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Participatory Guarantee Systems: Co-Defining Agricultural Practices for Food Sovereignty²

1. Introduction

This article stems from a study carried out in 2021 and 2022 on Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS), with the aim of getting to know their characteristics and favouring the development of new, more inclusive and democratic solutions for organic certification in Italy. PGS are in fact recognised as an innovative tool (Sacchi, 2019), albeit predating Third Part Certifications (TPC; it is the conventional way to assess and certify organic agriculture with a certificatory organization controlling the farm). Widespread throughout the world, PGSs are based on collectively defined production and processing standards, inspired by organic farming practices, but sometimes more restrictive and also capable of including aspects of social and economic justice, with procedures for verifying and sanctioning irregularities that are specific to each case and in any case negotiated among participants (Willer, Schaack, & Lernoud, 2019).

This contribution aims in particular to clarify how it is possible to frame PGSs in the evolution of relations between (urban) consumers and (rural) producers in Italy in the light of Alternative Food Networks (AFN) aspiration to food sovereignty, and how far PGSs are actually able to respond to these expectations. An essential premise is to note how these initiatives are scarcely diffused, little known and largely ignored by the academy, with few exceptions (Coscarello, 2016; Vittori, 2018; Salvi and Vittori, 2017; Sacchi, 2019).

2. Theoretical framework. Food sovereignty and alternative food networks

To facilitate the understanding of participatory assurance systems, a useful conceptual tool can be Alternative Food Networks (AFN) which can be defined as «Those forms of marketing chain for which (1) the consumer-producer relationship is not only mediated by purely commercial operators, (2) the product has special symbolic values for consumers linked to its origin and to the type of trade, and (3) the marketing chain spans a short distance and implies personal relationships» (Corsi *et al.*, 2018, p. 12). AFNs can also be seen as «a diverse range of interconnected and multilevel (individual, social, socioecological) processes that are deliberately activated in order to «make space» (temporally, spatially, materially, and/or symbolically) for radical alternatives that are incompatible with dominant modern capitalist configurations» (Feola, 2019; p. 979), i.e. to be considered as radical utopias, those experiences that Storey (2019) identifies as capable of making strange what is taken for granted, such as the experiences we live every day, so as to question them, to undermine their being taken as facts and allow the emergence of something radically different.

In doing so, rootedness in the collective and community dimension is absolutely fundamental (Piccoli *et al.*, 2021), leading AFNs to deal with social justice, solidarity economy, access to food, food sovereignty (Rossi, *et al.*, 2021). To understand exactly what is meant here by food sovereignty, which came to the headlines due to the Italian government's decision to dedicate a ministry to it, I refer to the definition offered by La Via Campesina, a civil society association and peasants movement active all around the world with a strong hold in rural areas, in 2007 «Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to nutritious, culturally appropriate, accessible, sustainably and ecologically produced food, as well as the right to be able to decide their own food

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and production systems. This places those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies and above the demands of markets and corporations» (Food Sovereignty Forum, 2007).

It is thus clear that in the concept of food sovereignty, agricultural issues are intrinsically linked to social and environmental ones. Loconto and Hatanaka (2018) highlight how grassroots movements have developed their own characterisation of sustainability, rejecting top-down assumptions. This is the direction taken by agroecology, a concept developed as early as 1928 by the American agronomist Karl Klages, which, however, has only recently found favor in Europe. The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) gives this definition «Agroecology is a holistic and integrated approach that simultaneously applies ecological and social concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agriculture and food systems. It seeks to optimise the interactions between plants, animals, humans and the environment while also addressing the need for socially equitable food systems within which people can exercise choice over what they eat and how and where it is produced»³. Gliessman (2018) offers a whider perspective, proposing the following definition: “Agroecology is the integration of research, education, action and change that brings sustainability to all parts of the food system: ecological, economic, and social. It’s transdisciplinary in that it values all forms of knowledge and experience in food system change. It’s participatory in that it requires the involvement of all stakeholders from the farm to the table and everyone in between. And it is action-oriented because it confronts the economic and political power structures of the current industrial food system with alternative social structures and policy action” (p. 599). Other authors underline the complexity of agroecology in its relation with power structure and institutionalization (Giraldo, and Rosset, 2018) and by asking, for instance, how much FAO and other public and private organizations stay consistent with the original understanding of agroecology settled by pioneers (farmers, scientists, movements) instead of trying to co-opt this concept (Rosset & Altieri, 2017). Agroecology and food sovereignty are strongly connected, overlapping in many points, both conceptual and methodological, being both, as highlighted by Loconto and Fouilleux (2019), the result of a collective co-generation started by the movements for organic farming and the right to access to land. Both, therefore, starting from the failure of agribusiness to feed peoples in a healthy way, represent «the awareness of the need to create an adequate, innovative framework for agricultural and food policies, capable of adopting a systemic perspective» (Rossi *et al.*, 2021, p. 3). Rossi and colleagues’ study highlights how food movements related to agroecology and food sovereignty are aimed at a resocialisation and relocalisation of the food system and its practices, including participatory assurance systems. PGSs, where farmers actively collaborate with local communities and other territorial actors, thus become social hubs of solidarity economy (Farinella & Podda, 2020).

