

PGS moving forward in the Greater Mekong Sub-region

By Michael B. Commons, Earth Net Foundation, Thailand



From 2-9 March 2016 Chris May led a PGS training of trainers on behalf of IFOAM – Organics International, in Bangkok. Earth Net Foundation organized field visits and logistical support. If you have not had the chance to join a training of trainers on PGS with

Chris May, you may have missed out. The training process was a reflection of the core values of PGS, in particular those Chris most emphasizes: “creating the shared vision” and a “participatory process”. From day one we had a ‘homework’ assignment to decide what would be an appropriate sanction for the whole group if any of us failed to deliver. This meant a failure by any of us would be our collective problem: already a different way of thinking.

This eight-day program started at the FAO regional office in Bangkok, being part of an FAO funded initiative. From day three we were out in the field, visiting Lemon Farm, a leading health food-focused supermarket chain. Ms. Suwanna and Mr. Natapol from Lemon Farm, who also joined as participants thanks to ADB support, shared their experience along with other team members and farmers involved in their PGS. There are now six PGS farmer groups and each group has developed slightly different standards and a different pledging process. These reflect the views and culture of their respective communities. Both farmers and staff emphasized that the visits are not a cold inspection process, but a chance to share and learn from each other. One farmer said that prior third-party inspection visits might have given “corrective actions” but no help. In PGS, instead, there is time to discuss the situation and look at options to improve upon it together.

We then made our move to Sampran Riverside Resort. The “Sampran Model” is a very inspiring case. Mr. Arrut, the manager, wanted to convert his family business into an organic resort. Buying organic produce from Bangkok and abroad would greatly increase costs for him and his guests, while all around Sampran district there are many farmers. The hotel was buying from markets, which were buying from farmers. So he decided to buy directly from farmers instead, if they would agree to grow organically. They helped the farmers to develop good organic management skills. With the “Sukjai weekend market” later established on the resort grounds, these farmers could also sell directly to and connect with local consumers. While many farmers are both part of a PGS and have third-party certification, which is currently paid in full by the government, the PGS seemed to be working very well and to be enough for this local market, once funding support for certification ends. The farmers we met combine monthly meetings with peer visits, making time to learn from and inspect the farm that is hosting

Table of Contents

PGS moving forward in the Greater Mekong Sub-region

PGS in Marathwada - Helping quench the long unquenched thirst

New technologies and PGS for food safety in Vietnam

Continental News: What’s new in...

Call for Papers Open for Organic World Congress



TOT Participants visit Wanakaset PGS.

the meeting. Many farmers welcome their customers to visit the farms, an element that increases participation and transparency.

After two more days of classroom training, we had a chance to look at the progress made by the Wanakaset Network PGS, of which I am part. Members of our group explained the process we had gone through to develop our common vision, our standards, and our peer visit method and forms. In the afternoon the trainees had a chance to practice the peer review process in two farms of the Wanakaset PGS. The participants debated how much freedom a PGS has to develop its own standards (if any). Some suggested that PGS should vary only in process, not in standards. My opinion has been that what matters are the [principles of organic agriculture](#), very well captured by IFOAM – Organics International, of [Fairness](#),

[Care](#), [Ecology](#) and [Health](#). Organic standards are only one method to try to capture these goals in a measurable way, but they should not to be confused with the goals themselves.

At Wanakaset we started from our own collective vision for this forest farming and self-reliance system, based on the principles of organic agriculture. The result is a simple document of 10 points that we all clearly understand and agree to. The favorite thing from the Wanakaset PGS process might have been a small innovation introduced by my colleague/teacher at Earth Net Foundation and pioneer in implementing PGS, Vitoon Panyakul. In the farm review form that we use, most questions have three smiley face icons as the answers: happy, sad and in between. Participants in a peer review just circle the face that reflects how they feel. For us happy means pass, sad means fail and the neutral face means a pass with some reservations. The form is a single, two-sided page: short, to the point and no staples.

After wrapping up the learning process in Bangkok, trainees were ready to take the lessons learned home and apply them with their farmers' groups. This FAO project sees PGS as an interesting tool to develop organic production and market (particularly the local market) in Cambodia, Myanmar and Lao PDR. While the project has yet to go the distance, the training left everyone feeling ready and inspired to put PGS in action.

PGS in Marathwada - Helping quench the long unquenched thirst

By Joy Daniel, Executive Director at Institute for Integrated Rural Development



Perhaps a century or so ago, the Marathwada region in central India had 30% lush green forest cover, with streams and rivers to support a variety of flora and fauna. Now, it has less than 1% forest cover and the farmlands are parched dry. Less than 10% of the region is sparsely irrigated while cultivation of the rest depends on scarce rainfall, which has steadily declined in the past three years along with the ground water. The once lush region is now better known for its drought as a permanent feature.

