



## Declaration – PGS pre-conference

The worldwide PGS community convened on September 6-7, 2021 at the event "**30 Years of PGS Development: A Root and Branch Appraisal**". This virtual gathering was organized by IFOAM - Organics International, Nature & Progrès and CIRAD, within the framework of the 20th Organic World Congress. The occasion was in many ways a celebration of how the movement has grown, and all that has been accomplished since the nascent PGS community gathered 17 years ago in Torres, Brazil, at the "First International Workshop on Alternative Certification", co-organized by IFOAM - Organics International and the Agroecological Movement of Latin America and the Caribbean (MAELA).

This year's conference took place virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and was nevertheless full of rich dialogue, gathering 117 participants from over 30 countries, including PGS practitioners and advocates, producers, consumers, community-based organizations, researchers and international donor organizations supporting PGS initiatives. Participant engagement was optimized by providing professional interpretation in English, French and Spanish.

We looked back to celebrate all that has been achieved since the 2004 gathering in Torres. It was the beginning of a strong and growing movement that stimulated the sharing of experiences, the creation of new PGS initiatives, as well as the search for forms of legitimization and legal recognition for PGS initiatives.

Now 17 years later, participants shared their work and reflections through four plenary sessions, 12 paper presentations and nine lively roundtable discussions divided in three tracks: Diversity, Sustainability and Innovation. By bringing together PGS initiatives from around the world at different stages of development, this intergenerational event allowed us to learn from our challenges and imagine ways to co-construct the path ahead.

The reasons to celebrate are many: at least 235 PGS initiatives in 77 Countries, have certified 1.110.964 producers and an estimated total of 755.000 ha of organically managed agricultural land. PGS are recognized as valid conformity assessment mechanisms within and beyond the organic sector and are included in legal frameworks and public policies supporting organic agriculture in many countries.

Challenges from the early days are still with us now, and while various innovative practices and technologies make it possible to tackle them in ever more creative ways, there is also reason to remain alert, aware of the risks represented by attempts to simplify the characteristic complexity of PGS. As we shared the diversity of our

experiences, innovations, and strategies for sustainability, the following points were highlighted:

### **PGS are essential for building sustainable food systems**

Adopted in 2008 by IFOAM - Organics International, the official definition for PGS remains valid today, guiding the work of PGS initiatives as it states: "PGS are locally focused quality assurance systems. They certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange." PGS are valid, trustworthy mechanisms to generate organic credibility and a necessary instrument to enable market access for all actors involved in the organic sector, particularly those producers who are primarily serving their local communities. PGS have great value beyond certification, as they foster knowledge exchange and strengthen local networks among producers and their communities, thereby cultivating sustainable food systems.

### **Support and recognition of the right kind are key**

Citizen recognition and social legitimation are essential to the affirmation of PGS as a trustworthy guarantee system. Legal recognition can bestow additional credibility, but is not sufficient on its own, and comes with risks for the full expression of the benefits of PGS. State authorities should first focus on supporting mechanisms to promote organic agriculture and the transition to agroecological systems and only later, as appropriate, defining and enforcing quality control aspects. In order to secure citizen recognition and social legitimation, PGS need to consistently manifest, over time, the six key elements of PGS.

In the development of supporting policies and legal frameworks for organic agriculture (including PGS as a valid certification mechanism), it is essential to adopt an inclusive, multi-stakeholder approach to decision-making, to avoid or mitigate the risk that these policies or regulations impose procedures that constrain diversity, restrict flexibility for local adaptation, or suppress the full expression of the six key elements of PGS, in favor of qualities typical of a third-party approach to certification.

### **Local markets remain a priority, international trade is an option**

In line with the principles of organic agriculture, the priority market for producers involved in PGS initiatives remains the local market. Depending on the different contexts in which they are located, producers often have the need and the capacity to access international markets. The credibility that is generated through PGS cannot be limited by geographic spaces or market definition, as long as organic integrity can be maintained with transparency throughout the value chain. Therefore, the possibility should remain open that the products certified by PGS initiatives can transit between different geo-

political boundaries, locally and internationally. Indeed, the development potential of the organic sector as a whole expands when PGS is recognized. But in places where the organic sector is legally regulated and only third-party certification is considered legitimate, public policies have unfortunately created trade barriers for organic products.