2.1 The consumer-producer relationship and community building

Participatory guarantee systems are based on direct and active collaboration between consumers and producers, as well as other actors such as local associations and public administrations, sometimes even research bodies that facilitate the constitutive process (Forno, Maurano & Vittori, 2019) and the definition of specifications (Pisseri *et al.*, 2020). The variety of actors involved makes the governance of these experiences complex (Loconto & Hatanaka, 2018), but, at the same time, a harbinger of organisational innovations (Chiffolleau *et al.*, 2019), which arise from the sense of belonging and the need to be active subjects (Hruschka, Kaufmann & Vogl, 2021) in fact «sustainable consumption paths start from the social, symbolic and material contexts where consumers live. [...] In other words, AFNs are drivers for system innovation» (Brunori *et al.*, 2012, p.5).

3 <https://www.fao.org/agroecology/home/en/>

This participation is the distinguishing feature of PGSs as opposed to third-party certifications that are instead based on government *enforcement* (Cuéllar-Padilla & Ganuza-Fernandez, 2018). What changes radically is the role of consumers and producers where «Farmers are no longer price takers, as in conventional chains, nor are they just price makers» (Chiffolleau *et al.*, 2019, p. 12) and consumers themselves participate in the negotiation of the price, no longer simply set by producers towards the very overcoming of the concept of price in favour of cost coverage. In these experiences, consumers find space for their aspiration to become prosumers, critical and active consumers (Lekakis & Forno, 2019), capable of reacting to the negative externalities of globalisation (Uleri, 2018).

Against these ambitions, however, are the TPCs that oppose the recognition of different systems, as well as current legislation, which is often impervious to changes in practice (Giunta, 2016; Rossi, 2017). Moreover, PGSs require a considerable investment of time, only partially compensated by financial savings, as well as the ability to manage egalitarian interpersonal relations and conflict mediation (Cuéllar-Padilla & Ganuza-Fernandez, 2018). Once again, the insertion of PGSs in the local social context is an essential character, with pros and cons, since the collective and negotiated construction of the whole process, including documents such as specifications and survey sheets, involves interaction between actors with different and often divergent interests (Home *et al.*, 2017).

AFNs, and PGSs as part of them, are in the vast majority of cases embedded in broader movements for social justice, climate change and the eco-systemic balance between humans and non-humans (Kaufmann, Hruschka & Vogl, 2020; Elia, 2009), interacting generatively on multiple levels (Niederle *et al.*, 2020). Knowledge, generated and disseminated collectively and democratically in AFNs and PGSs as an element of innovation (Sacchi, 2019; Pohl *et al.*, 2021), circulates within groups and networks giving structural, procedural and socio-cultural support that influences the development of democratic governance (Berti & Rossi, 2022) and collective leadership (Giambartolomei, Forno, & Sage, 2021) within the organisations themselves and in the wider social context. Rossi, Coscarello and Biolghini (2021, p.16) note how «The recognition of new values in food and practices develops within social relationships and participation of all stakeholders in the definition of internal rules through horizontal governance (Nelson *et al.*, 2016). . . At the same time, this increases networks' and communities' capacity to look for, build and share social values, in a process of mutual reinforcement. In other terms, social interaction and mobilisation are crucial to food re-signification and this re-socialisation of food is functional to community consolidation and societal empowering».

