

The 10th gathering of the Ecovida Agroecology Network



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Every two years the Ecovida Agroecology Network organizes a meeting that brings together smallholder farmers and grassroots organizations to learn from each other about agroecology. The 10th gathering of the Ecovida Network took place in Erechim, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, on April 21-23, 2017. About 1.500 participants, coming from different regions from the southern part of Brazil where Ecovida is active, spent three days debating and proposing new directions and strategies, exchanging knowledge and meeting old and new friends.

Currently, the network represents 4.500 families organized into 28 regional centers. Ecovida Network is known for its pioneering work on PGS and for its advocacy activities that succeeded to have PGS included into the Brazilian organic regulation in 2011. However, few people know that PGS represents only a portion of the activities carried out by Ecovida. Indeed, for some years, issues concerning the recognition of PGS have taken up a lot of the organization's time and energy. This was necessary in order to work towards full compliance with the legislation and to register farmers according to the requirements of the Ministry of Agriculture (MAPA). As this recognition process began in 2011, many seminars, plenary sessions, workshops and trainings were needed and consequently the gatherings of

the Ecovida Network were intensely focusing on this topic.

Today, the 'National Register of Organic Producers' counts 3.967 farmers certified through PGS in Brazil. Thanks to this achievement, the 10th gathering was finally the occasion to move beyond certification and to return to discussing agroecology and its holistic philosophy. As an example, out of 30 workshops at the event, only two were about certification. New and old themes are gaining momentum. Participation of youth and women in farming and in grassroots organizations was a highlight of the meeting. Unfortunately, the gathering could not ignore a certain sadness that is going through the country, the result of the current political situation, which brought the dismantling of many important social policies and makes it impossible to communicate in an effective way with the current government.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The 10th gathering of the Ecovida Agroecology Network

Introducing PGS elements to third party certification: the example of EKO label in the Netherlands.

Short News

Nevertheless, this situation does not break the spirit of the Ecovida Network. With little financial public aid we managed to hold one of the largest gatherings, welcoming more than 100 visitors from other Latin American countries. For the first time, 38 chefs from the Slow Food movement prepared around 10 tons of organic food to serve 7.500 meals during the three-day meeting.

It is worth mentioning some important decisions that were taken regarding certification, i.e. the decision to stop certifying organic wild collection with PGS. Ecovida has officially withdrawn the certification of such products from its PGS standards. This decision was made after several meetings and plenary sessions for two reasons. On one side, the seasonality of wild collected products in Southern Brazil makes the wild collection a nomad activity, thus making it difficult for collectors to participate

in farmers group meetings. Creating more rules and norms for participation adapted to such specific situations could in the end bring more difficulties and bureaucracies than benefits for all. On the other side, norms on organic wild collection in Brazilian legislation are still under discussion, and it will require different standards depending on the product. This reductionist vision ended up making it unfeasible to certify wild collection. Thus, from now on, Ecovida Network will elaborate particular norms and create a different seal for wild collection.

The next Ecovida gathering will be held in 2019, participants are already looking forward to this possibility, which is perceived as an important moment for individuals, as well as for the whole community to meet and bring the movement forward.



10th gathering Red Ecovida, Erechim, May 2017

Introducing PGS elements to third party certification: the example of EKO label in the Netherlands.



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As we know, Europe does not have a regulatory environment conducive to PGS and only third party certified products are allowed to be labeled ‘organic’ or ‘ecological’. Nevertheless, PGS initiatives are spreading also in Europe. Many groups of producers and consumers pursuing more meaningful relationships between production and consumption are looking at alternative systems of certification for local markets. It is very interesting to see how PGS are becoming an appealing tool for addressing certain issues created by the current market structure.

The successful uptake of PGS at European level, despite the political situation, is linked to one of its main features: knowledge sharing and co-creation. Indeed, PGS are a tool through which different actors generate socially robust knowledge through meaningful interactions, in order to solve problems.

