

Self-Organized Evaluation, Control and Certification? Participatory Guarantee Systems for Agricultural Commons

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Author’s Explanatory Note: The following ‘Praxisbericht’ is not free from theory, however mainly based upon the practical outcomes and experiences of our on-going master thesis on Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS): “locally focused quality assurance systems that certify producers based on the active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks, and knowledge exchange.” (International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements 2022). Herein we have made it our task to co-create a PGS with the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) *Ouvertura*. Initiated by the community itself, our research process aims to provide and create the basis for the joint development and implementation of the PGS. Hence, we follow a participatory and transformative approach in which people involved in *Ouvertura* shape, feedback and co-create the process with us. Our research involves people in the process of reflecting on their organization, processes, values, and goals. Changing themselves and their organization. This process of self-reflection and self-design leads to the organizations’ development and will thus as well be part of this ‘Praxisbericht’.

1 Introduction: Commoning Alternatives to Agricultural Certification?

The latest Assessment Report on Climate Change of the IPCC leaves no doubt that the current system is facing a severe social and ecological crisis (IPCC, 2022). Already more than a decade ago political ecologist Ulrich Brand (Brand, 2009, S. 1) warned on today's "multiple crisis", a term that tries to put into focus the complex and interdependent dynamics of current problems. These interlinked crises, Brand and Wissen (Brand & Wissen, 2017, S. 43) later argue, are the consequence of human's "imperial mode of living" in capitalism's centres, a mode of living based on capitalist societal-nature relations that enable the exploitation of nature and other humans elsewhere. Therefore, research that tries to address this multiple crisis needs to focus on systemic and encompassing alternatives that restructure and transform capitalist societal nature relations in an emancipatory and democratic way (Brand, 2016, S. 503)

Consequentially, our following report conducts research on one of these alternatives: The commons and commoning. Forms of social organization and practices that challenge capitalist markets, modern states, and the imperial mode of living through self-governed and cooperative satisfaction of basic needs (Helfrich/Bollier, 2020: 7, 19). More precisely, we research systems and processes that enable commons to evaluate, control and certificate their common practices i.e. their commoning and common goods. Even though participatory guarantee systems have been in place in community supported agriculture since decades, theoretical debates on its value for the self-organized evaluation of agricultural commons are still missing. Hence, literature on alternative modes and practices of evaluation, control, and certification for commons and commoning need to be researched and developed. Along a case study (Yin, 2017) of the community supported agriculture Ouvertura in lower Austria, we thus research the question:

How can agricultural commons evaluate, control and certificate the(ir) commoning and common good(s) with participatory guarantee systems?

We try to understand our research question via the theoretical lens of the academic literature on commons and commoning (Federici & Linebaugh, 2019; Helfrich & Bollier, 2020; Ostrom, 1990) and explore the topic through a participatory and transformative research approach. We structure our thesis in three parts: First, we want to contribute to the existing theoretical debates on commons and commoning and their systems of evaluation and control. Second, we want to conduct a qualitative case study on an agricultural commons via a participatory and transformative research approach. Next to expert interviews and participatory observation, this means co-creating a participatory guarantee system with the members of Ouvertura, and thereby writing a practical handbook for how to implement a commoning system of certification, control and evaluation. Finally, we aim at a transformative communication strategy of our first and second outcome to popularize our work, i.e. making

it understandable and usable for other commons and the broader public through dissemination in CSA-networks and workshops.

2 Contextualization: PGS & Agricultural Commons – Global Developments

As mentioned before, anti-capitalist, market- and state-critical approaches to change the food system often put forward agricultural commons and commoning (see chapter 3.1) as a viable alternative. While historically agricultural commons are nothing new, their modern version developed especially since the 2nd half of the 20th century within the new social movements for anti-globalization and food-sovereignty. The aim was to counter capitalist agriculture's unsustainable and exploitative character via a spatial re-localization and socio-cultural and ecological re-embedding of production, allocation, and consumption through self-organization (Braukmann, 2015, S. 30–31).

Within these modern developments starting in the global south (Brazil), Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) were established as self-organized forms of evaluation, control, and certification of agricultural processes. Defined by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements PGS are “locally focused quality assurance systems that certify producers based on the active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks, and knowledge exchange.” (*Participatory Guarantee Systems | IFOAM*, o. J.). Via a variety of features these Systems hence aim at countering externally prescribed standards and goals of industrial capitalist agricultural production in third party certification systems (see chapter 3.2, 6).