The building of communities of intent is one of the most relevant elements in the formation process of PGS, which allows for a shift from strictly agricultural skills and knowledge to social ones (Kaufmann, Hruschka and Vogl, 2020), with formal and informal exchanges (Hruschka, Kaufmann & Vogl, 2021; Cuéllar-Padilla & Ganuza-Fernandez, 2018), in fact «PGS helps to involve users, raises their capacity to act (empowerment) while being totally focused on local needs. PGS initiates a learning process, diffuses and upgrades knowledge of stakeholders» (Cazas *et al.*, 2020, p.1).

2.2 Fundamentals of participatory guarantee systems

Participatory Guarantee Systems are organisations made up of farmers, consumers, experts, representatives of public administrations, agribusiness professionals that operate locally in communities and certify producers (Loconto & Hatanaka, 2018). IFOAM⁴, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements representing globally the organic principles, offers periodic reports where the term Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) was firstly coined in 2004 at the close of the workshop on alternative certifications held in Torres, Brazil and attended by more

4 <https://www.ifoam.bio/our-work/how/standards-certification/participatory-guarantee-systems/pgs-faqs>

than 40 initiatives from twenty countries. The first PGS experiences, in Europe, can be traced back to the 1970s in France, although most of them have been initiated in the last ten years. What the PGSs are attempting is a return to the origins of organic certification, which was originally essentially a participatory system and which during the 1980s and 1990s was institutionalised and transformed into third-party certification under the control and direction of states. Today, PGSs are widespread throughout the world (Willer, Schaack, & Lernoud, 2019), with varied characters but traceable to the presence of collectively established standards inspired by organic agriculture, with established verification procedures and a structured management body. A further relevant character is the abandonment of the binary certified/non-certified logic in favour of greater inclusivity (Lemeilleur & Allaire, 2019) while maintaining the principles of vision sharing, participation, transparency, trust, learning process and horizontality.

The adherence to PGSs has an uneven nature, ranging from the calculation of interest for farmers who see them as commercial solutions (Kaufmann, Hruschka and Vogl, 2020) to the highest political aspirations (Feola *et al.*, 2021; Hruschka, Kaufmann & Vogl, 2021), to the demand for more control over the food chain by consumers (Sacchi *et al.*, 2022; Rizzo *et al.*, 2020) and the fight against waste (Caldeira *et al.*, 2019). PGS thus represent a bottom-up alternative to top-down TPCs (Cazas *et al.*, 2020) so that «the use of a grassroots-based alternative to conventional organic certification may be viewed as concrete example of how actors who have been marginalised by the global market system can potentially enter that very system on their own terms» (Nelson *et al.*, 2016, p. 378). The participants therefore expect political action from the coordinating body and the network in the direction of asserting the full legitimacy of these alternatives.

In Italy, PGSs are scarcely widespread and known, as well as very little studied. An initial mapping was carried out by Vittori (2018), following a first research of Sacchi *et al.* (2015) who identified seven of them and drew an initial identikit of them, concluding on the one hand that “the Italian ‘anomaly’ of participatory guarantee systems is undoubtedly the high involvement of consumers, organised in GAS, in the implementation and guarantee process” and on the other that «the common denominator of these experiences is the fact that they are generally network experiences which involve, at the same time, local producers and citizens/consumer-actors. Only the case of the GP Toscana²², would seem to have started from a need raised by the producers themselves. The other experiences instead show how the process is mostly driven by RES⁵ or DES⁶» (Vittori, 2018; p. 127).

3. Methodology

This contribution, which starts from the work of Vittori (2018), intends to develop the discourse on participatory guarantee systems in Italy by attempting to answer the research question: how is it possible to frame PGS in the evolution of relations between (urban) consumers and (rural) producers in Italy in the light of the aspiration to food sovereignty of alternative food networks? In order to answer this question, a mapping of PGS experiences was conducted starting from the work mentioned above and the mapping of IFOAM International, and then supplemented with a keyword search on Google and a request to the organisations involved for further contacts. In this way, 13 PGSs were identified. Of these 13, one was officially abandoned, because of the end of the public funding that supported it in the beginning, and not contactable, while three others did not respond to contact requests. Consequently, developing a qualitative research, 9 in-depth telephone interviews were organised with 9 representatives of the remaining PGSs. The person who answered the questions was identified internally by the organisations.

