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Participatory Guarantee System as prefiguration of redefined relationships within food networks

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Abstract

Although agriculture is usually considered a production sector, it can be seen as a life-making activity as well simply through a mind shift that involves decolonizing the imaginary. Agriculture, with its rich experiences of resistance and counteraction to the neoliberal approach to agro-industrial food production modes, can be understood as a process of unmaking capitalism. With this in mind, this contribution is part of a study resulting from 18 months of participatory research conducted in Italy aimed at developing a comprehensive proposal for the construction of a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) in the Italian organic sector by analyzing and building upon ongoing PGS experiences. Accordingly, the article seeks to understand whether the selected experiences can be considered as unmaking processes and as a prefiguration of new relationships in agri-food chains by identifying elements that are an expression of the generative and transformative efforts which interrupt routines and deconstruct socio-economic architectures that hamper or discourage non-capitalist imaginaries. The results suggest that PGS experiences provide evidence of an active and proactive micro-level which, with "mutable" specific societal systems, influence the real evolution of modern globalized capitalist societies, offering a concrete solution to support food sovereignty and social justice while being transformative of socio-economic practices.

Keywords: participation, embeddedness, unmking, PGS, AFN

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Sistemi di garanzia partecipata come prefigurazioni di relazioni ridefinite nelle reti del cibo

Riassunto

Sebbene l'agricoltura sia solitamente considerata un settore produttivo, può essere vista anche come un'attività che crea vita, semplicemente attraverso un cambiamento di mentalità che implica la decolonizzazione dell'immaginario. L'agricoltura, con le sue ricche esperienze di resistenza e contrasto all'approccio neoliberale alle modalità di produzione agroindustriale del cibo, può essere intesa come un processo di disfacimento del capitalismo. In quest'ottica, il presente contributo presenta parte di una ricerca partecipativa di 18 mesi condotta in Italia, finalizzata a sviluppare una proposta di Sistema di Garanzia Partecipativo (PGS) nel settore biologico italiano, analizzando e costruendo sulle esperienze di PGS in corso. Di conseguenza, l'articolo cerca di capire se le esperienze selezionate possono essere considerate come processi di disfacimento e prefigurazione di nuove relazioni nelle filiere agroalimentari, identificando gli elementi che sono espressione degli sforzi generativi e trasformativi che interrompono le routine e decostruiscono le architetture socio-economiche che ostacolano o scoraggiano gli immaginari non capitalistici. I risultati suggeriscono che le esperienze di PGS forniscono prove di un micro-livello attivo e proattivo che, con sistemi sociali "mutevoli", influenzano l'evoluzione reale delle moderne società capitalistiche globalizzate, offrendo una soluzione concreta per sostenere la sovranità alimentare e la giustizia sociale, trasformando al contempo le pratiche socio-economiche.

Parole chiave: partecipazione, embeddedness, unmking, PGS, AFN

■ Introduction

In the social sciences there is a wide ongoing discussion on how to better address our economic, social and environmental needs in connection with the transformation of agricultural and food production systems. The productivity of industrial capitalist agriculture has been a key element in modern development narratives, yet there is considerable evidence of its deep instability and of the intractable biophysical problems originating from the substitution of labour, skills and knowledge with technological capital (Weis, 2010). From the end of the Second World War through to around the 1970s, the modernization paradigm established itself globally, with a widespread attempt to make agrarian structures converge in the evolution pathways of developing industrial societies through the adoption of models of production intensification, sectorial specialization, market liberalization, vertical control over the various stages of

food production, and replicability and standardization of the production cycle. Industrial development became a matter of social order and economic stability (Hoogvelt, 2001).

Currently there are different experiences on the ground aimed at organizing economic action differently, through the adoption of both more equitable and more sustainable production and consumption practices (Rosol, 2020). This therefore calls for further study and discussion of the emergence of new economic logics and reflexive consumer attitudes, and for the delineation of evolving social formations that drive the resistance of non-capitalist modes of production in which the expanded reproduction of capital is only one of the many trajectories of economic action. This raises questions about the logic behind socially and more equitably integrated economic activities (Elsen, 2018).