Globally, PGS are far more established in the global south where they are nowadays also used without the explicitly political aims of the social movements in which PGS originated. This is especially the case in areas where state and market structures fail to achieve their governing and “certifying” function. At the same time, state involvement plays a big role in the development of PGS structures in the global south: In India PGS was adopted as proper system of certification for within-country trade. In Brazil and Mexico as well PGS were supported by state structures. However, while in Brazil the Movement managed to save its interests in the law-making process, in Mexico state involvement led to laws that set unachievable standards for PGS, thereby deteriorating the alternatives future development. In the global north, PGS can mainly be found in explicitly state and market critical alternative agricultural projects. They make up a niche in capitalist industrial agriculture's guarantee systems and are especially relevant in France and areas where agricultural commons try to organize new structures.

3 Theory: Concepts for PGS in Agricultural Commons

In our point of view and following Nancy Hartsocks (2019) approach to *standpoint theory*, we believe that knowledge, also scientific knowledge, is context and situation driven. Hence, researchers ought to lay out their ontological and epistemological conceptualization. Our ontology follows the conception of Collier (1994) and Gorski (2013) of a world formed by

events, structures, and mechanisms. Hence, scientists should not make the mistake of letting themselves be carried away by investigating solely the "exciting" events but should explore the mechanisms, structures, and powers that lead to events. This approach to science as a tool to analyze the world consequently leads to an understanding that the world is complex, and that the things scientists observe are influenced by their context as well by the person investigating. Regarding Epistemology we try to understand ourselves as scientists embedded in social and cultural context. Consequently, the questions and research we do is biased by us. Lastly, we would like to lay out our understanding of society and nature. Analytically we claim that society and societal interactions function distinct from nature and vice versa. However, society symbolically and materially constructs and interferes with nature, while it is at the same time affected by nature's complexity and ecological limits (Görg et al., 2017). Normatively, we attribute society the ability to self-reflexively change its currently problematic interaction with nature through acknowledging biophysical boundaries and complexities (Devictor, 2017) and consequently changing behaviour in a learning process.

3.1 Transformative Agricultural Commons

In our research on commons, we will follow a strand of research that has taken up Ostrom's revealing insight on underlying practices and therefore focuses on *commoning* as a practice that creates commons as a social structure, rather than conceptualizing commons as a good or resource. It is especially (Helfrich & Bollier, 2020, S. 18–19) who want to emphasize that commons are most importantly (systems of) interactions and relations that create vivid and distinct social structures, that work alternatively to the logic of the market and the state. Further, they perceive commons and commoning not only applicable to the common use of natural resources but for any kind of self-organized problem solving and need satisfaction. From an analytic perspective, commons can thus be understood as distinct forms of social practices and structures, and they encompass a wide range of real-world phenomena such as the Wikipedia, community supported agriculture and many more. From a normative perspective however, it is important to keep in mind that a spectrum from rather affirmative community-capitalist, to more transformative capitalism-challenging commons exists (Dengler & Lang, 2022, S. 15–17; Federici & Linebaugh, 2019, S. 4).

For a critical conceptualization of commons, it is thus important to reflect on their anti-capitalist, state and market critical features. To be able to properly distinguish critical from non-critical commons, we are using Nancy Fraser's (Fraser, 1997/2013) elaborations on the distinction between *affirmative* and *transformative* remedies for injustices. In short, Fraser undertakes this distinction to differentiate between actions, ideas and structures that try to 'solve' problems or remedy injustices only by tackling superficial symptoms (affirmative approach), and those that try to 'solve' problems by tackling their underlying root cause (transformative approach). While affirmative commons can thus be conceptualized as decentralized and local niche-structures producing commodities within capitalism (Federici 2019, S.93), transformative commons aim at so-called 'commonism', believing in the possibility to overcome capitalism due to the generalizability and transformative potential of commons and commoning on a societal level.

In agriculture, such a transformative commons project would try to counteract the division of producers and consumers and the separation to the means of production by jointly financing the farm and sharing the produced harvest. Thereby, all of them become members of the same association. In a utopian world, they would probably cease to exist in their roles of financiers, producers and consumers at all, and would voluntarily share their resources and join for the tasks they need and want to do for satisfying their needs.

3.2 Evaluation, Control, and Certification in Agriculture

Following especially (Grünwald, 2013, S. 17) it is important to understand agricultural certification and guarantee systems in the broader context of socio-cultural and politico-economic structures, which can be grasped as specific, historically developed food regimes (Friedma & McMICHAEL, 1989). Processes of certification need to be perceived as political practices embedded in these structures or regimes, therein being concrete forms of governing or what Michel Foucault calls “governmentality” (Foucault, 2010). Just like any other practice, they too can be affirmative or transformative practices or systems.