5 RES is Rete di Economia Solidale, network of solidarity economy; it is a modality of interaction and connection between different subjects and organization of third sector in Italy with a certain degree of institutionalization

6 DES is Distretto di Economia Solidale, district of solidarity economy; it is a more structured institution involving different stakeholders, both public and private, profit and non profit

The interviews, which were semi-structured, were aimed at investigating the guiding principles of the experiences, their history, the motivations and subjects who guided the formation of the PGSs, how they function, the subjects who are part of them and the areas on which the experiences focus, and the relationships with the context. Following the example of McCarthy *et al.* (2022), I applied a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 2017), starting from what emerges from the interviews and comparing in the analytical phase with the literature. The full transcripts were analysed repeatedly starting with an initial categorisation derived from the a priori choice of questions proposed in the interviews, and then letting the analytical categories emerge from the interviews themselves, thus applying a modified grounded theory approach as suggested by Gould and Lincoln (2017).

The realities surveyed in this work, compared to those considered by Vittori (2018), are summarised in Table 1, where it is possible to compare the survival of PGS experiences and take evidence of the data collection timing:

	Name	2017	2022	Interview on
1	Participatory Guarantee - Tuscany	IFOAM	Not available	//
2	Participatory Guarantee - terra TERRA	IFOAM	IFOAM	23.12.2021
3	The Lombardy PGS - C'è Campo	IFOAM	IFOAM	9.01.2022
4	DES Parma	Autod.	IFOAM	11.01.2022
5	Impollin/Azioni	//	IFOAM	21.12.2021
6	META Participatory Guarantee and AGR culture	Autod.	Not available	//
7	CampiAperti	Autod.	Internet	22.12.2021
8	Corto Circuito Flegreo	Autod.	Internet	16.12.2021
9	PGS Mugello	//	Not available	//
10	PGS Maremma	//	internet	17.12.2021
11	PGS Valdisieve	//	Not available	//
12	Casentino Biodistrict	//	internet	21.12.2021
13	Sheep Brogna	//	snowball	16.12.2021

Table 1: PGS mapped.

In Table 2, it is possible to have a perspective of the geographical distribution of Italian PGS and the timeframe of their establishment. It provides also an overview of the dimension of Italian PGS with the number of producers associated in 2021.

	Nome	Region	Active from	N. of producers
1	Participatory Guarantee - Tuscany	Toscana	Not available	//
2	Participatory Guarantee - terra TERRA Rome	Roma	2004	About 20-25
3	The Lombardy PGS - C'è Campo	Lombardia	2015 - closed	//
4	DES Parma	Parma	2014	About 30
5	Impollin/Actions Lazio, Umbria, Calabria, Abruzzo	Lazio, Umbria, Calabria, Abruzzo	2010	About 60-70
6	META Participatory Guarantee and AGR culture - Apulia	Puglia	Not available	//
7	CampiAperti, Bologna	Bologna	2001	159
8	Corto Circuito Flegreo - Campania	Campania	2011	About 30
9	PGS Mugello	Mugello	Not available	//
10	PGS Maremma	Maremma	2021	//
11	PGS Valdisieve	Valdisieve	Not available	//
12	Biodistretto Casentino	Casentino	2014	About 20-25
13	Pecora Brogna	Veneto	2020	14

Table 2: PGS identification data (place, date of foundation, members' number)

Number of producers and consumers involved in Italian PGSs vary largely case by case and is in constant evolution. The number of consumers is not possible to be defined. In the very majority of cases, such as Campi Aperti, tettaTERRA, Biodistretto, ImpollinAzioni and so on they are the customers of the markets; in other cases, such as Pecora Brogna, they are members of connected associations (Slow Food, in the specific case).

4. Results

The characteristics of Italian PGSs in 2022

Asking the representatives of participatory guarantees which words best represent their initiatives the picture seems to be very consistent to AFN literature. They indicated: community (recurring, especially in the sense of a place where a unity of intentions is manifested) (Rossi, 2017), food self-determination (Chiffolleau *et al.*, 2019), participation (Berti and Rossi, 2022), relationship (Bruonri *et al.*, 2012), encounter (Home *at al.*, 2017), intelligent system (to be able to communicate something to consumers by setting the rules of the system), transparency (Rossi *et al.*, 2021), effort (Piccoli *et al.*, 2023). A first characteristic is the experimental nature of these experiences, recognized by participants themselves as time and space situated (Feola *et al.*, 2021):

«we define it as an experimental path because it is continuously enriched, experimental because it is not defined but also because by doing more experiments this path is refined» (P5);

A second aspect is adoption of criteria ethically oriented towards collective well-being, trying to overcome the limits of industrial farming thanks to a collective action (Elsen, 2018):

«the participatory certification that we do is based on three to four criteria: respect for human beings (no black labour market and caporalato) respect for animals (no intensive farming) environmental compatibility (no synthetic chemicals) maximum transparency» (P5).

