

Name of Initiative: Solidarity Economy District of Parma (DES Parma)

Location: Parma and the surrounding region of Emilia, 1 producer in region of Romagna, Italy

Production method: Organic (additional core values: solidary economy, enhancement of the local dimension, prioritization of local resources)

Number of producers involved: 57 producers certified

Number of eaters involved: Data not available. 31 GAS, 1 organic farmers market (MercatiAmo) and 1 food coop (Oltrefood) are involved in the PGS

Type of products: Fruits and vegetables, cereals, meat and cured meats, eggs and poultry, cheeses, honey and hive products, fish and fish products, jams, preserves, juices, wine.

Starting date: 2013

Rationale and Context

The Solidarity Economy District of Parma (*DES - Distretto di Economia Solidale*) was created in 2008 as a structure to enhance local production and to exchange quality goods and services, that are respectful of people and the environment and sold at a fair price in and around the city of Parma. Consumers organized in "Solidary Buying Groups" (*GAS - Gruppi d'Acquisto Solidale*), and the producers they buy from, play an essential role within the membership of DES Parma. A total of 31 GAS are part of the network. GAS are commonly considered to be the Italian equivalent to CSA, with the specificity that GAS membership only includes consumers and that the scope of activities and marketing channels can be broader compared to CSAs models present in other countries.

PGS development in DES Parma started in 2013, initiated by engaged producers willing to explore a new approach to certification, to differentiate themselves from producers who are not committed to the values of solidarity economy, and to enable consumers to learn about their principles and agricultural practices. The aim was to establish a system that would be simple and where participation would not mean an additional burden on the producers.

Today, PGS certified producers in the DES Parma network appreciate the PGS as it enhances their feeling of being part of a family. Through the PGS, a culture of support and cooperation has been created, and exchange of knowledge takes place regularly, in particular during farm visits. Participation in the PGS also gives access to additional marketing channels that encourage or even require participating producers to join the PGS: the organic farmers market "MercatiAmo" and the Foodcoop "Oltrefood", in Parma.

About 60% of the producers in this PGS initiative are also third-party certified organic. A few producers who only sell through GAS have decided to discontinue their third-party organic certification after joining the PGS, as they were unhappy with the bureaucracy and felt they no longer need it to maintain consumers' trust.

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

The producers who launched the PGS initiative back in 2013 knew each other through their participation in the DES Parma network, and were already working together to some extent. It was under the lead of these farmers that the initial documents and processes were developed. The Solidarity Forum (Forum Solidarietà) was an early supporter during the set-up phase, providing human resources for project planning and reporting, general organization, facilitation of meetings, coordination of visits, information and promotion.

The development of this PGS initiative can be divided into three main phases: PGS design, from February to June 2013; PGS piloting, from July 2013 to June 2014, and chemical and bacteriological analyses from July to December 2014. During the design phase, 16 meetings with an average of 15 participants were organized, and the basic functioning was defined, including the guiding principles, the modalities of participation, and the initial sheets for collecting information from the producers (before and during the farm visit).

During the piloting phase, 17 farm visits were carried out, and processes and tools were improved. It was also during this phase that a dedicated PGS page on the DES Parma website was created, where information about the producers could be publicly accessible. Finally, 40 samples from produce and irrigation

water were collected and analyzed for various parameters. Currently, laboratory testing is no longer done due to lack of funding, but in the initial stage of the PGS development these tests were important for trust building and in order to shake off worries about contamination from an incinerator plant located in the proximity of some producers.

The day-to-day management is carried out by the DES Parma PGS team, which is currently composed of two paid staff members, one secretary and one technician, and five volunteers: one DES Parma board member, two producers, and two representatives from the Foodcoop Oltrefood. The PGS team takes care of processing producer's applications, verifying producers' commitments as well as the consistency and continuity of their participation in the initiative. Decisions about PGS management are taken by this team. For high-level decisions the board of DES Parma, composed of 13 members representing the various GAS and producers, can be consulted. In some cases, a consultation with the whole network may be carried out. Certification decisions are taken by the farm visit team, after each visit.

Volunteers can be involved in various activities, such as in the farm visits, where producers and consumers accompany a peer-producer and a technician, who leads the visit. The decision to involve a paid technician to follow all farm visits was based on the perception that this would ensure consistence and high quality of the inspections.

DES Parma is an association with consumers and producers at the core of the membership. Consumers play an important role for PGS implementation, influencing the vision and values of the organization, funded through their membership fees. Direct participation of consumers in PGS processes takes place mainly during farm visits, to which all consumers in the network are openly invited. However, according to the experience of DES Parma, it can be difficult to motivate consumers to take active roles in a PGS initiative. Consumers often report that they are too busy to participate in the verification visits directly but trust that the PGS team and the producers do a good job. Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic it has become even more difficult to involve and motivate consumers to participate in the farm visits.

Production, marketing, philosophy and production principles

Today 57 producers are certified through the DES Parma PGS. They are all located in the region of Emilia in proximity to Parma, except for one apricot producer who is located in the region of Romagna, where production conditions for apricots are better. The PGS started with a focus on vegetables, but today the produce range includes fruits and vegetables, cereals, meat and cured meats, eggs and poultry, cheeses, honey and hive products, fish and fish products, jams, preserves, juices and wine.

