

# Participatory Guarantee Systems for Organic Agriculture

Case studies in Central and West Africa:

Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ghana, Mali, São Tomé and Príncipe



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## Glossary

- AMAP - Benin:** Association pour le Maintien de l'Agriculture Paysanne au Bénin
- AMSD:** Malian Association for Solidarity and Development
- ARAA:** Regional Agency for Agriculture and Food
- BMZ:** German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development
- CCC:** Central Certification Committee
- CG:** Control Group
- CNABio:** Conseil National pour l'Agriculture Biologique
- COBIOME:** Coopérative des Opérateurs Biologiques de la Menoua
- COROS:** Common Objectives and Requirements of Organic Standards
- COLOC:** Local Committee of Certification
- CREDD:** Cadre Stratégique pour la Relance Économique et le Développement Durable
- FUPRO:** Fédération des Unions de Producteurs du Bénin
- GADD:** Groupement d'appui pour le développement durable
- EAOPS:** East African Organic Products Standards
- ECOWAS:** Economic Community of West African States
- EOAPG:** Ecological Organic Agriculture Platform of Ghana
- EU:** European Union
- FAO:** Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
- FASA:** Faculty of Agronomy and Agricultural Sciences
- GIZ:** German Agency for International Cooperation
- INRAB:** National Institute for Agricultural Research of Benin
- IPR:** Institut Polytechnique Rural
- LCCO:** Local Coordination and Certification Office
- LCG:** Local Control Group
- OAPI:** African Intellectual Property Organisation
- OM4D:** Organic Markets for Development
- PGS:** Participatory Guarantee Systems
- REC:** Regulation and Evaluation Committee
- SDGs:** Sustainable Development Goals
- SPG-STP:** Sistema Participativo de Garantia de São Tomé e Príncipe
- WG:** Working Group

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## Executive Summary

This publication presents six case studies of PGS initiatives for organic agriculture that are operational in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ghana, Mali and São Tomé and Príncipe. The studies were prepared between 2020 and 2022, as part of our efforts to monitor and document the development of PGS initiatives in Central and West Africa. This was done in order to build a detailed picture and present the current status of the implementation approaches adopted in different countries.

Until relatively recently, the concept of PGS was not widely spread in these regions, and most initiatives only started to emerge after 2015, triggered especially by international development cooperation aid. In fact, PGS implementation and development in the African continent is often not only supported but also initiated through internationally funded projects and interventions, in coordination with local stakeholders (in particular non-profit and non-governmental organisations) promoting sustainable approaches to agricultural practices, food and nutrition security.

This is true also for the PGS case studies presented here: all have benefitted from significant support from international donor agencies, particularly at the initial stages of development. Some of these interventions were country-specific, for instance, in the cases of Benin, Cameroon and Mali, while others were part of a regional project framework, such as the **Organic Markets for Development (OM4D)** project. The latter was implemented by IFOAM – Organics International, together with the support of its partner organisation Agro Eco – Louis Bolk Institute and numerous local partners in four countries: Ghana, Burkina Faso, Togo, and São Tomé and Príncipe. Specifically, OM4D promoted, between 2017 and 2022, the strengthening and further development of PGS in Burkina Faso, and the implementation of the first PGS initiatives in Ghana, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Togo.

This publication is a valuable addition to the set of tools developed by IFOAM – Organics International to support and promote PGS as credible, relevant and cost-effective mechanisms through which producers can guarantee that their products have been produced according to the **four principles of organic agriculture**. Information was gathered partly during the implementation of the OM4D project and also collected through a specifically designed questionnaire, answered by PGS practitioners and stakeholders who have or had an essential role in the development and implementation of the initiatives presented, and are therefore co-authors of their respective case study. All figures were collected until January 2022, except for the PGS initiatives in Benin, Cameroon, and Mali, which provided figures up until end of 2022. We encourage any interested person to contact the single PGS initiatives for further details and to follow up on their progress.

## Foreword

According to the definition adopted by IFOAM – Organics International in 2008,

**"Participatory Guarantee Systems (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."**

PGS have gained recognition in the organic sector and the agroecology movement as locally based organic guarantee systems, where stakeholder participation at all stages of implementation is essential. Compared to third-party certification, the advantage of PGS is that participation leads to potentially lower costs and a more inclusive approach to verifying conformity with organic standards and ensuring the organic quality of products. In addition, PGS promote trust between producers and consumers through regular and, as much as possible, direct relationships, bringing social benefits to entire communities.

IFOAM – Organics International recognises the full diversity of organic agriculture, including different approaches to conformity verification and guarantee systems. This is why we support PGS as an alternative and complementary tool to third-party certification, especially appropriate to smallholders, family farmers and local sustainable food systems. We are the only organisation collecting, compiling and publishing global data on PGS, through various channels such as the annual publication [The World of Organic Agriculture](#), the [Global Map of PGS initiatives](#) and our [PGS Toolkit](#), all freely available online.

This set of PGS case studies brings additional experiences to our [PGS Toolkit](#), with six cases from Central and West Africa. The publication offers insights into the reasons that led to the development of PGS initiatives in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ghana, Mali, and São Tomé and Príncipe, describing how these PGS initiatives operate and address compliance; how governance is implemented; what the main marketing channels and strategies used are; and what challenges lay ahead. Based on their experience and lessons learned, each chapter also provides recommendations for the future and on developing PGS initiatives, thus contributing to the learning process that is one of the key elements of this approach.

Despite the fact that they are based in different countries, there are various similarities among the case studies, which could be resulting from similar geographical or cultural contexts, but which are also directly linked to the specific stage of development for organic markets in their countries. Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ghana, Mali, and São Tomé and Príncipe are all countries with an emerging organic sector, in which some certified organic produce is exported (e.g., organic cotton from Benin, organic cocoa from São Tomé and Príncipe or organic shea butter from Burkina Faso). At the same time, the domestic organic market is still marginal, with no or few organic outlets and few producers making organic claims for locally traded products. There are no fully implemented organic regulations in any of the countries considered, although some discussion is taking place on national standards and legal frameworks to regulate the sector.

Of course, there are also clear differences, such as years of experience in PGS implementation, the scale of operations and numbers of producers involved in the initiatives, especially the ratio of those that are currently certified. Differences are further seen in terms of the extent to which producers and consumers actively participate in the certification process and their governance structures. A significant difference refers to how these PGS initiatives approach the issue of financial sustainability. Although this represents a challenge to all,

few have prioritised and implemented strategies (i.e. collecting membership or certification fees from producer members) to cover operational costs without depending on external funding, such as project and development cooperation aid donor resources, which remain an important or even the only source for PGS initiatives in this region.

Food security and health have emerged from these case studies as the main drivers for PGS implementation in Central and West Africa. This is clear from the titles chosen by the co-authors for their chapters, which emphasise the concern shared by all PGS initiatives featured here of making healthy, organic certified food easily available for all at the local market. Studies indicate that participation in PGS can empower producers by basing their activities on long-lasting social processes and connections to their communities<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, PGS have the potential to significantly contribute to reducing food insecurity and improving food sovereignty and nutrition, especially among farmers and consumers in rural areas<sup>2</sup>. Thus, PGS initiatives for organic agriculture, with their diverse set-up and specific adaptation to the contexts where they operate, have a relevant role to play as part of a broad and inclusive strategy for achieving multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

### Summary: key information on case studies presented in the publication

PGS Initiative	Organisation	Country	Year of Creation	Producers involved (2022)	Producers certified (2022)
SPG-Benin	Fédération des Unions de Producteurs du Bénin (FUPRO)	Benin	2012	700	450
CNABio PGS	Conseil National pour l'Agriculture Biologique (CNABio)	Burkina Faso	2015	1098	781
SPG Etso Mbong	Groupement d'appui pour le développement durable (GADD)	Cameroon	2016	160	40
PGS Ghana	PGS Ghana	Ghana	2018	480	36
Bio Local SPG	Malian Association for Solidarity and Development (AMSD)	Mali	2016	300	252
SPG STP	Movimento Bio STP	São Tomé and Príncipe	2018	40	12

<sup>1</sup> Home, Robert, et al. "Participatory guarantee systems: Organic certification to empower farmers and strengthen communities." *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems* 41.5 (2017): 526-545.

<sup>2</sup> Bouagnimbeck, H. "Global Comparative Study on Interactions Between Social Processes and Participatory Guarantee Systems: A Best Practice Study for Learning and Development with Case Studies from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America." *AGROECO. IFOAM Organics International* (2014). Online: <https://www.ifoam.bio/global-comparative-pgs-study>

## Explanatory note on concepts adopted in this publication:

### **PGS initiative:**

Entity or organisation (with or without a formal, legal status) that has adopted a common set of standards for organic agriculture as well as a common set of procedures, and that has a coordination body (i.e., secretary, association) responsible for keeping an overview of the data coming from the regional/subgroups, local groups or the individual farmers directly. A PGS initiative will also typically adopt one common label and/or a logo to identify the products of their farmers as organic, often in addition to a logo that is used by other PGS initiatives or organic operators, such as a national/regional organic logo.

A PGS initiative can be composed of one single local group, especially at the initial stage of development. Even though it is common for PGS initiatives to be composed of various local groups, it is also possible that the PGS producers in a PGS initiative work together simply based on geographic proximity or technical expertise, without actually forming a local group. Producers may therefore join a PGS initiative as members of a local group or as individuals.

### **PGS status:**

Setting up a PGS is a long process and requires two or more years before the producers involved can be fully certified. In our data collection, we distinguish between two situations:

- (a) **Operational PGS:** a PGS initiative that is implementing a functional certification system to certify their producers and has emitted at least one certificate to one farmer. All PGS initiatives presented in this publication are operational.
- (b) **PGS under development:** a PGS initiative that is in the process of developing a functional certification system and has not yet emitted any certificates.

### **The number of producers within a PGS:**

There are two categories of producers considered for a PGS initiative:

- (a) **Producers involved:** Farmers and processors that are involved in a PGS either as certified or as not having yet received certification, including those that are in the process of conversion and that are expecting to get a PGS certificate in the near future.
- (b) **Producers certified:** Farmers and processors that have been verified through a PGS and have received a PGS certificate or a proof of certification, as well as if they are approved as part of a group within a PGS initiative.





# PGS in Benin

Organic Food Produced and Consumed  
Right Here, Where We Live!



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## 1. History and general presentation

The SPG-Benin initiative was developed in 2012 as part of the activities of the “**Association pour le Maintien de l’Agriculture Paysanne au Bénin**” (AMAP - Benin), a cooperative of organic producers. Founded in 2008, members of this cooperative had been offering weekly baskets of organic fruits and vegetables to over 300 consumers in Cotonou and the surrounding areas. Their organic claims were not backed up by a documented guarantee system, but from the outset, consumers were invited to visit the areas managed by the organic farmers and could participate in farm activities twice a year.

As some of the buyers and consumers began to ask for proof that the fruits and vegetables were indeed produced according to organic standards, the demand for an organic guarantee began to emerge. Processors of vegetable and soy products also required proof of certification, to assure their customers of the quality of the products they were marketing. To meet this demand, we decided to explore the development of a **Participatory Guarantee Systems** (PGS) initiative and the implementation of PGS certification, which seemed to be the best option to offer a documented organic guarantee to all consumers, especially those who could not participate in visits to our organic farms.

However, we also had an important motivation for adopting certification: improving market access. The main driver of our PGS initiative became the opportunity to develop better markets for the cooperative members through an organic guarantee, with the potential to increase the market share of their organic agricultural products and their income while

providing healthy food to our population. The vision of SPG-Benin, "To produce and consume organic, where we live," was thus developed from this drive.

Technical and financial support was essential from the beginning and throughout the development of SPG-Benin. Since 2012, Helvetas Inter-Swiss Cooperation and Helvetas Benin have provided resources for stakeholder engagement, standards and certification tools development. Various other local and international organisations promoting sustainable agricultural practices, rural development and food and nutrition security in Benin have also supported, or are supporting the implementation of PGS through different projects: the French Committee for International Solidarity (CFSI) and the Fondation de France (FdF), GIZ, the European Commission, Acting for Life, Servair Group, HORTITECHS DEVELOPMENT, Agriculteurs Français et Développement International (AFDI) and Plateforme Agriculture Ecologique et Biologique du Bénin (PABE).

In 2014, our PGS initiative became fully operational, and a ceremony was held, in the presence of Benin's Minister of Agriculture and Livestock, to grant AMAP – Benin the use of the newly created "SPG-Benin" brand and to award organic certificates to 27 members of this cooperative. These were the first farmers in Benin to receive organic certification through PGS. In 2016, the Federation of Producers' Unions of Benin (Fédération des Unions de Producteurs du Bénin - FUPRO) became the host of our PGS initiative. FUPRO's main objective is to influence national policies and programmes to achieve better development conditions for Beninese family farmers, and our PGS provides a good framework to achieve this goal.

There is currently a great demand among producers for support to obtain PGS certification. However, SPG-Benin faces many challenges, in particular:

- Lack of personnel to accompany stakeholders (farmers, consumers and others) during the certification process and the farm visits;
- Low availability of organic agricultural inputs requested by producers to fully convert to organic agriculture;
- Lack of transportation services to travel and support farmers and consumers involved in PGS;
- Lack of resources to communicate and increase the visibility of the SPG-Benin.

## 2. Standards and compliance

**The standard for organic agriculture** used by our PGS initiative is called "NABE-BE 01-08:2012" and it was developed for our specific context based on the **principles of organic agriculture** as adopted by **IFOAM – Organics International**. Helvetas Benin supported the work of an organic agriculture expert who provided technical assistance through several workshops, group work, and training sessions. This was an essential step in developing our PGS initiative, as the financial and technical support made it possible to train and involve producers, consumers and other stakeholders from the initial design and drafting of our certification tools all through to the issuing of the first certificates two years later.

Our standards and tools are regularly revised to adapt to new situations and requirements, as needed. Revision often goes through two stages: first, an expert or a group of resource

persons works on the drafting of new proposals or amendments; then, representatives of all stakeholders participate in a workshop (or series of workshops) to validate new proposals or documents. We have also developed a Certification Guide that describes and defines the procedures for certification and the requirements for the use of our PGS logo. These guidelines include information on how new producers can join the PGS initiative, how farm visits are conducted, what the general structure is and who is involved in the decision-making process.

For example, the certification guide states that there are four types of audits or farm reviews, each with a different purpose:

1. quality assurance (the first farm review for each producer, which measures the level of compliance with standards),
2. verification (this is done after the quality assurance visit, in case deviations were found in the first farm review),
3. monitoring (for already fully certified producers, to check that compliance is being maintained)
4. and follow-up visits.

