms.

Thus, the first key difference is political in nature and relates to the intrinsic distribution of power. The style of governance used by PGS involves applying radical democracy to the agri-food system [26]. Through mechanisms such as general assemblies involving all the participants every month and committees where everybody in the initiative participate due to its rotating nature, the participation of all the people involved in the initiative is, beforehand, guaranteed. In contrast, and after the critics expressed by the informants, in third-party certification, power and responsibility lie with specialised government agencies or private companies without local ties. This system is hierarchical and leaves producers and consumers without a voice. Technical expertise is valued above empirical, practical, and regional knowledge, and the stakeholders directly affected by the certification process are subordinate to intermediaries. In PGS, the stakeholders involved (always those related to food production, and, in some cases, also those related to food consumption) are responsible for establishing certification standards. Active participation is a crucial part of PGS membership and helps ensure the quality assurance process. Even though this approach has more complex requirements that involve greater time and effort and may come with the challenge of “emotionally” managing the group (difficulties and challenges related to that point are analysed forward), it is significantly more transparent and decentralises how certification happens.

The system’s horizontality (when the challenges it entails are surmounted) helps empower stakeholder communities by promoting farmer self-awareness and self-confidence. The system also benefits consumers, when they are active partners of the initiative, as they gain more information and power when it comes to their dietary choices. PGS can thus also help counter “consumer deskilling” [27], a phenomenon that has important repercussions on the restructuring of agri-food systems and consumer sovereignty.

Second, PGS and third-party certification employ very different administrative models, and the differences extend far beyond the types of forms used. Indeed, the discrepancies in the latter are influenced by a much more important difference: the identity of those designing the forms. In third-party certification, generic forms are designed by technical specialists; the same forms are used by the different countries/regions subject to the overarching regulatory regime. In contrast, in PGS, producers (and consumers) design the forms, which are tailored to local conditions and sociocultural context.

Finally, in third-party certification, confidentiality is protected by law. Consequently, no information regarding the reasons underlying non-compliance are made public. In this system, non-compliance means the loss of certification and the inability to sell one's products under the organic label, among others. In PGS, certification-related information is made publically available and thus there exists social pressures and control. This system make-up has important consequences given that PGS are always associated with localised agri-food systems in which: (1) consumers are engaged because of their concerns over the physical, social, and economic origins of the food they eat [28]; and (2) there are physical and emotional ties between producers and with consumers [29,30]. Consequently, non-compliance does not only result in the loss of certification (which is already important), but also entails the loss of access to local marketing channels and exclusion from the social network established around the PGS, in the community in which farmers work and live.

6. Are Participatory Guarantee Systems a Viable Alternative to Third-Party Certification?

As we stated at the beginning, PGS have greatly proliferated over recent years, in tandem with the growth of localised agri-food systems. However, they are not effective in all contexts and its sustainability is at stake. Regarding our field work, we have identified both external and internal challenges.

6.1. External Challenges

A significant ideological barrier has been generated by societal distrust of self-management and the imagined rupture with certification conventions that are assumed to be technically superior. In most cases, society is reluctant to accept a system based on autonomy and jointly established standards over a system based on technical expertise, as the latter is considered to be more objective. At work are also cultural barriers among stakeholders, which are largely influenced by status or profession [31]. As stated in the second PGS meeting, these barriers lead to differences in the perceived trustworthiness of people's abilities. People with technical expertise who have trained to work as inspectors are seen as more trustworthy than producers, who know how to produce food, or critical consumers, who know what they want to eat. Remarkably, such barriers persist, even in the face of unending food-related scandals that occur in the food production and marketing chains supposedly controlled by technical specialists (e.g., the cucumber crisis, the poultry-dioxin affair, and the outbreak of mad cow disease). However, the proliferation of regulated seals and labels, which are supposedly conferred after technical inspections, have generated confusion and distrust among consumers [32], which may ultimately weaken these barriers.

A second external challenge has to do with established power dynamics within agri-food chains. When PGS are established, in some cases, they have faced fierce lobbying by certifying bodies, who wield significant governmental power. These bodies view PGS as a threat to their niche market and use economic and political pressure in their attempts to discredit these groups as well as to prevent them from being officially recognised or gaining societal acceptance. For example, the international and Latin American chapters of IFOAM recognise PGS and have created dedicated discussion fora and meeting spaces for them. They have even created an interactive map that shows the PGS that are emerging across the globe. In contrast, the European chapter of IFOAM (where certification bodies are especially present) does not even mention PGS on its website.