In light of the above has been developed this contribution, part of a study resulting from 18 months of participatory research conducted in Italy aimed at developing a comprehensive proposal for the construction of a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) in the Italian organic farming sector by analysing and building upon ongoing PGS experiences. In parallel, the study focuses on identifying the elements that not only create a crisis within capitalism but also cause the governance structures and relational models to operate under different economic logics.

■ Theoretical framework

Multiple crises and capitalist agri-food systems: trends, logics and counteractions

The current context is characterized by a multiplicity of crises and radical changes, from climate change to demographic shifts, which are dramatically affecting Italy too. As early as 2012, Brown highlighted how the production system has pushed humanity beyond the planet's limits, influencing the Earth system just like the major geological processes, in what we now call the "Anthropocene" era (Brown, 2012). Congedo et al. (2023) have highlighted that in Italy soil degradation now affects 17.4% of the national territory, with an increase of 18.5% over the 2006-2019 period, while ISPRA, the Italian Institute for Environmental Protection and Research, (2021) underscores that while Italy enjoys abundant rainfall it is also characterized by a disparity in water availability that makes the country particularly prone to water crises. The global overpopulation situation, with the major risks it entails for food security (Cafaro, 2019), does not affect Italy, which, on the contrary, suffers from a decline in the birth rate and a demographic crisis that brings with it political and social challenges (Villani-Lubelli, 2024).

Supplying sufficient safe and nutritious food for a growing global population is now posing many social and environmental challenges within the

evolution of contemporary capitalist societies. Among the most serious are the need to maintain adequate legal and social conditions for the rural labour classes and the need to increase food production globally without undermining the planet's capacity to meet the food needs of the next generations and to deliver other essential ecosystem services. The current capitalist global food system appears as a complex system characterized by an ongoing marginalization of small-scale petty commodity producers and an ever-expanding remit of industrial agriculture which with a significant disruption of wild ecosystems becomes a major force reshaping the biosphere (Altieri and Nicholls, 2020; Akram-Lodhi, 2021). Despite repeated warnings about the rapid loss of biodiversity, increasing pressures of the cost-prize squeeze of family farming systems, and rising phenomena of agricultural labour exploitation, global food production systems worldwide are becoming ever less diverse in terms of the ecosystems, species and within-species genetic resources they comprise, and ever more unequal and unfair in terms of spaces of power and autonomy that actors can have within the food chains and territorial control over natural resources (Swinnen et al., 2021). The hegemonic presence of industrial capitalist agriculture is further fuelled by the power of transnational corporations which have control over surplus value and decision-making, especially in the consolidation of agri-production input (chemicals, fertilizers, seeds and animal pharmaceuticals) and in the management of agri-food transformation and marketization stages (processing, distribution and retailing) thus reducing options for both farmers and consumers (Weis, 2010).

The transformation of goods and activities into commodities (i.e. commoditization), has been the leading force that transformed all societies – although not homogenously – from the mid-19th century (Harvey 2007; Polanyi 1944; Sraffa 1960). Behind this process there is an implicit denial of the forces and the relations of production that generate the products and make commodity consumption possible.

In his critical description of the mechanisms of capitalism expansion, Marx pointed out that – in the course of history – processes of accumulation and exploitation would assume different forms in different countries, going through various stages in different orders of succession and in different historical periods (Marx, 1976). Although Marx constructed a precise and clear analytical framework to reveal and explain the laws of social motion, he firmly believed that there could be a variety of ways by which a set of capitalist relations of production could penetrate the agricultural complex and consolidate into it (McCarthy, 2010; Akram-Lodhi and Kay, 2016; Bryer, 2019; Uleri, 2019). The infiltration of capitalism into agriculture was described not as an immediate event but as a complex and controversial historical process: "the entry of capital into agriculture as an independent and leading power does not take place everywhere all at once but rather gradually and in particular branches of production" (Marx, 1981: 937); however, it was seen as an inexorable stage of contemporary societies.

