



## 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.



*Our son’s task is to find solutions to pest problems on Youtube. He is the junior agricultural technician of the family.”*

## Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) in Lao PDR

# THE STORY OF MS SINSANGA AND MR SENGSAVANG: SPREADING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ORGANIC FARMING

Lao PRD is a mountainous country in Southeast Asia. Even though poverty rates are decreasing, poverty remains widespread and many households are unable to meet daily food requirements. Many households especially in rural communities depend on agriculture as their main income. Unsustainable farming practices and deforestation have led to increased environmental degradation and vulnerability of small-holder farmers to natural disasters and the impacts of climate change. Health concerns among the population related to pesticide use are increasing. The government of Lao PDR has recognized the potential of organic agriculture to address these challenges and has made it part of the strategy to eliminate poverty and to provide nutritious and healthy food to its citizens.

Ms Sinsanga Keo Vong Kot and Mr Sengsavang Luangphachaleun live on a farm in Phonsim village in Savannakhet Province in the south of Lao PDR with their 19-year-old son and 17-year-old daughter. They rent about one hectare of farmland from the government, on which they grow a variety of vegetables and rice, and also raise ducks and chickens. They produce food for their own consumption and sell the surplus at a local market as their main source of income.

In 2012, the government started promoting organic agriculture. Mr Sengsavang remembers: “I have been growing vegetables using chemicals since I was young. One day government representatives came here and explained about the bad effects of chemicals on the environment and on people’s health and encouraged us to join a project about organic agriculture.”

The government provided technical training on organic practices and also gave Mr Sengsavang the opportunity to travel to Thailand to learn new farming skills. Now that organic practices are well-established on the farm, they have much less problems with pests compared to the past. Mr Sengsavang explains: “We grow a large variety of crops and use crop rotations to prevent pests from becoming a problem. But even if pests appear, nowadays it is easy to find solutions online.”

## ORGANIC GUARANTEE THROUGH PGS, WITH GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

In 2016 the government started to promote Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) to guarantee the

organic quality of the vegetables. According to Mr Thavisith Bounyasouk, Deputy Director Standard Division of the Department of Agriculture: “Our government is promoting PGS as an affordable method for organic farmers to build consumer trust in their products, to link them to markets and to facilitate their engagement in collective selling and buying.” In Lao PDR, the government also plays an important role in the implementation of this system, recognizing PGS, keeping some oversight through participation of local government representatives and allowing PGS farmers to use the national organic logo.

Support for marketing is also provided. Ms Sinsanga and Mr Sengsavang, together with the other five PGS members of Phonsim village, share a stall at the central market that the government provides them free of charge. Six times per week they sell their vegetables with the other members of their group.

### IMPROVED SELLING CONDITIONS AND GAINING CONSUMER TRUST

Ms Singsanga, mainly responsible for selling, sees the switch to organic as a major improvement: “When we were growing conventionally we often had leftover vegetables that we had to throw away. Now with PGS-organic we are sold out within two hours at the market and return home. The price of the vegetables was decided in an open discussion between the farmers of our PGS group and the consumers. We want to have a fair price, fair for farmers, but also fair for consumers.” The PGS group decided to go for a simple pricing system. All our vegetables are tied together in small bundles. Each bundle costs Laos Kip (LAK) 2 000 (about USD 0.25), three bundles are sold for LAK 5 000 (about USD 0.60).

Consumers in the local market are interested to learn what PGS-organic. Ms Sinsanga explains the benefits to the farm and to health. Many local consumers have already visited their farm. Regular consumers of PGS-organic vegetables explained that the quality of PGS-vegetable is better



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than conventional, they can keep PGS-organic vegetables for more than 5 days in the fridge while conventional vegetables only last 2 or 3 days.

Transitioning to organic and having access to the market through PGS, has improved the lives of all PGS participating farmers in Phonsim village. Some members have built a new house and can afford for their children to attend school regularly. Ms Sinsanga and Mr Sengsavang

have bought a small truck to deliver vegetables to the market. Their daily expenses are much easier to cope with now and also their daily food and nutrition has improved. “Now we have plenty of vegetables to eat and we also have our own chicken and ducks.”

### BECOMING A TEACHER FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

Recently Mr Sengsavang started in a new role: he is becoming a farmer teacher in a new government project that aims at educating young people to become the next generation of organic farmers. He is proud and optimistic about the future: “I am happy that I have the chance to share what I know with the next generation. I want them to continue what we started – farming in the organic way. I believe that the young farmers will continue to develop organic agriculture and bring it forward. In the future, I’m sure they will have more innovative and advanced organic techniques.”

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### 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)