

## **Name of CSA: GASAP Network (Reseau des GASAP)**

**Location:** Belgium, mainly in the Brussels area

**Production method:** Agroecology, organic and peasant agriculture

**Number of producers involved:** 44 producers are in the network, 30 are in the PGS process.

**Number of eaters involved:** Around 75 groups and 5600 eaters are part of the GASAP network

**Type of products:** Vegetables, fruits, grains, mushrooms, livestock products, honey, juices, pasta, bread, beer, kombucha, chocolate etc.

**Type of market:** CSA

**Starting date of the PGS initiative:** 2016

### **Rationale and Context**

The GASAP Network was founded in 2012 and unites around 75 Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiatives in Belgium, most of them located in the Brussels area. The term GASAP stands for Solidarity Buying Group (Groupes d'Achats Solidaires de l'Agriculture Paysanne) and represents a form of CSA where groups of citizens or "eaters" commit to taking part in the production of a small-scale farmer for a full production season, by paying for their share of the harvest in advance. The farmer, in exchange, commits to deliver on a weekly or biweekly basis, his or her products to the group in a predefined location. In recent years a number of small-scale processors (e.g. bakeries) have also been included in the system. The role of the GASAP network is to support producers by facilitating the interactions between groups of eaters and producers, assist in creating new groups and providing support for advocacy in different political arenas. The network's long-term objective is also to improve the solidarity aspect of the partnerships between consumers and farmers.

PGS development in the GASAP Network started in 2016 in the framework of the COSYFood project, although discussions about PGS had started already several years earlier. PGS was seen as an approach to improve and consolidate the relationships between stakeholders in the network, to strengthen the common vision and the continuous improvement of production and consumption practices.

Some farmers were interested in PGS also as an alternative to third-party organic certification, which they criticized as being insufficiently oriented towards agroecology. As most of GASAP farmers have third-party organic certification, the quality control aspect of PGS has never been central in the discussion.

After some years of implementation, PGS is now perceived as a valuable tool that has helped to address some of the challenges inherent to the network. Specifically, PGS has contributed to improve the relationships between producers in the network by creating space for exchange and sharing of experiences and difficulties. PGS has helped eaters and producers to communicate transparently, to better connect and understand each other's struggles and difficulties. The flexibility and inclusiveness of PGS is appreciated as it allows stakeholders to take ownership and adapt the system so it fits to the needs and realities on the ground.

### **Stakeholder Involvement in the Set-up and Operation of the PGS**

The PGS initiative was developed over a period of 3 years between 2016 and 2019, with funding from the COSYFood project which covered the work of a small project team including one dedicated employee for the network. Volunteers also helped and, right from the beginning, eaters and producers were regularly involved and consulted.

After a review of existing PGS initiatives and a survey of members (both producers and eaters) about their expectations and constraints, a draft PGS model was designed by the project team and discussed more broadly with active members, producers, and at the network's General Assembly. The development of the standards and procedures was then carried out with intensive input from a small group of volunteer producers and eaters. Once this was completed, the tools tested on a small number of vegetable growers from the network.

Today, a small team of 2 part time staff members (for one full time equivalent) takes care of the PGS coordination, which entails: scheduling and organizing all farm visits, organizing events and trainings, as well

as communication and sensibilization activities. Considerable time is also invested in following-up on recommendations and observations after the farm visits, to make sure stakeholders (producers and GASAP) are well supported.

Consumers occupy an important role in the GASAP PGS: their participation in the process is considered essential for the guarantee system to effectively go beyond internal controls. Actually, the involvement of consumers here exceeds what is found in most PGS initiatives, as consumers are also object of evaluations and reviews. Indeed, it is not just the producers, but also the consumers who commit to the principles of the network and the charter. The standards include sections that are specific to consumers and which are also evaluated as part of the PGS process.

Broad participation in the development and implementation of the PGS has been a core priority for the GASAP network, in particular to minimize challenges related to stakeholder engagement and motivation. Despite these efforts, it can be challenging to motivate stakeholders, especially consumers, to take active roles, so a lot of time from the coordination teams goes into contacting stakeholders and carrying out follow-up activities.