6.2. Internal Challenges

In both of the PGS meetings, participant initiatives stressed that the main internal challenge faced by the members of a PGS is time requirements. PGS procedures demand a significant time investment. This fact means that mechanisms for providing a clear return to members must be developed. For example, the exchanges, learning, improvement, and social networking that take place need to be explicit and useful. As a result, PGS are not adapted to all contexts nor are they universal solutions to the certification problem. PGS require a certain degree of militancy and a significant amount of political involvement. In many cases, key figures can be identified. These people act as project leaders at certain points in time and assume important responsibilities. They make it possible for the PGS to move forward and become stronger. Directly related to this, we have identified some unequal power distribution risks. When the procedure is promoted by one or a few people that have the time or the resources to dedicate to the PGS, collective action becomes weaker and power relations evidence a non-horizontal structure. There is an enormous challenge around the difficult balance of making the PGS operative and active, and allowing the needed time to make it horizontal and inclusive in the guarantee procedures, the decision making and the assumption of responsibilities.

Another internal challenge is handling disagreements. It can be difficult to express that a member is not respecting the established standards. Fear of creating open conflict often prevents PGS from functioning properly. Indeed, shying away from conflict instead of viewing it as an opportunity can result in frustration and discouragement and, ultimately, kill PGS functionality.

A third element to be considered is related to PGS being based on collective management principles. However, coming to the required consensus about the specific principles to adopt can prove difficult. Before establishing their methods for verifying compliance, PGS should clearly define the criteria and principles to which they wish to adhere, which will inform the set of standards they establish. This initial step requires a concerted collective effort to determine what PGS members want and why. This process, which involves negotiation and teamwork, aims to achieve consensus on general criteria. It requires openness and tolerance on the part of those involved. Part of this process is clarifying the exact definitions of terms such as quality, proximity, seasonal production, and small-scale farming. As literature on participatory methodologies has pointed out previously, it is easier to agree upon general criteria than concrete proposals [33].

Finally, it can be challenging to carry out the farm visits to check for compliance and generate spaces for learning and exchange. Members shared that they may feel insecure about their ability to look for and properly identify evidence of non-compliance. This insecurity is attributed to the common misconception of technical background needed to be competent at these tasks. Usually people think in technical knowledge provided by universities. Indeed, people seem to undervalue their own practical experience, which is also technical, and the utility of the questions and concerns raised by member stakeholders who bring to bear important ideological convictions. For example, producers and consumers can complement each other during visits: the former can shed light on more technical aspects of the production process, while the latter may be more attuned to issues related to water use, energy use, and waste disposal.

The main difficulties encountered by PGS are the suite of tasks that are usually outsourced in third-party certification. Indeed, the certifying body becomes the one that assumes the necessary time investment and that takes on the burden of resolving conflicts and conducting inspections. In contrast, PGS change the power and market structures that have been established by official regulations. They question the idea that third-party certification is the only valid mechanism for ensuring quality in agri-food systems. This shift in certification-related responsibilities implies an alternative vision of food and farming, one in which food is a “commons” rather than a politicised “commodity” associated with differential rights [34]. Such proposed changes fit within the social framework of what Lozano and Gómez Benito [35] have identified as food citizenship, whereby everyday citizens participate in the governance of food systems, whether by producing food, making food consumption choices, or both.

7. The Important Implications of the Politics behind Organic Certification: Procedures Matters

After what has been analysed, we can affirm that PGS are tools that are consistent with alternative modes of conceiving and organising food systems, which are referred to as “alternative food networks”, “short food supply chains”, or “local food systems” [36]. Conversely, it has also been commonly invoked as “food citizenship”, “food democracy”, and “civic food networks” [37]. PGS represent a radical change from neoliberal food systems, which are described as “corporate” [38] or “financialized” [39], from the perspective of their modes of production, the resulting food systems, and the mechanisms used to ensure compliance with autonomously defined standards. PGS are consistent with the idea of re-localising and re-socialising the concept of the food system [40], as expressed by Schermer [41] via the notion of “food from somewhere”. PGS establish trust in local food systems and refer to goals of autonomy and empowerment. Indeed, this new approach was first developed in 1996 as a result of proposed food sovereignty policies [42], driven by the Via Campesina international movement (cf. [38,43]).

PGS thus are distant from the trend in the responsible consumption movement toward ever more numerous seals and labels (from both public and private sources) and instead espouse certain definitions of food quality. These signs of food characteristics—which include not only the regulation-based organic label, but also private-sector markers such as appellations of origin, the GlobalG.A.P. label, the Rainforest Alliance seal, or the Fairtrade (FLO) mark—are granted according to sets of standards that are defined by different stakeholders with varying degrees of democracy [44]. PGS represent a major change regarding this tendency to focus the agri-food system in the local context, where consumers, as well as producers, have a voice to make decisions about the food they want to have. Thus, they play a far greater role in agricultural postproduction than do the organisms responsible for such labels and seals [45]. Indeed, they represent a significant change in regulatory systems because they give voice to consumers and producers to define food quality, that is, they embed all the agri-food system in local communities.