People involved are aware of being pioneers, to some extent, in practicing something totally different to the mainstream even if sustainability are becoming very popular, PGS are still largely ignored (Loconto & Hatanaka, 2018):

«until a few years ago, if you talked about PGS, it was something crazy, it was only done in avant-garde sectors ... now with this story that if you don't talk about resilience and sustainability, suddenly participatory guarantee systems have become a flagship ... a lot of things are changing ... participatory guarantee systems are much talked about but little is done» (P10).

The founders of the Italian experiences are always groups of sensitive and attentive producers and/or consumers; in some cases they are linked to movements of political claims (Forno *et al.*, 2019), such as the 2001 Social Forum in Bologna that saw the creation of Campi Aperti:

«after the social forum in 2001, there were the three-four producers who founded open camps and for the first time there was talk in Italy of food sovereignty in the first world, as if it was first to tell the countries of the South to fight for their food sovereignty or as if it was first a nationalist idea of a government to ensure the supply of food» (P7).

In Rome, too, PGS has a strong political and social value, reconnecting consumers and producers, countryside and city, through a reflection about food chain and solidarity economy (Rossi *et al.*, 2021):

«was founded in 2004 with the intention of connecting town and country, to create a network of critical consumers and producers who support each other, also for those who have very small productions that they can sell in small direct markets; many of the producers do not have certifications and process at home outside the regulations and therefore the need arose to give guarantees to consumers» (P2).

The participants, who gradually come together, are producers and consumers, looking for an alternative to the large-scale retail trade (large organised distribution), although it is not always so easy for them to fully understand the value of these experiences (Brunori *et al.*, 2012):

«they lost some who were only interested in the market, they are not fully aware of the meaning of the PGS, they remain a little bit on the fringes of the community, they are not far away, but they do not always concentrate on the practical work... when they hear about the highest systems then they realise that they do not put their heads on the meaning of the things they do, they need this part but they do not always realise it» (P4).

The motivations for joining PGS may therefore be purely utilitarian, in order to gain access to the markets organised by Campi Aperti, terraTERRA, Biodistretto Casentino and so on. However, in many cases there is also a strong idealistic drive (Feola *et al.*, 2021). First of all in rejecting third-party certifications, perceived as not very rigorous, easily circumvented or cumbersome and bureaucratic:

«organic, not all of them do it certified, some producers like to enter a different perspective, some left because they did not see the sense in it other than having a piece of paper that cost too much bureaucracy, some did it just to participate in the market but then they understood the sense, they saw how useful it is, they saw how the exchange of skills then helps them work together» (P4).

The issue of trust in official certification is an issue for producers, knowing well how TPC work and questioning the affordability of a procedure based mainly on paper-based controls (Lemeilleur & Allaire, 2019):

«in 2014 we formed the Casentino bio-district association in which there are organic people and others who are not certified, also for economic reasons [...] some have left certification because they are still more, they do not use any products, even the exempted products do not use them, some contest it [third-party certification], people who were organic before 1994» (P12).

From their side, the same doubts rise in the mind of consumers, especially considering that the TPC costs are covered directly by farmers, so that certification entities such as ICEA depend on the contribution of the business they have to control:

«[the reasons for starting the PGS:] to have a kind of horizontal certification, which in some way is an alternative to the certification that you pay for, there is a conflict of interest in conventional certification, a conflict of interest because the farmer controlled pays the controller, so in some way a lack of balance is created» (P5).

In other more specific cases, it is a necessity to overcome the limitations of official certification:

«In the case of Brogna sheep products, the PGS is used to certify sheep that graze on high altitude land but are not certified organic and therefore producers lose their organic certification» (P13).

How PGS works in Italy

The operation of certification systems tends to be uniform. In an initial phase, a founding group has identified the essential requirements on the basis of which an initial outline assessment is

made followed by one or more visits at the farms. The visits are often attended by an agronomist or technician and always by a farmer producing the same type of product (vegetables, cheese, honey, etc.):

«[PGS is based on] provincial committees formed by companies and consumers, companies apply to provincial committees, participate in an interview and visit with a producer of the same type of product but from a different territory, a consumer and a technician; there are visit manuals and protocols, they ask questions and visit and pass everything on to a committee of technicians, producers and consumers who evaluate, if positive they are included otherwise they talk to the company to see if something can be changed» (P3).