Nonetheless, the porosity of and fluidity between modes of production

should be considered not only under a unidirectional lens, explaining capitalist consolidation and enlargement, but also under an analytical lens, taking into account trajectories of origination and the strengthening and survival of non-capitalist modes of production, first and foremost as spaces of autonomy, "resistance and experimentation, refusal and proposition" (Feola et al., 2021: 3). In the creation of such spaces, alternatives that are incompatible with dominant modern pre-capitalist configurations emerge in the form of new social relationship logics for unmaking capitalism. Unmaking efforts are thus generative since they entail not only the interruption of capitalist reproduction but also the intrinsic ability to allow something else to sprout, as a result of a combination of situated processes able to "make space" for a radical alternative in the specific here and now (Feola, 2019). They do not originate abrupt and disruptive ruptures or disarticulations within and from the capitalist formations but give rise to generative grey zones of hybridization between modes and relations of production. According to Feola (2019), processes of unmaking can involve both material and symbolic deconstructions in the attempt to foster the erosion of modern capitalist rationalist and utilitarian subjectivities, even though this might cause – at the individual level – crises, negotiations and setbacks. Unmaking can occur through public initiatives, such as so-called Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) initiatives (Elsen, 2018), offering an answer "organized by collectives directly to satisfy human needs not subject to the discipline of profit maximization or state-technocratic rationality" (Wright. 2010: 141). More often, however, it comes from a private and limited sphere of citizens' agency, and hence at first appears as less prone to co-optation by the state.

Alternative food networks, utopia and unmaking capitalism

Agriculture is often considered the first productive sector of the economy, conversely it may be regarded as an activity strictly connected to social reproduction, as a "life-making activity" (King, Lulle & Melossi, 2021: 57). The latter view requires a decolonization of the imaginary concerning food production and consumption (Levkoe et al., 2019b), understood as a mindset change, in a process of unlearning, understood as "a process in which both farmers and members scrutinised and rejected taken-for-granted" (van Oers, et al., 2023:12) as well as of counteraction to the strong tendency of capitalism to disempower farmers and consumers (Uleri, 2021), practising a form of agriculture that must be considered "as an alternative that survives, develops and prospers (even under capitalism)" (Uleri, 2019: 47). It is possible to consider this as an "unmaking" of modern capitalism, with its socioecological and economic configuration (Feola, 2019). Although this framework concerns a small minority of cases, niches can be a space for testing new solutions with the potential to scale up and anticipate or prefigure new scenarios (Brunori, Rossi

& Guidi, 2012), even providing radical alternatives in the direction of sustainability for humans and non-humans (Feola, Koretskaya, & Moore, 2021).

It is possible to arrive at the concept of radical utopia understood as the possibility of "making strange … what currently exists in order to dislodge its taken for grantedness" so that new possibilities can emerge and we are able to "imagine radically different circumstances" (Storey, 2019: III). In the economic field, this means a resistance against the condemnation and co-optation of the desire for a "just, equal and ecologically healthy existence for all of human and non-human nature" (Moylan, 2020: 1). Alternative food networks are usually embedded in the SSE, embodying its main values and principles (Rossi, Coscarello, & Biolghini, 2021). The SSE is a pathway to empowerment and democratization by which civil society actors directly organize various activities, rather than simply shape the deployment of economic power. Thus, the objectives of SSE approaches, as well as their functioning and organizational culture, are beneficial, and their significance lies not only in their economic potential or their capacity to cope with actual societal problems but also in their emancipative power. The SSE involves forms of "governance which are more horizontal and democratic; and often linked to collective action and active citizenship" (Utting, 2016: 15). Members and users can control important decisions and transactions. This kind of management allows for SSE organizations to function in such a way that they can attain their specific aims and at the same time generate social capital and own assets for further development.