The first three are regular farm reviews, which are always mandatory and are normally announced and scheduled. Follow-up visits are non-regular audits, carried out only on a case-by-case basis, as they are intended to investigate complaints or possible fraud issues reported by consumers. These may be unannounced.



All the producers who apply for certification receive training on the content of our organic standards, how to collect data using the specific forms, and the operation and structure of the PGS initiative. The producer engagement process starts with a commitment form that we call the "Individual Declaration Form": all farmers applying for PGS certification must fill out, sign and submit this with their application. Their commitments are made public at a meeting of the oversight body of our PGS initiative: the Regulation and Evaluation Committee (REC). The farmer's participation in the PGS initiative is then formally recognised.

Farm visits are then organised, and information is collected from all producers working together as members of a local Control Group (CG), and from the organisations supporting the group: these will be responsible for the Local Coordination and Certification Office (LCCO). This is done using documents such as the "Individual Declaration Form" (for each producer), the "Organisation's Declaration" and "Membership Form" (for the LCCO), the "Crop Monitoring Form" (for each farm) and "Conformity Verification Visit Form" (used at each farm visit). All documents are kept by the LCCOs or by the PGS coordinator, except for the "Crop Monitoring Form" which is kept and used by the producers themselves. This document can be seen as a farm management tool and contains basic information about the producer, the areas managed (including the type of crops grown on each area farmed, their location and dimensions, the kind and origin of inputs used, and the dates of application), harvest and sales. At the moment, all the documents are in French, the official language of our country, but we are considering the possibility of translating the certification tools into Fon, Bariba, Dendi and Yoruba, which have the status of national languages of Benin.

As indicated, compliance with the standard is essentially verified through peer reviews for quality assurance, carried out by the local CG; and regular visits for verification and monitoring, carried out by the producers themselves, with consumers and other stakeholders (including members of the LCCO). When a new group of producers joins our PGS initiative, it is necessary to constitute and train a CG (with farmers and consumers) and to establish and train a Local Coordination and Certification Office (LCCO). Only then can the farm reviews be scheduled. The frequency of these visits depends on several factors such as the sector or value chain targeted, the type of certification to be granted and the type of farm review being considered. Organic vegetable producers, selling directly at the markets are visited every six months. For rice producers, quality assurance visits are carried out annually. For companies processing organic products, these reviews will take place every two years.

The "Conformity Verification Visit Form" was designed to collect information at each farm review and includes a final session that summarises the findings and recommends a provisional decision on certification. This is agreed upon by the three people joining the farm review team, two farmers and one consumer. The farm review team, appointed by the members of the CG, sign the final report and submit it to the LCCO, whose members then assess the information provided to take the final decision on certification, endorsing the decision of the farm review members or requesting clarifications. The LCCO must then report this to the Regulation and Evaluation Committee, which, in case of approval, allows the LCCO to issue the certificate of use of the PGS Logo and the certificates to the approved farmers.

We have developed a table of non-conformities and corresponding sanctions so that, if a producer is found to be non-compliant with the standards, a previously defined, corresponding sanction must be applied. This document indicates the possible non-compliances based on the different sections of our organic standards, such as product contamination; conservation of soil and water; soil fertility management and soil preparation techniques; harvesting; use of inputs and pest control; handling, storage and processing of organic

food and bee products; labelling, packaging and transporting. However, the main issue we encounter during farm reviews refers to record keeping: many producers are illiterate and do not fill out the "Crop Monitoring Form" correctly and regularly.

The table of sanctions also refers to requirements included in the Certification Guide, addressing the structure and implementation of the certification system itself in areas such as documentation and governance, marketing and communication. Hence, it is not only the producers who are verified: the local Control Groups (CGs) and the Local Coordination and Control Offices (LCCOs) must also be able to meet the requirements such as having the necessary resources to coordinate the certification activities and ensuring that all stakeholders involved have the necessary skills to implement and document controls. Sanctions are gradually applied, depending on the specific non-conformity identified and on whether it is the first, second or third time the same issue has been verified. Producers are then requested to fully comply by a given date, well aware of running the risk of not being certified or even being excluded from the PGS initiative if they fail to do so.

The effective implementation of the provisions of the Certification Guide and compliance with the organic standards are necessary for the use of the label to be granted to an entity (company, producer association, cooperative, etc.), which in turn issues the certificates and provides access to the PGS logo to its verified and approved members. Technical support for the interpretation of standards and use of approved inputs is normally provided by the Quality Department of FUPRO BENIN and by HORTITECHS DEVELOPMENT.

### 3. Structure and management

The structure of our PGS initiative was established after the standards and the certification tools were already in place. The form adopted is that of an association, structured in three levels, namely:

- the Control Groups (CGs), composed of farmers at the base;
- the Local Coordination and Certification Offices (LCCOs), made up of representatives of the CGs and voluntary consumers, in the middle, corresponding to the organisations that join the PGS initiative as paying members and that are responsible for helping the producers organise the CGs;
- and the Regulation and Evaluation Committee (REC), which brings together representatives of the LCCOs and other resource persons, and provides oversight for the entire guarantee system.

Each CG is composed of three to ten producers, located as close together as possible to each other, to facilitate regular monitoring and control among local group members. SPG-Benin operates in 32 out of 77 communes of Benin<sup>1</sup> with more than 700 farmers involved, and the average distance between the areas these farmers manage largely varies from one commune to another. The size of the area managed by each producer also varies, between 500 m<sup>2</sup> to 1 ha, making all producers smallholders. To be eligible to join SPG-Benin, a farmer must be a member of an officially registered cooperative or association, which will then join

<sup>1</sup>Benin is divided into 12 departments (French: départements) which are subdivided into 77 communes.

the PGS initiative as an LCCO and support the producers to establish the CGs. Producers should also be familiar with organic practices in the specific value chain selected: capacity and competence in organic agriculture should already be in place before they become engaged in the PGS initiative.

Each LCCO is composed of a representative of the supported CGs, plus a representative of the supporting entities and consumer representatives. For the time being, only the LCCOs pay a membership fee, of 50,000 FCFA, to join SPG-Benin. Producers do not have to pay to join, but they must commit individually, through a formal, signed pledge. This pledge will require them to comply with the requirements specified in the standards, to respect the procedures and requirements of certification defined in the certification guide and to participate in decision-making meetings and training sessions on organic agriculture.

There are various kinds of organisations that are members and responsible for LCCOs: cooperatives of organic producers (AMAP BENIN, MINADEGO, HOUENOUMAFE, ACFA, UPC Bio, CPS, etc.), young producers' organisations (AJAM) and departmental unions of producers (UDMARs). It is important to note that there are several situations in which only a part of the producers joining these organisations actually engage in the PGS, while many continue to cultivate with chemical inputs. In any case, only those producers who have committed individually will be eligible for organic certification and entitled to use the SPG-Benin logo.

The administration and general management of the PGS initiative is shared between two organisations: FUPRO BENIN and HORTITECHS DEVELOPMENT. FUPRO BENIN has a technical team trained in PGS certification and undertakes various activities to support further development and scaling of our PGS initiative, such as revisions and adjustments



of our organic standards, research and communication. HORTITECHS DEVELOPMENT has appointed a staff member to perform as the main PGS coordinator and is also working on the dissemination of PGS through training sessions for stakeholders and the involvement of students from high schools and agricultural training centres.

Financial sustainability is not ensured through the collection of membership fees from LCCOs. As a result, SPG-BENIN is not able to directly employ paid staff members for administration and management work. These activities are mainly financed by externally funded projects, only for a limited period of time. A great deal of voluntary work is still necessary to maintain the initiative operational. Overall, the calculation of the cost of certification per producer should take into account all expenses incurred in the operations, but these can vary widely from one region to another, according to the change of parameters and factors specific to the intervention zones. Such a detailed calculation is not yet available, but we would like to have it in the near future.

The number of certified producers has steadily increased from the first 27 farmers in 2014, to over 200 farmers in 2019 and reaching more than 450 certified farmers in 2022. Producers receive individual certificates once they are approved, but these certificates are granted as group certification, within their CG. This means that the certificate is only valid if all the members of the group are able to comply with the standards and are found to do so after all visits are carried out. In case non-compliances are found for one producer, the corresponding sanction will most likely have an impact, for example, the loss of certification for the whole group.



Consumers have an important role to play in our PGS initiative: they are the eyes of all those who purchase our organic, PGS-certified products. Their presence at the farm reviews and their participation in the certification process ensures a more holistic control of the production, better traceability and credibility of operations. Some member organisations such as AMAP-Benin periodically organise visits to organic farms for the benefit of the consumer families. Restaurant owners, retailers and processors are also invited to join the farm visits. Visits for the general public are not yet organised on a systematic basis but are being considered, as this is something we would like to do as part of our dissemination activities.

In addition to producers and consumers, the initiative also relies on the support and voluntary engagement of various stakeholders such as technicians from research institutions and representatives of NGOs supporting organic or sustainable agriculture in the country (e.g., OBEPAB, CRASTEDA, CECAGRID). Technical support is normally provided to the local groups directly by their supporting organisations, such as AMAP-Benin. This association purchases and distributes to all its producer-members the organic inputs that are necessary for production (compost, poultry droppings, neem oil, neem cake, etc.). This facilitates traceability and ensures that everyone uses the same inputs, reducing issues with standard interpretation and cases of non-compliance related to the use of non-authorised inputs. Three Beninese companies are currently supplying organic inputs to AMAP-Benin (Hortisem Benin, Biophyto, Agropromo), while local seeds are provided by the National Institute for Agricultural Research of Benin (INRAB).

Resource persons from several public institutions, including supervisors from the Territorial Agricultural Development Agencies (ATDA), are involved in the implementation of our PGS, particularly at the level of our Regulatory and Evaluation Committee (REC). This is the main kind of governmental support available. Representatives of INRAB, the Soil and Water Sciences Laboratory and the National Agency for Standardisation, Metrology and Quality Control (ANM) also make important contributions through their voluntary involvement.

## 4. Marketing

SPG-Benin developed a national logo which is protected by the African Intellectual Property Organisation (Organisation Africaine de la Propriété Intellectuelle – OAPI). This logo can be placed on the labels of produce from approved producers and processors, together with their own logo and that of the entity supporting their local CG. PGS-certified products are sold mainly through local, direct marketing channels, such as weekly pick-up or home deliveries of organic baskets with fresh fruits and vegetables; sales to restaurants and retail stores specialising in organic products. Some speciality stores and retailers reserve specific shelves for our organic, PGS-certified products. We have also facilitated the negotiation of contracts so that our producers can supply to conventional partner stores and large companies, such as Servair Benin (Cotonou Catering), or so that organic soybean producers can connect with small and medium enterprises that process their goods into organic products requested by consumers on the market.

Most of the organisations involved in our PGS initiative use the support to set up collective marketing channels for their certified products. This kind of support is necessary to communicate more efficiently with buyers and consumers, for example, through social media, so that producers can focus on production and quality assurance. Hence, although approved producers are free to sell their products as they choose, most prefer to use collective marketing channels. For instance, a company ordering and purchasing in bulk from a group of

certified producers, is the most common approach used for sales.

The organic sector in Benin is still emerging. Locally produced, third-party certified organic products are not sold domestically, as they are geared towards export. Our PGS-certified organic products are therefore the main option for consumers looking for alternatives to conventional food production. In general, prices of PGS-certified organic produce are 4% to 9% higher than that of conventional products.

Consumers recognise the SPG-Benin logo in the market, but it is important to raise awareness and communicate better about organic and our initiative. This could lead to an increase in demand and encourage more conversions to organic practices and continuous production of a wide range of organic goods. Organic consumers have been involved from the beginning in the entire process of developing the documents and implementing the PGS, which we consider one of the main strengths of our initiative. Further involvement is still possible, and it has the potential to support our efforts to build better marketing channels for smallholders and family farmers. Current strategies to promote our PGS initiative include training and public awareness-raising activities for both farmers and consumers. We do this by using social networks and participating in radio and TV programs conducted in local languages, especially those focusing on rural and agricultural issues. Producers are also encouraged to use visual indicators such as placards and signs to show that their area is under organic management, making it easier for anyone in that commune to see and participate in the social control.

## 5. Lessons learned

PGS certification provides a locally appropriate approach to organic certification of agricultural products and allows organic demand to be matched with supply to develop local organic markets. When we launched our PGS initiative, the main challenge was to sell organic products better: this was met to a good extent, as there is a growing demand for organic farm products in Benin. The main challenge now lies in mobilising partners to fund a vast project of dissemination and support, so that more producers can benefit from the PGS approach, convert to organic practices and sell their certified products throughout the country.

For other initiatives interested in PGS, we recommend ensuring that the farmers interested in participating in this guarantee system become familiar with organic practices, and ideally with the specific scopes or value chains in which they want to operate, long before they apply. Organisations supporting farmers should train them in organic agriculture and processing before starting with the certification process. They have to also make sure their knowledge remains relevant and available, for example, by offering further capacity-building activities once the certification process is underway. Also, it is useful to build demonstration plots, so that producers have good practical examples of how organic practices are implemented.

Our experience indicates that the implementation of collective marketing strategies should be supported as much as possible. Supporting the establishment of a collective supply system of organic inputs (organic fertilisers and organic pesticides) is also highly recommended. In any case, it is essential to look for markets for organic products even before starting production. Consumer awareness campaigns should be planned and regularly conducted, as good communication can encourage the demand and consumption of organic, specifically PGS-certified products. The increased demand will eventually encourage more producers to convert and join PGS, creating a virtuous cycle. Working towards institutional endorsement of the PGS initiative, perhaps through public procurement of the

certified products, can also further encourage farmers to convert and remain committed to organic practices.

SPG-Benin can be considered as the first initiative of its kind in West Africa, as development started in 2012. The actors of SPG-Benin are highly mobilised and there is a strong demand and political will. Nevertheless, our PGS lacks the human, material and financial resources to scale up, as farmers' demand for capacity building and certification support is constantly increasing. We recognise the need to create conditions for the financial sustainability of our certification operations, for example through contributions from the PGS stakeholders. We believe that there is potential for SPG-Benin to act as an umbrella organisation for the organic movement in the country, bringing together those who produce, process and market truly organic agricultural products.