In the Netherlands, the idea of introducing participatory approaches in certification is not completely new to organic movement. Already in 2008, Demeter, the biodynamic certification

organization, had established the so-called Farm Talks. Designed as a methodology for collectively observing and discussing specific challenges, Farm Talks were initially conceived as a possible alternative to third party certification. Even though the method was considered not suitable as a substitution for Demeter inspection in 2013, **Farm Talks still go on as a practice to provide farmers with means for knowledge exchange and personal development.**

Recently we came to know a new Dutch experience driven by the EKO label where innovative elements from PGS have been integrated into the organic value chain. This is an example of how **Organic 3.0** can inspire diverse ways of integrating transparency and integrity within the value chain. The EKO label started as a voluntary guarantee system developed by Dutch producers in 1985 and was one of the pioneer marks for regulated organic products in Europe. After the introduction of the EU Regulation in 1992, the EKO mark became a logo that simply identified organic products certified according to



Organic glass house growers meet to talk about the sustainable development of their subsector

the EU Regulation without any stricter standards. After 2012, when the placement of the EU logo on prepackaged organic products was made mandatory, the situation changed and **EKO seal went back to being a label based on private standards and stricter sustainability requirements**. Once it became voluntary, one third out of the 3.000 previously certified member producers decided to become license holders of Stichting EKO-keurmerk in order to maintain the EKO label on their products.

The EKO label scheme is currently undergoing a period of revision in order to move towards true sustainability throughout the whole value chain. Today two prerequisites qualify producers and vendors for obtaining the EKO-mark: the company needs to be certified organic in the Netherlands by SKAL, and it has to share the mission and vision of EKO as described in the producer and processor codes. The EKO-codes were developed together with the organic stakeholders (farmers, processors and traders) and are also based on the best practices from other leading organic standards owners like Naturland, Bio-Suisse and KRAV. The EKO-code for farmers was launched in June 2014, while the EKO-code for processors was published in July 2015. In order to attain true sustainability in production and consumption, EKO members commit themselves to achieve two smart goals per year on key sustainability criteria contained in the codes: *closing cycles, soil fertility, plants & seed, biodiversity, pure & clean, climate and social & fair*.

To make the EKO-code a useful guide towards better practices, EKO, Bionext¹, Biohuis² and the organic processors association Bio Nederland have started in 2015 a two-years project called '*Organic more sustainable*'. **The objective is to identify potential sustainability steps for the organic sector - from good to better** - achieving this through a co-creation process based on participatory approaches such as peer reviews and consultations.

This methodology was tested in three pilot groups; each composed of 8-10 people, representing

different subsectors within the EKO organization as goat dairy farmers, glass house farmers and organic shop owners³. Firstly each participant had to perform a self-assessment of his own activity, evaluating it according to the different sustainability criteria contained in the codes.

After that each group re-assessed every member through a peer review approach that followed the same assessment criteria of the self-evaluation form. The results of both reviews were graphically presented as spider diagrams, which were then used as starting point for discussion within each subsector.

At this stage the peer review is not used yet for implementing a certification scheme but rather to come up with key performance indicators and how to measure them, highlighting strong points and features that need to be improved.

The self-assessment is useful to translate the EKO-code for farmers into dedicated questionnaires that are relevant, specific and understandable for farmers and shop owners.

Soon this experience will be extended to different sectors. What has clearly emerged from the pilot groups is that working at subsector level is important to define and target relevant indicators and goals.

Another important phase of the project will focus on communication since it is essential to raise awareness among consumers of the added values behind the EKO label and its step towards true sustainability and best practices.

René Heusschen, who is co-leading the project together with Leen Janmaat (Louis Bolk Institute), hopes that in the future consumers will also be able to join group assessment and that the peer review system could be used to build a participatory certification system within the EKO label.

Right now the time is not yet ripe but the pilot groups were very satisfied with this innovative participatory approach.

¹ The Dutch umbrella organization for the national organic sector.

² Dutch association of organic farmers.

³ The approach for organic shop owners was different. Here it was a combination of certification program for organic shops and further sustainable development on energy, waste, packaging and health issues.

