

SARD and... good agricultural practices (GAP)

Good agricultural practices (GAP) are principles and codes of practice for farm management that can contribute to achieving sustainable agriculture and rural development (SARD) by improving food safety and quality, environmental sustainability and social welfare. In recent years, a multiplicity of GAP codes of practice have been developed to promote improved agricultural practices at the farm level. If the benefits of national GAP codes of practice are to be fully realized, governments should encourage participation of a broad set of stakeholders, as well as overcoming challenges related to national capacities for compliance with social and environmental practices.

Did you know?

- FAO defines Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) as practices that “address environmental, economic and social sustainability of on-farm processes, and result in safe and quality food and non-food agricultural products”.¹
- The term “GAP” is also increasingly and most commonly used to designate codes, standards and regulations that have been developed by the food industry, exporters, producers’ organizations, governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to guide agricultural production methods at the farm level. These GAP codes of practice usually focus on food safety and quality and define such factors as maximum residue limits of pesticides and product traceability.
- Brazil, Mexico, Malaysia and Thailand are among the countries that have already developed public national GAP standards. National GAP in Chile and Kenya, on the other hand, are private and have been developed by exporters’ associations. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) launched ASEANGAP in 2006 to harmonize GAP standards throughout its ten member countries.
- Experiences in Malaysia, Viet Nam, Thailand², Argentina, Costa Rica, Brazil, Ghana and Kenya indicate that GAP codes of practice can help improve enterprise management practices, increase productivity and cost savings, and improve the efficiency or reduce the use of pesticides and fertilizers.
- There are more than 400 private sector standard schemes³ worldwide, making the lack of harmonization between private and public standards a key issue.

Why is action needed?

- In the development of agricultural codes of practice, governments have the greatest role to play in public national GAP. Nevertheless, private GAP, such as GLOBALGAP, together with other standards such as BRC and ISO are also important for the food industry.
- Many producers continue to engage in agricultural practices that are environmentally, socially and economically unsustainable, causing serious damage to the environment, workers and themselves.
- Although agricultural producers recognize that food safety and quality standards are key to maintaining and improving market reputation and guarding against legal liability,⁴ they often subordinate environmental, social and labour standards, such as occupational safety and health (OS&H), to food safety and quality specifications. Pesticide standards, for example, emphasize trace residues in food products rather than the risks to

workers’ health from pesticide use.

- By adopting national and public GAP, producers help improve the safety and quality of food and other agricultural products, enforce standards consistent with national legislation, and reduce the risk of violation of national and international norms governing the use of pesticides, maximum levels of chemical residues and other contamination hazards.
- Greater consumer awareness and demand for high-quality goods produced in a socially responsible fashion have led retailers and the food industry to request producers to comply with ever-higher standards, thereby substantially increasing producers’ investments, costs and need for updated knowledge.

What are the policy goals?

- Enable governments, producers, the food industry and workers to meet national and international food safety and quality regulations.

Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD)

Agriculture and rural development are sustainable when they are ecologically sound, economically viable, socially just, culturally appropriate, humane and based on a scientific approach.

Rural development policy must aim to meet the nutritional and other human needs of present and future generations; and maintain, and where possible, enhance the productive and regenerative capacity of the natural resource base. It must also provide for the durable employment of those generations, reduce their vulnerability and strengthen their self-reliance.

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- Help producers, workers and their organizations to engage in appropriate and viable agricultural practices that reduce environmental impacts by using inputs and resources more efficiently.
- Enhance social welfare, including of the poorest groups, by improving OS&H in agricultural production and respecting core labour standards.
- Increase national revenues from agricultural exports by harmonizing national codes of practice with international export regulations.
- Enhance information on GAP benefits, challenges and costs.

The policy issues

Over the last decade, growing concerns about food quality and safety in value chains have led to the proliferation of both public and private GAP codes of practice worldwide. Trade and government regulatory requirements related to agriculture are defined by public international standard-setting bodies and conventions such as Codex Alimentarius, the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE). National GAP in developing countries have often evolved from private

GAP requirements in key export markets, through the agency of stakeholders in the food industry.

For small and large producers to adopt and implement national GAP, the following national capacities and environmental and social concerns in agricultural production need to be addressed.