# BioSPG

Advancing Healthy Food, Biodiversity and Well-being for All in Burkina Faso



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## 1. History and general presentation

BioSPG is the national PGS initiative in Burkina Faso and it is implemented by the **Conseil National de l'Agriculture Biologique** (CNABio). It is a non-profit association under Burkinabe law that serves as the umbrella organisation for agro and organic agriculture stakeholders in the country. Before this PGS initiative became operational in 2016, organic agriculture was mainly being practiced in Burkina Faso for export. CNABio saw this gap and decided to specifically work on the development of local organic standards and of an appropriate verification system, so as to address the national market and build consumer trust in locally produced organic food.

The first step in this direction was to develop national organic standards, through a participatory process, which was finalised in 2013. This process included workshops with stakeholders on the introduction of the PGS concept in the country. These workshops were carried out with support from IFOAM – Organics International. A pilot phase for the operationalisation of our PGS initiative took place between 2015 and 2016, with support from the organisation ASTM. For this first pilot phase, as well as for the second phase which took place between 2016 and 2017, we actively sought out producers, mainly within our membership, to join the certification process. At the same time, we also carried out awareness and communication campaigns in various media to increase the visibility of the label BioSPG. Since 2018 it is word of mouth, mainly through PGS-certified operators, that leads other producers to join our system.

The shared vision of BioSPG stakeholders was defined during a workshop organised in 2018: *BioSPG is the credible and accessible Burkinabe label, adopted by consumers and producers of healthy food, contributing to the preservation of biodiversity and improving the well-being of all stakeholders.* The main objective is to contribute to the preservation of the environment while offering healthy and quality food to consumers.

Before PGS was introduced, some producers had already been working together, for example, through cooperatives, accompanied by NGOs or other organisations. They had already benefited from the capacity building sessions, exchanges and collaboration. Others only started to cooperate with their peers after joining the initiative. One of the particularities of this PGS is the heterogeneity of the certified operators, who can be:

- Producer groups or associations: up to 50 people/ha, in rural and urban areas on common land (Producers often cultivate a few plots individually);
- Associative farms that are managed as a single farm: operated by farm workers and employees;
- Demonstration and training farms owned by a local or international NGO;
- Individual farms (family farms);
- Commercial farms (private farms owned by an individual who employs farm workers);
- Processing and marketing structures.

BioSPG became fully operational in 2016 when we certified the first 87 producers who were managing a total area of 12.7 ha. These figures have changed throughout the years<sup>1</sup>; increasing as new producers joined every year, or reducing in some years when several producers had their certification suspended or withdrawn due to non-conformities found. As of January 2022, a total of 977 producers were registered as members, and 781 of them were already certified.

The distance between producers and the areas they manage varies a lot because our members are spread across the country. The size of the areas managed also varies a lot. In some groups, a producer may manage a few plots of 100 to 400 m<sup>2</sup>, while commercial or associative farms may cover several hectares.

Consumers can be involved in the certification process in different ways;

- by joining unannounced farm visits,
- lobbying activities,
- planning meetings with producers,
- and awareness raising campaigns.

Only a minority of these consumers are also members of CNABio and most consumers are not formally involved in the activities, although we strive to keep them informed and engaged via social media groups.

Members of CNABio are also involved in PGS activities and provide support for technical advice and training of producers. The government and local authorities recognise this PGS initiative but unfortunately, they do not offer technical or financial support. Regular communication with government representatives is done by presenting the results of the certification and also by involving them in PGS meetings at the national level.

The initiative has benefited from financial and technical support from various international donors, such as the Fondation de France/CFSI, Action Solidarité Tiers Monde, the Regional Agency for Agriculture and Food (ARAA) of ECOWAS, FAO, EU, Helvetas, Nitidae and CIRAD. Between 2018 and 2022, the OM4D project contributed a lot to the development of our PGS by providing additional funding and human resources. By 2022, the last year of OM4D project implementation, the number of certified producers had doubled compared to the first year. There were also increased opportunities for exchanges and capacity building, for instance, CNABio organised the 6th West African Organic Conference in November 2021, with several presentations and discussions on PGS. This project also supported a study visit and excursion by PGS practitioners from Togo who were also involved in OM4D. They came to Burkina Faso to learn and exchange on different approaches to PGS and organic agriculture, as well as build regional knowledge networks.

## 2. Standards and compliance

CNABio is the bearer of the BioSPG initiative. The organisation was created in 2011 with the objective of contributing to the creation of a regulatory and legislative framework favourable to the development of organic agriculture in Burkina Faso, in particular, to create a national market for organic products. Discussions on a Burkinabe standard for organic farming resulted from the observation that the emerging organic sector was fo-



ocusing on export, while at the national level there were no references for organic practices and certification. This was so, even though the offer of, as well as the demand for organic produce, were in place, locally. With support from IFOAM – Organics International, in 2012, the elected representatives and members of CNABio gained a better understanding of the organic sector, agricultural practices, standards and guarantee systems, and became familiar with the concept of PGS.

A committee of national experts was set up to accompany a consultant selected to develop national standards for organic agriculture that would be used with PGS for conformity verification. Funding for this was available through CNABio's membership fees together with donations and support from various international donors. Several fieldwork and drafting tasks were carried out in a participatory manner, until the validation of the standards and the certification guide were achieved in 2013. The NAB-BF 01- 10: 2013 Burkinabe Standard for Organic Agriculture (Standard for the Production of Agricultural Products) was developed using various international normative references, which included the IFOAM Basic Standard, the EU regulation, the East African Organic Products Standards (EAOPS) and the Codex Alimentarius.

In order to make sure that producers understand what they are committing to, we developed the "Guide to certification of agricultural products under the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS)". To do so, we used international references such as the PGS Guidelines developed by IFOAM – Organics International (2008) and carried out capacity building sessions. The PGS coordinators play a major role here. Each operator, be it a farm or a producer group, must appoint a coordinator, who is trained by CNABio for this purpose. CNABio technicians are also regularly in the field with the operators to provide technical support.

Producers who want to join the PGS initiative must first register and become members of CNABio. Then they must submit the operator commitment form that contains all the essential information related to the farming area and to compliance with the standards. Farmers pledge their commitment to comply with the Burkinabe organic standards by completing and signing this form, which also states their commitment to take part in: the PGS initiative, receiving the farm visits, contributing fees, accepting sanctions in case of non-conformities identified and requests for improvement.

For new producers, a conversion period of two years is foreseen in case of annual crops, and of three years in case of perennial crops. If plots have been treated with organochlorine pesticides (e.g., endosulfan), the conversion period is 10 years from the last treatment date. No conversion period is necessary if the history of the plot is known and the farmers have already complied with the standards (i.e.: fallow land, adopted agroecological approaches, etc.).

There are three levels of control.

The first happens through the Local Control Group (LCG), made up of producers at the local level, who are responsible for checking the farms on a regular basis and recording their findings. This regular, often daily control, is very effective which could possibly be due to the proximity of farms.

Then there is a second level of control, which is carried out by the PGS coordinator, who is also responsible for ensuring that the documentation of each operator is in place, and provides monitoring and advisory support.

Finally, a third level of control is carried out by the Central Certification Committee (CCC), which makes the final decision on certification and grants. It issues the certificate to the producers that are fully compliant with the organic standards.

Gradual levels of sanctions apply in cases of non-compliance. This depends on the non-compliance found or how serious it is, and if it is the first time or a recurring non-compliance. These are described in the PGS certification guide and Risk Analysis form. The sanctions range from a warning, the downgrading of products affected, to suspension of the operator until correction is made or until the exclusion of the producer. The main non-conformities cases are also clearly indicated in the guide, and they refer to:

- the use of non-allowed inputs (chemical fertilisers/pesticides, dirty water, GMO seeds),
- the history of the plot, risks of contamination from neighbouring conventional areas and governance issues that might impact the verification of compliance.

Non-conformities are normally identified during peer reviews and farm visits by the CCC, or with the LCG and producers. The consequences of the non-conformity are defined in advance on the "Risk Analysis" form, which is filled in and submitted by each new producer together with all the documents for the application. This indicates which sanction is applicable depending on risks verified, so that producers are already aware of the possible sanctions from when they apply.

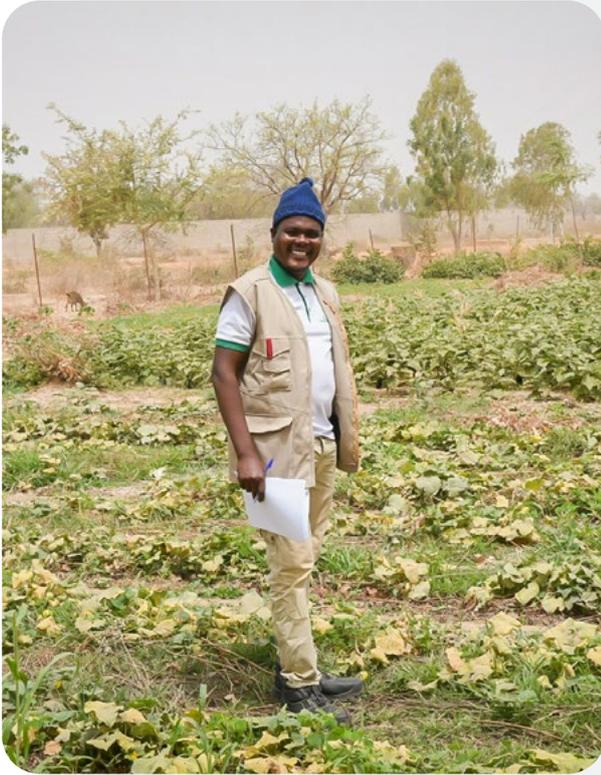
The annual farm reviews are organised in a participatory way with the CCC, the GLC, the producers, the PGS coordinators, staff from CNABio, the consumers and other technicians working in the area. Information is collected on paper and digitally. The main difficulties refer to the availability of all the producers during the visits to verify conformity and the availability of all the tools and information provided by the operators.

A first technical support visit is carried out by the PGS Coordinator and CNABio technicians and a preliminary report is drawn up with recommendations for improvement, to be taken into account during the visit to verify conformity or farm review. Each farm review is scheduled after the technical support visit. At the end of the farm review, the decision on certification is discussed. This decision on certification is then validated by the CCC, as the final step in the certification process, and transmitted to the operator.

The CCC also prepares recommendations for each operator, which must be addressed in a development plan to be put together by the operator. To check the implementation of this development plan, another on-site visit by the CCC also takes place. This is carried out on a regular basis, ideally annually.

Producers that are approved receive a certificate which is used by all members in the case of cooperatives or groups of producers. The choice of which marketing channels to use depends on their own internal organisation, but essentially producers can autonomously decide how to sell their certified products.

The main documents that have been developed and are used for PGS implementation are: the standard, the PGS certification guide and the BioSPG label; all of which belong to CNABio. The BioSPG label has been protected by the African Intellectual Property Organisation (OAPI) since 2015. Other documents are: the monitoring and control tools, such as the registration form, the operator commitment form, the database, and the risk



analyses. As technical documents, they are regularly revised and adapted to needs. In addition to these, all producers keep the following documents or copies of them: farm/site plan, rotation plan, production monitoring booklet, book of inputs used, outputs book, and complaint registers.

The information collected for each farm is stored digitally. Documents are in French, and the PGS coordinators are responsible for translating them into local languages and explaining them to the producers, whenever necessary. All the information and other tools of the BioSPG are published via the communication and information channels of CNABio. Newsletters are produced quarterly and include reports on the figures of certified operators. The general public can consult this information at any time by contacting CNABio or the operator directly, for example, for farm visits.

### 3. Structure and management

Producers are largely organised in groups and they are the basis of our system. They make up four bodies that each have different roles:

- The Local Control Groups (LCGs): responsible for organising producers and for regular, close control of the farming areas. These are set up by the producers (as a group or farm) and they function autonomously.
- PGS coordinators (or PGS coordination offices): appointed by the producers among the members of the LCGs, they are responsible for; organising and implementing the local control system; collecting information and carrying out a risk analysis with

the producers; filling in the database and related documents; informing and training stakeholders; preparing the individual registration forms; implementing the second level of control, and developing an improvement plan that takes into account the recommendations of the CCC.

- The Central Certification Committee (CCC): set up by CNABio, this body is autonomous in its decision making. The CCC is responsible for; checking the documentation of new operators applying; carrying out interviews with the different stakeholders in a participatory way; deciding on the certification and grading the certificate; as well as elaborating reports, audit and recommendations for the improvement plan which are transferred to the verified operators. The CCC is also in charge of managing the BioSPG logo.
- The CNABio technical team, in collaboration with the LCG and PGS coordinators, is responsible for general management and administrative work, provides interpretation of standards, and offers support on clarifying the use of inputs (what is allowed or not allowed), together with the PGS coordinators.

Every operator must designate a PGS Coordinator who mainly works on a voluntary basis. However, some local Associations, NGOs and farmers involved, may assign the role of PGS Coordinator or corresponding tasks to one of their paid staff members. All members of the CCC work on a voluntary basis. On the other hand, members of the CNABio technical team are paid staff members that have PGS activities as part of their tasks, such as monitoring and ensuring the functioning of the permanent secretariat of the CCC. Fees are charged to the different PGS members, according to their status, as presented in the table below.

Category	File fees	Activities to be certified				Non-CNABio member supplement
		Production	Apiculture	Transformation	Distribution, (1) commercialisation	
Individual producer	20'000	15'000	15'000	15'000	15'000	25'000
Community-based organisation	20'000	15'000	15'000	15'000	15'000	25'000
Farmers' cooperative and MSE	30'000	15'000	15'000	15'000	15'000	25'000
Enterprises (SARL, SA, etc.)	30'000	25'000	25'000	25'000	25'000	75'000
National Association	30'000	20'000	20'000	20'000	20'000	75'000

*Fees are indicated in West African CFA francs (F.CFA)*

## 4. Marketing

Several producers or producer groups that are now certified have started to develop short channels for the sales of their products. In general, operators are individually responsible for marketing. The main channels they use are direct farm-gate sales, weekly eco-bio markets, eco-bio shops, E-market, and home (box) delivery. Some operators work together to organise farmers' markets, some shops rely on several producers for supplies and sometimes an operator buys from other PGS-certified producers to meet demand from their customers. This goes to show that there are different marketing strategies in place although they are not driven directly by the PGS initiative.

In the beginning, the majority of consumers were expatriates who were already familiar with the concept of organic certification. Following scandals of misuse of synthetic chemicals and bad agricultural practices, especially in vegetable production in urban and peri-urban areas, the population has generally become increasingly aware of and interested in health, food and nutrition security issues, so the demand for organic products has increased in the past years. Members of our PGS initiative say that consumers at the point of sale, ask fewer questions about the origin of the products when they see their organic certificate or product label with the BioSPG logo.

