Participatory Guarantee Systems: a certification idea for small organic farmers

What is this research about?
Over the past two decades, the organic sector has experienced increased demand. In response, the organic sector shifted away from setting their own standards for certification (a first party or peer system), to a system where an outside organization set standards and makes sure that they are followed (a third party system). This research looked at the problems with an outside organization (third party) being responsible for certification.

This research also presented another option for certification of the organic sector by looking at a model for certification used in Mexico. This model is called a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS).

What did the researchers do?
The researchers looked at the history of certification of the organic sector. This research also involved a case study of a working model of a Participatory Guarantee System in Mexico.

What you need to know:
Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) are a worthwhile way to certify organic producers so that smaller producers can participate in the organic food market.

How can you use this research?
Policymakers and Government can use this research to shape economic policies and programs that reduce costs of organic certification and to develop the organic market away from the current industrial model.
Researchers can use this research to advance the field of organic farming and production.
Organic farmers can use the research to learn more about an alternate way to certify their organic produce.

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What did the researchers find?

The third party certification system for organic producers had the following problems:

- Farmers focused on rules instead of their natural ideas for organics;
- Individual farmers had little input on standards; and
- The high cost pushed small farmers out.

The Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) certification system addressed the above concerns relating to the third party system. In addition, it provided additional benefits:

- It was easy to understand and there was no cost for certification and less paperwork;
- Farmers returned to sharing information and knowledge; and
- Products were sold directly to consumers and consumers were involved in the process.

The PGS certification system had the following challenges:

- PGS did not meet international regulations for certification. Therefore, people getting certified with PGS in Mexico can only sell their products in Mexico;
- Social and personal conflicts occurred sometimes because volunteers on the certification committee were at times too hard on farmers, and other times too easy; and
- PGS required donated time and resources, including the University of Chapingo, which led to a lack of consistency and continuity.

About the University of Guelph researcher:

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