



WHAT ARE PARTICIPATORY GUARANTEE SYSTEMS (PGS)?

According to IFOAM – Organics International, PGS are “locally focused quality assurance systems. They certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange”. Farmers, consumers, local authorities and NGO practitioners work together, to visit farms, exchange information and ensure that farming practices comply with an Organic Standard.

Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) in Lao PDR

THE STORY OF MS BOUCHAN: WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Xieng Khouang is a mountainous province in the northeast of Lao PDR. While agricultural production is increasingly moving towards commercialized farming, the vast majority of rural community members are subsistence farmers.¹ While poverty rates are decreasing in the country, many rural households remain poor and malnourished with a high rate of children stunted.² Since 2009, the government and other organizations have been promoting organic farming as a means to improve the livelihoods of farmers, reduce the environmental impact of farming and provide nutritious safe food to farmers and local consumers. Governmental policies and strategies also provide a means to empower and strengthen women in rural areas given the key role that they play in agriculture, being responsible for over half of the agricultural activities.³

“In the past our income was very low. We lived in poor conditions and did not have enough money to support the education of our 5 children. I got some income from weaving, but I made not more than LAK 5 million (USD 700) per year, from which I still had to buy raw materials. My husband used to have a salary as a local government official, but at the end of the month we never had enough to pay for all our basic needs.” Since the shift to organic farming, the couple’s situation has changed. They earn enough money for expenditures, every day. The total income from the vegetables is about LAK 25 million (USD 3 000) per year, enough to support the family and to allow their children to finish the last years of school. Now they are grown up, earning their own money, so Ms Bouchan was able to save enough to build a new house. “Finally we are able to eat what we want every day” she said, “not only do we have money to buy meat or fish, we also have plenty of our own vegetables.”

Ms Bouchan started organic farming in 2009 when she heard about a training program organized by the Sustainable Agriculture and Environment Development Association (SAEDA). Although farming was new to her, she quickly learned to grow vegetables organically and she observes how her soil is getting better every year.



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IMPROVEMENT OF INCOME AND LIVELIHOOD

Xieng Khouang is one of the leading provinces for organic agriculture in the country with more than 550 households involved. One of these farmers is Ms Bouchan Huengvilay. She lives in Yone village with her husband and grows a variety of vegetables including leafy, fruity and root vegetables and herbs on 1 300 m². Ms Bouchan thinks back, “In



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PGS FOR BUILDING TRUST BETWEEN FARMERS AND CONSUMERS

In 2016, the Laotian government started encouraging organic farmers in Xieng Khouang to become part of a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS). In a PGS various stakeholders come together to guarantee the farming practices adopted by the farmers. Consumers, local authorities and PGS farmers of different groups form PGS committees to carry out peer reviews and ensure the organic quality of the produce.

For Ms Bouchan, PGS was a great way to gain consumer trust, "The PGS really helped us to communicate to consumers about organic and to build their trust in our practices. Before joining the PGS, selling my vegetables was very difficult. Firstly, consumers did not know me, what was I doing and I had no way to offer them a guarantee on how I grew crops. As a member of the PGS, we have become more accepted and people trust that we follow the Lao Organic Standard. Now I can sell my products very easily", she said proudly.

FARMER EMPOWERMENT IS AMONG THE SOCIAL BENEFITS OF PGS

Ms Bouchan sees the benefits of PGS not only in terms of quality assurance: "For us, PGS is very useful to learn from other farmers and to improve our practices. I learned a lot about how to deal with pests and how to make organic pesticide using chilies, garlic and galangal."

As a result of implementing a PGS, farmers, and especially women that may experience limited access to formal training programs, continuously

exchange their knowledge. Moreover, becoming a facilitator to carry out peer reviews of other farms improves self-confidence and pride in their work. Many PGS farmers around the world feel that knowledge sharing and the social organization are the most remarkable benefits of PGS.

Ms Bouchan sells her vegetables on Wednesdays and Saturdays at an organic market in Phonsavan, capital of Xieng Khouang. Only PGS-certified farmers are authorized to sell there and this was the main marketing channel for her when she first gained PGS certification. Now, other channels have become more important: she sells most of her products directly at the farm gate or by home delivery on her small motorbike. "Consumers like to come to my farm, point at the vegetables and ask me to harvest for them directly from the

field. Other consumers got used to me delivering the vegetables directly to their doorstep." Her leafy vegetables-herb mix is especially popular and she sells up to 4 kg per day to a small shop in town.

SUCCESS OF MS BOUCHAN INSPIRES OTHER FARMERS TO JOIN

In Xieng Khouang, 70 farmers are now PGS certified, most of them women. Many neighbors have come to Ms Bouchan, willing to learn her techniques and farming practices. Soon, some of them will join the PGS as new members.

Ms Bouchan looks positively into the future: "In fact, I hope that one of our future members will be my son. He lives next door with his wife and has taken part in a training program, similar to what I did in 2009. I hope someday he will be farming organically not only on his own land, but on mine too."

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1 FAO. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [online]. Lao PDR. [Cited 23 November 2017]. <http://www.fao.org/lao/fao-in-laos/lao-at-a-glance/en/>

2 UNDP. United Nations Development Programme [online] Human Development Reports. Lao PDR [Cited 27 November 2017].<http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/LAO>

3 FAO. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [online]. Lao PDR. [Cited 23 November 2017]. <http://www.fao.org/lao/fao-in-laos/lao-at-a-glance/en/>

ABOUT FAO TECHNICAL COOPERATION PROGRAMME (TCP)

- Title: Small-scale Farmer Inclusion in Organic Agriculture Value Chain Developments through PGS
- FAO project in 2 countries: Cambodia and Lao PDR
- Objective: Address certification and marketing issues through the promotion of PGS
- Implemented 2015-2017 together with the Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries (Cambodia) and the Ministry Agriculture and Forestry (Lao PDR)
- Key partners: IFOAM – Organics International, Asian Development Bank and Earth Net Foundation
- Facilitating organizations in Lao PDR: Groupe de Recherches et d'Echanges Technologiques, (GRET), Sustainable Agriculture and Environment Development Association (SAEDA)