

Name of the initiative: Beijing Farmers Market



Location: Beijing, China

Production method: mostly organic

Number of producers involved: around 40 farmers

Number of eaters involved: over 10 thousand families are served by the market

Type of products: vegetable and animal products, processed foods

Type of market: farmers market

Starting date of the PGS: 2013

Rationale and context

The Beijing Farmers Market is a social enterprise that provides a platform for local organic farmers to connect directly to consumers in Beijing. The market operates two permanent community stores and organizes farmers markets multiple times a week, in different parts of the city. The founding members were driven by concerns about the impact of conventional, chemical/synthetic input intensive farming methods on the environment, and the decline of rural areas.

In 2010, when the market started, the first farmers to sell their products were well-trusted pioneers of organic farming in the region. Once the market started to become popular and more producers wanted to join, the need for a guarantee system arose. Criteria were required to decide which producers could sell at the market and truthfulness of their claims needed to be verified. To ask for organic third-party certification was not considered an option, because organic certification fees in China are expensive and especially the small and diversified farmers, whom the market wants to serve, cannot afford them. None of the farmers currently selling at the market has third-party organic certification.

It was at a general meeting in March 2013 that stakeholders took the official decision to establish a PGS for the Beijing Farmers Market. They believed that way to ensure a successful initiative, able to compete with other markets claiming to offer healthy and natural food, was to have a transparent, systematic and standardized system of quality assurance. The PGS was also welcomed as an additional mechanism to increase the involvement of producers and consumers in the management of the market and to enable them to take roles in product quality assurance, knowledge creation and culture building. Furthermore, they believed that producers that are new to organic agriculture, but committed to learn, could be effectively supported to improve their practices through the PGS.

Stakeholder involvement in the operation of the market

The market started its operations in September 2010, on the initiative of foreign artists. In the early years, the development and organization of the market was almost exclusively taken up by volunteers. Since 2013, employees take care of the coordination and run the community stores, but volunteers continue to play an important role.

The management of the market and decision making is carried out by staff in consultation with producers and consumers. Originally, it had been considered to operate the market as a cooperative with joint ownership and management by producers, consumers and employees, but the idea was abandoned due to complexity and bureaucratic hurdles. Also, the set-up of a management committee composed of key stakeholders failed due to difficulties to mobilize consumers and experts. Instead, other structures were put in place to ensure participation and representation of stakeholder perspectives in decision-making. For example, at least once per year, stakeholders gather for general meetings, which have become important moments to discuss strategic issues.

More than 10,000 families in Beijing benefit from the market. At least 1,000 people are regular consumers, showing up at the market almost every week to do groceries for their families. Some consumers have gained a thorough understanding of organic farming and may speak on the behalf of the market at meetings or events. Some have become volunteers at the market and are watching the stalls, editing social media posts

or providing professional advice. Others have become loyal farming volunteers who help out with harvests, planting or other farming work, sometimes bringing along the whole family. Finally, others have become regular participants in farm visits.

Experiences from the development of the PGS

Even before the official decision to develop a PGS was taken, the market already had some experience with standard setting and farm visits. In the beginning, producers who wanted to sell at the market had to agree to the philosophy of organic agriculture and denounce the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, antibiotics and hormones. This was a simple, one-sentence requirement. Volunteers occasionally visited the farms to review them and have a discussion with the producers about their production practices. They would often ask on social media if there were consumers who could support by driving them to carry out the visits. This was not only useful to solve the problem of transportation, but also to get "consumer witnesses" at the farm visits. Being open, transparent and encouraging interaction have been part of the strategy to build consumer-trust and to assure producer-commitment to the market's principles from the beginning.

In autumn 2011 a first attempt was made to develop a more refined and professional production standard. For this purpose, farmers were invited to draft requirements for different productions that could serve as bases for further discussion and consultation. During a meeting with all farmers from the market, conflicting views became apparent. Some farmers wanted to set the standard higher, while those who were less familiar with organic principles and practices wanted to set it lower. At the end of an exhausting process of deliberation, it was decided to keep the one-sentence principle.