The claims to contrast neoliberal system through agriculture can be understood through the lens of food sovereignty. The international farmers' organization La Via Campesina, which defined the concept in 2003, calls food sovereignty "the peoples', Countries' or State Unions' RIGHT to define their agricultural and food policy, without any dumping vis-à-vis third countries". In Italy this takes the shape of a return to land, including by young people (Uleri, Elsen, & Piccoli, 2022), and the self-organization of consumers and producers in so-called Alternative Food Networks (Rossi, Coscarello, & Biolghini, 2021). Alternative food networks (AFN) are "Those forms of marketing chains for which (1) the consumer-producer relationship is not only mediated by purely commercial operators, (2) the product has special symbolic values for consumers linked to its origin and to the type of trade, and (3) the marketing chain spans a short distance and implies personal relationships" (Corsi & Barbera, 2018: 12). AFN can be seen as "a diverse range of interconnected and multilevel (individual, social, socioecological) processes that are deliberately activated in order to 'make space' (temporally, spatially, materially, and/or symbolically) for radical alternatives that are incompatible with dominant modern capitalist configurations" (Feola, 2019: 979). This leads, as a starting step, to the re-appropriation of knowledge and pride by producers and consumers with a recodification of the idea of sustainability (Loconto & Hatanaka, 2018), devoting special attention to the preservation of biodiversity, soil fertility, water purity, air salubrity, and so on, ultimately within the framework of agroecology (Rover et al., 2020).

Providing a definition of PGS, Loconto & Hatanaka (2018: 416) state that "PGS are networks created within local communities and consist of farmers, experts, public sector officials, food service agents, and consumers". IFOAM offers a comprehensive definition of this model too, stating that "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" (IFOAM definition, 2005). More generally, PGS are experiences of self-management of land, in the direction of a direct control and legislation (Rover, 2008) and a deeper participation of all the actors in the food chain (Forno, Maurano & Vittori, 2019). PGS are "based on peer-review assessment, involving producers from the community, who are considered capable of verifying compliance against the standard commitments" and "the common key elements of PGS: 1. shared vision, 2. participatory, 3. transparency, 4. trust "integrity based approach", 5. Learning process and 6. Horizontality" (Lemeilleur & Allaire, 2019: 9). In PGS responsibility is shared between farmers, consumers and other actors in a horizontal structure of governance where each category and each individual draw motivation (Kaufmann, Hruschka & Vogl, 2020), struggling with the difficulties of keeping in balance formalization and inclusiveness (Hruschka, Kaufmann & Vogl, 2022). Horizontality in governance structure and knowledge production with different definitions of quality, based on the holistic approach of agroecology, may be considered the main contribution of PGS to rural development in a broader sense (Chiffoleau et al., 2019).

■ Methodological remarks

Data collection and methods

The research sets out from the general framework of SSE to understand the potential of AFN, and of PGS in particular, to support the claims to better control over its food chain, viewed from the perspective of institutional organizations. The study is based on a qualitative research approach (Kirby, Greaves & Reid, 2006) that considers the qualified views of experts and project managers working to promote the diffusion of PGS. The analysis of the answers is based on keywords as well as on recurrent headwords. The general perspective adopted is a feminist methodological approach (Sprague, 2016), paying specific attention to hierarchies, both explicit and implicit, and power relations in the direction of emancipation and the promotion of empowerment of the people taking part in the process.

In order to identify the elements that, through parallel alternative governance and interaction models, generate possibilities for the re-orientation of the trajectories of modernity from the "inside" in our capitalist societies, the research results presented here seek to provide a response to the following

main research question: "Which are the distinctive elements of the PGS organizational model that allow these experiences to be transformative and to promote food sovereignty as a key step in the unmaking of capitalist food production and consumption practices?"

