

Products guaranteed through PGS in France finally accepted in Biocoop retail shops

By Joelle Katto-Andrighetto



About half of the producers guaranteed through the French PGS “Nature & Progrès” have double certification: the PGS one of N&P, and the official, third party certification. This allows them to sell their products as “organic” in France’s regulated market. The other half, holding “only” a N&P guarantee, have been facing difficulties for many years to sell their products in French organic shops. Organic shops were very reluctant to source products that could not officially be called “organic”. Some producers have nevertheless managed to find, here and there, and depending on affinities and negotiations, some organic shops, willing to support them.



Since June 2011, the situation has changed in the Biocoop network, a major retailer of organic products in France. Discussions initiated in 2010 with the Board of Biocoop SA have finally reached a positive conclusion, thanks to one Board member long-time supported of N&P and to the effort of many stakeholders within the Biocoop network, among which many shop managers who were also members of the N&P association. Decentralized general assemblies of the Biocoop network approved, in June last year, the following decisions:

- Biocoops are now allowed to sell products that respect an organic standard controlled by a PGS and that meet local production criteria, defined in the Biocoop standards.
- Special labeling will indicate clearly that these products do not correspond to the official definition of organic agriculture, and the label of the PGS will have to be displayed on each product.
- A special code and color will be assigned to PGS products.
- Any label referring to PGS will have to be approved by the Biocoop Board.
- Each Biocoop selling a product guaranteed through PGS will have to have the corresponding certificate and a valid license.

In other words, products guaranteed through Nature & Progrès can now be sold legally in all the Biocoop outlets throughout France, provided that they are

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produced less than 150 km from the corresponding shop (“local” criteria). This does thus not grant full access to the Biocoop retail network, but it is nonetheless a welcome recognition of and support for the French leading PGS, Nature & Progrès, and for the concept of PGS in general. In other words, products guaranteed through Nature & Progrès can now be sold legally in all the Biocoop outlets throughout France, provided that they are produced less than 150 km from the corresponding shop (“local” criteria). This does thus not grant full access to the Biocoop retail network, but it is nonetheless a welcome recognition of and support for the French leading PGS, Nature & Progrès, and for the concept of PGS in general.

Walking the Green Road: PGS meets CSA in South Africa

By Konrad Hauptfleisch



Ensuring a future for real food. Engaging the consumer and producer in a conversation to redefine their relationship. Building trust, sustainability, and in the final analysis ensuring that farmers keep on farming and consumers keep on eating good food. That is what the invitation to the launch of the Green Road said.

On December 7, 2011, a new supply chain initiative was launched in Stellenbosch, South Africa. Members of the local Biodynamic and organic community came together under the leadership of the Organic Farmers’ Market’s organisers, to develop a new short supply chain model that borrows ideas from social three folding, CSA and biodynamic agriculture, underpinned by PGS. The Stellenbosch Organic Farmers’ Market

has been in existence for close to 10 years, offering trading space for organic farmers to connect with their consumers. The Market has seen many incarnations and challenges, and recently the decision was made to expand its operations outside the traditional open-air, one-day marketplace into a supply chain that will develop more farmers and serve more consumers.

This is how the Green Road was conceived. Its birth took place at a meeting of growers and consumers, where both ends of the supply chain were asked to commit themselves to the other.

The organisers of the Green Road presented a picture of the new supply chain model to the group. The Green Road would consist of a group of committed farmers serving a group of involved and committed consumers. This basic concept comes straight out of the traditional CSA methodology, of consumers engaging in a direct relationship with farmers, ensuring a guaranteed supply of fresh, organic food to consumers committed to support the farmers financially and morally. But this is also where the Green Road takes another tack.



Growers are challenged by the seasons, the climate, the lack of marketing skill and the lack of time to serve a demanding consumer body effectively. Consumers on the other hand have routines far removed from the land - bills to pay, jobs to go to and lives to lead. They tend to delegate the responsibility for their food to retailers, and the certification of organic integrity to third-party certification bodies.

The Green Road initiative is a joint initiative between growers, administrators and consumers. The growers are individual farmers as well as grower communities, committing all or part of their produce to the Green Road supply chain. On the other side are the consumers, organised around a Consumer Support Group, committing all or part of their monthly food budget to the Green Road. In the middle is the Hub which co-ordinates and facilitates the flow of products in the supply chain. The Hub also administrates the PGS, training and extension, services, value-addition, marketing and financial governance. The Hub could be a combination of volunteers from both ends, as well as key positions filled by employees to support the system on a full-time basis.

