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PARTICIPATORY GUARANTEE SYSTEMS IN ORGANIC FARMING AS AN EXPRESSION OF AGROECOLOGY AND AS A PART OF AN ECONOMIC DEGROWTH PROGRAM: THE EXPERIENCE IN ANDALUSIA

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Abstract

The regulatory framework that surrounds organic production has become more complex as the sector has developed. The current regulation at European level is designed according to the understanding of which the distance between the producer and the consumer of organic foods is long, which does not have to be necessarily certain and, clearly, it is not the most favourable situation from an environmental point of view. They have been carried out alternative experiences oriented to the use of short size channels for the organic production marketing, based on the participation of the agents who integrate them. The Participatory Guarantee System developed in Andalusia between 2005 and 2007 is an excellent example of these experiences.

Keywords

organic farming, certification, agroecology, Participatory Guarantee System, Andalusia.

1 Introduction

The evolution that has undergone the regulation on organic farming in the last years at European level, mainly in the matter of product certification, has not convinced to a large group of people pertaining to the sector. It has been gotten to consider that the bureaucracy and the costs necessary to accede to official seals (legally essential to the marketing of organic products) on the part of the interested ones can even discourage the conversion towards organic agriculture, mainly of the small producers.

This reality has taken to those diverse associations of the sector try to enhance the research and development of alternatives to the official organic farming products certification system. These alternative systems do not try to replace the official certification system, but to complement it when the marketing channels are short; saving costs and focusing in the learning process that emanates of the participation in the organic movement.

The Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) are a specific case within a frame of network certification in organic farming. This one (PGS) concentrates in the implication of all the agents related to the production, marketing and consumption of organic foods in its process of verification; reason why the confidence generation is very important. The PGS base their controls on a set of rules and procedures. It might be that these standards were linked to compliance with the organic farming regulations with legal effect in the place where the PGS is implemented, to the standards of any international organization, or they were defined by and for the System itself.

In 2005, the Organic Farming General Direction (Dirección General de Agricultura Ecológica, DGAE) of Andalusia Government decides to develop in the Community a pilot project of certification through Participatory Guarantee Systems. This initiative was realised of simultaneous way in three zones: Serranía de Ronda (Málaga), Sierra de Segura (Jaén), Castril and Castilléjar (Granada). Their choice was not accidental, but farmers of these areas had expressed previously their difficulties to make possible their access to the production and marketing of organic products.

As the adaptation of the PGS for this pilot test in Andalusia was designed, the farmers had in the first place to commit with group rules so they guaranteed the ecological quality of their products and their implication in the activities of the System. Also, of annual way groups of farmers would visit other producers' plots, normally accompanied by more agents pertaining to the System, like consumers or technicians. This process is known as "crossed visits", selecting the group additionally farms to visit of random way or because suspicions of breaches were had. In order to develop all these stages the farmers and other stakeholders within the System were grouped in associations composed by an admission committee, a quality commission and another one for the organization of the visit groups.

The analysis of this experience, pioneer not only in Spain but within the European Union context, turns out from special interest in order to consider the relevance of their possible extension and its legal recognition (this last still pending). All this within a strategy of promotion of short marketing channels in organic farming, the communitarian participation and the traditional agriculture, in agreement with the principles of the agroecology and by extension of an economic degrowth program.

2 Characterization of the zones involved in the PGS project

2.1 Serranía de Ronda

The Serranía de Ronda is one of the areas in which the province of Málaga is divided, being located in the west side of the province and being composed of twenty municipalities. According to data of the Institute of Statistic of Andalusia, in year 2008 fifteen of these municipalities had a population of fewer than one thousand inhabitants, not reaching five hundred inhabitants nine of them. Ronda, the most important municipality of this area, would be by far also the most populated.

If we compare the municipal registers done in 1998 and 2008, we can see as the twelve municipalities situated in the center of the region of Serranía de Ronda have lost inhabitants. All the others (excepting the municipality of Arriate) have increased their population below the average of population growth in Andalusia. The Serranía de Ronda is one of the zones of the province of Málaga that has undergone a rate of depopulation most accused. To this phenomenon it is added the fact that in all the municipalities of the Serranía de Ronda the percentage of population over the 65 years old is superior to the average in Andalusia (14.59 percent in 2008), as well as in almost all the cases the percentage of inhabitants below the twenty years old is smaller.