To answer this question, fourteen in-depth interviews have been conducted with nine representatives of different PGS initiatives in Italy and five key informants from organizations that are particularly active in promoting the PGS model (Mountain Partnership Secretariat of the UN, IFOAM, Slow Food, Movimento per la Terra and Rete.org) in late 2021. The PGS initiatives have not been sampled, all the initiatives active in Italy have been involved, considering that PGS model is not diffused, they were 12 in 2021, 7 in 2017 (Vittori, 2018; Salvi & Vittori, 2017). Three initiatives have not answered to the request of interview. In addition, official documents, websites and dissemination materials of all the fourteen organizations have been analysed. Key informants were suggested by the organizations themselves, as representative of their institutions, after a request for contacts was made setting out the aims and background of the research.

The Italian PGS are characterized as follows:

Code	Name	Region	Interview n.
1	Pecora Brogna	Veneto	I1
2	Cortocircuito	Campania	I2
3	Cibo Maremma	Tuscany	I3
4	Impollinazioni	Lazio and Abruzzo	I4
5	Casentino	Tuscany	I5
6	Campi Aperti	Emilia Romagna	I6
7	C`é Campo	Lombardy	I7
8	terraTERRA	Lazio	I8
9	DES Parma	Emilia Romagna	I9

Analytical framework

To develop the research, three key concepts were identified on the basis of which the interviews were analysed: food sovereignty, the intangible commons dimension of participatory guarantee practices, and the transformative potential of PGS.

AFN and PGS experiences are always linked to increased participation of consumers and producers in the direction of food sovereignty. Kaufmann, Hruschka & Vogl (2020: 3) state that "participation is multidimensional, highly complex, and context-specific in nature. It can occur in different forms,

mean different things, and change over time" and it takes place in a perspective of community-building (Hruschka, Kaufmann & Vogl, 2022). In AFN "farmers are no longer price takers, as in conventional chains, nor are they just price makers as often occurs in direct selling; in turn, consumers are aware of the meanings behind the prices they agree to pay" (Chiffoleau et al., 2019: 12). The difficulties in governing such a totally new relationship between consumers and producers (Berti & Rossi, 2022), allow us to consider AFN and PGS experiences as experiments of radical democracy (Cuéllar-Padilla & Ganuza-Fernandez, 2018) and an "innovative governance mechanism consistent with the principles of food sovereignty" (Nelson et al., 2016: 384). A particularly significant aspect is the mind shift required of consumers (Brunori, Rossi & Guidi, 2012) in the direction of a socialized undertaking of responsibility (Uleri, 2018).

In AFN, and specifically in PGS, the collective dimension of knowledge production seems to be central (Pohl et al., 2021), generating empowerment (Nelson et al., 2016) thanks to their embeddedness (Piccoli, Rossi & Genova, 2021; Cazas et al., 2020; Chiffoleau et al., 2019; Uleri, 2018). Taking part in a PGS, according to Kaufmann, Hruschka & Vogl (2020), produces benefits in community development and social cohesion at the social level, as well as self-responsibility, self-confidence and self-management at the individual level. These benefits are largely the effect of an environment and specific praxis aiming at a general exchange of knowledge within the community (Hruschka, Kaufmann & Vogl, 2022). AFN and PGS experiences are strongly embedded in the local context, with characteristics of grassroots movements and a drive towards transformation (Nelson et al., 2016). The inclusive knowledge production process is specifically transformative in the direction of democratization of economic activities (Kaufmann & Vogl, 2018), because PGS visits "are more than just a means of monitoring production; they provide a valuable opportunity for peers to learn from each other and exchange experiences as well as for producers (and consumers when they also take part of the PGS) to engage in discussions" (Cuéllar-Padilla & Ganuza-Fernandez, 2018: 5).