### **Production, marketing, philosophy and production principles**

A total of 44 producers, out of which 20 are vegetable producers, are part of the GASAP network. The wide range of products includes vegetables, fruits, grains, mushrooms, livestock products, honey, pasta, juices, bread, beer, kombucha, chocolate and forest products like birch juice. In the beginning, participation in the PGS was restricted to vegetable growers, but an expansion of the PGS to other scopes started in 2021. By the end of 2022 it is foreseen that 25 members will have gone through the PGS process, including a small number of livestock producers and processors. Producer members are not limited to sell to GASAPs and are free to use and build other marketing channels.

The network's charter sets out the main elements, objectives and commitments to be followed by all members, producers and consumers. These 5 fundamental principles, inspired by and closely related to agroecology, organic agriculture and family farming, are at the center of the GASAP philosophy: peasant agriculture, agroecological practices, solidarity with and between producers, education and sensibilization about food systems, transformation of the agri-food model.

Two distinct sets of standards are used: the basic and the aspirational standards. The basic standards indicate the minimum that everyone must respect. Criteria linked to production include organic agriculture, local food, peasant agriculture, seasonality, transparency and respect of social rights. For eaters, the compulsory aspects cover long-term commitment, self-management and pre-payment.

The aspirational standards provide a reference towards which all the actors of the sector could or should evolve. There is no requirement to comply with the aspirational standard. What is verified and discussed is the willingness of stakeholders to evolve in the direction that the aspirational standard shows. Both the compliance with the basic standard and the willingness to evolve towards the aspirational standard are verified through the PGS process.

In addition, two aspects are of high importance, as they are founding objectives of GASAP: improvement of the economic situation of farmers and access to quality food at an affordable price for consumers. Finding a price scheme that is fair and feasible for both producers and consumers is a big challenge, and according to the experience of GASAP, requires commitment and intensive discussions between both parties. The PGS initiative provides additional tools and processes to structure these interactions and reflections.

### **Functioning and Structure**

The commitment to the charter and the values of the network is a precondition for membership. Organic certification is not required, but the usage of agro-chemicals is a clear exclusion criterion and only small-scale family farms and processors are accepted. For verification of their eligibility to join the network, all applicant producers are visited by GASAP staff members. This process is considered a part of the regular GASAP membership application process and is kept separated from the PGS process.

In 2021, participation in the PGS process has been officially included in the charter of the network and is now expected from all producer members. Due to different reasons, nevertheless, not all producers have to go through the PGS process for the moment. They still participate in some of the PGS activities, as all are expected to join at least one field visit each year.

The PGS process is regularly reviewed and updated based on the experience. At this moment it consists of a 3-phase process: the pre-visit phase, the annual field visit and the post-visit phase.

In the first phase, pre-visit questionnaires are filled out by the producer. The questions concern production aspects, distribution and marketing methods, but also well-being, job satisfaction and profitability.

During the second phase, all consumers linked to the producer through their GASAP are invited and encouraged to join the field visit. It is required that at least one producer from the network, who has a similar production, also participates in the visit. Producers are also encouraged to invite all their eaters and colleagues that are not part of the network. To enable participation by as many consumers as possible, field visits are usually scheduled on weekends. The visits are structured in three parts: in the first 1 to 1.5 hours, the producer shows the visitors around and explains about the production. Visitors may ask questions and verify information from the pre-visit questionnaire. In the second part, participants take 5 to 10 minutes to reflect on themselves and their practices and to note their doubts, remarks, ideas or questions. A diagram for aspirational topics, with versions for producers and for eaters, helps to structure this reflection, which can be done individually or in groups of stakeholders (producers, GASAP, network representatives). In the third part of the field visit, participants take turns to share their reflections on what is good, what could be improved, what are the obstacles, what kind of support could be provided and what the next steps could be. Conclusions from this reflection are collected and included in the field visit report.

The field visit report is prepared by the team that conducted the visit, summarizing the visit, the results of the discussions and the list of concrete actions for producers and for the groups. This report includes a part that can be shared on the GASAP network's website or during the GA, and a more or less confidential part, depending on the agreements with the producer. This second part can include binding recommendations for the producer (in case of deep divergences with the Charter for example) or expected long term changes. The post-visit phase includes follow-up on the recommendations which may take place the whole year round and again the focus is on providing support the producers and the GASAPs to help them to follow the recommendations and to achieve their goals.

