

Eco foot prints – using people’s participation as a way forward

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For millions of organic farmers who earn their livelihoods from cultivating a host of diverse crops, much has changed for the better in the past decades. The cycle turned as natural farming gave way to chemical applications but now we again see the return of the organic way of life. Various methods of farming has been tried across eco-regions, however, the underlying element that runs through all systems of sustainable farming is the need to preserve and conserve the soil. It is accepted that this element is manifested best through organic ways of farming. Organic farming ensures that air, water and soil are unpolluted leaving the environment safe for the present and future generations. Thus, soil is considered as a living unit, one that must be preserved for a healthy earth.

The interest towards organically grown products has increased exponentially in the last decade, however the market share of these produce is still considerably low. Small organic farmers face a variety of problems. Not only do they have to compete with market forces but also ensure that their product is sold at competitive prices and brings sufficient profitable income. In India, with growing consumer concern over pesticide residues, there is a need to support and encourage organic production.

A practical system of certification and an assured market are but, two strands of the continuum that would define the future of organic foods in the modern world. Organic producers around the world have been developing methods to guarantee the organic integrity of their products for fifty years. It was increasingly felt that third party certification was not the answer in the long run due to a number of reasons, primary among them, costs and bureaucracy. Today, what are generally referred to as Third-Party Certification systems have become the dominant means of organic guarantee. While Third-Party Certification is a component in the world trade, there are downsides to the system. The inherent expense and paperwork required in a multi-level system discourages most small organic producers from being certified at all. This limits local and domestic trade as well as access to organic products. Worse yet, it limits the growth of the organic movement as a whole.

Marketing of agro-ecological products will determine to a large extent, the future of organic and ecological products. Fair trade constitutes the final link in the continuum as it will help ensure fair prices and help maintain social and environmental standards related to the production of these goods. It is at this stage, that interest of producers needs to be sustained as organically grown food would prove to be more remunerative to the farmer, if it is fairly traded. At Keystone, the emphasis on fair trade and organic produce has been through the concept of local marketing.

Keystone through its ‘Green Shops’ work with small indigenous farmers and gatherers while providing them assistance in value adding organic produce and ensuring conservation of biodiversity. Fair trade aims at conserving indigenous knowledge, traditions and crafts and promoting sustainable

harvesting and farming methods. It also ensures that a large amount of trade occurs through local markets and provides employment opportunities at the local level.

Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS)

The concept of Participatory Guarantee Systems or PGS arose to fill the gaps in third party certification. In 2004, a conference sponsored by MAELA ((Latin American Agroecology Movement) and IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements) was held in Brazil. Representatives from over 20 countries presented and shared their experiences on the “alternative” certification systems that had been developed based on the local context. Thousands of small-scale producers now associate themselves with these alternatives programs, which are now collectively referred to as Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS).

Keystone and many other organisations around the world are involved in building this concept as they see PGS as a tool to help build credibility and increase the local market for organic produce. PGS supports producer groups in mutually facilitating improved farming practices through the sharing of knowledge and experiences and evolving a sense of community enterprise that builds on trust and leadership.

PGS is a system of quality assurance that is directly managed and controlled by local stakeholders. PGS programs first cropped up as an alternative to third party certification systems for small-holder farmers primarily selling directly to consumers.

Participatory Guarantee Systems subscribe to the same ideals that guided yesterday’s pioneering organic farmers. PGS programs require a fundamentally ecological approach to agriculture that uses no synthetic chemical pesticides, fertilizers or GMO’s, and further sustains farmers and workers in a cradle of long-term economic sustainability and social justice. There are dozens of Participatory Guarantee Systems serving farmers and consumers around the world. Although details of methodology and process vary, the consistency of core principles across countries and continents is remarkable.

PGS in India

India has developed an internationally accepted Third Party Certification system for the export of organic products, providing an export opportunity for India’s farmers. With growing consumer concern over pesticide residues, the government has recognized the need to support and encourage organic production for domestic consumption as well – specifically from millions of India’s small diversified farmers. For most of these farmers (many of who are illiterate) Third Party Certification is not seen as practical.

In 2006, FAO and the Ministry of Agriculture, in consultation with farmers, NGOs and state government officials, began working on a model PGS programme specific to India. After a national workshop in September 2006, pilot PGS programmes were launched with 14 groups of India. The structure is being

slowly built up with the programme based on farm appraisals by peer farmer groups and facilitated by NGOs. The PGS documents as finalized, have been translated into 6 regional languages – Marathi, Tamil, Hindi, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam and are being pilot tested in different parts of the country.