We adopt various visibility strategies, including participation in fairs, door-to-door awareness-raising activities, consultation frameworks, visibility actions through the media (including social media) and the design of visibility tools such as brochures. Some of these activities are organised by CNABio but others are directly organised by the producers involved in the PGS initiative themselves. A strong role in promotion is played by consumers, who encourage their friends and family to buy from organic producers they already know.

Our BioSPG logo is protected at the OAPI and there is a growing awareness among consumers, as they become more familiar with our logo and the quality of our organic products. The main benefit of consuming organic that our consumers normally emphasise is the health benefits that organic farming offers to all and to the environment. We regularly conduct consumer consultations, via the CNABio website, as well as via training and visits to the CNABio office. On the market, our PGS presence is increasingly visible. Because of its requirements, its rigour, the participatory aspect and the cost of its certification, our PGS initiative is increasingly known by stakeholders in the organic sector and we are witnessing a strong demand at all levels, from producers and consumers.

## 5. Challenges and lessons learned

There are various challenges that we have to face to implement this PGS initiative, starting with a lack of financial support from policymakers, which makes it difficult to upscale to other regions of Burkina Faso. A general obstacle to the development of the organic sector in our country is the low availability of organic inputs (bio-pesticides, bio-fertilisers and seeds). As a result, the availability of organic products is also limited and demand is currently higher than supply. Maintaining good data on volumes of BioSPG-certified products is also still a challenge.

When we launched this PGS initiative, we faced many challenges that we managed to overcome, for example, the lack of recognition of our BioSPG label, which was addressed through communication activities and OAPI validation since 2015. We started with a small

number of certified operators but managed to gradually increase this number by shifting from a “push” strategy to a “pull” strategy. An important turning point came in 2018 when we decided to no longer call on operators (push strategy), after our second pilot phase. We instead chose to open the system to any operator seeking certification (pull strategy). As a result, in 2018, only two operators were certified (compared to 16 in 2017), although we currently receive even more applications for certification than we can handle. The advantage of the pull strategy is that operators seeking certification are highly motivated and often quite autonomous.

On the other hand, we were lucky to count on various partnerships and this had an impact on our financial stability. As the number of institutions supporting our PGS increased, we were able to double the number of CNABio technicians in charge of the PGS initiative and extend the area of operation.

For anyone interested in developing a PGS initiative, we would recommend to:

- involve community leaders from the beginning, and to strengthen the capacities of operators regularly, both on ecological organic agriculture and PGS processes. It is important to ensure rigour in control activities, while really focusing on the participatory approach.
- Speak about our shared vision and values during workshops and other opportunities because it is important in order to foster ownership and involvement.
- Make sure to develop resource mobilisation strategies for the operation of the PGS by pooling efforts with stakeholders.
- Communicate about the initiative and its benefits in the media because it is essential. At any point of PGS implementation, it is really important to raise awareness of the benefits of organic agriculture and of PGS as a framework for stakeholder empowerment. Synergise capacity-building actions with other PGS initiatives in other countries, both for regional and global exchanges.



Producers will remain interested as long as they are able to obtain benefits by joining the PGS initiative. We believe that one important benefit to producers is the assurance of the quality of their products, which facilitates consumer acceptance and market access. But they also benefit from the trust gained in their own ability to better plan crops and market their organic products. Finally, improved collaboration between stakeholders such as exchanges, and information sharing, but also economic collaboration and potentially improved income due to increased consumer trust and increased demand are important benefits.

The strength of our PGS initiative lies in the existence of a locally designed organic standard and our PGS guide. However, the implementation of our guarantee system would not be possible without our committed and motivated PGS and LCG coordinators, the trained, committed and motivated technical team of CNABio and a strong demand from stakeholders for this PGS initiative. The fact that we can count on the willingness of some technical and financial partners to support our PGS initiative, and the involvement of all stakeholders in the certification process, contribute to a strong initiative. Furthermore, the cost of certification is currently affordable to the producers.

Some aspects that we still need to work on, refer to the currently low funding resources and low involvement and understanding of organic agriculture by public technical agents. To make PGS even more accessible and visible, we still need to translate all PGS tools into local languages and further develop awareness-raising strategies.

In the future, we would like to seek international recognition of BioSPG and of our standards. We have already applied to IFOAM – Organics International for a **Common Objectives and Requirements of Organic Standards** (COROS) assessment of our organic standards, so that they can be included in the IFOAM Family of Standards, and we also plan to apply for the Official PGS Recognition Program. We hope this will contribute to our efforts to get more public support, in particular for the development of organic inputs by public authorities. We also aim to include animal husbandry as one of the scopes covered by the Burkinabe organic production standard. Ultimately, we would like to increase the involvement of consumer organisations in our PGS initiative and, at a regional level, it would be good to seek harmonisation of PGS practices, while taking into account local specificities.



# PGS Etso Mbong

Making Agriculture More Profitable  
and Healthier in Cameroon



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## 1. History and general presentation

The PGS initiative Etso Mbong is implemented in the Menoua division of West Province, in Cameroon. This region is characterised by a strong and very rapid demographic growth and the population is mainly concentrated in the city of Dschang, the capital of this area. The city is also home to one of Cameroon's six state universities, the University of Dschang, that has an important Faculty of agronomy and agricultural sciences (FASA). There are more than 30,000 students at the University of Dschang, constituting an important consumer market for agricultural produce.

In Menoua, the agricultural sector is the main engine of growth and employs approximately 60% of the active population. The favourable agroecological conditions and the dynamism of producers, mainly women and young people, allow for a great diversity of production. Producers grow food and cash crops on small farms. The main crops are cocoa, plantain, taro/macabo, corn, peanuts, yams, potatoes, ginger and vegetable crops (e.g., onions, carrots, tomatoes, watermelons, cabbage, leeks, peppers, lettuce, among others). On the other hand, due to high population growth, the amount of arable land per capita is decreasing over the years and the pressure on the environment is increasing. Market gardening, for horticultural production, in particular, has been having a negative impact on the environment and producers' livelihoods, due to increased and uncontrolled use of expensive synthetic agrochemical inputs (mainly pesticides).

The ideation of the PGS actually begins when the NGO **Groupement d'appui pour le développement durable** (GADD), with the support of the German organisation "Bread for the World". GADD focused on sensitising farmers in Menoua to the limitations of conventional agriculture, and positioning organic agriculture as a mode of production adapted to current environmental, social and economic concerns. Implementation started in 2016, with an initiation phase that ran until 2018. GADD initiated in 2017 the "Project on promoting organic agriculture" (**PROBIO**), aimed at improving the living conditions of the people of Menoua through the adoption of organic farming practices and the development of organic markets. An important target of the project was to reduce the use of inorganic fertilisers and pesticides, especially in horticulture, due to the negative impact on the living conditions of farmers and the environment of production areas. A significant number of producers were introduced to organic farming practices through training (theoretical and practical) and monitoring, while regular farmers' markets started to be organised once a month in Dschang.

A market study was also conducted in the framework of the project, revealing that:

- some capacity on organic agriculture among producers was in place;
- these producers needed access to the market;
- consumers in the area demanded an organic guarantee;
- and there was a geographical proximity between producers and consumers.

These were all favorable conditions for the setting up of a PGS initiative for organic agriculture, focusing on the local market. Hence, by the end of the project in 2018, after recognising the multiple benefits and relevance of PGS for small-scale farmers, GADD decided to put in place a PGS initiative to serve farmers and local direct organic markets, which was named "Etso Mbong", meaning "healthy food" in Yemba, the local language.

An initial two-day PGS training was conducted in April 2018. Various local stakeholders were invited, including producers, GADD's staff, hotel and restaurant representatives as well as representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture in Cameroon. From May 2018, we proceeded with the development, testing and validation of basic documents and procedures, such as standards for organic agriculture, a database of producers, the PGS certification process, structure and functioning of the initiative, farmer's pledge, consequences in case non-compliances are identified, organic certificate and logo, to provide evidence of organic status. From early on in 2019, we organised a series of training as part of another project ((ProCVBIO), to build stakeholder capacity on PGS and organic agriculture. This enabled us to launch the peer reviews in April 2019 that consisted of visiting farms to verify compliance with the standards. Starting from July 2019, sales of organic products from producers with an Etso Mbong certificate started, in an organic shop opened for this purpose in the centre of Dschang.

Much as there were a few challenges during the development of this PGS initiative, some still remain relevant for implementation until now, such as:

- low regular consumer involvement in PGS management;
- poor record keeping by the farmers involved;

- general low understanding of organic agriculture and the PGS concept by both producers and consumers, despite the training;
- limited appropriation of the PGS documents and procedures by the different stakeholders involved;
- irregularity or discontinuation of market supply of organic products, despite high demand;
- and some difficulties to organise individual farmers into groups of producers.

We did and still do our best to tackle these challenges, especially through awareness raising and education on the multiple benefits of organic agriculture. We also conduct targeted training on organic practices and PGS; offer support to production through the provision of inputs and small equipment and support the development of business models, including initiation to contract farming; and through the regular monitoring of producers by facilitators. An important component of the assistance provided refers to the technical itineraries for the production of specific crops and tools to improve record keeping.

Finally, sharing best practices through exchange visits and sharing results of the experimental field maintained by GADD, as well as the activities carried out through farmer field schools, create further opportunities for capacity building and for reducing the knowledge gaps.

This PGS was demand driven since it responded both to the needs of consumers looking for safe, healthy food, and to the needs of producers who wanted increased income and improved livelihoods through sustainable farming practices. Setting up a PGS also helped to address the issue of organic claims that were not verifiable, building consumer trust and improving market access to committed farmers. The shared vision of stakeholders in our PGS is to make agriculture more profitable and healthier in the Menoua department, which can be summarised in the slogan we adopted: “Mangeons bio, vivons longtemps”.



The stakeholders learned about how to set up a PGS through awareness-raising and training activities conducted by the technical adviser on organic agriculture at GADD. Technical and financial support for PGS development was provided by Bread for the World, through GADD's projects that focused on organic agriculture. Technical support was also provided by IFOAM - Organics International, as the PGS concept was implemented in our context following IFOAM PGS guidelines and based on exchanges with other selected existing PGS initiatives in Africa.

Currently, 40 small-scale farmers, the main beneficiaries of Etso Mbong, have received their PGS certification. These producers are organised into 11 local groups, corresponding to the villages where they are based. In addition, 10 processors and one reseller are involved in the certification process and have also received certification. Before starting to develop this PGS, some of the producers worked together as members of a producers' association, while others were individual producers. The number of producers involved has been gradually increasing: from 82 in 2018, to 160 producers as of 2022. Producers in the same village or local group are geographically close, and the average distance between the areas managed by producers in different villages is 30 km. The average size of the area managed by each producer is about 2300 m<sup>2</sup>.

Consumers have an important role to play, as they drive the demand by buying our organic products and getting involved in the design and functioning of the PGS. Local authorities also support our PGS and the intervention in the communities by taking part in specific activities such as trade fairs and sensitisation meetings and regularly buying organic products. We communicate with them through demand-driven meetings, farmers' markets, and the organic shop. Moreover, they provide the PGS with logistical means to facilitate the implementation of specific activities, for example, through the provision of space for the organic farmers' market by the Dschang Council.

## 2. Standard and compliance

When the moment came to decide and select which standards for organic agriculture to adopt, the stakeholders initially agreed, through a participatory process, that it would be appropriate to adapt an existing standard from another African country (e.g., Benin) or the regional East African Organic Products Standard (EAOPS), as the climatic and socio-economic situation in these parts of the continent are quite similar to those in Cameroon. However, given that: (i) the EAOPS were developed through an intensive and inclusive consultation process with national and international experts, including IFOAM - Organics International, and (ii) that PGS is quite well developed in East Africa, the actors felt that it might be better to use the EAOPS as a point of departure and reference, adapting it to the conditions Menoua. As a result, a new organic standard was developed specifically for PGS Etso Mbong.

In order to make sure the producers understand the standard and what is expected from them, a summary of the standard was developed and made available to all, particularly through training about the principles of Organic Agriculture and the specific requirements (e.g., information on inputs that are allowed and those that are not). Training courses also cover topics such as how our PGS works, its governance and what the roles and responsibilities of the Local Group and the Regional Council are. One copy of the complete version of the standard is made available to each Local Group and a pledge is signed by each farmer-member of the PGS, stating their individual and collective commitment to the standards.

Compliance to the standard is verified through six major steps, starting from the moment a new farmer joins the initiative. These steps are:

1. When a producer wishes to get the organic certificate and use the logo, she/ he joins a Local Group, fills out a questionnaire on past and current production practices, signs a pledge and addresses a demand to the Regional Council via the Local Group, which is formed by farmers of the same village.
2. The regional council reviews the files and instructs the Local Group to organise a visit to the area managed by the applicant farmer.
3. The farm reviews or inspections are organised by the Regional Council in close collaboration with the Local Groups. They are conducted once per cropping season for each producer, by a team of at least three persons: an appointed producer, a consumer available during the proposed period and a representative of GADD. The inspection team fills out a formular, collecting data about farm operation as well as basic control points, such as; source of seeds, soil fertility, pest and diseases management practices, waste management, and measures to ensure that organic soil and organic products are protected from contamination. The information is collected with a farm visit formular (paper) while the size of the area is measured with a GPS.
4. The visit team sends its inspection report to the Local Group. The report includes a preliminary decision about the certification of the visited producer. The case is then discussed in a meeting with the entire group, including the producer inspected, in order to decide on a recommendation, which could be: to certify unconditionally, to certify with conditions, or to deny certification.
5. The Local Group delivers its decision to the Regional Council.
6. The Regional Council decides on the organic status of farmers based on the recommendation of the Local Group, and the decision is then communicated to the farmers. Approved farmers will be provided with a certificate and the PGS Etso Mbong logo. With these, they can sell their products in the organic shop, the farmers' market and through their own marketing channels.

If certification is denied, the farmer can make an appeal to the Regional Council. If deemed relevant; a new inspection visit will be organised, with a different team. If the non-compliances are confirmed, assistance will be offered to help the producer address and correct them. Consequences for non-compliance are defined in advance, and they include minor and serious non-compliances, which can be discovered during the farm visit or through social control within the Local Group. The main non-compliances identified include poor record keeping by producers and failure to comply with requirements related to the buffer zones, which are necessary to avoid potential contamination and limit contaminants in organic products.