The region of the Serranía de Ronda covers a territory of 1.256 square kilometers known for enjoying a great environmental wealth, which finds its apogee in the presence of the Natural Parks of Sierra de las Nieves, Grazalema and Alcornocales, where they inhabit species of flora and fauna of an enormous value. This fact makes of the tourism the economic activity with the greater amount of establishments in most of the municipalities in the region.

The primary sector is very important as well in the economy of the zone, occupying to a great proportion of the population. In agriculture, the olive grove and the cereals are considered the main crops in almost all the municipalities of the Serranía area. With respect to the livestock, the sheep would be the most numerous cattle. While forestry it emphasizes in the obtaining of the cork.

If we focus in the sector of organic production in the Serranía de Ronda, taking the data to the year from beginning of the project of the PGS in Andalusia (2005) we can see that the size of the organic farms was mainly smaller to the ten hectares for agriculture (76 percent of the cases). Nevertheless, in the case of the organic livestock, the 32 percent of the farms had between 100 and 500 hectares, and a 6 percent had more than 1.000 hectares (Cuéllar Padilla, 2009).

2.2. Sierra de Segura

The region of Sierra de Segura, in the province of Jaén, is located in the northeast of Andalusia, and it is composed of thirteen municipalities. Its 1.931 square kilometers were inhabited by 26.375 people in 2008, which represents a population density of 13.66 inhabitants per square kilometer.

As was the case of the Serranía de Ronda, the population of the region of Sierra de Segura is aging, as the percentage of population over the 65 years old is well above the the average in Andalusia. Except in the municipalities of Ojanco and Puente de Génave where the population increased, but below the average rate in Andalusia, in all the municipalities of the area there has been a population lost between 1998 and 2008.

The region of Sierra de Segura is situated in a very mountainous area belonging to the Natural Park of Sierras de Cazorla, Segura y las Villas. Because of the complicate morphology of this terrain, the weather is characterized by its variability from one area to another within the region. As the height increases the temperatures are lower and the humidity is concentrated more easily and may exceed 1.500 ml of rainfall annually. However, at lower levels summers are very hot and almost dry.

The main crop in the region of Sierra de Segura is the olive grove, whether if we refer to the conventional agriculture or to the organic farming model. In this region are established some important organic olive oil production cooperatives as Sierra de Génave, pioneer in the sector. In addition, since 1997 it has been developed in the municipality of Puente de Génave the international congress Ecoliva, meeting of producers from the organic olive sector all around the world.

2.3 Castril y Castelléjar

The municipalities of Castril and Castelléjar are located in the northeast of the province of Granada, within the region of Huéscar. According to data for 2008, Castril has a population of 2.523 inhabitants, of who the 19.82 percent is below the twenty years old and the 27.11 percent is over sixty-five years old. The municipality of Castelléjar has 1.624 inhabitants, characterized this population by its high aging because only the 13.49 percent is below the twenty years old, whereas the 31.77 percent is over sixty-five years old. The high age of the population has much to do with a strong exodus of the youngest generations, which is reflected in a loss of population in both municipalities.

“Many have emigrated [from Castril] towards other places, some to Alicante to also work in agriculture, but of course, winning more than in the town. Others go away to Benidorm, Murcia, Valencia and Marbella, among others sites, to work like builders and in the services. This phenomenon began in the 50’s, although most migration occurs in the last 20 years, which coincides with the increase of the subsidies” (Madera Pacheco, 2004).

Unemployment registered as much in Castril as in Castelléjar is relatively low (less than the 7.5 percent), being the construction the economic activity in relation to which there is a greater number of establishments, according to data for 2007. The primary sector is also very important, with the olive grove in Castril and the cereals for grain in Castelléjar like main agricultural crops (IEA, 2009).