Prevailing focus on exports and food safety rather than environmental and social concerns

In defining and implementing national GAP standards and principles, most governments, food industries, NGOs and producers' organizations focus on complying with the regulations of international trade and importing governments. Generally, GAP codes of practice do not integrally address, and sometimes conflict with, the needs of domestic and subsistence agriculture and other broader development objectives, such as environmental concerns, natural resource tenure and core labour standards, including the exclusion of child labour. Only when the safety and traceability of the final food product are an issue do most GAP deal with environmental or social welfare issues.

Challenges in addressing social and environmental issues in national GAPs

Although improving OS&H has been shown to increase agricultural production in both the short and long terms, such as through a decrease in lost workdays and productivity due to illness,⁵ the widespread belief that small farmers in developing countries are more concerned with obtaining food than improving OS&H has hindered advances in social welfare through GAPs. Furthermore, industry and governments alike tend to underestimate the long-term costs of occupational health hazards, while overestimating the costs of investing in OS&H. Inadequate awareness and training of small-scale farmers and waged agricultural workers increase the risks of exposure to hazards. On small-scale farms that are not GAP-certified, workers commonly spray pesticides without personal protective equipment (PPE), disregard re-entry periods after pesticide application and drink irrigation water.⁶

The diversity of agricultural systems and holding sizes, and the lack of awareness and enforcement of existing labour regulations, which are themselves often outdated or inapplicable to agriculture, also make OS&H difficult to define through GAP. While many developing countries governments consider low labour costs to be a main comparative advantage, and stricter standards to be barriers to export markets, the acceptance of lower labour standards has profound human rights implications.

Challenges in implementing and monitoring compliance to social and environmental standards, especially for small producers

Governments, producers' associations, workers' unions and other stakeholders in the food industry rarely have the necessary capacity to assess opportunities, costs and strategies for implementing the environmental and social dimensions in national GAP in ways that are locally appropriate and economically viable. Workers' unions, cooperatives and consumers' associations need stronger bargaining power to exert pressure on governments and the food industry to adopt codes of practice for



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socially responsible production. Costly and complex certification systems and insufficiently developed indicators hinder monitoring of compliance with GAP and reduce the returns to agricultural producers and exporters. Compliance with social and environmental GAP requirements is a particular challenge for small-scale farmers, for whom investments in costly chemical stores, latrines and other infrastructure and documentation systems are disproportionate to the number of employees and the scale of farm operations and revenues.⁷ Even certified small-scale outgrowers find it difficult to train workers in OS&H, ensure correct use of PPE and provide first aid kits and other basic health services.⁶

Lack of market incentives

Developing country producers have relatively few market incentives to adopt higher social and environmental GAP requirements. Niche and specialty markets in developing countries are limited because consumers are either uninformed or unable to pay a premium for responsibly produced food.

Agricultural price volatility, small profit margins, short duration of first-mover advantages, and uncertainty of export markets can discourage producers from investing in social and environmental improvements. Furthermore, the stringency of buyers who are seeking GAP-certified produce varies depending on the overall availability of certified produce; volume, the reliability of business operators, macroeconomic stability. Therefore, meeting higher social and environmental GAP requirements does not always guarantee better market opportunities and price premiums for producers, even though it may sometimes give access to more remunerative domestic and export markets.

What are the policy options?

Environmentally, locally appropriate GAP codes of practice can help improve soil fertility, increase the efficiency of water use and pesticide management, and conserve biodiversity. Socially, GAP can help to expand workers' and farmers' skills and bargaining power, strengthen



workers' unions, and ensure better OS&H. To realize in full the potential benefits in the development and adoption of national GAP, governments should carry out the following.

Design national GAP programmes based on broader stakeholder consultation

- Engage government, the food industry, producers' associations and workers' unions in the development and adoption of national GAP programmes, as is already occurring in several countries.
- Develop a minimum set of non-prescriptive voluntary principles for national GAP, and encourage producers and workers to meet GAP principles through solutions that are appropriate for local economic, environmental and social conditions. Promote implementation of and adherence to GAP principles, in both export and domestic-oriented agriculture.
- Carefully consider the harmonization of national GAP with prevailing private standards, which may induce costly mandatory regulatory systems and represent non-tariff barriers to trade.⁸
- Consider expanding national GAP to address lawful access to the natural resources used in agricultural production, respect for community rights and claims over resources, and

long-term impacts on the soil and other resources used.

- Consider the development of a multi-tiered or modular approach to national GAP that allows different actors to progress at appropriate paces, gradually developing their capacity to meet more sophisticated GAP schemes, which may be harmonized with or equivalent to GAP standards in international markets.