Technical support, such as for the interpretation of the standards or to answer questions about allowed inputs, is provided by the NGO "Bread for the World", through the technical adviser, field facilitators of GADD and through collaboration with strategic partners in and outside the country.

### 3. Structure and management

As of April 2022, the legal status of our PGS initiative is that of a cooperative: the “Coopérative des Opérateurs Biologiques de la Menoua (COBIOME COOP CA)”. The structure of PGS Etso Mbong is composed of 3 key groups.

**Operators:** these are the producers, who join a local group in their village after initial training in organic agriculture. As part of their commitment, they agree to share knowledge and experiences with other members of the Local Group, to attend meetings of the Local Group and to participate in visits/inspections of other production areas, when appointed by the Regional Council

**Local Groups:** composed of operators from the same village, who come together to form a group under the initiation of GADD. Each Local Group has a coordinator (elected by the group members) and ideally consists of at least five members. The main responsibilities of a Local Group are to validate membership applications by new producers, collate information on all members, exercise continuous informal social control and conduct the scheduled visits/inspections to members' production areas, in collaboration with the Regional Council.

The Local Group also issues an opinion on who will be certified and sends it as a recommendation to the Regional Council, proposing improvements or corrections to support the overall conversion of each operator. The Local Group can also suggest the exclusion of indelicate members from the Regional Council.

**The Regional Council:** this is the principal body of the PGS Etso Mbong. It is composed of one representative for each of the local groups, two representatives of GADD and one consumer representative. Even though participation is voluntary, the members can benefit from certain advantages related to their functions. The Regional Council meets at least once a quarter, and the main responsibilities are: to register each of the Local Groups and ensure coordination between them, verify and centralise information on producers involved; develop and revise the tools and procedures of the PGS; commission inspections of the production units; review the summary of inspection reports submitted by the Local Groups; follow up on issues of non-compliance and to issue organic certificates. The Regional Council also organises internal decision-making meetings, validates or invalidates the exclusion of indelicate operators, works to strengthen the technical capacities of PGS members and performs as the appeal body, in case the Local Group decides not to give certification.

The administration work and general management of the PGS are carried out by GADD, in close collaboration with the Regional Council and the newly formed cooperative. GADD has benefitted from external funding for the set-up of the PGS, mainly to develop tools and procedures, organise workshops and capacity-building activities, as well as inspections of production areas and meetings of the Regional Council. GADD was also responsible for the development of the logo and is implementing marketing activities. GADD's staff is paid, and part of the external funds cover employees' salaries, while all the work done by the producers is based on voluntary contributions.

So far, our PGS initiative does not charge fees for the inspections and assessment of the farms nor for participation in the PGS. Discussions are currently underway on charging a membership fee and collecting a commission on the produce sold. We cannot estimate the costs of certification per producer at the moment, but we are currently collecting information in this regard.

## 4. Marketing

There are essentially four main marketing channels: an organic shop, which was set up specifically to sell the PGS certified products; an organic farmers' market; local and regional fairs; and the marketing channels that the producers manage autonomously. The organic shop and farmers' market are only for products certified by the PGS, while the local and regional fairs as well as the autonomous marketing channels used by the producers can include conventional products. As a general rule, producers may sell their produce as they prefer, collectively or individually.

In order to promote the system, we invest a lot in awareness raising and education on the multiple benefits of organic agriculture. Communication between stakeholders is facilitated via social media and messaging apps, as well as populating GADD's website with PGS-related information. We have developed our own logo since there is currently no national organic logo in Cameroon, and so an important aspect of our marketing approach is advertising the PGS Etso Mbong logo. The recognition of our logo is growing due to specific activities implemented, such as the promotion of the logo in targeted events, expansion of platforms that communicate about the logo and advertising it in the organic shop and farmers' market.

The price of PGS-certified products is the same compared to a few conventional products such as cocoyam and cassava. However, for most organic products, such as Irish potato, tomato, and red and white cabbage, the price can be 30% higher than the price of their conventional counterparts. Comparison with third-party certified organic products is not possible, since these are not available in the area where the PGS initiative operates.

Awareness of the importance of organic agriculture is generally low. Nevertheless, there is a growing educated middle-class group and people concerned with health issues who regularly prefer and ask for organic products. This is due to the health benefits of organic agriculture, as shown by a market study done before the start of the PGS initiative. Consumers have an important role to play so we have involved them in the design of the PGS initiative as one of the main actors. Consultations with them take place regularly.

## 5. Benefits and challenges

The biggest benefits of PGS for the producers are:

- the possibility to be organised and gather under the common goal of producing and selling organic products;
- the opportunities to share information, techniques, and use of traditional knowledge, for example, for seed management and conservation, and to join concerted efforts and collaboration;
- and the access to new, potentially more profitable markets.

For consumers, there are also benefits as they have increased access to certified organic products, a demand that was clearly identified in the market study. The fact that these products are guaranteed increases consumer confidence in purchasing organic products

and enables regular sales, with consumers also willing to pay higher prices for most organic products. This potentially results in increased income for producers.

For anyone interested in starting a PGS initiative, we recommend conducting a market study beforehand and working with groups of producers instead of individual producers from the beginning. Be aware that PGS is a long-lasting process, which requires a lot of resources, so it is important to plan ahead. It is vital to involve other stakeholders such as consumers and local administrative authorities, also from the initial stage, and make sure to enable market access for the organic products to maintain motivation and keep it high.

The strengths of our PGS initiative lie in the collective efforts (for capacity building in organic agriculture, marketing, PGS ownership and management) as well as the reinforced social bonds within local groups that lead to community development. Educating local consumers about the principles and benefits of organic agriculture has also been an important part of our activities, in association with the collective support offered to producers for local marketing and to help them seek solutions to their production problems.

But we must also mention some of the weaknesses, common among other PGS initiatives, such as the fact that it requires a high degree of dedication from producers. A long-term process is needed for the capacity building before the establishment of the entire PGS. This is a complex social organisation and we depend a lot on voluntary work. From the marketing perspective, the long distance between marketing channels and producers remains a problem.

With the newly formed cooperative, we expect that the system will properly develop in the future. The cooperative builds ownership for the sustainability of the PGS, helping to stimulate the commitment of the operators to get involved in the running of the PGS and to generate financial means to cover the resulting expenses.





# PGS Ghana

Organic Agriculture for Healthier  
Food Production



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## 1. History and general presentation:

**PGS Ghana** was launched in 2018, in the framework of the project OM4D implemented by IFOAM – Organics International and AgroEco, with support from local partners. A feasibility study carried out in 2017, showed that organic farmers in Ghana had successfully built some production capacity for export markets for many products, such as fresh and processed fruits, cocoa and palm oil. During this time, there were several private initiatives that started to promote organic products on the local market, for instance, box schemes, weekly farmer's markets and shops offering organic products. However, most of these initiatives were still very recent and had not yet established guarantee systems. The producers in the country were already making organic claims at the local markets without having a clear guarantee system in place. This was still at a low scale since there was not a strong demand for guaranteed organic produce from buyers or consumers.

As part of the implementation of the OM4D project, a PGS expert from IFOAM – Organics International visited Ghana between 9 and 17 June 2018 and carried out a three-day PGS training. This was the first opportunity for 27 participants to learn about PGS, reflect and discuss the feasibility and applicability of the concept in their own context. The participants were representatives of several national stakeholders, such as producers, NGOs, researchers and governmental agencies, including the Ecological organic agriculture platform of Ghana (EOAPG) which is the national umbrella organisation for organic agriculture in the country.

During the initial training, the stakeholders discussed the potential development of a

PGS initiative and agreed to the proposal of establishing PGS Ghana as a tool to expand and professionalise the local market for organic products, by creating a trustworthy and affordable guarantee system for the local market. The technical capacities as well as the motivation were partially available among stakeholders, while support from the OM4D project would offer additional technical and financial resources. The stakeholders also agreed that the PGS initiative should operate at the country level. One of the participants of the introductory training was selected and employed for a consultancy as a PGS Advisor, to coordinate the activities and develop PGS in Ghana with other stakeholders.

The entire set up and support, both technical and financial, happened in the framework of the OM4D project. The PGS initiative also received support through other projects such as AFC-MOAP, a project funded by GIZ, which ensured additional technical expertise for implementation and the development of essential documents.

In 2021, the PGS initiative was registered with the Registrar General Department in Ghana as a non-profit making organisation, duly incorporated under the Companies Code Act 179 of Ghana. PGS Ghana is a membership-based organisation, operating across the country, in different regions with different cultural backgrounds and languages. Members operate in their regions and cross-sell produce.

The main goal of PGS Ghana, as stated in the constitution approved by the members at the annual general meeting of 2022, is **“to create linkages to connect producers directly to local customers by setting up and promoting Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS), an affordable alternative to third-party certification for domestic markets.”** The constitution also lists various other objectives that build the shared vision of PGS Ghana, referring to generating awareness of the importance of organic agriculture for healthier food production, adding value to products and increasing the income of farmers and processors by offering opportunities to broadly market their products and services.

This initiative targets producers and processors, as individuals or groups. Any individual, organisation, association, network, or the company of good and ethical standing, in the organic sector, with operations in Ghana, is eligible to become a member of PGS Ghana. They can also acquire voting rights 12 months after joining the initiative, having paid their fees accordingly. Membership can take place as follows:

- Group of producers: For farmers working collectively on a piece of land or individual farmers managing their own on individual land but working with other farmers in a local group.
- Individual farmers: These are individual farmers who have organic enterprises and are not part of a local group.
- Processors: These can be individuals or groups for processors, producing any product to be certified as organic.

Every individual producer or processor must be a member of the corresponding regional group, while those who are part of a local group can elect one leader to join the regional group.

The areas managed by the farmers are relatively close to each other within each of the 10 geographical regions where the PGS initiative is operating, but the distance between

the regional groups is quite big. The average size of the areas managed by each producer is around 4,25 ha. The number of producers and processors involved in PGS Ghana has evolved gradually since the beginning of the initiative, increasing from less than 30 to more than 400 by the end of 2021, mostly based in Greater Accra and the Eastern Region. As of 2022, 36 certificates have been issued in total, to individual members and groups of producers.

Consumers are not yet directly involved in the PGS Ghana, but the possibility of joining as members is foreseen in the constitution. They have an important role to play in helping to motivate producers who claim they are producing organic to join the initiative, to be able to support their claims. Although local authorities like the Ministry of Agriculture, the Food and Drugs Authority and the EOAPG are not directly involved in the PGS initiative, regular dialogue with representatives of these agencies is considered essential and has been established. There is a need to work more closely with the local authorities for social and legal recognition. So far, the strategy has been to approach the relevant authorities starting with a visit to introduce PGS, followed by an invitation for further engagement.

## 2. Standard and compliance

The stakeholders initially adopted the East Africa Organic Produce Standard (EAOPS). This decision was based on the assumption that organic practices in East Africa are relevant to Ghana and that it would be easier to build on what had already been developed. A voluntary committee came together to work on a revision of the EAOPS in order to adapt parts of the standards to the local context. This is how we developed the Ecological Organic Standard of Ghana, with various scopes: crop production, animal production (including beekeeping), aquaculture, wild collection, processing and handling. Once these standards were finalised, they were submitted to IFOAM – Organics International for a COROS assessment. Once approval was received, they were then included in the IFOAM Family of Standards in 2021.

In order to make sure the producers understand the standards and what is expected from them, we developed a pictorial brochure, which is distributed during training and is also available on our website. We also carry out regular training, covering different parts of the standards and provide training to leaders from each region, who replicate such training in local languages and remain active as local focal points for the producers, supporting them with the documents and record keeping.

Producers must keep records of their entire process, on their own. We collect from each farm all the necessary information to monitor their organic status, such as acreage, crops grown and inputs used. But we also collect information related to challenges the producers face and their sustainability goals. This information is kept on a digital database, while hard copies are kept in the project office, managed by the organisation, AgroEco, in Accra. The documents are in English and not all producers can understand them, which is why training local leaders from each region is so important.

All producers take a pledge and sign a declaration stating their commitment to follow the **principles of organic agriculture** as defined by IFOAM – Organics International and to comply with the Ecological Organic Standard of Ghana. Producers take oral pledges at their regional or group meetings, after their registration as a new member. Compliance against the standard is verified through regular monitoring and annual conformity verifi-

cation visits. Each producer or processor is visited at least once every year and we carry out both announced and unannounced visits.

We have developed a checklist, which has been used during these annual visits and farm reviews, which refers to all the areas covered by the standards for organic production, including standard requirements, the compliance criteria and the classification for each point in terms of the possible non-compliances identified (minor or major). We have also developed a PGS manual, which further specifies possible cases of non-compliances and consequences currently foreseen. This is a living document that will be revised as necessary.

Usually, non-compliances are discovered during unannounced visits, also carried out every year by regional leaders and the PGS advisor. They are separated from the annual peer reviews. Depending on the kind of non-compliance identified, and how it affects the organic integrity of the product, it could result in the withdrawal of the certificate or in the decision not to issue a certificate at all. For minor issues, such as failure to keep proper records, farmers will receive a written warning. Minor violations of the standards will lead to fines. In cases of repeated minor violations, the consequence will be suspension of that producer, until corrective actions are implemented. For any clear violation of the standards, such as confirmed use of prohibited pesticides and synthetic fertilisers, the complete withdrawal of approval for that producer for a clearly specified period of time would be foreseen.

Annual farm reviews are organised by the regional certification committees, in coordination with the PGS Advisor, based on a notification requesting the farm review, that each applicant (individual or group) must submit. A team composed of at least three people, including members from the region and the regional leader, visit each producer or producing group, on the date that is agreed on by both parties. If the producer has not yet received any certification and this will be the first farm review, the date is proposed by the applicant producer or group. If the farm review is for a renewal of certification, then the visit should happen one month before the expiration of the certificate, on a day agreed with the producer.



For each farm review, one producer takes the role of the lead inspector, often together with the PGS Advisor or regional leader, explaining to the visited producer every step of the process, asking questions and collecting information, following the checklist. The lead inspector must be a producer member who has taken part in one of the peer review training that are organized by the regional groups. Farm reviews are in any case an opportunity for all participating members to learn how to conduct reviews. The findings are recorded and presented to the visited producer right at the end of the visit, so that any inconsistent, missing or incorrect information can be adjusted, added, or commented on. The lead inspector and the visited farmer will sign the final report, which includes a decision about the certification, as this decision is taken at the end of the visit by all who were present and took part.