Producers certified through this PGS initiative are free sell their produce through any channel they prefer. Since the GAS approach is at the core of the network, most produce is sold through the various GAS, using an online purchasing software called GASAperto which organizes and coordinates orders.

"MercatiAmo" is another marketing channel linked to DES Parma that exists since 2015. This organic farmers' market was initiated by various GAS from the region in order to provide the opportunity also to non-GAS members to benefit from the solidarity economy approach. The market is now running three times a week. The prerequisite for selling at this market is third party organic certification but additionally farmers are expected to join the PGS. The reason is that the market wants to create a community and bases its values on the principles of the PGS, which are perceived as superior to that of third-party organic certification. There is also Oltrefood, a Foodcoop in Parma which is also interested in PGS and has encouraged some producers to join the initiative.

The core values of DES Parma are stated in the charter adopted when the association was founded in 2007, and comprise the following themes, which are fundamental also for the PGS initiative: ecological sustainability, fair and socially sustainable economy, the enhancement of the local dimension, and prioritization of production and consumption of local resources. Organic third-party certification is desirable, but not a requirement for membership. Conventional producers can also join the PGS if they show a commitment to move towards sustainable agricultural practices. Nevertheless, experience has shown that it is unlikely for conventional producers to complete the PGS certification process Parma as their commitment to the values does not match the high expectations.

Functioning and Structure

The application form and the farm visits are the main PGS implementation tools. Interactions are much more frequent than the annual farm visits and much of the verification of the producers' commitment as well as trust building take place informally, in the course of a year, complementing the formal parts of the PGS processes.

Through the application form, producers commit to respect the Charter of DES Parma, to receive visits at their farm and join farm visits to other producers, to regularly provide updated information about their farms and to participate in meetings and trainings events.

During the farm visit, the information provided in the application form is verified. The filled application form and the farm visit report template are used by the farm visit team, composed of one technician, at least one peer-producer and other producers or consumers willing to join as volunteers. During the visit various aspects are reviewed and discussed that are not strictly linked to the organic certification, like environmental considerations or energy sources.

There is no strict schedule for the farm visits. Visits every two years to all certified farms are desirable, however most producers receive formal farm visits less often, due to the low level of funding of the PGS activities. One compulsory visit take place for all new farms before they can be approved in the PGS. If there are serious needs for improvement, the farm will be visited again after some time, often one year later, to verify whether the issues have been addressed. Other farms are visited if issues come up that demand verification, such as when the production scope is expanded or if the farmer drops out of third-party organic certification. This irregularity and the low frequency of visits is feasible and does not compromise trust, because there are other frequent opportunities to meet the producers and to talk to them outside the farm visits.

After the farm visit, a report is written by the farm visit team, including recommendations for improvements. Then, a meeting is organized during which the report is presented and discussed with the producer. The final decision on certification is made by the farm visit team but in the absence of the visited producer. All PGS certified farmers are listed on the DES Parma website and the application form along with the farm visit reports are uploaded there and remain available to the public.

It has happened that some producers were suspended or left the PGS initiative. The biggest hurdle is however for producers to get PGS certification, in the first place. Participation requires producers to show a strong commitment towards values that in many ways exceeds what is expected in third-party organic certification. There were several producers who started the application process, but dropped out before completion when they realized the mismatch between their own commitment and the requirements of the PGS initiative.

The DES Parma PGS team might reach out to producers outside farm visits in cases of low level of involvement or issues with trust. In such cases, meetings are arranged to discuss whether the producers still feel committed to the PGS initiative, to address the problem and to rebuild trust.

Costs and funding of set-up and funding of the program

Volunteer efforts and funding from membership contributions are the main resources available for operating the DES Parma PGS Program.

During the set-up phase, most of the work was carried out through volunteer contributions with a small amount of funding for administrative tasks from a project of the Solidarity Forum (Forum Solidarietà). Also, the lab testing that was carried out in the early stages of the project was funded through external sources.

Today DES Parma relies almost exclusively on annual membership contributions from producers and consumers to maintain and implement the PGS. The annual contributions are of 50 Euros for producers, and 10 Euro for consumers, per family, inside the GAS. DES Parma is not intending at this moment to introduce fees specifically for PGS certification. Participation in the PGS was offered for free, from the beginning, and there is concern about how the introduction of fees would be perceived now.

Expenses refer mainly to remuneration of two positions: the technician who is hired to join all the farm visits and the DES Parma secretary, who is responsible also for the general administration of the PGS (scheduling visits, supporting the producers, processing applications, etc.).

Lack of funding is a major challenge for the operation of the PGS. It is still possible to keep the program running and functional at the minimum, but the possibilities for implementation of activities and further development of the system are limited.

DES Parma experienced difficulties accessing public funds although the legal framework on the local level favors initiatives such as DES Parma. Parma has become an organic district in 2019 (more info about these can be accessed here: www.organicdistricts.eu). There has also been passed a Regional Law on the Solidarity Economy. DES Parma contributed to the writing of this law which recognizes PGS on the local level. To obtain recognition under this law is currently not an advocacy priority, but may bring opportunities for the future.

Sources

- DES Parma Website: <https://www.desparma.org>
- Interview and additional information obtained from Francesca Marconi, President of DES Parma.