### **Strength in diversity with 6 key elements at the core**

Diversity is an advantage: PGS initiatives are and should continue to be adapted to the specific context where they operate. By building on previously existing experiences and adopting and adapting practices, new PGS initiatives can start one step ahead, without hesitating to experiment, to create, and to leverage new ideas and technologies to serve the goals of the PGS. The diversity of practices in PGS implementation should continue to develop: whether it is within, or among PGS initiatives. Local groups within a PGS initiative may differ according to local specificities, environmental and political contexts, social and economic, religious or cultural norms. PGS initiatives may differ in their structure and governance, how they make use of available resources, their reliance on institutional support, or their level of cooperation with other forms of conformity verification. Every PGS is and should remain unique, so long as the six key elements of PGS remain the core of their functioning and governance, providing a framework for development and implementation.

### **Support is welcome that does not undermine autonomy**

Various PGS initiatives benefit from external support at different stages of development, be it financial or technical assistance, or various forms of contribution from non members. But reliance only on external sources, voluntary work, or limited sources of income can lead to instability. It is essential that PGS include and embrace a diversity of strategies to remain sustainable, ensuring viability through collaboration with projects, universities and government authorities, appropriate marketing channels and communication strategies, consistent local coordination and members' commitment. PGS initiatives should have their own autonomy and independence in terms of decision-making power and financial sustainability, and they can be strengthened through external collaborations and support.

### **Inclusiveness: responsibilities must be shared among the entire food system**

PGS demonstrate the advantages of working together, of cooperating, of collective effort and intelligence. The incorporation of consumers, actively participating in the decision-making processes and overall implementation of PGS initiatives, is considered of the utmost importance where relevant and feasible, even if requiring this participation is not

realistic in every context. Various experiences show the benefits of combining PGS and CSA approaches to engage more consumers and non-producer actors, to compliment and contribute to the process of building sustainable food systems. The use of new digital technologies might also increase and improve inclusion of different actors throughout the entire food system, even as direct relations and social processes will remain essential for PGS implementation.

### **Networking is beneficial and necessary: at global, regional, national and local levels**

The main purpose of a network is to create connections for communication and cooperation, consolidation and expansion of PGS initiatives: spreading information among members, creating spaces and a sense of belonging to a community. It also serves important roles beyond the membership such as raising awareness and serving advocacy purposes, including a platform for dialogue and lobbying for PGS recognition. PGS networks can facilitate the development of support mechanisms and programs as well as the creation of markets and market channels and the improvement of the guarantee process relative to the needs of the local food systems. Though PGS networks' characteristics vary according to local and regional realities (much like PGS themselves) the core function revolves around strengthening members' participation and demonstrating a commitment to upholding the principles of PGS.

### **IFOAM - Organics International Resources Have Strengthened the PGS Movement**

The Official PGS recognition Program and the Family of Standards (FoS), developed by IFOAM - Organics International, are two useful tools for assessing the coherence of PGS implementation with the key elements and features of PGS, and the quality of organic standards. These tools can be used to facilitate the development, further improvement, communication and recognition among different PGS initiatives, from different countries, at different levels. Use of these tools may also help to overcome (some) trade barriers.

## Conclusion

We have come a long way since that first gathering in Torres, and we remain firmly committed to the key elements of PGS first formulated there: Shared Vision, Participation, Transparency, Horizontality, Trust, and a Learning Process. These continue to serve as the compass guiding us towards sustainability.

This year's event was an occasion of joy and celebration, a time to acknowledge the diversity of the many PGS in our international network, and to recognize the maturity of the PGS movement. We have seen that the value of PGS extends well beyond the producers who participate, and includes benefits to the social, cultural, environmental and economic contexts in which they are embedded.

Our movement has grown despite of everything. We have persisted against the headwinds of limited resources, the crosscurrents of mainstream cultures that value individualism, competition, and hierarchies. We have been sustained by a belief that we are on the right side of history.

As we were so generously reminded by Laércio Meirelles in the closing gathering, "the world needs more of us and our work". Indeed, our spirits have been lifted by this gathering, and we have been emboldened to be more creative and more daring as we continue our work building capacities for organic farming.

We invite and encourage every reader of this document to strengthen their commitment to PGS and join us in working towards a stronger organic movement and a better future for all. This is a commitment to a whole paradigm. It opens a pathway for building an organic world, for building communities' capacity to embrace this ideal. The organic movement is about people and the love they share for each other and the wonderful world we live in. It is much more than healthy food, it is about living in an enlightened world.



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