The report is then submitted to the PGS Advisor, who is responsible for issuing the certificate. All certified producers get individual certificates once they are approved. Information collected during farm reviews is kept on paper. We have the plan to work with a digital collection tool in the future, as using paper is not very practical. But internet access is still an issue for many of our farmers.

Farmers usually find it difficult to keep records, which is something that clearly emerges from the farm reviews and poses challenges to this approach. Logistics also create challenges, in particular ensuring transportation and access to the farm areas, which makes it difficult to ensure regular or more frequent visits to the producers. Transportation is actually the biggest challenge for PGS-Ghana, as it limits our potential to reach out to producers in remote areas, and creates marketing obstacles. This is because it is difficult to ensure that products stay fresh after travelling long distances from the farms where they are produced, to the urban areas where they are sold.



### 3. Structure and management

Farmers are the basis of the system. Before this PGS initiative was set up, most of the producers and processors had not been working together with other peers. There was only one group of farmers that had been working together beforehand and had adopted organic practices as well as making organic claims, though they were not certified. The majority of our members have joined a local producer's group and each of these groups in one region elect a representative who joins the regional group on their behalf.

There is one national governance authority, the National Executive Committee, whose volunteering members, elected via the Annual General Meeting, must be active stakeholders, and at least 2/3 of them must be organic certified producers and processors. All members with voting rights can take part in the election for the National Executive Committee.

The Annual General Meeting is the major authority of this PGS. The first Annual General Meeting was held in 2019 and the first national committee was then elected. According to the constitution ratified in January 2022, elections should take place every 2 years, unless there are exceptions in place.

Up until January 2022, the PGS Advisor, employed by the OM4D project, was responsible for general management and coordination; and was also providing technical support for the interpretation of the standards, answering questions related to allowed inputs, etc. The salary of the PGS Advisor and some of the costs for PGS-related activities paid by committee members or regional leaders were also reimbursed and covered by the OM4D project. Moving forward, it is foreseen that an appointed management team, composed of remunerated staff members, will take over the overall coordination. But we expect that all other functions, carried out by regional leaders and members of the National Executive Committee, will remain not remunerated.

We are collecting fees from the producers and members, through the membership and certification fees. These are different depending on the category of producer, processor, or if it is another stakeholder. The fees were decided by the initial working committee, and considering that PGS is quite new in Ghana, most smallholder farmers will not pay more unless they experience market benefits. This was something that was manageable before since the OM4D project was there to support most of the financial activities. Membership fees and funds from international and national donors represent the sources of income needed to maintain the initiative operational.

Now, if a new producer wants to join the PGS, they will have to follow these steps:

- Notify the PGS Advisor that they want to be part of PGS –Ghana
- Fill in an application form online for membership and pay the membership fee
- Attend meetings of regional or producing groups in your region
- Join the WhatsApp group for their region
- Take the pledges at the regional group or producing group
- Agree on when the first farm review will take place

All producer and processor members must take part in meetings and training. The renewal of their certification will only take place based on the outcome of the annual peer review visits.

There is a conversion period for those who are transitioning to organic, depending on the scope of production: one year for vegetables, one and a half years for cereals, and two years for tree crops.

For animal husbandry, the period of conversion depends on the conditions, which are described on chapter 3.1.1 on Animal Husbandry of our standard and indicated below:

Type of Species	Period of conversion
Poultry	45 days
Rabbits	45 days
Sheep	3 months
Goats	3 months
Pigs	3 months
Meat production cows	12 months
Dairy production (all species)	3 months
Layer eggs	45 days

## 4. Marketing

A few marketing channels are currently available exclusively to our PGS-certified producers and processors, such as three regular farmer’s markets in Accra, Labone and Tema. It is possible for consumers to place online orders via social media and many of our producers offer home deliveries. Certified farmers also sell their produce in conventional markets.

We are carrying out many activities to promote PGS Ghana, for example, joining different farmer’s markets, fairs and congresses, developing communication materials and regularly posting information and updates on our social media channels. We have a website where producers can find out how to become a member and read about all the benefits of joining PGS Ghana. As part of our communication strategy, we have also developed a video with local chefs praising our local organic produce and explaining why they prefer products that are produced by PGS Ghana-certified farmers.

We developed our own logo which the producers can use to label their products together with unique identification codes. Consumers can use those codes to track each product up to the farm it comes from. All certified producers can purchase stickers with the PGS logo

and their PGS number on them, to label and market their products through their preferred marketing channels as organic. There is no restriction to where and how the certified and labelled produce can be sold: producers are free to join one of the markets created by PGS Ghana or to find their own buyers.

The logo is not yet very well recognised by consumers and we are trying to address that through communication activities. Our focus in these activities is on the potential positive impact of organic produce consumption, on health.

People from the general public who are not members of the PGS initiative can also access information on the benefits of organic, the organic standard we adopt and the certification process from our website and social media channels. Consumers are always welcome to visit the farms and normally this is arranged directly with the owner of the farm.

In general, PGS Ghana aims to improve communication between organic stakeholders in Ghana, West Africa, and the entire world, by; providing necessary information on the organic industry; holding meetings, seminars and workshops; and attending congresses or other relevant national and international forums.

## 5. Benefits and challenges

The biggest benefits of PGS for the producers are the opportunities for knowledge exchange and access to training, which really contributes to improved production practices. One important result of this capacity building is that our certified producers are better able to answer consumers' concerns in the market. This ensures that consumers get the assurance of truly organic products, which is important because there is a general sense that fraud is common in the market. With consumers' trust, producers often benefit from a premium price and preference for certified products. The different marketing channels we have created are very beneficial, as well. In fact, the main strength of PGS Ghana as a national initiative is that we have been investing in training sessions on organic farming and working in various regions.

There are of course many challenges, at different levels, both affecting take-up and operations. From the perspective of the producers, the main difficulty is a common lack of willingness to switch to organic practices by a lot of farmers, or a weak commitment to organic principles and low awareness of the benefits of organic agriculture. The latter is true both for producers and consumers. The support from the government is also missing and it could come as a recognition that this organic guarantee system is in place, endorsing the claims that our certified producers make, as well as the PGS logo. The way to tackle these challenges is basically through training and education, meetings, and holding spaces for discussions, in particular, to clarify the benefits of a PGS initiative in the set-up proposed.

Anyone interested in PGS or thinking about developing a PGS initiative should look for an agreement among all stakeholders on a common vision very early on. The choice of a pattern to design a PGS initiative should not be hurried, and probably it is better to start with a local group first, and then move to a national PGS initiative only at a later stage. This configuration, with one approach for the whole country, brings additional complexity that our current structure is struggling to manage and might need to be adjusted once the project phases out.

Understanding the demands that can be addressed by the PGS is also important and ideally, the initiative should be demand-driven, to ensure commitment from all stakeholders from the beginning. PGS Ghana was mainly a project-driven initiative: it did not emerge independently out of a need by the producers or consumers in Ghana, although we understood that it would be an interesting approach to try out after the concept was introduced. In fact, the process to get enough buy-in from potential members was not easy. Later on, with the proposal, new ideas emerged that many were not willing to accept. The expectations from project partners and donors were high especially considering the short timeframe of implementation: PGS processes need time to mature so that stakeholders can really understand and take up their roles.

Furthermore, at the time we started, there was no clear consumer demand for organic guarantee. After the COVID-19 pandemic, not only has the demand for organic produce in general increased, but we also started to see consumers being interested in production practices, asking questions about the guarantee of products labelled organic, especially local products. This is an opportunity for us to raise awareness and build trust in organic agriculture through PGS.

For the future, we plan to address the need to increase and disseminate marketing channels, as markets for organic produce in Ghana are mostly available in the cities, far from where many of the producers are based. Therefore, until we have a car to help pick up produce, it will be challenging to increase the number of producers involved in this initiative, particularly the producers working in groups, as they produce in volume and will require bulk sales. Therefore, we will continue to work hard to create more awareness about the benefits of organic agriculture and PGS, develop strategies to get more producers from the rural areas to join the initiative and solve logistic challenges, hence, opening more markets or linking with existing markets.







# BioLocal

Enabling Access to Healthy and Fair Food for All Through PGS Certification in Mali



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## 1. History and general presentation

Bio Local is a PGS initiative implemented in Mali since 2016 by the Malian Association for Solidarity and Development (AMSD). Organic and ecological agriculture is one of the pillars of AMSD, which campaigns for a green and ecological transition through the promotion of organic and ecological agriculture at a small, family-farming scale in Mali. The vision of AMSD is to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as to take into account the priorities of the Malian government, referring to the Framework for Economic Recovery and Sustainable Development (Cadre Stratégique pour la Relance Économique et le Développement Durable (CREDD)) 2019-2023, to address the complex development challenges facing Mali, which has made the fight against poverty and inequality its main concern.

In recent years, we have seen a strong demand for organic products by consumers in our country. Unfortunately, the few or poorly organised local organic producers are not able to meet this demand. Also, organic certification bodies or structures are not yet available in the country, so third-party certification remains difficult to access and potentially very expensive. PGS Bio Local emerged, therefore, in order to fill this gap, as one possible tool for organic certification that is efficient, flexible and transparent. The main motivation was the desire to contribute to the development of a sustainable agricultural sector and to guarantee healthy food to all for a fair price, via a label that could easily be recognised.

AMSD started offering training sessions in 2016 on organic agriculture and the risks of using chemical inputs, to over 800 producers. As local standards for organic agriculture were

not available, the NGO SwissContact International supported the development of the first drafts, funding the work carried out by an international consultant expert in certification. This marked the starting point for the development of our PGS initiative.

AMSD campaigns for an ecological and energetic transition: developing alternatives for ecological agriculture and food that respect nature, the preservation of biodiversity, the planet and people. We see the deployment of the PGS certification as a way to allow everyone to have access to healthy, fair food. Producing and eating locally and healthily is an absolute necessity to achieve the SDGs. At the basis of our activities and constituting the vision of the PGS initiative itself are the goals to promote the autonomy of small-scale, family farmers; the preservation of natural resources, biodiversity, nutritious local food systems, social cohesion and collective organisation; and to assert the rights as well as the improvement of the incomes of small-scale, family farmers.

As of 2022, PGS Bio Local counts 252 certified producers managing about 112 hectares, offering vegetables, cereals and wild-harvested products from several regions and villages. The initiative has been able to reach 2000 direct consumers and 100,000 people through extensive awareness-raising programs and communication campaigns. A program is currently being implemented in order to certify more than 1500 producers in five regions of Mali over five years, financed by the international NGO SOS FAIM.

The main beneficiaries of this PGS initiative are small-scale, low-income producers who have been farming mainly for subsistence and often have a track record of adopting traditional, sustainable agricultural practices. Various stakeholders are involved: farmers' cooperatives, consumers, consumers' associations and nature conservationists; processors, distributors and agroecological and organic agricultural experts; organic input and seed companies; research institutes and universities, agronomists and students; marketing companies; and the technical structures of the Ministry of Agriculture, Environment and Health. Various stakeholders from the organic sector in Mali collaborate as technical contributors, such as PGS-certified organic producers, members of the board of the NGO AMSD and the technical team as well. Institutional support has also been provided by local and international NGOs such as SOS FAIM, FENABE, NGO BACIR, UPSB, and IFOAM – Organics International.

The evolution of the number of producers certified by Bio Local has been gradual: we started with 50 producers in 2016 and now, in 2022, more than 550 producers are involved (including those that have received and those that are still waiting for certification). The decision to limit the total number of certified producers at the moment is related to the lack of funds needed to cover the corresponding increase in costs, with additional evaluations and administration of the program.

About 40% of our producers are based in Bamako and its surroundings. The distance between producers or between areas managed by producers is of 1 - 3 kms, and the average size of the area managed by each of them is 0,25 ha. Before we started implementing the PGS, producers were not yet working together. It was through the PGS initiative that social links were created between them and other stakeholders since PGS facilitates social cohesion and contributes to local development. The PGS Bio Local offers a framework for multi-actor exchanges, enabling cooperation among farmers and members of cooperatives, as well as between farmers and consumers who love organic products and are defenders of nature.

## 2. Standards and compliance

In 2016, we started the process to develop standards for organic agriculture, based on the **principles of organic agriculture** and the **IFOAM Norms**, as well as other organic standards from our region (Burkina Faso and Senegal), and from Europe (Nature et Progrés - France). We also used as references the Codex Alimentarius, our country's national priorities and the SDGs.

This first version of our standards was launched in November 2017. After a participatory consultation process, this was replaced by the second version (Version 2.0). While our standards are inspired by international norms for organic agriculture, they are the result of work carried out by a group of Malian actors, reflecting on our specificities. AMSD was supported by an international consultant to carry out an inclusive process that brought together agroecology and organic agriculture stakeholders which included: agricultural researchers, local communities, consumer organisations, processors and distributor organisations, farmers' organisations and international institutions active in Mali. The standards refer to plant production, animal production, fish farming, beekeeping, wild food collection, processing, conservation and labelling of products. Their purpose is to define the ideal conditions for farm production, storage units and distribution sites (marketing areas), including the stages of handling and transportation, in our country.

Our PGS initiative targets small-scale producers as well as producer support and training structures, taking into account the social, economic, cultural and ecological realities of our context. The Bio Local label offered by our PGS initiative is a tool for promoting organic agriculture in Mali, adapted to this context, based on the following pillars: crop protection, soil and consumer health, water management, protection of biodiversity, respect for the natural habitat, product quality and decent work.



The PGS certification is a part of a general conversion process, that starts with the conscience of each producer about their own approach to farming, and leads to the granting of the logo, which producers can place on their products to clearly communicate that they have complied with the requirements of the organic standards. Implementation is carried out with the contribution of trainee agronomists from the Institut Polytechnique Rural (IPR) in Katibougou. AMSD is building on technical and local knowledge to innovate and inspire this new certification model.

In order to ensure that producers understand the standards and what is expected of them, a series of training and communication sessions were organised, during which the general content and details of the requirements were explained. The producer engagement process actually starts with a written and public commitment to comply with these standards, made by each producer when they submit their first application for certification.

From each producer and the areas, they manage, we collect all relevant information such as the history of the practices (background), the producer's skills, type of culture, yield, production technique and their commitment to organic agriculture. All documents are in French but translated into local languages. Producers keep the following documents on their own: registration form, plot management and evaluation reports. The farmer's pledge or written commitment, signed and dated, stating their adhesion to the organic local certification, is a prerequisite to adhere to PGS Bio Local and therefore, is collected and stored centrally.