The ability of PGS to build trust is also associated with the idea of food “commons”. In the case of PGS, we propose that quality assurance is the common feature upon which the collaboratively established processes are built. They provide an efficacious alternative in a market characterised by individuation and neoliberalism [46], of which third-party certification is a manifestation. Here, we are not using Ostrom’s definition of “commons”, which focuses on institutional economics and identifies “commons” as natural resources that are managed by small communities according to clearly defined principles. In that context, the food “commons” are goods. Instead, the food “commons” discussed here are the methods for ensuring food quality within localised production systems, which arises from the specific needs of the social group that builds the PGS and which is implemented via the politicization of the satisfiers (under a Max Neef perspective) [47]. A mechanism is established that bolsters satisfier self-management by strengthening the social ties of concerned stakeholders within specific localised areas. Indeed, this approach does not seek to appropriate the services developed within a framework of commercial and individualistic concerns.

The regional groups that have built PGS within the EU are not following official regulations. Instead, they subscribe to an alternative system that is not officially recognised and assume the consequences. PGS do not correspond to either of the movement types defined by Friedmann and MacNair [48]: (1) movements that adopt constructive, non-confrontational strategies with regards to the powers that be (i.e., governmental institutions and for-profit corporations); and (2) movements that adopt radical, combative strategies. PGS do not seek to either inform or fight government regulations and/or official systems of governance. Their strategy is build autonomy, and they assume the resulting costs and disadvantages. Indeed, in the various communication fora used by PGS (cf. [49] (pp. 2–3)), as well as in the first Spanish PGS meeting, it is been stated that official recognition of PGS can lead to more disadvantages than advantages, based on the experience of Brazilian and Mexican groups.

Such verification invites us to affirm that the regulations a society establishes are not neutral. They are framed by a specific perspective on the role of public institutions, private stakeholders,

and civil society. When establishing regulations such as those governing the organic sector, policy choices have important implications. Society can choose either an approach that strengthens the tendency towards globalization and that bolsters international markets via the adoption of common technical rules or an approach that favours local initiatives emerging from the needs and interests of local stakeholders. These decisions are not made based on economic/societal concerns or on in-depth analyses, but rather arise from cognitive systems or systems of reference, which inform not only practices (cf. [50]) but also government regulations. Regulations in the organic sector are the product of conventional cognitive systems, which have established mandatory mechanisms that significantly impact the sector's development. The coexistence of the two types of approaches has not been taken into account in any of the organic regulations discussed and approved until now.

In this sense, discussion regarding organic sector conventionalisation has been centred on the definition and adoption of certain standards [50,51]. Here, we are interested in stressing the importance and relevance of the different possible governance systems in this conventionalisation process. The principles upon which a system is based will strengthen certain tendencies versus others. In other words, results will be different depending on whether a system is rooted in: (1) a production-based paradigm that promotes international trade and globalised agri-food systems and that thus adopts commonly shared international standards and procedures that are determined by government regulations and technical bodies; or (2) principles such as food sovereignty and food democracy [10]. This will be very conditioned by who and how decisions are taken regarding agri-food systems.

PGS are based on a system of reference that is highly dissimilar from the hegemonic system. They represent a new framework that is inspired by other cognitive systems. They view resource management and productivity differently; favour a more holistic worldview and foster the interaction between different forms of knowledge, including traditional knowledge, as well as creation and implementation of knowledge within specific contexts; and operate on a value-weighted scale where emphasis is placed on factors such as equity, solidarity and justice. Overall, procedures are rooted in the principles of radical democracy. This enormous shift brings one of their main limits: the development of a very political and critical approach is required to a group of producers (and consumers, when they get implied) to develop such governance system.

8. General Conclusions

The proliferation of Participatory Guarantee Systems across the globe and particularly in places where they are not officially recognised as systems for certifying organic production is encouraging debate on certification mechanisms in agri-food systems.

The social groups and networks associated with PGS render visible the implications of using a technical approach to regulate the organic sector. By questioning whether third-party certification is the only way to ensure food quality, PGS are drawing greater attention to the political and social processes by which sectors are certified. It is more than just a matter of whether or not a technical approach should be used. Indeed, PGS propose a different vision of the relationship within food systems, a vision of their territorial embeddedness, and a different governance model to handle their functioning.

PGS use quality assurance procedures that politically confront third-party certification. Trust is viewed as emerging from social dialogue, and radical democracy determines decision-making and capacity building. Horizontality is used to facilitate discussion among producers and, in some cases, to engage consumers as well. In this vision, agri-food systems are closely tied to specific regions. To be effective, PGS must engage in community building, and their members must have organizational and technical skills. The ultimate result, when all these conditions are attended, is group empowerment.

However, these characteristics—which allow the creation and growth of PGS at the local level—also present major challenges. To function properly, a PGS requires time, effort, and community building. In current agri-food systems, certifying bodies assume these responsibilities, which makes

them easier for producers, but rather implies an individualist and undemocratic agri-food logic. However, PGS have to deal with disagreements and conflict resolution, which are natural results of the collective effort. It is not surprising that PGS fit well within political social frameworks that view food as a common good and confidence building as a common itself. Otherwise, PGS implementation is rather difficult, and we believe that they cannot be used in situations in which stakeholders are not involved in methodological development and implementation.

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