One must realize that PGS and Third Party certification are not parallel, but complimentary systems of certification. The use of both within India will bring the greatest number of farmers into a system of committed organic production. Working at a grassroots level with the direct involvement of farmers and consumers, PGS certification of millions of farmers can take place relatively quickly; providing safe clean healthy produce to millions of Indian families not likely to gain access to Third Party certified products.

Fair Trade in Practice

Keystone's role in marketing was necessitated by the interventions in organic and natural products emerging from its development interventions in the Nilgiris. Promoting traditional agriculture and creating a local market for crops grown in the Nilgiris are the prime objectives of Keystone's local marketing effort.

The primary source of livelihoods for these communities has been hunting and gathering. Though, this still continues, they also work in nearby plantations to supplement their income. Products like honey, other Non Timber Forest Produce and agricultural produce were being sold to traders at very low prices.

Presently, local marketing in Nilgiris is so poor that almost all the produce is grown for the outside markets and even vegetables grown organically are sent to large wholesale urban markets. Food security is not given priority as food items are brought from the plains and the entire population including farming communities depend on it.

The first step towards local marketing began with the Green Shop at Kotagiri, Keystone's base in the Nilgiris, that has been expanded to other towns of Nilgiri district. The supply base for these products have been through a network of resource centres across the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. Keystone helped to set up the centres and provided them training on many aspects like value addition. The communities were also trained on how to manage the centre - procurement of raw materials, setting prices, weighing, packing, invoicing, stock maintenance, cash, etc. This has been an ongoing process and constantly needs fresh inputs to keep these aspects strong.

Keystone has six full fledged Production Centres. The Production Centres are mainly run by tribal women who undertake value addition activities and share benefits amongst group members from sale of its products to Keystone. Around 6-8 people work in each of the centres, full time. During season time or when they get large orders, 20-25 people are involved. These centres are independent - they have their own bank accounts, revolving funds etc., which they operate. Keystone continues to be a facilitator in the process.

Keystone is dealing with honey, beeswax products, valued added forest products, organic homestead products, organic spices, pepper, coffee and herbs. Presently, three Green Shops in Kotagiri, Coonoor and Ooty are selling the products in retail. Our Green Shops act as the interface between small indigenous farmers and consumers. Creating awareness and bringing forth

Case of Amuthasurabhi Makkal Kulu

This young dynamic group was formed about 4 years ago and today is quite efficient in being able to handle and execute orders. Though the group has had its share of problems with keeping themselves together, they have continued to persevere and today are suppliers of unique products - bees wax candles and balms. They have worked hard at acquiring the skills and continuous training by Keystone, provides them the opportunity to constantly improve product quality. These products are the only items that are also exported through a fair trade company, IFFAD, based in Chennai. Apart from these, they also work on amla candy, amla mouth fresheners and pickles. The group today supplies about 4 lakhs worth of products to Keystone.

For the first time, in Jan 2008, a system was devised that enabled to have a share in the profits. This has given them a tremendous incentive.

the values of the products are the key responsibilities of the shops. Sales accrue from tourists visiting the Nilgiris and a set of regular customers who subscribe to organic values. The products are also sold to firms marketing organic products and network organizations who work with indigenous communities and organic farmers in different parts of the country.

Today, there is an assurance with relation to market prices as well as the confidence of sale. There are close to 1000 harvesters/farmers who supply a range of products. Today, they are able to process produce from their own areas which apart from increasing their incomes, gives them a stake in the forests and farms as well as provides them employment opportunities.

With well laid out quality parameters and insistence on traditional and sustainable farming practices with multi crop rotations, we try to balance the needs of the consumers with that of the farmers. Assuring a stable market for the locally produced items, doing away with premium pricing and giving a competitive and realistic value for both the farmer and consumer is our goal. In its efforts to promote local marketing, Keystone is organising Bazaars every week to sell organically grown vegetables and fruits from the Nilgiris. Efforts are being made to spread awareness among consumers and encourage farmers to take up organic farming. This initiative is essential as it brings together the consumers and farmers to a common platform wherein they earn and gain from each others perspectives.

Conclusion

Keystone's experience from the past years points out that the efforts of marketing organic homestead produce and forest products, grown and collected by indigenous communities, needs to be expanded. Keystone now brings produce from other organisations as well as supplies to a network. The need is to integrate PGS and fair trade principles. It is challenging but one that is likely to be overcome in the near future resulting in combined benefits for the consumer and farmer.

Keystone is a member of the IFOAM International Task Force on PGS, the PGS Organic India Council (PGSOIC) and International Foundation For Fair Trade and Development (IFFAD)

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