We consider that the field visits and peer evaluation of the farms represent the only effective method to ensure compliance with the standards by all members. With this process, producers evaluate the agricultural and ecological practices of other producer members. The farm reviews are of two kinds: farm visits organised by the technical team of the Certification Support Office (BAC) to check the information provided in the application forms, and peer evaluations for inspection and practical advice, carried out by the Local Committee of Certification (COLOC). Reports of these visits are then sent to the One National Certification Committee (CNAC Bio Mali).

If a producer is found to be non-compliant with the standard, a report of non-conformity is prepared and sent to the CNAC Bio MALI for their opinion and recommendations. The main non-conformities identified so far refer to the use of chemical inputs that are not allowed, the use of GMO seeds and indications of a lack of commitment to the process by the producer. We have developed a list of recommendations on actions to take depending on the kinds of non-conformity and non-compliances that are identified. The main issues found during farm visits and peer reviews refer to the use of composts and other inputs in a non-efficient way. The need for support, alternative practices or inputs and agronomic advice among producers is high.

Farm tours are also organised for exchange among farmers and other stakeholders, as well as visits to the headquarters of the NGO AMSD the agroecology training centre "CEFARI-VERTE", which offers training to all new adherents on the principles of organic agriculture. This helps newcomers to better succeed in their efforts to convert to organic practices.

### 3. Structure and management

Since 2017, AMSD has been maintaining the PGS initiative with its own funds, without any subsidy. However, collaborations exist between actors and technical services of the state, farmers' organisations, and universities, mainly for technical support. AMSD therefore, hosts and supports the PGS, in cooperation with farmer organisations and cooperatives. The overall structure of our PGS is composed essentially of these levels:

- Operators (producers organised in local groups)
- Local Committees of Certification (COLOCs) each with a local PGS coordinator;
- One National Certification Committee (CNAC Bio Mali); and
- The Certification Support Office (BAC).

Each local group of producers working together must keep information on the individual members and appoint a COLOC.

The COLOC is therefore formed at the local level, consisting of a group of five producers, consumers and technicians, which carries out the farm visits and peer reviews at the geographical zone where they are based. One local PGS coordinator is appointed by the CNAC Bio Mali for each COLOC, according to his or her knowledge of organic farming. The local PGS coordinator ensures that the peer reviews are carried out once a year according to a well-defined schedule, documenting them as visits of inspection and practical advice, sanctioned by a report of the evaluation of the peers in the zone. Each local PGS Coordinator reports directly to the CNAC Bio Mali and the BAC, receiving assistance, if necessary, from the technical services of the state, such as local technical services of water and forestry, technical services of the National Directorate of Agriculture and Plant Protection, etc.

The administration and general management of the PGS initiative is carried out by the BAC, whose secretariat is hosted by the NGO AMSD. The BAC is composed of representatives of operators, consumers, and support structures and acts in coordination with CNAC Bio Mali and the COLOCs. This PGS initiative currently operates with a team of 10 people (five full-time paid staff members and five volunteers) and other resource persons engaged in the agroecological transition in Mali.

The CNAC Bio Mali is responsible for oversight and is the body for the overall coordination of PGS Bio Local. This multi-stakeholder group is supported by the international partner SOS FAIM and by all of Mali's farmers' organisations, and is essentially responsible for addressing challenges and issues related to the certification process in Mali, involving as many stakeholders as possible. CNAC Bio Mali also makes final decisions on certification, granting to approved producers the right to use the Bio Local brand for a period of three to five years. During this time, the COLOC and the BAC ensure regular control and the CNAC Bio Mali supervises the good management of the brand by the producers. The organisation of the actors and promoters of agroecological agriculture in CNAC Bio Mali also aims at creating a supportive structure and making our voices heard through advocacy and awareness-raising actions.

To be accepted into the PGS Bio Mali distribution network, each producer or group of producers who wish to join our PGS initiative must commit to respecting the principles of the

standards and the principles of organic production and organic farming, as well as the conditions of animal and plant production (regarding contamination, soil management, storage, handling, transport and marketing) in accordance with our standards. Certification can therefore be granted to individuals or groups. For example, a group of women working together at a market garden will be certified collectively.

In the case of groups of farmers, distributor or processor, they must present evidence of their legal recognition and a written commitment between the group and the NGO AMSD (pledge), in which they state their commitment;

- to respect the control and validation procedures,
- to enforce established sanctions against the organisation's producer members
- and to abandon the use of non-authorized inputs, pesticides, chemical fertilisers and GMO seeds under penalty of exclusion.

In case of individual producers, they sign a written commitment stating that they will produce in accordance with the prescribed techniques respecting the standards, participate in meetings and training organised to improve the quality of labelled products and prove the existence of a permanent and unsoiled water point in the area under management.

They will submit the request and application for certification, fill out the forms duly completed and signed and send all documentation to the CNAC BIO Mali or to the COLOC with the support of the local PGS Coordinator. After evaluation and examination of the application file by CNAC BIO Mali, a first visit to the farm is carried out by a team of the BAC. This step also serves as training for the COLOC members to learn about peer reviews. After this initial visit, the peer review visits are carried out by the COLOC, a report of control and validation is prepared by the local PGS coordinator, with the support of technicians of the BAC, and sent to the CNAC BIO, which remains the only body to issue a certificate. The producer can be certified directly if they have no history of chemical use. Otherwise, they must go through a period of conversion for over the years.

The issuance of a certificate entitles the operator (as a group or individually, depending on how they are registered) to use the BIO LOCAL label for a period of three years. Within the framework of a pilot certification project, the duration can be extended over the life of the project in order to perpetuate the action.

The activities at the local level are implemented by the actors themselves. However, due to the high demand for certification, we have integrated a minimum price per producer to cover the costs of certification, payable once a year. The cost varies according to the area where the producer is based:

<b>Cost of certification</b>	<b>Bamako and surroundings</b>	<b>Region and outside Bamako</b>
Producers / farmer	10 000 F.CFA	30 000 F.CFA
Cooperative, NGO	20 000 F.CFA	60 000 F.CFA

## 4. Marketing

We have a very loyal community of at least 3,000 consumers who support our work, and direct sales represent the main marketing channel. The demand for organic products is always higher than the availability. The policy of PGS Bio Local is to allow the certified producers to sell their products at a higher but fair and equitable price, at least between 10% and 25% above the prices of conventional products. This is always done by mutual agreement with all actors. We do not impose prices; we simply facilitate and advise. Producers are free to sell their products as organic through their own marketing channels, keeping the records and track of sales as a sales or purchase slip to facilitate the traceability of the product and avoid cases of fraud.

We have developed our own logo and consumers recognise it in the market. A series of meetings have been organised to support consumers to understand the certification process and issues affecting the availability of certified organic products. Consumers tend to prefer organic due to the perceived health benefits for themselves, their families and the population in general. The market value of PGS Bio Local can be seen as the certified products are always solicited on the market and sell better than conventional products.

As part of the dissemination and communication efforts, we organised; agroecological caravans in several villages, radio and TV broadcasts, and exchange visits between producers. These multiple actions have really contributed to enlightening and facilitating the understanding of producers and consumers on the benefits of organic agriculture and ensuring their adhesion to the certification process. The organisation of regular organic markets at the headquarters of AMSD and the sale of organic baskets during the Covid-19 pandemic have strengthened the confidence of the actors in our PGS label.

A marketing plan has not yet been developed but it is planned as part of our PGS development strategy, in order to actively engage and link more small farmers to the market. Social networks, direct sales, advertising and awareness campaigns are part of our approach, as much as word of mouth, which is really relevant because consumers are always satisfied with our services and recommend them, even if organic products are more expensive than conventional ones.

## 5. Benefits, challenges and lessons learned

This PGS initiative contributes to revitalising and supporting sustainable food systems in Mali. It prioritises and maintains the health of the producers as well as that of the population, while contributing to the dissemination of organic practices that build soil fertility and support pest prevention, using locally appropriate technologies. PGS allows certified organic farmers to access learning tools to increase their know-how, develop agricultural production and productivity and to have access to local and national markets. Our PGS initiative also supports the development of an "economic patriotism" through local consumption of products "Made in Mali". Finally, it provides an essential tool to monitor and control all the stages of the organic value chain: production, transformation, storage, transport and marketing.

There are several challenges, in particular, the fact that very few farmers are committed to implementing organic agriculture practices with large areas under cultivation. Producers that have adopted agroecological and organic agriculture approaches have managed to

achieve economies of scale while reducing their production costs, but they still face difficulties in marketing their products. The majority of Malian consumers are not aware of what are and the benefits of organic products. Some Malian consumers, particularly those in urban areas, are beginning to appreciate organic products for several reasons, including shelf life and organoleptic quality.

When the PGS initiative was launched, the main challenges were the high costs of certification and administration, logistics and lack of infrastructure for the implementation of organic markets for local produce. But compared to third-party certification, PGS is still performing as a less expensive, participatory, democratic and accessible approach to certification for organic agriculture. In fact, for those of us in Mali who have been engaged in the agroecological transition for the past 12 years, PGS is the only way to democratise agroecology and organic agriculture. We see the label PGS Bio Local as a blessing, supporting us in our efforts to promote behaviour changes, towards agricultural practices that are sustainable, making certified organic agriculture less expensive and accessible to all.

The strengths of this PGS initiative, related to its philosophical, social, environmental, ecological and equitable dimensions, lay in the fact that it promotes the autonomy of small-scale, family farmers, the preservation of natural resources, and biodiversity while contributing to creating nutritious local food systems and social cohesion. PGS Bio Local also serves to assert producers' rights and support the improvement of their incomes and livelihoods.

Among the weaknesses of our PGS initiative, we must include a gap in financial support required to address the needs of producers who wish to convert to organic practices. Conversion requires support and assistance, as the risk of returning to conventional agriculture becomes greater in case production failures. Unfortunately, the NGO AMSD does not have the means to deliver such assistance on a regular basis, as would be necessary. Nevertheless, we make a lot of effort to assist producers whenever we can, supporting their activities through training modules and practical sessions in the field.

The development of organic agriculture in Mali is at a very early stage and there are various gaps to be addressed. Qualified human resources for organic production as well as funding and support from political and administrative authorities are lacking. Organic agriculture is not well recognised in rural areas, which results in an archaic or false vision of organic. The abusive use of chemical inputs by producers in general, without really knowing the real needs of the soil or the crops, is also a reality. Finally, access to land remains an issue.

In the future, we would like to further contribute to the creation of social links between farmers and consumers through short value chains and direct marketing. We see that it is important to institutionalise agroecology and organic agriculture in Mali and it would be beneficial to get recognition of the PGS label by local authorities. Ideally, this would allow to boost exchanges between regions of the country, and facilitate the integration of organic products in the local and national, maybe even international markets. On a global level, we feel it is important that the different PGS initiators work together to advance and harmonise our practices. We will strive to promote the vision of the organic movement in Mali!



# PGS in São Tomé and Príncipe

Producing Organic Food for  
the Good of our People



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## 1. History and general presentation

The PGS initiative “*Sistema Participativo de Garantia de São Tomé e Príncipe*” (SPG-STP) were founded in August 2018, with the support of the OM4D project, implemented by IF-OAM – Organics International, AgroEco and local stakeholders. São Tomé and Príncipe is an island country: two volcanic islands totalling 1001 km<sup>2</sup>, where much of the territory is mountainous. Subsistence farming is widespread and although the domestic market for organic is only emerging, various cooperatives of organic producers have been exporting crops such as cocoa, pepper, vanilla and coffee, which are certified by foreign third-party certifiers through internal control systems for group certification.

Before joining the PGS, many producers were already working together as members of these organic cooperatives. The organic produce from the certified areas that was not exported was sold at the local market as conventional and there was no specific demand for certified organics from our national consumers. Nevertheless, we knew that the need and demand for healthy, organic food products existed in our country and many of the producers who had experience in organic practices and certification were attracted to the idea of having some kind of local certification, for the local market. The discussions on this topic that took place in the framework of the OM4D project, were essential to drive the PGS initiative, providing our stakeholders with the opportunity to think about the food that people consume right here and how to contribute to ensuring national food and nutritional security.

The main goal of our PGS members is to be recognised as producers of healthy organic products. We saw the importance of organic farming and decided to produce organic food for the domestic market to ensure food and nutrition security in our country, and to improve the income of our families.

As part of the PGS development process, a three-day training was organised and delivered by IFOAM - Organics International and international experts. The participants learned about key elements and features of PGS, discussed the specific needs and gaps in our national context and had a chance to experience a simulation of a peer review for conformity verification. At the end of the training, the proposal to start a PGS was launched. Later on, one of the participants was selected as a PGS facilitator, to coordinate the implementation, convening and supporting the work of 12 volunteers that formed a PGS Working Group (WG). The PGS WG is composed of producers, processors and the local OM4D project team, including one representative for each of the six communities involved in the project. This WG has taken a leading role to define and guide the development of our PGS initiative, deciding on joint activities, evaluating documents and setting priorities.

Our PGS is operating in the northern and central parts of the island of São Tomé. We started with 36 producers, mainly growing vegetables for the local market, all based in the communities of Santa Clara, Santa Luzia, Agua Sampaio, São Carlos, Pinheira and Amparo II. The majority of the producers were not yet adopting organic practices for horticulture and only one, Mr. Antonio Veigas from Amparo II, had already converted all his farming area to organic agriculture by 2017. Therefore, 34 producers needed support for conversion, which they accessed in the form of funding for inputs (equipment, seeds), technical assistance and trainings on agroecology and organic agriculture.

Several activities for PGS implementation were coordinated with different components of OM4D and other internationally funded projects for increased impact, hence, enabling, for example, the provision of training in agroecology and organic farming to over 300 producers in São Tomé and Príncipe by the end of 2021. These training sessions were offered by local trainers and experts through the local NGO ADAPPA, all involved in PGS implementation. Despite the support, 16 of the producers initially involved did not manage to continue the conversion process, mainly due to technical difficulties and concerns about not maintaining their yields during the transition.

We proceeded with 18 producers and during the first meetings, the PGS WG translated and adapted the organic production standards of IFOAM - Organics International to our context; developed and adapted other documents such as the checklist for peer reviews, Farm Management Plan and Registration to the initiative, and the Producers' Pledge/Agreement, using as reference, examples from PGS initiatives in Brazil and South Africa. In addition to funding the position of the PGS facilitator and support for conversion, the OM4D project allowed us to develop and implement a strategic communication plan. This was aimed at promoting the benefits of organic agriculture in the country, hence, giving visibility to this PGS initiative and building marketing channels.