The increasing population, rapid industrialization, and the extended coverage of cash crops such as cotton and

sugarcane all place demands on the limited and decreasing water resources. The competition is not fair and the small farmers and peasants are often left out. With 20 liters per person for household chores as a luxury in many of the villages, there is nothing much left to cultivate even small plots of land. The situation is worsened by the fact that most of the people depend on farming as their main source of livelihood. No water means no income and getting into a debt cycle. The region has unfortunately become the hotbed for farmer suicides in the country. Until recently, there was hardly any action on sustainable water conservation and management measures.

In the villages of Chincholi, Jambli, and a cluster of hamlets around them in Aurangabad district of Marathwada region, the farmers have done something different.



Farmers groups introduced water wheels

These villages together have about 100 organic farmers and four Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) groups with around 15 organic farmers in each group. Some of these farmers bring their produce to the weekly organic bazaar in Aurangabad and also sell their produce through Mahagreen Producer Company (a farmers cooperative). The water crisis had affected their farm produce badly. Now, thanks to the water conservation efforts undertaken, there is a different story to be told. Ramesh

Moghe, a small farmer, now cultivates onion, vegetables, cotton, and pigeon pea on two acres of land. During the last year, he achieved an income of nearly sixty thousand rupees (900 US\$/ 800 Euro) from this small patch of land, compared to almost nothing only two years before. Some other farmers in the cluster also experienced similar benefits from the interventions they initiated in the area.

The farmers from these villages, particularly the organic farmers motivated during the PGS group meetings, came together to plan concrete measures to sustainably improve the availability of water. The PGS groups got into action beyond organic farming. Together with resources mobilized by the Institute for Integrated Rural Development (IIRD) from other organizations (Bread for the World (BfdW) and the National Bank of Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD)), the farmers contributed money and resources to build three check dams in a nearby stream. This has helped increase water levels in 45 open wells and thus increased irrigation to 200 acres of farms around the stream. The farmers are waiting for the rains to plant grass and agro-forestry crops on farm bunds and along the streams, to prevent soil erosion. Two of the farmers groups also introduced water wheels that help fetch an equivalent of four pots of water in one trip. This has allowed women to share the burden of this daily chore with the young men, who enjoy rolling the water wheels. Some of the groups also accessed credit from banks to install drip irrigation on their farms and are able to irrigate and cultivate a greater area with the same water resources. This story of change will continue to unfold, with PGS as the humble beginning that brought the farmers together.

New technologies and PGS for food safety in Vietnam

*By Leandro Rossi, Monitoring & Evaluation and Communications Officer at VECO Vietnam
(Excerpt from an article originally published online by VECO International on 24 February 2016)*



Vietnam has a major food safety problem. Not a week goes by without news coverage of a new food safety scandal. These frequent scandals have many different causes, but one key issue is this: toxic, banned pesticides and synthetic fertilizers are smuggled across

Vietnam's porous border with China to be sold at local markets at very low prices. The Vietnamese government has an extensive list of allowed, restricted and banned agricultural chemicals, but the list is hard to enforce.

Add to that the fact that most Vietnamese farmers are poor smallholders who tend plots of land smaller than one hectare. These smallholders often have a hard time accessing accurate information on how to safely use and store the agricultural chemicals (whether they are allowed or banned) they buy in their local markets. The seller might have given them instructions, but most farmers spray their produce liberally, just to be sure that their harvest won't be spoiled by a stubborn pest. The result is that a lot of the vegetables that make it to market have unacceptably high levels of chemical residues. This explains why the issue of food safety keeps many Vietnamese consumers awake at night.

The number of farmer groups in Vietnam that grow safe and organic vegetables is growing steadily, hand in hand with the Vietnamese consumer's increasing appetite for these kinds of vegetables. VECO Vietnam supports a number of these farmer groups through their projects. There are more than a hundred stores that sell vegetables of these kinds in Hanoi. However, and oddly enough, research shows that only 4% of all vegetables consumed in Hanoi on any given day are safe or organic.

Why don't consumers buy more safe and organic vegetables if they are so worried about the safety of their food? That is a good question and it has many answers: Vietnam's average monthly income is quite low, and safe and organic vegetables are more expensive than conventional ones; many consumers have little trust in their country's institutions, let alone its certification systems; entrenched buying habits discourage many consumers to start frequenting new and safe stores. However, if you ask the consumers directly, the most commonly quoted reason is the following: "I don't really know where to buy safe or organic vegetables".

VECO Vietnam works to help resolve these problems. During an event at the Vietnamese Women's Museum on 30 January 2016, the VECO Vietnam team presented two potential ways to make an impact. The first was the [Safe & Organic Food Finder \(SOFF\)](#) platform. This innovative platform, supported by Vredeseilanden's Innovation Fund, helps consumers in Hanoi find stores that sell safe and organic vegetables. Consumers can

enter their address and then SOFF tells them which stores in their neighborhood sell safe and organic vegetables. Consumers can also find a store's contact information, the kinds of certificates the store has obtained and which safe and organic vegetables lay on its shelves. Thanks to SOFF, families will be able to buy their groceries at reliable stores, stores will increase their sales and farmers that specialize in safe and organic vegetables will earn a better income. There is also an app version available for [Android](#) and [iPhone](#).