The massive introduction of wood crops like the olive grove and the almond tree in territories of the municipality of Castril is relatively recent (from end of the 90’s), having occupied land in which herbaceous crops have grown previously (wheat, rye and barley mainly). This change has destabilized the scheme of private consumption and feeding of the livestock through the fruits of the field that they had traditionally established the farmers of the zone, whom used to combine sowing and pasturing on their

land (Madera Pacheco, 2004).

The environmental wealth that surrounds to the municipalities of Castril and Castelléjar is very great. Within the municipality of Castril is the Natural Park of the Sierra de Castril that counts on 12.696 hectares of extension. In Castelléjar are situated the rivers Guardal and Barbatas, besides being the municipality a good access point to the Natural Park of the Sierra de Baza, located in the south-east of the province of Granada.

After these brief descriptions, we can find some common characteristic in the territories involved in the project developed by the Organic Farming General Direction of the Andalusia Government on Participatory Guarantee Systems for the organic production:

- All the municipalities are located in zones with a high environmental value, generally mountainous, officially protected in several of the cases (Natural Parks of Sierras de Cazorla, Segura y las Villas, Sierra de las Nieves, Grazalema, Alcornocales and Sierra de Castril).
- From a demographic point of view we can see as a population aging occurs in the different territories, being the proportion of the elderly population present in the different zones over the average in Andalusia. Also, most of the municipalities have lost population in the last years, and the few that have increased it have done it relatively slow.
- The primary sector is one of the main economic activities of these territories, being the olive tree, the cereals and the almond trees the main agricultural crops and characterized the farms where they are carried out by their small size.

According to Torremocha Bouchet (2008) the common characteristics in the territories in which the project of the Andalusian Participatory Guarantee System was developed constituted its "solid root", whereas the differences required flexibility. As well, she indicates like some of the common features of the farms implied directly in the project the fact that they were well dispersed, the plots were generally of small size and they were to great distance from the main centers of consumption. Also in these farms some producers worked as nonprofessional agriculturists, not economically dependent on the performance of their land. The organic vegetable gardens of private consumption were frequent, being problematic the fact to sell the agricultural surpluses obtained without having to go through all the procedures for the certification by third part.

3 Stages of project implementation

3.1. Creation of the Organic Farming General Direction and the emergence of the project

In 2004 the Organic Farming General Direction like dependent organization of the Government of Andalusia is created. Manuel González de Molina, a university professor, an expert in agroecology, renowned environmental activist and member of the Green Party (Los Verdes) of Andalusia, is appointed director of DGAE thanks to an agreement between his political party and the party which governs in Andalusia.

First the Direction decided to carry out a work of recognition of the demands of the agents involved in the organic farming sector in Andalusia. For this purpose several meetings in diverse points of Andalusia have been organized. It was in these meetings where farmers of the territories of the Serranía de Ronda and the Sierra de Segura exposed their disagreement with the necessity to apply in their cases the official certification system, asking for a possible solution to the Direction in order to make their agricultural activities profitable.

After receiving these requests the Direction orders to the accomplishment of a complete preliminary research about the organic certification in Andalusia. This study concludes that the same opinions raised by the farmers of these two zones (involved in the later PGS) were defended by many other small organic farmers, being recognized his validity even by some of the main international organisms related to the sector. In view of these results, the Direction made the final decision to act.

3.2. Individual work in the three areas involved

First of all is decided to establish a working group in each one of the three zones involved in the project. This required the support of both consumers and producers, as well as those individuals, organizations or institutions, which could be sensitized with the different principles that surrounded the PGS

(environment, health, rural development, participation...).

In this phase, lasting six months, it is tried that each one of the three zones, with the support of the technicians facilitated by the Direction, define individually how they would outside like their model of Participatory Guarantee System.

3.3. Sharing ideas and developing the internal procedures of the PGS

At the end of year 2006, after the six months period of individual reflection phase of the working groups from the different territories implied in the PGS project, it was decided to share the individual groups' ideas. A meeting between members of the different zones from the project was held, in which it was agreed to design a joint regulatory frame for the whole Participatory Guarantee System of Andalusia. Later, were begun to implement in each zone the conclusions (both territorial and systemic) that they had been reached in the meetings. As well, remained a continuous communication between the agents implied in the PGS in the different zones, as well as of these with the coordination of the project (held by two technicians located in the cities of Málaga and Córdoba).