Up until April 2020, we had monthly PGS WG meetings. Then we had to suspend these meetings due to restrictive measures to fight the Covid-19 pandemic, for about six months. In October 2020, following all the security measures required by the government, we resumed the in-person activities, therefore completing the registration, farm management plans and farmers' pledges of all 18 producers. From then on, we began to conduct field visits, to understand the situation of the producers involved, and peer reviews, to verify compliance with our organic standards. After the last round of peer reviews was carried

out in December 2020, we were able to deliver organic certificates to 10 of our producers, during a ceremony with representatives from the government, including the Minister of Agriculture Mr. Francisco Ramos. In January 2022, 15 producers received annual peer reviews but only 12 received certification. In addition, we certified one farm in Terra Batata, which is collectively managed by producers working for the New Apostolic Church near Monte Café, in the centre of the island of São Tomé.

Hence, at the moment we have 13 certified operators out of a total of 20 members (including producers involved but who still did not receive PGS certification). We would like to increase our numbers and small, family farmers are the target beneficiaries. Most of our members are active in one or more of the different organic commodity cooperatives, but the areas certified by our PGS do not correspond to the areas where they grow organic cocoa, pepper and coffee, with very few exceptions. The producers are based in different communities and within each community, producers are on average about 1 km away from each other, managing individually about a quarter of a hectare (0.25 hectare) each. While it is relatively easy for producers in the same community to visit each other, visits to producers in other communities do not happen due to the distances (on average between 20 and 35 km), a challenge that is intensified by the lack of proper roads to access all farming areas on a regular basis.

The importance of organic agriculture to build sustainable food systems in our country has been recognised by the Government as a priority. Thus, there is a great acceptance of our PGS initiative and the involvement of governmental authorities in some of our activities. At the moment we have not yet involved consumers or consumer associations in our PGS initiative. This is an area we would like to improve, so that consumers also actively participate in this process, beyond buying the products. We are still missing other actors along the value chain, but we are exploring partnerships with processors and hotels that could potentially become involved in PGS certification.



## 2. Standards and compliance

When the moment came to define the organic standards to adopt, the PGS WG selected the IFOAM Norms, focusing on the standards for organic crop production, which we translated and adapted to our context instead of developing a new standard from scratch. These standards were discussed during various meetings by the PGS WG, where all participating communities were represented through community leaders, who were mainly farmers themselves. These representatives also worked with producers in their communities, to discuss and explain the production standards during meetings and peer review exercises carried out for each farmer prior to the first peer visit for conformity verification. The members of the PGS Working Group who worked on this adaptation also provided and continue to provide technical support to our members whenever there is a need for interpretation of standards or questions on allowed inputs.

Producers joining the initiative commit to following our organic standards by filling in a farmer's pledge, which is part of the contract signed by each farmer, in the presence of the PGS facilitator and members of the PGS WG. It is a printed document that is filed in, signed and kept in the office that hosts our PGS initiative. A Registration and Farm Management Plan is also completed for each producer, often during a farm visit with the support of the PGS facilitator and members of the PGS WG. In the Registration and Farm Management Plan, information is collected about the production area, types of existing crops, production techniques used, how soil fertilisation and pest management are carried out, the number of households members involved in farming, what labour is used and whether or not there is a field notebook for recording practices and production outputs. The area managed by the farmer is also mapped and this is attached to the Farm Management plan.

Each producer is visited at least once a year, for a peer visit to verify conformity with our organic standards. This peer review includes a visit to the areas managed by the producer, carried out by a group including; producers from other communities, PGS WG members and neighbours of the visited producer. Among the people joining the visit, a committee is formed with three people volunteering or being appointed at the moment: a community peer, a peer from another community and the PGS Facilitator or a representative of Movimiento Bio STP. These three people go through the verification checklist together with the producer, asking and answering several questions to verify if the production practices are in line with the organic production rules we have adopted.

After the peer review visit, the visiting committee fills in a document, the verification checklist report, which contains the conclusions and recommendations of the visit. If non-conformities are found during the visit, they will be clearly stated in the conclusions based on the answers to the checklist and observations from the visit. Depending on the non-conformities found, if any, the producer is advised on how to make changes in order to comply with the organic standards. We have not yet established sanctions, as the visits we have made so far have only allowed the making of decisions on whether to certify the producers who were fully compliant or to identify producers that need support to achieve compliance and recommendations for improvement. The verification checklist report already includes a decision on certification, as it is the visiting committee that decides if the producer visited should receive the certification. This decision is then endorsed by a representative of Movimiento Bio STP, who reviews the report, and signs the certificate. In case there are issues in the report presented, missing documents or information, doubts about inputs used or any other clarification needed, the representative of Movimiento Bio can request a new visit, thus the final decision on certification is suspended until all issues are cleared.

All producers receive a copy of the standards once they join the initiative, and their certifi-

cate, once they are approved and certified. All other documents are filed by the PGS facilitator at the office. We do not yet organise farm visits for the general public, but anyone can have access to all the documents and information on our PGS initiative at the office and these are presented in the official language of the country, Portuguese. Most producers are fully literate, but in case producers cannot read, we organise specific community meetings, for example, on the production standards, and then documents are read to all by the PGS facilitator or the community leader, to ensure all understand what they are committing to.

### 3. Structure and management

In 2019, the association “Movimento Bio – São Tomé e Príncipe” representing the national organic movement was created in order to gather and give voice to all stakeholders in the organic sector in the country. Some representatives of the newly created Movimento Bio had been members of the PGS WG from the beginning. Therefore, it was agreed that this association would host the PGS initiative and that PGS certification would be offered as one of the services available to those joining the national organic movement. Movimento Bio - STP has been registered as a legal entity since 2021.

The structure of our PGS initiative starts with the members, who are producers based in six different communities. After that comes the PGS WG, working as the advisory board as well as providing guidance and technical support, and then the PGS Facilitator who convenes the PGS WG and coordinates activities. Finally, Movimento Bio – STP hosts and has oversight on the PGS initiative. The roles and responsibilities of our stakeholders can be described more in detail as follows:

- Producers work in local groups, within their communities, and are responsible for producing according to the defined standards for organic production, receiving and joining farm visits for technical assistance and verifying compliance;
- The PGS Working Group (WG), with 12 members is responsible for setting priorities, preparing documents and developing new tools and strategies, for example, for marketing and communication;
- The PGS facilitator who is responsible for general management and coordination, record keeping, scheduling visits and managing funds;
- The verification committees, ad hoc groups, composed of three people on a rotation and voluntary basis, formed on the day of each peer visit to; verify conformity, depending on who is joining; be responsible for carrying out the verification according to the checklist, in line with the production standards; and prepare the recommendations and decision on certification after the visit.
- the Movimento Bio, responsible for promoting the PGS initiative and advocating towards the government, for endorsing the decisions taken by the verification committees and for signing the certificates that are issued to the verified and approved farmers.

The PGS facilitator was hired by the OM4D project between 2018 to 2022 and is currently working on a voluntary basis. So far, this is the only position that has been covered during the implementation of the project, since all other people involved in PGS implementation

have been voluntary contributors; which is necessary since other sources of income are not yet available. Our members had the plan to charge a membership fee to all participating producers, to ensure financial sustainability. The idea was that each member would contribute a fee based on their sales of organic products, based on the assumption that our members will be able to sell their certified organic produce at the farmers' market organised by the PGS initiative, potentially increasing their income, which would make it possible for them to pay a reasonable membership fee and maintain the certification services. So far this has not yet been feasible, therefore, we decided to avoid collecting membership fees for the moment.

New producers joining SPG – STP goes through a mandatory conversion period. The producer must contact the PGS facilitator, with support from the community leader, if necessary, to receive a copy of the organic production standards, get registered by signing the farmers' pledge and contract, and fill in the registration form and farm management plan. The PGS facilitator will then schedule an initial farm visit to understand the situation of this producer, already using the verification checklist as a reference. As a result of this initial visit, the producers will receive recommendations so that, within a period established for the conversion, they can be visited again, this time for a peer review and conformity verification visit. This approach is important to ensure that producers are accompanied in their transition course, towards organic agriculture.



## 4. Marketing

Our producer members sell mainly in conventional markets, both with and without organic claims. Some producers are selling directly to consumers who specifically search for organic products, through direct sales at farm gates or home delivery services that are organised via phone or messaging apps. All verified and approved farmers receive individual certificates and stickers to label their products, which they can use to sell through any marketing channel they prefer, and wherever they like.

We still lack a regular specific marketplace for organic products. A farmers' market exclusively for our PGS members was launched in 2021 and it is planned to take place periodically as the main collective-marketing channel. We also plan to expand to at least one specialised store to be inaugurated in 2022, in addition to improving and coordinating the direct sales and delivery services as a group, with voluntary access to all members.

The strategic communication plan is currently being implemented, to raise awareness of the benefits of organic agriculture, improve the visibility of our PGS and promote organic products. As part of this plan, we produced videos for national television and had spots for the radio, which were streamed in 2021. We have developed a session on the website of the national organic movement Movimento Bio-STP, that promotes our PGS initiative, offers information for new members and will list all of our marketing channels. Other promotional materials we created, such as t-shirts, educational leaflets and banners, are used during events such as the National Agriculture Fair that is organised every year on 30 September, to give visibility to the places where produce can be purchased, such as the farm-gate outlet managed by producer Mr. Antonio Veigas, in Amparo II.

Our own PGS logo is used in all promotional materials and organic certified produce sold by certified farmers. The logo is not yet well known but we hope this will change in the near future as a result of our awareness-raising activities, and with more regular marketing channels being available. We conducted a consumer survey in the framework of



OM4D project in 2019, and we intend to repeat this regularly to understand how consumers view organics and our PGS initiative. We found out that some consumers are aware of or sensitised about organic farming in general, highlighting the health, environment and nutritional quality of the products as the main reasons for consuming organic produce. The results of the survey indicated that the following issues keep consumers from purchasing more organic food: the limited availability of organic products at regular markets and the lack of information about where organic products can be bought. Those are points that guide our marketing strategy for the next steps.

PGS-certified products usually sell at the same price compared to conventional products, so there is no premium for the producers, at the moment. However, producers do report that their organic produce is in demand, that they benefit from direct sales from loyal customers, and that often they manage to sell organic produce faster than conventional. We have no basis for comparison between the prices of PGS-certified organic products and third-party certified organic products, as the latter are mostly not vegetables or fruits for the local markets, more specifically, they are commodities such as cocoa and pepper for export.

## 5. Benefits and challenges

The agricultural sector in São Tomé and Príncipe faces various challenges, which of course affect directly the work of PGS members. A large part of the territory, including the areas where many of the PGS producers manage their plots, has no or only very degraded accessible roads. The flow of products for commercialisation is a major problem, as well as the theft of agricultural products taking place at the plots, which discourages investment in production. In this context, the difficulties producers face to fully convert to organic practices are an added burden and were indicated as reasons for many of those who left the PGS initiative in the initial stage.

For those who stayed and managed to go through conversion, the most common benefit of joining the PGS mentioned is precisely that of being part of an organised group, where they can share and overcome difficulties, be supported in the conversion process and improve their agriculture practices together. We see that converting to organic has meant having good quality soil in their fields, in addition to benefits related to their family's health, by avoiding the use of harmful agricultural inputs. We expect to ensure access to a differentiated market and increase producers' income in the coming years, as additional benefits. It is still early to talk about the value of our initiative in the local market because our logo is not yet known and our producers do not yet have a consolidated market. However, with promotion for more visibility, we expect there will be recognition by the general public of our legitimacy to certify organic products.

The biggest challenge for producers joining our PGS remains to convert to organic practices. The lack of alternatives to conventional inputs is often mentioned as an obstacle for conversion and one of the major complaints from our producers is that they do not have enough time to make their own organic compost or insecticides because they are busy with production. There are interesting organic inputs being locally produced and used with easily available resources such as the "manipueira" liquid, obtained from the processing of the cassava root for flour, which serves both as a pesticide and fertiliser. But the production of this liquid is time-consuming and it is not yet easily available for purchase, which means only a few producers are familiar with this input.

In order to convince producers that organic production has advantages, it is necessary to show concrete success cases. We have at least one such example, the pioneer Mr. António Veigas, from Amparo II, who serves as an inspiration, regularly receiving visits and sharing his knowledge. In fact, all producers from the community Amparo II that joined our initiative from the beginning of the process managed to get certified in 2020 and continue to be actively involved in the PGS.

The general strengths of our PGS are to do with; the existence of a PGS WG, composed of people with diverse skills who work together; the support we receive from the national organic movement; and the engagement of the community leaders and pioneers with organic farming in our country. The main weakness is the fact that we do not have financial sustainability, due to the discontinuation of project funding and the lack of other regular income streams, since our producers are not yet able to contribute a fee to maintain the PGS initiative operational. A lot of volunteer work is currently taking place but we are aware that this is not sustainable. Our aim now is to establish a regular, physical marketing outlet, where consumers can easily find organic products. On the other hand, we also want to certify more producers and broaden the base of our initiative. We will continue to implement the ongoing strategic communication plan and raise awareness among the population on the advantages of organic agriculture and consuming organic products.

For anyone interested in implementing PGS, our recommendation is to ensure capacity building and training on both PGS and organic farming to all involved, from the very beginning. It is also important to set up differentiated markets, specifically for organically certified produce from PGS members, as soon as possible, as well as to look for alternatives for agricultural inputs that can be used in organic agriculture, so that the transition to organic practices can be less problematic, from an early stage.

PGS implementation is a process and as such it has its phases: we are still in the embryonic stage. We started raising awareness among 40 producers, but now we are working with 20, out of which we managed to certify 10 in 2020 and 13 (12 producers and one commercial farm) in 2021. We are taking small steps! What we want now is to keep farmers who already received certificates and guide the others who did not manage to complete the conversion process we had started together. There is growing interest from producers that are living in other communities as well, so we see good potential to include more producers soon.

The ceremony to deliver the PGS certificates to the first 10 organic producers in our initiative was attended by the Minister of Agriculture Mr. Francisco Ramos, and several directors of that ministry. Mr. Ramos is very outspoken about organic agriculture and supports the idea promoted by Movimento Bio STP of making São Tomé and Príncipe, the first country that is 100% organic. Our PGS initiative is already contributing to this idea, supporting producers and addressing consumers, and we will keep advocating for policies and governmental programs contributing to this goal, as currently, they are not yet in place.





# Participatory Guarantee Systems for Organic Agriculture

Case studies in Central and West Africa:

Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ghana, Mali, São Tomé and Príncipe