A characteristic of all Italian PGS is the involvement of consumers, even if in different way and starting by different relations with the PGS. For instance, in the case of Pecora Brogna, where the PGS is conducted by farmers, consumers are involved through Slow Food:

«the certification commission, made up of the producers, a technician who is a veterinarian and a consumer indicated by the Slow Food group together, goes to the companies that have signed up and check that the specification is respected» (P13).

The certification procedure can be developed collectively, to foster the exchange of experiences, that is a relevant characteristic of PGS (Piccoli *et al.*, 2023):

«the system is activated not just with one producer but with four or five producers to make a collective process, small groups with a motivational meeting, then the filling in of the producer sheet involving a commitment to the principles and answering questions» (P4),

and it has a strong aggregative connotation, recalling the community based action on which PGS and AFN are built (Berti and Rossi, 2022):

«the visit is open and anyone can come, an entrance visit where they go and see the reality [...] let's say we do it as a bioregion those who are nearby know each other or the suppliers and this helps to create a reliable system» (P7).

Generally speaking, a very important feature of PGSs is also that they are open to willing parties even when they do not fully adhere to the specifications, i.e. there is a tendency not to exclude producers outright, but to accompany them in fully complying with what is expected:

«Visits to producers, both old and new, serve to verify where there is consistency and where there are deficiencies, let's say minor or serious. If they are serious deficiencies, the producer is suspended until he gets back on track. If they are minor deficiencies, he is asked to put things back on track and then the final check is made» (P8).

Relationship with local policies and the territory

Participatory guarantee systems are based on a strong connection with the territory, critical consumption organizations such as Fair Trade, Slow Food, Solidarity Purchasing Groups, Solidarity Economy Districts. PGSs draw on these entities to involve consumers in verification and certification procedures. Interaction with local administrations and other institutions, called upon to respond to citizens but not always up to the task, is a different matter.

In some cases, there is a strong attention and recognition by local administrations:

«for the region we are in the forum for the solidarity economy, we are a rib of law 19/2014, within that law there is the participatory guarantee that the region supports» (P4).

Sometimes, these relations are instrumental to facilitate PGS activities:

«the conversion into an APS is allowing us to have an interface with the institutions of the Eighth municipality, we would like to continue a discourse with them, we have relations with left-wing 'neighbouring' municipalities that have people within them who frequent the realities of our markets, even with small municipalities such as Oriolo Romano that allows a fixed market and Porte Fibreno where our modalities have been accepted in a municipal resolution» (P2),

And the recognition of local institutions gives legitimacy to PGS existence and operativity:

«in our small way we thought of involving the mayors of the area, the institution from echo and weight, legitimate. No other things would be needed...» (P13).

This connection and interaction with local authorities and parties, however, is ambivalent, especially with regard to the dimension of political struggle:

«since the birth of Campo Aperti we have always had an ambivalent relationship, our general policy is to have dialogues, now we have authorised markets and therefore institutional relations, until 2009, since 2002, our markets were illegal and we still have close ties with the occupied social centres, they were born that way, illegal, then in 2010 we gave birth to Genuino Clandestino with respect to the right to home processing, we have a double track, we are trying to improve local, municipal and a little bit regional legislation, but also to stay outside the rules. At the administrative level, politically we say yes to farmers' markets, the participatory guarantee is just beyond comprehension; in words everyone is always in favour, in fact we have many obstacles, ambivalent is the key word» (P7).

In other cases, it seems to be there no understanding in the institutions about the profound disrupting approach of these experiences (Feola, 2019):

«they want to make Grosseto an experimental province for food policies, but it is very difficult, we seem to say things that are out of this world» (P10).

On the other side, sometimes it happens that other organisations in the area are more open, for profit business are able to caught the marketing sound ability for consumers better:

«The relationship with the local administrations is a sore point, the bio-district was born from the bottom up and the administrations do not look favourably on us, the trade associations have felt sidelined, the administrations try to manoeuvre us, it is not an easy path. There is a cooperative that runs the canteens and they have managed to pass PGS off as an organic product even though it is not certified in the tenders. Even with the festivals there is a protocol to have local and bio-district products used as much as possible» (P12).