One of the main results of this process of cooperation was the development of the internal procedures for the PGS in Andalusia. The technicians tried to grant the greater autonomy possible to the agents of the project, orienting them just to maintain the procedures within the legality imposed by the Regulation (EEC) nº 2092/91.

3.3.1. Internal procedures of the social certification system in Andalusia

We will analyze the content of the internal procedures of the Participatory Guarantee System developed in Andalusia by a review of the main aspects of each one of the seven articles that compose it.

I. Participants

It will be subject to the compliance with the provisions regulated the use of the seal of the social certification system, in which it is only possible to participate through the entrance like individual person in some of the three groups in which the project is developed. In the management of the admissions it must be considered that during the year the group will be able at the most to duplicate its number of members.

First of all, in addition to compiling an application form to the System, the interested farmer must be supported by some of the members of the group or, if not, during his period of test it would be assigned to him a tutor. Later, the farmer must be interviewed by the admissions committee of the System and one first valuing visit must be made. The answer after these processes cannot take in arriving at the interested one more of a month; if it does it the farmer would be considered in fact within the system. After the positive answer to this initial evaluation, the farmer accedes to a period of test of a year of duration in which he will not be able to use the seal of the social system of certification, but he will participate actively in the PGS although without paying the regular fees.

In this sense, the annual fee to be paid by all members of the System is set in 30 Euros.

II. Management structures within the social certification system

Social certification system is based in the following structures:

- **Assembly.** It has the participation of all the members of the group, being the most important decision maker of the System, because the assembly solves on changes in the functioning and the composition of the PGS, being able to propose new sanctions and remedial norms.
- **Admissions Committee.** It evaluates and it makes the final decision, considering the criteria established, in the processes of admission of new members in the System, as much in the starting phase (requests, documents, interview, first visit), like during the period of test. The admissions committee will be composed by a minimum of two people pertaining to the group.
- **Quality Commission.** It organizes so much the mandatory annual visits as the extraordinary ones at random and those caused by suspicion. As well it analyzes the information arisen from these visits deciding the convenience of sanctions or recommendations. It also manages the complaints. This institution will be composed by three people, one of which should make the workings of secretary, reason why is important that he has management capabilities.
- **Visit groups.** They carry out the admission visits, and the annual and random visits, taking samples that direct to the laboratory. They inform to the quality commission on the cases of contamination by drift. They determine the visits by suspicion and the analyses to realize in them, although these must be carried out by a group different from the one which requests them. The visit

groups will be composed by a consumer, a producer and of optional way by one third member from outside the group. This last member has the function of “external endorsement” in the PGS, decided in the annual assembly of the group the need for its formal invitation.

If it is not possible to establish all these structures in the system of individually, it is allowed that the admissions committee and the quality commission, work as just one.

Each commission will have a spokesperson, and all the documents generated during the work of the System will be kept by the secretary of the group.

The allocation of people to the positions that compose the different structures from the system (except in the assembly) will last one year, although in the case of the visit groups the period can be limited to ten visits per group and year. The decisions regarding the appointments will be taken by the assembly in the case from the admissions committee and the quality commission, and by this last institution in the case of the visit groups.

III. Control process

Each producer will be visited at least once a year. In addition, the quality commission will establish a ten percent of random additional visits (and analysis). After a visit a term of seven days is given to the producers to facilitate those documents required by the visit group.

IV. Infractions and sanctions

The quality commission in compliance with the Regulation (EEC) nº 2092/91 can apply the following sanctions:

- Very serious. They happen when are used inputs that are not allowed and when the farmer has hidden or falsified circumstances such as contamination, illegal uses or the sold amounts. These infractions result in the expulsion of the group.
- Serious. They are infractions by external contamination that have happened of involuntary way, entailing its accomplishment the return of the producer to the period of conversion.
- Slight. They are caused by lacks in the process of continuous improvement in the agroecological management, not by direct breach of the Regulation (EEC) nº 2092/91. Usually they are settled with recommendations, but if these are unfulfilled of repeated way the producer is penalized with an economic sanction (100 Euros after the third breach, 200 Euros after the fourth breach and decision of the quality commission after the fifth breach).