The most common issues identified refer to the way communication takes place between producers and the GASAP, and to problems with the governance model. Low income of producers and instable access to land are also common issues. It is however unlikely that the field visits detect serious non-compliances that would lead to an exclusion of the producer from the network, as the application process is considered solid enough to approve as members only those that are committed to the values of the network. Also, the network and relationship between actors is so close, that serious problems or tensions become visible and can be addressed any time, during the year. Instead of a conformity verification system, the PGS rather functions as a tool to facilitate interactions, to improve practices and relationships and to support the strive for higher aspirations.

When conflicts between stakeholders do appear, the GASAP network often acts as mediator. In especially problematic situations, the Specific Support Process may be applied. This process is based on mediation and support, which are sufficient to solve problems in most cases, but it also provides a clear framework, in case the collaboration with one of the GASAP Network members should be terminated.

In addition to the PGS process as described for each individual member, there is also an annual reunion that takes place usually at the end of the year and to which all people that were involved in the field visits are invited. In this meeting which is called COMAC (Commission Mixte d'Accompagnement et de Contrôle) all visits that took place during the year are discussed, analyzed and once again verified. This step represents the possibility of assessing the results of the PGS process for consistency, to ensure equal treatment and to identify areas where tools and processes can be improved.

## **Costs and funding of set-up and operation of the program**

The GASAP Network is a non-profit organization that operated almost exclusively on a voluntary basis for some time. Thanks to the membership fees, basic functions can now be carried out by a paid network coordinator. Many activities, including the development and operation of the PGS initiative, are fully dependent on temporary and therefore unreliable public funding or volunteer efforts.

The set-up and piloting were made possible by COSYFood, a 3-year project on the sustainability of alternative food systems. This project funded the work of a small team that coordinated the development of all the PGS processes, tools still used and improved on the basis of the outcomes of the visits (as PGS is a process in constant evolution).

At the moment, the PGS operates with funds offered by the Wallonia Region, through another 2-year project which covers the costs of two staff members, for a full-time position.

During the 1.5-year funding gap between these two projects it was difficult to keep the operation of PGS operational. The Covid-19-pandemic created additional difficulties and income sources for the period after the end of the ongoing project (December 2022) are still uncertain. As a solution to the lack of reliable long-term funding for PGS, the COSYFood project had envisioned that teams of volunteers would operate the PGS initiative. However, the experience shows that it is difficult to sustain the commitment through volunteers only and paid staff members must be maintained, somehow.

In any case, charging fees for PGS certification is not under consideration: the network believes that certification should be free and not add to the burden that producers already have to carry.

## Framework

GASAP is not the only organization interested and involved in PGS in Belgium: there are several other organizations (e.g. Mouvement d'Action Paysanne, Terre-en-vue, Cocoricooop, Agricover, all being part of the movement Agroecology In Action) and together they have formed a national PGS Platform on to regularly meet and exchange. Some producers work with several organizations and one objective of the platform is to define compatible processes, approved by the PGS initiatives in the country, so that the results/conclusions of PGS visits carried out by one of the organizations are recognized by the other organizations, avoiding duplication of visits, or even better, combining visits. This pooling of networks, beyond its practical aspect for producers, should also allow for a better resilience of PGS processes (especially on the critical point of the involvement of eaters/consumers). In the long run, the cooperation is expected to facilitate a wider recognition of the PGS, especially by public authorities.

## Any additional information or advice?

Make sure to include the eaters and producers into the process right from the beginning and take enough time to build the processes with them. Otherwise it will be very hard to reach people and to obtain their interest later.

Make sure that the people taking care of the PGS are competent, that they know the reality of the producers, have interpersonal and facilitation skills. Make sure the tools you develop are easy to use.

## Sources

- GASAP PGS Guide (2019 version)
- GASAP Charter (2021, version)
- GASAP website: <https://gasap.be>
- Documents from the 2022 General Assembly of the GASAP Network
- "Eat, farm and participate: experimenting with PGS in Belgium", Christophe Nothomb, GASAP, The Global PGS Newsletter from IFOAM – Organics International, November & December 2018
- "Synergies between Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) and Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS)", Magali Jacques, Gaëlle Bigler, Christophe Nothomb and Jocelyn Parot. EatingCraft International project. 2019
- PGS for GASAP from URGENCI website: <https://hub.urgenci.net/beacons/gasap-participatory-guarantee-system/>

- Interview and additional information obtained from Francesca Baldin, responsible for PGS in the GASAP Network