Reinforce social welfare in national GAPs

- Ensure that GAP adoption strengthens the enforcement of existing national and international regulations, including ILO core labour standards on freedom of association, the right to organize, collective bargaining, forced labour, discrimination, equal remuneration for work of equal value, equality of treatment and opportunities, and child labour.
- Ratify and implement ILO Convention No. 184 on Safety and Health in Agriculture, and update national legislation and national GAP accordingly.
- Identify realistic and appropriate OS&H practices that are accessible to the majority of smallholders, subsistence farmers and micro-enterprises.
- Provide incentives and training and promote awareness to develop and use safer agricultural technologies and,

when hazards cannot be removed, ensure adequate utilization of protective equipment.

Enhance capacities

- Build farmers' and workers' awareness of the importance of OS&H, and reinforce their capacities to participate in standard setting, policy-making and social dialogue.
- Reinforce producers' and workers' capacities through group formation and the inclusion of social and environmental good practices in agriculture schools, extension and other training.
- Raise the awareness of businesses, consumers and citizens about win-win practices that lead to economic efficiencies and environmental and OS&H benefits, such as integrated production and pest management (IPPM).

Target small producers

- Identify and scale up good practices that provide locally appropriate solutions to GAP principles, in both subsistence and high-value agriculture.
- To overcome specific constraints encountered by smallholders, disseminate low-cost technologies, provide targeted training, and introduce social welfare measures appropriate to the scale of the farms.
- Increase support for smallholder compliance to national GAP standards by introducing incentives,⁸ support services and specific certification schemes, such as group certification for smallholders and other cost-saving mechanisms.

Encourage the food industry to adopt GAP standards that improve environmental and social responsibility

- Use GAP to minimize the environmental hazards associated with specific agricultural technologies, such as pesticide use in intensive agriculture, and link these to constructive environmental alternatives that also promote social welfare, such as organic agriculture.
- Extract lessons from the development of private supermarket standards in

domestic markets. In Malaysia and Thailand this has led to synchronization between GAP requirements in national and export markets.

Contacts

Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO)

Eve Crowley

eve.crowley@fao.org

For queries about GAP, contact the "Knowledge Forum" facility
<http://www.fao.org/KnowledgeForum>

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)

Ulrich Hoffmann

ulrich.hoffmann@unctad.org

International Labour Organization (ILO)

Ann Herbert

herbert@ilo.org

International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Association (IUF)

Sue Longley

sue.longley@iuf.org

References

This brief was prepared by Paola Termine, in collaboration with S. Casey, A. Poisot, A. Basilico, P. Liu, L. Pascal, P. Santacoloma (FAO) and others (see Contacts).

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³ **WTO**. 2007. *Private standards and the SPS agreement*. G/SPS/GEN/746. Geneva

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⁶ **Opondo, M. and Termine, P.** n.d. *Bridging the Gap: SARD Good Practices in the Horticulture and Livestock Sectors in Kenya*. FAO. Rome

⁷ **PIP Magazine**. 2007. No. 12, Nov. 2007. Available at: www.coleacp.org/pip.

⁸ **FAO**. 2005. *Committee on Agriculture, Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD) and Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs)*, 19th Session. Rome.

Tools and resources

Global commitments

Codex Alimentarius:
<http://codexalimentarius.net>

International Plant Protection: Convention
<https://www.ippc.int/IPP/En/default.jsp>

World Organisation for Animal Health:
<http://www.oie.int>

International Labour Standards:
<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/norm/>

ILO Convention N. 184 on Safety and Health in Agriculture:

<http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/cgi-lex/convde.pl?C184>

Private voluntary standards

GLOBALGAP (formerly called EUREPGAP):
<http://globalgap.org>

International Organization for Standardization:
<http://www.iso.org>

British Retail Consortium (BRC):
<http://www.brc.org.uk>

Other resources

FAO GAP:
<http://www.fao.org/prods/GAP>

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) - Trade and Sustainable Development:
http://www.unctad.org/trade_env

The "SARD and..." Policy Briefs are designed to encourage and assist governments in developing and implementing policies to achieve sustainable agriculture and rural development.

This series is produced by the SARD Initiative, a multi-stakeholder framework established to support the transition to people-centred sustainable agriculture and rural development. It is led by civil society, supported by governments and inter-governmental agencies and facilitated by FAO.
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