With the process of globalizing economies, also food production systems have been forced to compete on global markets. To guarantee global standards of “quality” among food production firms, international criteria have been developed. To control firms and communicate the level of quality external supervisors have been introduced. These systems of external control are also referred to as Third Party Certification (TPC). At the same time, an alternative approach to quality assurance has developed. Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) were established as a grassroot alternative to TPC. The key differences that distinguish PGS from TPC are multifaceted: First, TPC is built on the assumption that organizations cannot control themselves, second, TPC are built to guarantee the smallest common denominator on an international level, third, TPC are systems to check whether a certain level of quality has been achieved. Hence, the context, situation and development of an organization play no part in the assessment. PGS on the contrary aim at the process of development, trust, and the expertise of the people involved in the organization. PGS is a system of self-reflection and organization, and development, based on context and circumstances. It aims at the needs of the community and all stakeholders involved in the processes of food production, allocation, and consumption; as illustrated by the following quote from the biggest French PGS Organization *Urgenci*:

“The main goals of PGS are to maintain a solid basis of life cycle with farmers, consumers and co-operations. These three groups of stakeholders are fundamental to sustain a PGS system. These three together guarantee that knowledge, resources and a culture can be cultivated to create a sustainable self-reflective agroecological food production.” (Urgenci, 2019, S. 4)

4 Methodology & Methods: Participatory-Transformative Research

Unlike mainstream economic approaches to research, we understand science transdisciplinary. For us, it is a participatory process of exchange between theory and practice,

science and society, a social practice and thus a matter of social relations. Hence, the researched organisation *Ouvertura* and its members are the ones who set the agenda for the research done by the researchers. Consequently, participatory research requires researchers to understand the social commitment, the social context, and the researcher-researched relationship in the process. For these reasons, participatory research goes beyond a mere 'search for the truth' but is a political and democratic process that enables people to design, shape and analyse the subject of interest to empower themselves with scientific methods (Bergold & Thomas, 2012, S. 194–196).

To reflect on the influence researchers have on the process they ought to engage in a reciprocal process of feedback and reflection (Bergold & Thomas, 2012, S. 197). To guarantee the quality of reflections within this process we follow Ungers "Stationen einer partizipativen Studie" (Unger, 2014, S. 52) depicted below (Figure 0):

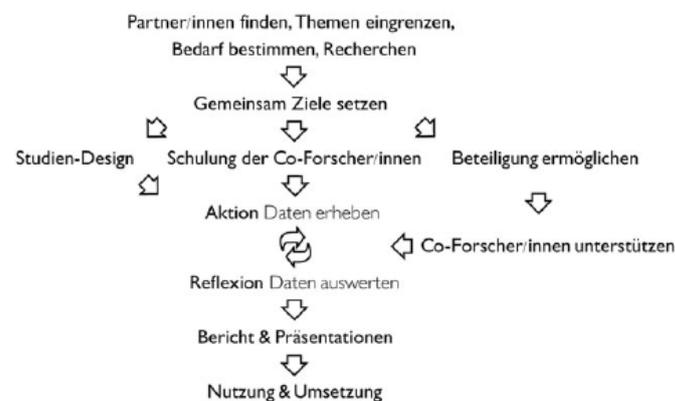


Abb. 4.1 Stationen einer partizipativen Studie

Figure 0 Unger's steps of a participatory study

The above explained steps of participatory research were accompanied by a set of qualitative research methods. An extensive literature review has set the basis for moderating PGS-Team meetings with *Ouvertura*. These have been documented in order to analyse the process afterwards. In addition, six researchers, and five practitioners in the field of PGS, Solidarity Economy, and TPC have been interviewed with problem-centered, semi-structured guidelines (Witzel, 2000). During our work on the farm and during meetings the method of participatory observation (Fife, 2005) has been used.