After the decision to develop the PGS, a dedicated staff member was hired. The first six months of the PGS development were spent designing a farm information and registration form, persistently following up with the then involved farmers (about 30) to make sure they all filled it out. The information was verified during subsequent farm visits. Through this form, detailed information about all farms and their production was available in writing for the first time. The notes developed into farm management files, that are kept for each farm at the market and that are used as reference for both monitoring and providing support.

The next step in PGS development was to professionalize the methodology and organization of the farm visits. The frequency of visits was increased and checklists were developed as a tool to serve the farm visit teams. But many weaknesses existed in the early system and many problems had to be overcome: the agricultural knowledge of the employees at the market was limited to the principles of organic agriculture and it was difficult for them to judge about production specificities and to draw conclusions when disagreements occurred. Consumers often had even less technical knowledge. Technical expertise came almost exclusively from peer-producers who were often difficult to mobilize for visits to other farms. Indeed, it became an increasingly labor-intensive task to repeatedly contact producers to convince them to participate.

This experience made the staff realize three things: Firstly, consumers and staff needed training for conducting farm visits. Secondly, a system to promote knowledge sharing and mutual support between producers was necessary, to make the participation in the visits more attractive to them. Thirdly, consumer participation in the field visits needed to be streamlined to only include consumers that were focused on the task of assessing the farm. For consumers who were mainly interested in spending relaxed time on farms, alternative opportunities needed to be created. One novelty was also the introduction of un-announced inspections as an additional tool to deal with suspicions. The increased rigor of the farm reviews did reveal problems. Three farmers were excluded due to serious violations. They had used prohibited inputs or were found to be reselling produce that did not originate from their own farms.

Production, marketing, philosophy and production principles

Demand for healthy, organic food in Beijing is high and producers selling at the Beijing Farmers Market get excellent prices. Markets take place around three times per week in different locations around Beijing, although Covid-19 restrictions and lockdowns have caused some disruptions in the schedule between 2020 and 2022. At the beginning of each month, market locations and times are announced on social media. At popular locations, up to 4,000 consumers visit the market in one day.

About 40 farmers and a dozen small artisanal processors are affiliated with the market. Due to the popularity, many producers are interested to join and there are hundreds of them on a waiting list. Only an average of about 10% of producers that are reviewed for admission to the market are found to comply with the standards and are approved.

The Beijing Farmers Market works with independent small farmers and that commit themselves to organic principles and do not use chemical fertilizers, pesticide, or genetically modified seeds, and who treat their animals humanely. The affiliated farmers benefit from a platform to sell their produce and receive a fair income in return. The main priorities are building relationships and community, providing training to farmers, as well as the education and sensibilization of consumers about why it is important to buy local produce from small-scale organic farmers. For this purpose, the market organizes events, celebrations and lectures.

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

The Beijing Farmers Market works on a non-profit basis. Main funding sources are a small margin taken from products sold at the community stores and fees collected from the producers who sell at the market. These producer fees are composed of monthly contributions, depending on the type of operation, and a small percentage from the sales at the market.

Due to its popularity, the Beijing Farmers Market sometimes gets paid or receives other benefits for agreeing to hold the market at a certain location. Shopping centers or real estate developers like to invite the market in order to achieve a higher passenger flow and for raising the reputation and brand of the location. The first community store, for example, was opened in 2013 as favorable rental conditions were offered to the market for moving into a newly developed shopping area.

Surplus revenue generated is used to run a micro-loan scheme for farmers. Through this scheme farmers can get pre-payments for their annual expenses, at the beginning of the farming season. These funds are commonly used by farmers for paying rent for the land, buy farm tools, or build greenhouses at the beginning of the year.

Sources:

English

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