This concept was presented to a group of 75 people, including 15 farmers ranging from a commercial biodynamic wine farmer to members of an emerging small farmer's trust. After the presentation, the audience was asked to form groups where questions were posed, debates were facilitated, and everyone came to grips with the mechanics of the new initiative.

The evening ended with an inspiring pledge by the farmers. Each farmer made the simple but far-reaching pledge: "I will grow good food for you". Their pledge was sealed by placing their thumbprint on a card displaying the slogan: "I am walking the Green Road". In turn, the consumers pledged: "I will buy good food from you", and placed thumbprints on cards of their own.



A Green Road farmer takes the thumbprint pledge (shown at right).

According to the [PGS Guidelines - How Participatory Guarantee Systems can develop and function](#) (IFOAM 2008), any such system should include a "farmer's pledge or similar". This process in the Green Road took the pledge to a higher level, making it inclusive in order to cement a relationship between farmer and consumer. In the same way the pricing, profit, costs and investment in this new initiative will become a collaboration between grower, facilitating hub and consumer.

By the time of going to print, the Green Road has already arranged their first PGS training workshop, where farmers, consumers and facilitators will take the first practical steps in creating the procedures and systems of the PGS. This process is being developed following the IFOAM PGS Guidelines and the systems already developed by PGS South Africa. Green Road further plans to develop their own standard, aptly named the Real Food Standard, which will be submitted for inclusion in the IFOAM Family of Standards in the near future.



Two farmers discussing the way forward.

If this new initiative is successful, the idea is to develop similar systems across the region based on the principles of local, seasonal and organic. While the constituent parts of this initiative are neither new nor unique, this is one of those instances where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The wheels are rolling on the Green Road, taking its passengers to an exciting destination: an even greener planet.

For more information on the Green Road, contact Liesl Haasbroek at info@bdaasa.org.za.

When PGS initiatives get stuck in standard interpretation difficulties

By Joelle Katto-Andrighetto



Organic standard setting and interpretation is a difficult task. Standard setters who function as democratic organizations and try to formulate the best possible standards based on political, technical and scientific aspects know how hard it is. Standard

setting can consume considerable human and even financial resources in committee meetings, expert contributions, background research, consultations, voting procedures and so on. Even once standards are set, questions around the right interpretation of certain requirements inevitably arise to those using the standard, regardless of whether they are operators or certification bodies. Many of the requirements typically included in an organic standard are (unfortunately or fortunately) subject to a certain level of interpretation.

Another difficulty lies in reviewing farming inputs and deciding whether they comply with the list of allowed substances or not. Sometimes, those having

PGS can definitely contribute to bringing consumers and producers' perspectives closer to one another, but it demands significant effort.

to do this job wish they had a chemistry background, but unfortunately very few do, especially in small organizations.

Certification bodies face these difficulties every day and have learned to deal with the imperfect world of organic standards. For PGS initiatives, the task can sometimes seem even more daunting. Certification bodies have professional employees who can dedicate days to investigating an issue. They often can ask the standard setter, in particular their accreditor or competent authority, if there is an interpretation

dilemma that they cannot solve. PGS initiatives are often left alone, with sole reliance on volunteer work, to handle everything including standard setting, interpretation and verification (without mentioning capacity building, market development and all other work done by most PGS). I have heard of PGS initiatives failing (dissolving) because they got stuck in standard interpretation difficulties. Other PGS initiatives, although not threatened yet, seem to be in a phase where debates on standard details absorb a considerable part of their energy. And indeed, with consumers directly involved and eager to “pick” on all farmers’ practices, this is not a surprising development. The challenge (and the benefit!) of involving consumers is that they are very strong advocates of the precautionary principle and of sustainability ideals, while lacking a lot of the technical agronomic understanding and insights into the reality of farming. PGS can definitely contribute to bringing consumers and producers’ perspectives closer to one another, but it demands significant effort.

As interesting and educative as standard setting and interpretation work can be, most important for PGS initiatives remains that they sustain themselves by providing an effective guarantee and contribute to spreading the organic vision. PGS initiatives must therefore find their own balance, depending on the amount of time and energy available from the stakeholders, and sometimes, solutions must be found that help reduce the burden of standard setting and interpretation. Here are a few possible solutions:

- Seek advice to resolve technical questions: you might be surprised that most experts in the organic world are willing to help: you may try to ask your local certification body or a globally renown one, ask standard setters such as your national organic movement if they are involved in standard setting, or the government people in charge of the regulation in your country. You can also ask advice from IFOAM. FiBL (www.fibl.org), the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture in Switzerland has very experienced experts working on standards and input approvals. OMRI (www.omri.org), the Organic Material Review Institute in the US specializes in reviewing inputs for organic agriculture.