The process of undertaking responsibility is strictly connected to the embeddedness of AFN and PGS experiences in the socio-ecological context and to empowerment of the community (Home et al., 2017) enabling transformational processes. AFN are spaces of transformation beyond capitalism under principles of autonomy, dignity and sufficiency (Feola, Koretskaya, & Moore, 2021) as well as sovereignty, inclusivity and grassroots empowerment (Montefrio & Johnson, 2019). Loconto & Hatanaka (2018) have documented the ability of PGS to promote a measurable empowerment of local communities, consumers and producers together, and the process of knowledge democratization in the making of a sustainability governance embedded in the local context. AFN are identifiable as grassroots innovation (Rossi, 2017) and, in particular, "these experiences re-significate food and related practices, create counter-narratives to the

dominant ones and enact concrete alternatives, as well as develop a collective agency to consolidate and spread their innovation. This grassroots innovation provides a representation of the embeddedness of the concept of commons in our society, as an ethical principle of organisation that structures every area of social and economic life, as opposed to the individualism, utilitarianism and profit maximisation that drive the neoliberal capitalist model" (Rossi, Coscarello, & Biolghini, 2021: 22).

■ Results and discussion

Institutional stakeholders´ perspective

Evidence has been collected around three main topics: (1) the capacity of PGS to support food sovereignty and relationship between food sovereignty, (2) the possibility of considering PGS as collective knowledge, and (3) the transformative potential of PGS.

Considering the first aspect, while one person stated that she has never thought about PGS in relation to Food Sovereignty (FS), all other responders said that, in their opinion, PGS is a tool for FS at least in the Global South, thanks to its embeddedness in society at the local level (Rossi, Cascarello, and Biolghini, 2021). In particular Slow Food said:

> *Absolutely, I think that if we were able to relocate the food system in the Global North, we would probably not be so dependent on the exploitation of the resources of the South where the power games are very different from those in the North, because the availability of money in the North gives power over the populations of the South … Making communities more involved around the food network ... if it were possible to make it a widespread system, it would give a robust boost.*

The Mountain Partnership Secretariat of the UN works almost exclusively in the Global South, and puts the question in terms of considering the Food Sovereignty of the Global South as a precondition for fostering FS in the Global North: if countries in the Global South were to concentrate more on producing food for their internal local markets, the Global North would be forced to produce food for itself. In the Global North PGS are much less widespread, and such a change could push their diffusion forward, reducing the capacity of industrial capitalist farming to penetrate traditional spaces (Uleri, 2019) and making space for alternatives (Feola, 2019). One Mountain Partnership informant said:

> *I believe that the Global South should not serve to supply the Global North with food, I find the situations I have visited personally absurd, even among the most virtuous experiences, where for the communities*

that produce food, it is considered a commodity, not even food because it is something they wouldn't eat, certainly not in the quantities they produce, it is cash crops, produced only for export; then they are forced to buy food from other countries of absolutely poor quality.

Regarding the communing nature of establishing and running a PGS, all those interviewed responded positively but without the capacity to go into the concept in any depth. To some extent it has to do with the symbolic value of food, deeply transformed by multinational branding (Weis, 2010) and decolonized by alternative food networks and their tools, such as PGS (Levkoe et al., 2019b). The most elaborate answer came from the Mountain Partnership:

We consider social capital, relations between people, a common good, to the extent that people work together for a common goal that is an intangible common good.

The transformative potential of PGS is strongly recognized by all actors, with different connotations. One peculiarity is the fact that in PGS, unlike in TPC, striving for improvement is enhanced even when a farmer is not fully in compliance with the standards. This is a strong supporting factor for transforming the whole context and includes actors that would otherwise stay apart, so the striving for improvement is enhanced in the direction of community building (Hruschka, Kaufmann, and Vogl, 2022). On the other hand, it must be said that PGS have existed for a long time but they have not succeeded in bringing about a wider and more generalized change in practices and policies in the food chain.

The training offered to farmers and consumers within the PGS process is valuable for transforming their habits and mindsets (Levkoe et al. 2019b) but have little impact on people not included in the process, considering that conventional certification recognizes the adaptation to certain processes. PGS have a holistic and agroecological approach with practices at a much broader and deeper level and therefore much more closely linked to an agroecological vision than a strictly organic one. The processes must be placed within a system, there are several different experiences not all linked to the PGS, but also to rural unions, to experiences of organization of indigenous peoples, agroecology, many movements that are close but do not necessarily overlap.