The lack of payment of the fees will be considered like an infraction to the internal procedures, which brings about a surcharge of the ten percent by every month of delay. If after three months the producer does not pay his debt he must leave the group.

V. Conflicts and complaints

It will be the quality commission the one that manages the complaints, which must communicate of written way indicating the identity of the person that perform it, the identity of the accused subject (which will have right to defend itself) and the reason for the complaint.

After the reception of the complaint a control visit must be held, and an analytic if is needed. This research will result in a report that the visit group directs to the quality commission.

VI. Allocation of costs resulting from the operation of the social certification system

The common expenses of the system (telephone, internet, stationery store...) they are covered by the annual fee of 30 Euros paid by each producer. The travel expenses for carrying out the ordinary visits must be paid by the visited producer, whereas in the random analyses will be the group who pays and in the case of analysis by suspicion the own denounced producer must pay them, giving back to him the group the paid amount if it is decided that the accusation is uncertain.

VII. Other features within the social certification system

The internal procedure of the social certification system establishes some additional comments beyond the Regulation (EEC) nº 2092/91, concerning the following topics:

- Meetings of interchange. Will be carry out encounters inside each one of the groups twice a year, and once a year concerning the project altogether.
- Prizes. Each group will set a series of criteria in order to grant a prize to the member with a better handling of his farm from an agroecological point of view.
- Social criteria in the manpower hiring. The workers who realize workings in a farm from the System will have to be contracted of legal way and count in their house with the essential services. In addition it will have to be guaranteed the absence of infantile work, as well as the attendance of the children to their education centers.

4 Conclusion

At the end of 2007, Manuel González de Molina stopped being the chairman of the DGAE and the project of

the PGS in Andalusia loses great part of its institutional endorsement. The seal of the social certification system was never official. One of the main arguments that tried to justify this change of attitude was the fact that it had been very expensive to establish a strong control system of organic farming in Andalusia, thus the existence of an alternative as the PGS could break that “achieved balance”.

Nevertheless, it must have been considered that in some of the groups within the PGS the positive results obtained in just a short time had been enormous, thanks to the construction of a dynamics of collaboration between their members. A good example of this spirit we have enterprising it in the municipality of Castril, in which the BioCastril cooperative grouped so much to consumers as to organic producers, counting in addition in its work with an environmental educator. This cooperative has carried out interesting initiatives like the participation in the program Ecological Foods for Scholars of Andalusia, the attendance to the weekly market of Castril, the organization of the First Meeting of Organic Farming in the Altiplano de Granada and the collaboration with other associations of the organic sector as El Encinar (De la Cruz Abarca, 2008).

Therefore we can affirm that if is desired to guarantee future survival of the PGS it is necessary, in one first stage, a great pressure on the part of the consumers and producers interested in this project on the public administration to give continuity to the important work already carried out.

“The regulation of these systems of credibility generation needs the union and coordination of all the agents who defend the coexistence of several models of social and economic organization. This union must allow them to exert the sufficient pressure so that the decision institutions must consider, also, the agroecological approach in their decisions. So they will allow including the processes like the Participatory Guarantee Systems in the supply of certification models, guaranteeing therefore the free choice for each operator” (Cuéllar Padilla & Torremocha Bouchet, 2008).

In the zones that have characteristics similar to those with the territories implied in the project of the Participatory Guarantee Systems of Andalusia, agriculture does not have to be understood like any other productive sector. That is to say, we cannot just analyze the agrarian activity (in these zones especially) like generating consume or inputs in relation to the other economic sectors and their manpower. Agriculture represents much more; it is able to preserve the survival of the natural spaces protected and guarantee the possibility to the native population of remaining with dignity in their territories, with which is conserved an invaluable traditional knowledge.

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