- Join forces with other organizations or initiatives to commonly do standard setting and interpretation: there are real economies of scale when the standard can be developed at the national level or regional level, if you can find other organizations (PGS initiatives or not) that share your general vision on what organic practices should be.
- Use an existing standard. This will save you considerable time and you will be able to always fall back on the standard setter to request guidance on interpretation when needed. You could use your national standard (whether it is a regulation or a private sector voluntary standard), or your regional standard if it exists. Another advantage of this approach is that it can sometimes grant you access to the national / regional organic logo. Some PGS initiatives have even signed agreements with certification bodies to use their standard. Another option is to sign a contract with IFOAM to use the new IFOAM certification standard (option available from May 2012 onwards). Whichever solution you choose, there will likely be a way for your organization to discuss and influence the development of the standard you follow (through the open consultation periods that most standards have), while not bearing the burden of the responsibility of developing it.

Regardless of the difficulties encountered, you will have to find a way that the PGS can continue to function while standard issues are being subject to (sometimes heated) discussions. This means that farm visits and approval of farmers should not be put on hold for months because a detailed requirement is under debate. After all, if there are conflicting and somewhat balancing opinions on an issue within your PGS, it is probably not that big of a deal if the practice is temporarily permitted until a proper decision is made. There is plenty of time in the future to perfect organic practices, and not enough time left in view of the environmental crisis to afford losing organic farmers and PGS initiatives on the way.

Continental news: What's new in...



...Europe and North America

- **Germany (1):** A tool for sustainable development - this is how PGS were presented during the [3rd Bonn Conference on International Development Policy](#), which took place on January 30-31, 2012. A workshop entitled "The role of certification schemes in creating sustainable societies/shaping sustainable lifestyles" as part of the conference was organized by Fairtrade International (FLO), who invited IFOAM and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) as partners in the certification arena to present a broad perspective on the subject. The two-hour session, brilliantly moderated by Louise Luttkholt, led to a fruitful debate marked by challenging questions and interesting reflections, for example, on the applicability of PGS to other quality assurance schemes and on the fundamental role of consumers in setting the sustainability agenda in development policy. For more information, please contact Flávia Castro: f.castro@ifoam.org
- **Germany (2):** In the framework of the BioFach Congress, in Nuremberg, the session entitled "Cooperatives: challenges, solutions" was the platform for Eva Torremocha (IFOAM World Board Member and IFOAM PGS Committee member) to emphasize the important role of PGS in creating sustainable communities and its possible links with agricultural cooperatives and Fairtrade. This session also included presentations from Rene Capote (FLO-International), Andrés Gonzales (Cooperativa Manduvira, Paraguay) and Linda Kleemann (IfW - Institut für Weltwirtschaft, Kiel). For more information, please contact Eva Torremocha: evatorremocha@hotmail.com
- **Germany (3):** IFOAM overview of PGS worldwide updated! In 2011 we launched the IFOAM Global PGS Survey and collected new and updated information about PGS initiatives all around the globe. Based on this data we have now updated our overview of PGS worldwide. The new map is available online, on the [IFOAM Global PGS Database](#). For more information, please contact the IFOAM PGS TEAM: pgs@ifoam.org.



...Latin America

- **Bolivia:** At the beginning of February, the Bolivian Minister of Rural Development and Land, Nemezia Achacollo, presented the National Technical Standard for Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) for production, processing and marketing of organic products in the domestic market. The official seal, which will allow for the identification of organic products to be sold in the domestic market (for agricultural production and non-timber agroforestry), was presented to producers from all over the country, gathered for the occasion in Patacamaya, according to a press release from the Ministry. For more information, please visit this [link](#).



...Africa

- **South Africa:** IFOAM is carrying out a global comparative study on interactions between social processes such as seed conservation systems and PGS. The study is being conducted within the framework of the project "Ecological and socio-economic intensification for food security in smallholder agriculture in Central Andes, Peru". Local researcher teams are conducting in-depth case studies of 8 PGS initiatives around the world. So far, the training of local researchers has been successfully completed in India and the Philippines and data is being collected. Herve Bouagnimbeck, IFOAM Africa Coordinator and coordinator of the study, is currently in South Africa to train local researchers. The next training is scheduled for March 2012 in Brazil. These trainings not only enable face-to-face exchanges with local researchers, thus improving the communication and creating a coordinated output, but also enable the study coordinator to visit the different local groups and discuss with local stakeholders involved in the development of the PGS. For more information, please contact Herve Bouagnimbeck: herveb@ifoam.org.

Imprint

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