Several developments have been observed in the second quarter of 2013. The PGS Network has conducted a number of activities to share its experiences and to collaborate with its potential partners. PGS for both organic and safe farming has been applied to new areas in Vinh Phuc and Hai Phong. In the meantime, Coordination Committee and organic inter-groups in Soc Son, Ha Noi and in Luong Son, Hoa Binh keep working actively.

In this second quarter edition of the PGS newsletter, we take the theme “PGS up-scaling” to highlight the development and expansion of PGS through contribution from local people.

Activities by PGS Coordination Committee in 2nd Quarter of 2013

Trương Minh Hoàng | Organic PGS Secretary

Coordination Committee plays as an information center to link the producers, distributors and consumers. Problems and challenges oftentimes occurred during production and distribution updates on the implementation of the PGS Standards have always been discussed in monthly meetings by Coordination Committee (CC) to figure out appropriate responses to problems and issues that cropped-up in the market chain of safe and organic agricultural products especially vegetables. The CC has a key mission of coordinating the the activities, particularly the integrity of whole PGS system. It is also responsible to guide Inter-Groups how to run PGS and how to cooperate to respond better to feedbacks related to product quality. For example, in early June 2013, the store named Mr. Sach of Victory Asian Company was found wrongly labeling “organic food” on uncertified products. The Coordination Committee has reminded the store to adjust its label complying with PGS regulations that make consumers not confusing when look for the right organic products. The Coordination Committee was later reorganized in the way that more specific responsibilities for each team were defined.

Collaboration activities with domestic and foreign agencies have also been addressed. With assistance from VECO Vietnam, CC has worked with VECO partners to implement the activities in the policy advocacy program for scaling up the PGS. The study tour to PGS areas in Viet Tri, Phu Tho and Soc Son, Ha Noi with participation from leaders and key staffs from MARD generated surprises and interests about new direction toward food safety and quality management—where farmers are developing self-regulations and responsible for the quality of their products. Lessons learnt from applying PGS were shared actively in seminars and forums to improve the understanding and application of PGS in food quality management, and to address the emerging issue of food safety, sanitation and hygiene. The Organic PGS will soon be run under a department of Vietnam Organic Association to advise organic development and operate the guarantee system for organic products for domestic market.
Forteen (14) groups are so far certified with PGS and three (3) new groups are accepted as in conversion time to organic production. The Inter–Group issued a warning to Song group of Thanh Lap due to its employment of untested water from outside for its organic farm. On the otherhand, the Inter–Group received warning from PGS CC due to its poor management of PGS labeling. This was a consequence of Dam Da at one point using label “organic chicken” for the product not PGS certified yet. In addition, the PGS inspection plan designed by the Inter–Group early this year has been closely followed and well conducted. Moreover, surprise inspection visits have often been taken to ensure the production practices are complying with organic PGS standards.

Several private local farms came to the Inter–Group and requested to voluntarily participate to learn experiences and particularly to be undergone of PGS to get certification for their private farm. However, they are not able to certify by PGS due to not the farmers accordingly. Although, all individuals interested in organic farming in the district are welcome to participate as a member of the PGS Inter–Group to share experiences and upscale organic farming models.

So far Inter–Group Thanh Xuan remains ahead in PGS organic production. It has a certified production area of over 5 has. with 9 PGS producer groups. Organic vegetable productivity reaches an average of between 15 to 17 tons/month, which is sold under contracts to companies and retail stores. Income of members of the Inter–Group is good and is increasing yearly. Regular and surprise inspection visits are being conducted effectively by the Certification manager. So far, an expansion area of 6 has in Thanh Xuan was inspected and accepted as in conversion period to organic. After 6 months of conversion, Inter–Group will inspect again to evaluate and officially decide whether to issue PGS certificate as appropriate.