SHORT NEWS

America

Brazil: The 'Federal Institute of Minas Gerais' produced three video to rise awareness about PROAPO, the 'Program to Strengthen Agroecology and Organic Production' in the country. One of these videos focuses on PGS, showing the experiences of producers, consumers and other people involved in different initiatives around the country. You can watch the video in Portuguese [here](#).

Colombia: On the 10th of June, RENAF (Red Nacional de Agricultura Familiar) organized a conference on 'PGS: A Political Betting for the Recognition of Agro-Ecological Production'. Important international panelists like Rita Schwentesius from Mexico, President of the Participatory Certification Committee of Chapingo Organic Farmer Market and Moisés Quispe, Director of the National Association of Ecological Producers of Peru (ANPE) attended. You can read more about the meeting [here](#) and have a look the recording of the full conference [here](#) in Spanish.

Perú: In Perú PGS are not officially recognized by the government. However, many PGS initiatives are implemented around the country with the support of local municipalities. ANPE, the national association of organic producers, has issued a formal letter addressed to the Ministry of Agriculture asking the government to speed up the process of recognition of PGS at national level. After a first round of meetings, the reactions of SENASA, the food and healthy national organization, have slowed down and it is not clear if the efforts will bear fruit any time soon. You can read the letter in Spanish [here](#).

Asia

Cambodia: According to the newspaper Phnom Penh Post, Kean Sophea, Deputy Director of the Department of Horticulture and Subsidiary Crops at the Ministry of Agriculture of Cambodia, said PGS plays an important role in reducing poverty for farmers but also in improving food safety standards. He added that many farmers had difficulties bringing their products to market, leading to large amounts of imports. Sophea said the Ministry of Agriculture will soon adopt regulations to set national standards for organic agriculture. This will allow farmers, including those involved in PGS, to more easily implement organic agriculture requirements. You can read the full article [here](#).

India: Mr. Abdur Rahaman of the NGO SEVA, who has promoted PGS in West Bengal since 2005, was invited to share his experiences at a two-day seminar titled *Present Agrarian Crisis in Jharkhand*, held in Ranchi on 8-9 April 2017. In the Indian state of Jharkhand farmers rely heavily on chemical fertilizers and pesticides as reported by Dr. Joe Hill for the NGO BIRSA. The majority of these farmers have shifted to conventional agriculture only in the past 10-15 years as a result of government policies, which mostly supported the agribusiness sector. Organic agriculture is making a slow entry in Jharkhand due to lack of support to farmers and lack of consumer awareness. However, through the national program for the support of organic agriculture and small-scale farmers (PKVY) the Government of Jharkhand has recently formed 173 PGS groups. For more information you can contact [Dr. Joe Hill](#).

Europe

The Horizon 2020 project **SIMRA** (Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas) started on April 1st, 2016 and will continue for four years. The project wants to categorize and understand social innovation in different settings, to develop an integrated set of methods for the evaluation of social innovation and its impact on rural areas and to disseminate new knowledge to policy-makers.

They currently opened a call for social innovation examples developed in marginalized rural areas in Europe. If you are a stakeholder involved in a PGS, let them know about your initiative by completing the questionnaire you will find [here](#).

Belgium: MAP, the Movement for Peasant Action, is launching a pilot project to provide support for groups of producers and consumers interested in setting up a PGS in Wallonia and Brussels region. After three years of fieldwork, workshops and development of questionnaires for farm visits, MAP is now launching this new project, you can learn more about this [here](#).

Oceania

Fiji: On the 1st of June the 'Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises & Development' (FRIEND), headquartered in the Fiji has launched two booklets 'Organic Simplified', a simple guide to realize easy and effective organic practices and 'Participatory Guarantee System Guidelines'. These publications were produced in partnership with the UNDP Pacific office in Fiji, the Sustainable Development Goal Fund (SDG-F), and the Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community (POETCom) of the Land Resources Division of the Pacific Community. You can get more information contacting friend@connect.com.fj.

Imprint

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