Slow Food underscores in particular how the process of participatory certification is transformative of itself (Kaufmann, Hruschka, and Vogl, 2020):

The process itself is the important part, it is a group that first of all understands the rules that you want to give, respecting a more than that

regulation, the fact of knowing that we are all on the same page, we start from the same needs because we decided them together; but once you get there, you create added value for the whole community, understand exactly what happens in the field and in the farms, there is a sharing of knowledge to better understand the needs of a category.

Participants´ perspective

According to the participants, the political dimension of PGS is connected to practices of co-design and co-production (I2, according to Elsen, 2018), the possibility to maximize the human contribution to agriculture in contrast to industrial agri-food systems (I6, according to Uleri 2019 and Feola et al., 2021) and to claim the right to safe and wholesome food for everyone (I8, according to Lowder et al., 2021).

PGS question, and partially try to unmake, the agri-food system's mechanisms by widening the range of issues to be considered, by creating a direct and personal relationship between consumers and producers, and by keeping the system open and welcoming to those with a willingness to improve.

In the case of Pecora Brogna PGS, PGS draws attention to aspects, such as animal wellbeing, often ignored by TPC. Another aspect is labour issues. Organic TPC carry out no controls on working conditions while several PGS add specific limitations and checks over this aspect:

We consider it [subordinate work] compatible but we encourage partnership relationships with respect to subordinate work. These things are not taken into account by conventional certification. The producer for us is the one who works the land and the fact of owning it does not entitle the owner of the land to define himself as a producer. A person who owns the land but makes wage earners work it is not a producer, if he works alongside five employees he is a minority producer, who produces 20%, it is not compatible with the path we are pursuing.

(I4)

A relationship of trust is the basis of any trade, and in the case of PGS it rests on a personal and direct knowledge of consumers and producers, through a community taking responsibility for the certification (see Uleri, 2018). To establish and develop a PGS the community has to learn

what it means when we talk about ecological, organic agriculture. It is the community that takes care of it and does not delegate it to a third party.

(I7)

By contrast, TPC controls may be easily bypassed, creating mistrust (I5), particularly for those adopting organic production only because of its higher profitability, while

> *in the PGS, every time I go to the market I sell because the others guarantee for me, the system is based on the trust between us, and between us and those who come to buy. I know that if my neighbour does something wrong the whole system can collapse, my farm is 80% dependent on the PGS, I can't risk it collapsing*
>
> *(I6)*

PGS aims include enlargement and the involvement of new farmers, keeping open the possibility for others to join. In practice this means that farmers not fully adhering to PGS principles may enter into something like a conversion process during which they can adjust their practices in order to conform to the PGS norms. PGS are based on

> *the idea that it is a common path of improvement; no one says no and closes the door to a relationship, but a dialogue is established in order to welcome the farm, the PGS has a generative purpose*
>
> (I7)

And it is

> *not a vertical control mechanism but a social and horizontal one, there is no need to hide, but only to discuss issues; there are no rules brought in from 'the other'; there is a collective critical reading of the social and rural reality. This makes everyone grow. There are people who have approached the PGS without knowing its political value and who have then gradually become involved. There are those who continue to feel judged by 'the other', which is not the case. There is horizontal and cross-cutting social control, you are controlled as much as you control*
>
> *(I8)*

Addressing directly the question of the transformative capacity of PGS (Feola, 2019; Feola, Koretskaya and Moore, 2021), the answers differ greatly, ranging from drastic pessimism to complete confidence. One key point that emerged is the need for institutional involvement, which is largely missing, in order to exit the niche by changing

> *the point of view [of decision makers]. Currently the agricultural land cultivated across the planet meets the food needs of the people who live there. If there are people dying of hunger it is for political reasons […] If we think about cli-*

mate change, a large part of the responsibility lies with agriculture, but there are a series of problems that lead back to the problem of managing power. It is obvious that if the loans go to agricultural enterprises that produce in a certain way, then small and virtuous ones are penalized'