During the second quarter of the year, the Inter–Group worked with Nong San Ngon store to respond in time to complaints from consumers of being suspicious about yard long bean with pesticides. The source of the product was identified immediately and a sample was sent to the Center of Experimenting Pesticides in the North for analysis. Fortunately, no any trace of pesticide was found in the sample. That was indicated a truly quality of organic vegetables under PGS management with high responsibility of farmers for consumers.
On June 2010, PGS was first applied to 252 farmer households on 13.5 hectares of safe vegetable (RAT) at Tan Duc SV Cooperative of Phu Tho Province. Regular monitoring of production costs and revenues showed an average increase of income from 15-20% from vegetable production applying PGS compared to conventional production. The initial results of adapting PGS indicated that the system is an appropriate quality standard guarantee system for small scale producers. Taking the lessons learnt from Tan Duc, Phu Tho Plant Protection Department (PPD) has provided technical support to Vinh Phuc PPD in applying PGS since June 2012. A Coordination Committee was established with main participation of producers and consumers who make closer linkage and better understanding of the needs from each side. In the second quarter of 2013, the PGS Coordination Committee carried out 6 inspection visits, with the result of 42 farmer households meeting the standards accounting for 67% of the total. At the same time, vegetable samples have been tested in the laboratory for chemical residue level. The results showed no residue of pesticide and nitrate is very low than the defined threshold. PGS Vinh Phuc intends to issue certification for the farmers on June 2013 who meet the required standards. Hopefully in the coming days, along with promotions and propaganda activities, the consumers in Vinh Phuc will appreciate and willing to pay a fair price for the safe and healthy vegetables produced according to PGS.

On January 28, 2013, the Centre of Applied Research Science and Technology of Hai Phong (RAST Hai Phong) signed with Vietnam Standard and Consumers association (VINASTAS) the Agreement of implementation a pilot of Organic vegetable production according to program “Raising awareness of consumers 2013” funded by VECO. One ha located in certified area for safe production of An Tho commune, An Lao district was selected as pilot site according to organic PGS standards. For learning experiences on organic farming, a study visit of farmers from pilot site to organic area in Thanh Xuan commune, Soc Son, Hanoi was organized by RAST. Consequently, 20 farmer households have voluntarily participated in organic pilot and the Investment and Commercial Construction Quang Ich JSC committed to stand by for its purchase. So far, RAST organized a training of farmer on organic basic knowledge and PGS system. To convert the pilot area to organic farming, at present, farmer group has planted attractive flowers on farm and made a buffer zone to isolate between organic and safe production area. Hopefully, with the efforts of farmers and support from the Centre, Hai Phong will soon have organic products. However, due to poor appearance of organic vegetable is one of reason make consumers might not immediately accept it. This will become the barrier promoting farmers keep working on organic if have no any support from company and local authority to organic farmer.
**Sustainability of PGS – a survey from CASRAD**

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In the framework of a cooperation project with VECO on Food Safety Advocacy, Center for Research and Development of Agricultural Systems (CASRAD) has been conducting surveys of sustainability of Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) at organic vegetable production areas: Thanh Xuan, Soc Son and Luong Son District, Hoa Binh and safe vegetable production areas in Tan Duc, Viet Tri, Phu Tho, Vinh Phuc and Lang Son Provinces. The survey was conducted with respondents including farmers, local officials, business outlets and consumers. Survey results showed the confidence of farmers and local officials in this certification system. Farmers involved in PGS system have their products guaranteed truly quality and have stable income. Farmers also can exchange knowledge and skills and learn continuously related to production. Adopting the PGS not only address economic benefits for farmers but also gradually recover the trust of market. However, the survey at stores where PGS products are being sold indicated that the consumers are unclear about, do not understand or do not know about PGS. To improve this situation, promoting PGS to buyers need to be done actively at the stores by retailers. With the essential principles of PGS and correct approach, PGS promises to become a useful tool not only for small-scale farmers, but also to get back the trust of consumers on the quality of food products they are buying, particularly for the safety and quality of vegetables today.

**Learning experiences of PGS development in India**

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In late of May 2013, with the support of VECO Vietnam, the Institute of Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (IPSARD) successfully organized a study program to learn from the experience of India about the success of Participatory Guarantee System (PGS). The delegation included staff and officials from the Ministries of Agriculture and Rural Development, and Commerce, Trade and Industry, VECO partners, (IPSARD, CASRAD, VINASTAS), the PGS Network and Hai Phong RAST. With the assistance from the Vietnam Embassy in New Delhi, the team worked with the Agricultural Research Institute of India, National Food Security Committee and other government agencies working in agricultural development. Noteworthy to mention was the sharing from Dr. Krishan Chandra - Director of National Center of Organic Farming on how the PGS in India got recognition from the government and sustained. After 5 years of operation, PGS has been recognized by Indian government as an important integral part of strategy for organic agriculture development for domestic market, along with promoting export organic products to European market. All the promotions for PGS in India were supported by MARD. The major lesson from the study program reaffirms the appropriateness of the PGS development for small farmers. This fosters our determination to strengthen and spread in Vietnam the network of PGS practitioners in the days ahead.

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