In certain extreme cases, PGS participants arrive to the point of throwing in the towel, abandoning any hope of building relationships:

«no contact and no sensitivity in local administrations, no foresight » (P5).

5. Discussion and conclusions

Starting from the conclusions of Vittori (2018), one of the first studies, with the report of Co-scarello (2016), aimed at getting knowledge about PGSS in Italy, I intend here to develop the discourse, extending it also to some realities that were not investigated at the time, in order to understand which characteristics of participatory guarantee systems favour relations between (urban) consumers and (rural) producers in the light of the aspiration to food sovereignty and agroecology.

Vittori, in his study, points out how consumers are very often the driving force behind the start-up of Italian PGSs, contrary to what has been observed in other contexts (Willer *et al.*, 2019) and as might be expected from the liveliness that new farmers demonstrate in other areas (Uleri *et al.*, 2022). With respect to this, the evidence presented here is more varied, confirming the strong idealistic drive (Elsen, 2017; 2018) of some cases, e.g. P2 and P7, but also the greater pragmatism (Uleri, 2018) of others, such as P12 and P13. On the other hand, looking at the practical features, what emerges from the interviews is perfectly in line with what has already been found by Salvi and Vittori (2017), but also by Cuéllar-Padilla and Ganuza-Fernandez (2018) and Willer, Schaack and Lernoud (2019) at an international level. The most widespread tools appear to be a more or less detailed specification with requirements to which producers must adhere and a questionnaire/survey form to collect data from each farm. An element that is not uniformly widespread but still emerged from the interviews is the possibility of not clearly excluding those who are not fully in line with the requirements, manifesting a tendency towards inclusion and a transformative drive in the context, as already noted by Lemeilleur and Allaire (2019).

Another aspect characterising PGSs in Italy as elsewhere, and AFNs more generally, is the participatory production of knowledge and its widespread and capillary circulation among participants, as defined by Sacchi (2019), in the direction of the development of democratic governance (Berti & Rossi, 2022) and collective leadership (Giambartolomei, Forno, & Sage, 2021). Particularly from the interviews, then, emerges the ambition to ensure that this participatory modality can be recognised, valorised and legitimised by the institutions, which, however, are not always actually able to respond to this call (Giunta, 2016). The co-participation of consumers and producers, ethically oriented towards collective wellbeing and the development of innovations functional to that wellbeing (Elia, 2009; Farinella and Podda, 2020), makes PGSs a means of redemption vis-à-vis TPCs, which are lowered from above (Nelson *et al.*, 2016; Cazas *et al.*, 2020) and perceived as easily corruptible, as emerged from the interviews. From interviews emerges clearly that all Italian PGSs have been created as alternative to TPCs, this is the first and starting motivation for the nine cases considered in this research. In origin there is always the vision of a more inclusive food system, more open to diversity and more welcoming with small farmers and producers.

In all of this, the ambition to transform the system in a more ecological and agro-ecological sense (Loconto and Hatanaka, 2018), or even to subvert the system (Feola *et al.*, 2021; Feola, 2019), going in the direction of a decisive relocalisation and re-socialisation of the agri-food system (Rossi *et al.*, 2021) remains an evident aim, declared on several occasions in interviews both internally and in relations with local institutions. Practices of democratisation of food quality control seem able to respond to this desire of Italian consumers, who participate in these experiences also and above all to regain a direct connection with producers. Combining the aspiration of consumers to re-establish a direct contact with producers and the desire of producers of a more inclusive food chain, it seems that PGSs are concrete tools to reinforce food sovereignty in local solidarity economy circuits thanks to the possibility of experimenting new practices, orient collective action for common well-being, be open and inclusive behind norms.

Although this study is based on limited interviews (only nine, even if almost the totality of PGS currently active in Italy) and analysis of secondary documents without the possibility of field observation, it has attempted to offer a broader view of a phenomenon, that of overcoming third-party certification and democratising quality control, which is little known and little studied in Italy. Although there is a growing body of literature on AFNs, our country still lacks a comprehensive view of PGS experiences, which deserve more in-depth study in their pedagogical dimension and in that of participatory governance development. Considering the conclusions delineated in this article, underlining the potential of food system transformation and social value generation, much broader and deep studies would be needed to better understand how PGSs could contribute to sustainable ecological and social transition.

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