



Photo: Anabell Rosas Domínguez

Participatory Guarantee Systems in action:

Building a resilient region in Mexico

Agroecological gathering to connect, share, and move forward in building the regional PGS.

In the central region of Veracruz in Mexico, a diverse network of producers, consumers, and grassroots organisations has come together to build a locally rooted, regional Participatory Guarantee System (PGS). More than a certification tool, this system fosters trust, collective learning, and agroecological resilience - reshaping how food is grown, shared, and valued.

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In the early 21st century, organic markets, known locally as *Tianguis Orgánicos*, began to emerge across different regions of Mexico. Their purpose was to offer healthy, locally sourced food while fostering connections between producers and consumers grounded in principles of social and solidarity economy. The goal was simple yet profound: to “put a face to our food.”

A bioregional alliance

The Ocelotl Ecological Market in the city of Xalapa, capital of the Mexican state of Veracruz, which is now known as the **Xalapa Agroecological Market (TAX**, by its initials in Spanish), was born in this context. From the start, it embraced the idea that organic integrity should be ensured through collaboration among all participants. At TAX and other organic markets in Mexico, participatory processes were promoted from the start, involving both growers and consumers. Visits to farms and projects were called accompaniment visits, rather than inspections, since the

intention was to foster continuous improvement through peer-to-peer feedback. This vision forms the foundation of its Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS), which aim to strengthen local systems of food production and consumption from an agroecological perspective.

Aware that these efforts could not stand alone, they sought to connect with other organisations already working in the region, using a hydrosocial watershed approach: going beyond the physical aspects of water to include social, cultural, and economic dimensions – thus fostering community involvement and the protection of territory and common goods. This led to an alliance with the Coalition of Organisations of the Jamapa-Antigua Bioregion (COBIJA), a group of seven organisations in the region that promote sustainable production alternatives. From that collaboration, the regional Participatory Guarantee System (SGPr) was born.

What we've built together

The formal construction of the SPGr began in 2021. Members of various alternative food networks, consumer collectives, markets, and producer cooperatives came together with the Xalapa Metropolitan Agroecology Training Platform (PMFAX) to reflect on the system's purpose and design. We were a part of this and asked ourselves key questions: Why build it? What role should each actor play? What criteria should guide us, considering the many dimensions of agroecology?

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From the start, trust was a core value. Over four years, we maintained this collective effort through 21 workshops and gatherings. The SPGr gradually took shape, formed by each group's principles and practices, and inspired by experiences such as the El Jilote PGS (in Jalisco) and collectives in Mexico City. We worked in stages. First, we defined the twelve guiding principles of our system. Then we developed regulatory elements, a self-assessment questionnaire, and the framework for accompaniment visits. This tool includes technical criteria for assessing agricultural, livestock, and processed food production, along with specific sections for mushroom and beekeeping activities. It also recognises the families behind each project and the ecological, social, cultural, and economic values they uphold.

We designed the procedure for granting the agro-ecological PGS label, based on three levels of assurance represented by the colors of the *Platanus mexicana* (Mexican

sycamore) leaf, an iconic tree of the cloud forest. Pilot visits to farms in three municipalities provided more than just data; they sparked valuable conversations and learning, helping us to refine the questionnaire and enhance its practical application. At the same time, we developed outreach materials and built a digital repository as a living memory of our collective process.

Why we continue

Today, as we start the first full trials of the SGPr, we observe genuine enthusiasm among participants. For many producers, this mechanism offers a broader and more formal recognition of their efforts and the care they invest in growing, processing, and distributing food through the alternative food networks in the region. This strengthens relationships with consumers, helps position their products, and expands market opportunities.

We believe that as more collectives earn the SPGr label, recognition and re-appropriation of agroecological food in our region, and in the spaces where it's made available, will continue to grow. More than just a label, the SPGr is a tool to highlight what we're already doing well, to share what we've learned, to strengthen networks, access fair markets, and ensure food that is fresh, healthy, and culturally meaningful.

Our collective learnings for agroecological resilience

The SPGr process aims to build a legitimate, locally grounded agroecological certification system tailored to our context. Over the years, we have learnt a great deal, and we'd like to share some of these lessons, which have helped guide us and may also serve others walking similar paths.

- One key insight has been the importance of respecting each group's internal pace and dynamics. Organisational autonomy is a strength, and aligning it within a collective process requires attentive listening, flexibility, and care.
- We also realised the value of identifying common ground and building shared language to facilitate collaboration across people, collectives, and territories. Agreeing on principles, defining concepts, regulating processes, and designing tools has been essential for moving forward.
- Working through committees, despite its challenges, has helped us organise the processes of evaluation, decision making, and follow-up. It has also enabled us to build collective capacities that support the sustainability of the organisation. At times, low participation in certain committees reminded us that maintaining structure requires ongoing energy and shared commitment.
- Participatory workshops have been crucial spaces for building relationships, exchanging knowledge, creating our own indicators, and reinforcing the territorial grounding of the process. There, we also learned that diversity is not an obstacle but a strength. When trust

is cultivated and the process is guided by shared goals, networks grow stronger, collective creativity flourishes, and profound changes in how we produce and consume food become possible.

This is why we believe in nurturing communities of learning and practice – spaces where each group’s experience contributes to collective reflection and empowers grassroots action. We are convinced that agroecology isn’t just something to be certified: it’s something to be lived, built collectively, and defended as a shared and contested territory.

This is just the beginning

The path ahead continues. We face challenges like time management within committees, internal communication, and the follow-up of observations. But we keep moving forward, together.

The SPGr is on its way to becoming a reliable and sustainable model, one that is socially rooted and strengthened through relationships, shared knowledge, and peer support. In a time of multiple crises, this system stands out as a living practice of transformative resilience: offering local alternatives grounded in trust, reciprocity, and care for life. ■

Meeting of producers and consumers at the Kaná Agroforest.



Photo: César Gustavo Priego Salas

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