(I4)

even though

overturning this [the agro-industrial] paradigm within these supply chains, I think is not even a utopia, it is an impossible operation because it goes exactly against the exploitation of soil for agri-food use by large producers that use chemicals and greenhouses, they spoil the land with these greenhouses that are horrendous to see, fertilize with chemicals, indeed we could say that chemical producers and pharmaceutical companies are one and the same

(I2)

Others make a more practical point, they suggest starting from a concrete action, something practical like the production of local wheat and bread (I3), and keeping the economy embedded in local society, considering that

the PGS works at the territorial level, everyone can go and check if one is organic or not, realize how it is and realize what lies behind a product, how much work is behind it

(I5)

And

it is based on relationships, it is a completely different paradigm. It is revolutionary, it is radically different from the large-scale retail system, therefore it is a very radical change. I also think it must be authentic, it cannot come down from above, it is created from below, it can be helped by legislation that can recognize it, the system is held up without any official help

(I6)

Finally, others focus on the empowerment of the community (Elsen 2018; Rossi 2017), considering in particular the capacity of PGS to drive knowledge and awareness of what organic, sustainable and ecological agriculture means (I7, see Akram-Lodhi 2021), or the fact that

it restores an active role that has been completely lost. In any sphere of production and consumption everything is delegated and only the final price is looked at, while a critical consumer asks himself questions about

price formation. And then people have a chance to speak at assemblies, many approached as farmers, many had no idea of an assembly as a place for collective decisions

(I8)

Ultimately, PGS seem to make space for strong communities, capable of being active players in the construction of their futures (I9) even in open, critical opposition to the mainstream imaginary around food and agriculture (van Oers et al., 2023).

■ Final remarks: theoretical reflections and empirical evidence

The nine PGS experiences investigated in this study provide evidence of an active and proactive micro-level which, with "mutable" specific societal systems, contributes to influencing – from the local agrarian and related exchange contexts– the real evolution of modern globalized capitalist societies. For its stability, capitalism has a constant need for capital accumulation; however, as already stated, it is far from being a linear process, and, to overcome its crisis (e.g. shortage of natural resources, land, and so on), it needs to expand in contexts and/or territories and societal contexts not primarily dominated by capitalist relations, in order to acquire raw materials, for example (Glassman, 2006). As Harvey's observes, "capitalism internalizes cannibalistic as well as predatory and fraudulent practices" (2013: 148), and presents enclosure of the commons as one of the forms of accumulation through which the Global North dispossesses the Global South. According to Luxemburg (1968), this concerns the relations between capitalism and the non-capitalist modes of production which start making their appearance on the international stage with methods such as colonial policy, international loan systems or land grabbing practices. In this respect, the PGS initiatives investigated by this study, with their local focalization, are an attempt to rebalance North-South relations around food; they represent a dismissal of the "organic link" between a trajectory of "accumulation by dispossession" and a "global expanded reproduction" (Harvey, 2013). This attempt can be directly expressed at the institutional level, as seen in the Slow Food and Mountain Partnership interviews, as well as become an indirect outcome of the day-to-day practice of grassroot territorial experiences. These nine initiatives represent an effort towards "building an alternative while a very dynamic dominant system exists and is co-produced" (Jansen, 2014: 6), rather than just waiting until the old system collapses under its own contradictions.

Though aware of the limitations of this study, in terms of time span covered and number of participants involved as well as its particular theoretical approach, the attempt has been to offer a reflection on the potentialities and criticalities of agricultural practices that differ from neoliberal agro-industrial

modes. The potential for economic sustainability of these practices has not been fully investigated, nor for the social reproduction of models strongly diverging from the mainstream. The rural-urban and food-territory nexus has also not been investigated, resulting in an analytical limitation that calls for further development of the subject. Further research should be developed in order to understand not only their long-term survival, but also their ability to avoid isomorphism and co-optation. On the policy side, then, it will be interesting to observe how decision makers will interact with concepts like food sovereignty and food justice or react to the call for locally-grounded governance of food chains in times of environmental crisis.

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