The second innovation was the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS). A [video](#) using animation and interviews with farmers, consumers and other PGS stakeholders was produced by VECO Vietnam and launched during the event. Why is PGS so important? Well, an essential aspect of producing safe and organic vegetables is certification. PGS is a quality assurance system that is feasible for smallholders: it does not involve costly external certification and the paperwork requirements are easier to manage. The [new video](#) provides information on how PGS works and on how it's being applied in Trac Van District in Ha Nam Province, one of VECO Vietnam's project locations.

A lot of steps are necessary to make PGS work and still more are needed to definitively resolve Vietnam's food safety issues. However, during this event, at least some strides were taken in the right direction.



Continental News: What's new in...

ASIA

PHILIPPINES: *Fundacion Educacion y Cooperacion* (Educo), a development NGO working for children's rights, sought the help of MASIPAG and PGS Pilipinas to conduct a PGS orientation for farmers producing organic products in Camarines Sur, Albay and Sorsogon provinces. The 2-day orientation was held in Carmel Farms in Pili, Camarines Sur, from 16-17 March 2016. The aim was to introduce farmers to PGS and broaden their understanding of a pro small-holder friendly system of certification that protects and promotes the organic quality and integrity of their produce. Representatives from the local government units of Bato, Pulangui, Donsol and Castilla also joined. For pictures and more information please see this [link](#).

OCEANIA

PACIFIC COMMUNITY: The Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community of the Pacific Community (POETCom) will be developing a certification system for the tourism and hospitality industry. "The standard is one of a few in the world and will mean that tourism operators like hotels will be able to buy from organic certified farmers fresh and value added products through a certified organic value chain," said Karen Mapusua, coordinator of POETCom. The standard could be applied to menu items, food/catering providers or whole destinations to create market opportunities for local farmers. The Pacific has its own organic certification scheme known as "Organic Pasifika". Products bearing the "Organic Pasifika" mark are certified to the Pacific Organic Standard by an internationally accredited and POETCom approved certifying body or through a robust, POETCom registered Participatory Guarantee System. For more information, please visit [POETCom website](#).

EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA

SPAIN: PGS are developing in the country and there are good examples coming from Galicia. In 2014 implementation started for the PGS "A Gavela". It was officially launched in 2015 and it now involves 18 producers, three shops and distributors, and a few organized consumers' groups. Their webpage offers information on their stakeholders and the system they have adopted, including templates of forms from annual visits for each one of the producers. This initiative is looking into strategies to expand its activities and to connect with other Spanish PGS. From 16 - 18 June 2016 they will host the Second PGS National Meeting, which will take place in parallel to the VI International Congress on Agroecology, hosted by the University of Vigo. For more information on PGS A Gavela, please visit their [webpage](#) (in Galician) or contact spg-agavela@saramaganta.info. For information on the Congress, please visit the [webpage](#).

USA: Fair World Project (FWP) is an independent campaign of the [Organic Consumers Association](#), initially launched in 2010, which seeks to protect the use of the term "fair trade" in the marketplace, expand markets for authentic fair trade, educate consumers about key issues in trade and agriculture, advocate for policies leading to a just economy, and facilitate collaborative relationships to create true system change. The Spring 2016 issue of their free, semi-annual publication *For a Better World*, showcases different models of consumer assurance programs that have great potential in the marketplace, including PGS. The article "Alternate paths for consumer's assurance of company and product integrity" is available online. The entire publication is available for [download](#), for free.





19TH ORGANIC WORLD CONGRESS

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9 - 11 November 2017 | New Delhi, India

Special announcement: Call for Papers Open for Organic World Congress

The 19th edition of the Organic World Congress (OWC) taking place from 9 -11 November 2017 in New Delhi, India now opens its Call for Papers. Every three years sector stakeholders come together at the OWC, the world's largest and most significant organic gathering, to discuss and deliberate the issues of the day. The 19th OWC is structured in four conference tracks: Main Track, Farmers' Track, Scientific Track, and Marketing Track. [Learn more here.](#)

The 'Marketing and Quality Assurance Track' discusses innovative ideas for shortening the value chains, for systems that build trustful relations between actors, for promising marketing methods and for organic and fair trade alliance building. Emerging trends in quality assurance, e.g. PGS, CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), fair

trade and other alternative and integrative systems will be presented. Therefore, we would like to encourage PGS practitioners and researchers to submit their papers and ensure that a wide array of models, experiences and local adaptations are well represented.

There will be 12 sessions over a period of three days. Each session will have three or four oral presentations and three poster presentations. The Track Committee will screen received papers and invite selected speakers that are committed to participate in the OWC 2017.

Submissions should be full papers of at least two, but no more than four, A4 pages. The deadline for submission is 30 September 2016.

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