5 Research Object: „*Ouvertura* - Solidarische Landwirtschaft“

Ouvertura, calls itself “*Solidarische Landwirtschaft*”, translated as solidary or solidarity agriculture, and strives to become an agricultural commons. *Ouvertura*'s motivation is stated clearly on their webpage: “Good food and an intact nature should be there for everyone! To achieve this goal, we step out of the global price war and finance our farm together with all the people it feeds. We share the harvest fairly among ourselves” [own translation].¹ The

¹ „Gute Lebensmittel und eine intakte Natur sollen für alle da sein! Um dieses Ziel zu erreichen, steigen wir aus dem globalen Preiskampf aus und finanzieren unseren Bauernhof gemeinsam mit allen Menschen, die er ernährt. Die Ernte teilen wir fair untereinander auf.“ (*Ouvertura* | *Solidarische Landwirtschaft*, o. J.)

project is connected to the *Munus* foundation (*Munus Stiftung – Boden für gutes Leben*, o. J.) which commonly owns the land on which Overtura produces its food. Both, Overtura and the munus foundation commit themselves in their statutes to work socially, economically and environmentally sustainable. Figure 1 shows an organizational chart created in the research process, which depicts the core project and its surrounding institutions:

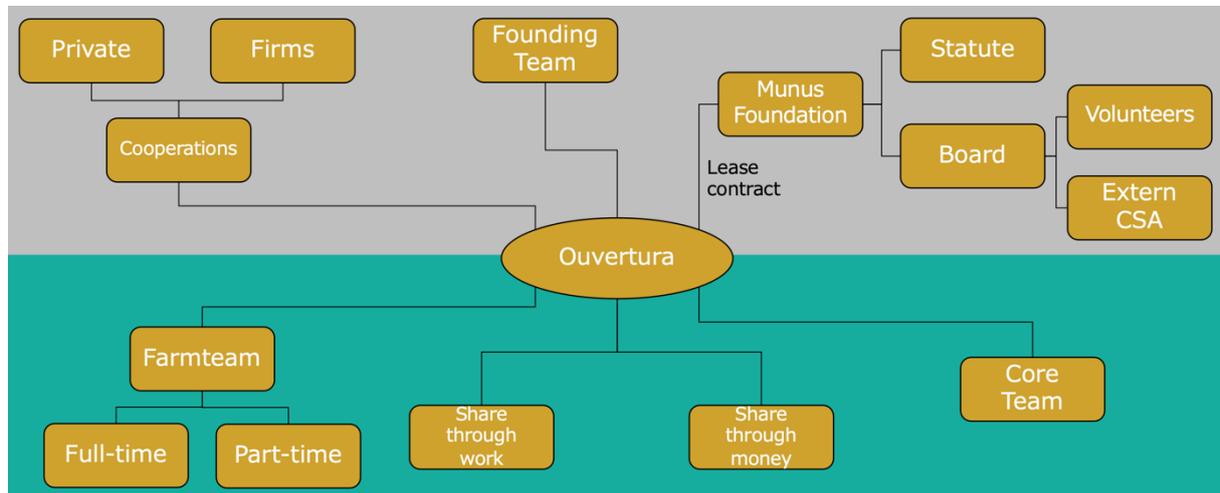


Figure 1 Overtura Organigram

In addition to this organigram, we provide you with some short practical facts about the project Overtura:

- Location: Lower Austria, Austria (20km from Vienna)
- Founded: ca. 6 years ago (ca. 2016), planning started earlier (ca. 2013)
- Members: ca. 100 and their households
- Core Team Members: ca. 8 (3 Full time, 3 part time, 2 volunteers)
- Areas of production/Food produced and distributed:
 - eggs, vegetables, cereals, fruits, milling – flour, cereal flakes, jams, chutneys, tea, bread
- Cooperations with other organizations and companies:
 - grains, mushrooms, fruits, bread
- Budget: ca. 150.000 Euro/Year
- Production Costs vs. Wage Costs: 1/3 vs. 2/3
- Juridical Form: Association (Verein)

6 Results: First Insights of Practical Research

6.1 Six Steps of Implementation

One of our key results is the implementation process itself. For this reason, we tried to document and reflect on all steps during the process. Thereafter, one of our key take aways is

the documentation of our process. Even though our process is still ongoing we have derived 6 main steps from our current development:

- 1) **Pre PGS-Implementation:** the process before the implementation of PGS. We believe one of the essential features of PGS is the incentive and ideas that come from the community (e.g. people from the organisation are actively involved and include into the process of decision making). This aspect might sound obvious and straight forward. On the contrary, we have experiences that it is key to not only ask people for their opinions, but to shape the process (timetable, tasks, meeting times etc.) in a way that is feasible for a diverse group.
- 2) **Organizing:** In our discussion rounds we have come up with feasible approaches to moderate discussion, set up regular meetings, schedule annual meetings, and finally send out enough instructions and information so that people have the necessary tools to create input. During the provision of information, we also believe that this modus highly depends on the group working with PGS. However, we encourage moderators to give people enough space for creativity and out of the box thinking combined with structure that guides the process.
- 3) **Farm Walk:** We have only done a trial farm walk until now. Hence, we strongly draw from our experts' interviews regarding this point. However, we have repeatedly heard that moderation during and after farm walks is key for a fruitful outcome. Therefore, we believe one person who structures and guides the evaluation process is necessary to keep social structures, the process of evaluation, and time in a constructive manner. In addition, practitioners have pointed out that right after farm walks the group ought to take some time to reflect together. One expert mentioned that the most relevant information is always drawn from these "post farm walk" discussions.
- 4) **Report and Result:** Another aspect that has been mentioned by various experts and practitioners was the relevance of a coherent report. The report should on the one hand be written in accessible language and on the other hand state the relevant information gathered from the farm walk. Additionally, it ought to include some key reflections and the key insights gained by the farm walk team.
- 5) **Presentation and Discussion:** During our team meetings we have discussed the possibility to use Holacracy for the discussion rounds. This seems feasible because the discussions are planned to be integrated into the annual assemblies. Thus, a governance tool is needed to handle group discussions of up to 30 people.
- 6) **Post PGS-Implementation:** We believe that focusing on one topic every year is an approach that on the one hand helps the community to focus on a topic and on the other hand, keeps the workload to a minimum. In addition, we believe the documentation of the changes made during the process of changing the status quo is helpful for learnings.

6 STEPS OF PGS



1

PRE PGS IMPLEMENTATION

- incentive from community
- form a working group
- develop a framework
- feedback on framework

2

ORGANIZING

- plan farm visits
- form groups
- shedule annual meeting of farm members
- send out instructions
- group meeting

3

FARM WALK

- carry out farm walk
- create a list with most relevant insights for report
- reflection round after farm walk

4

REPORT AND RESULTS

- write up a summary of the insights
- discuss priorities
- send out the report

5

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

- discussion of the results
- strategies for implementation
- name future working group

6

POST PGS IMPLEMENTATION

- implement findings
- document process



Figure 2 Six Steps of PGS

6.2 Four Core Criteria

Beside developing a roadmap-like process description of our work (Figure 2), we have developed four key criteria to focus on during the process of self-evaluation:

1. **Social:** Cultivating a commons that connects social interaction, the development of collective rituals and culture in the process of working together with nature.
2. **Solidarity Economy:** Economy as a way of life in which the well-being of all participants is in the foreground and all participants are of equal importance.
3. **Ecology:** We work together with nature and try to interfere with it as little as possible, so that we produce food and protect species at the same time.
4. **Politics:** Overtura is politically independent. The means and end of Overtura's core political criteria is self-organisation by peers in a grassroots democratic and solidarity-based manner.

The questions ought to be formulated qualitatively and quantitatively. We hope this will enable the people evaluating the process to include the context into their feedback. Moreover, as we are also including aspects of social life into our questionnaire, quantitative questions are not feasible for all areas.

6.3 Handbook

Finally, we are trying to sum up all our steps, insights, and outcomes in a “PGS-Handbook” which you can see below (figure 3). This Handbook will be written in accessible language and therefore is supposed to be usable for all communities that would like to implement their own PGS. For this reason, we will also include a “Guideline” for how to use the Handbook. This guideline will help others to understand how the logic an approach that has been used by Overtura to set up their PGS.

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Figure 3 First Draft Handbook: Guidance for PGS Implementation

7 Discussion: Critical Points & Open Questions

In the following paragraphs we lay out all those questions that came up in our current research process. Please see them as a first input for discussion, but feel free to critically reflect and pose questions on everything else that came to your mind reading our work.

Theory & Method: Commons, Control, Certification

1. Conceptualizing Commons: How would you conceptualize the separation between different forms of commons? (affirmative/transformative, non-critical/critical etc.)
2. Certification: Certification becomes a problematic concept, if commons projects do not produce for consumers who want to see the certificate as a sign for control at the market. What role can there be for PGS if not for reasons of certification?
3. Feedback and Control: In our theoretical and practical research we perceived a tension between control and feedback in guarantee and evaluation processes. Do you know of any alternative conceptions, and frameworks for processes of guarantee/control/evaluation? Do you know practical examples of such practices and institutions in commons or similar projects?

Practice I: PGS and the State

1. State Involvement I: Which role can or should the state play in PGS development? Is recognition and support through the state desirable, necessary, good or bad?
2. State Involvement II: What are your experiences with state involvement in alternative and critical projects? How to avoid cooptation?
3. Funding: How do you think is funding

Practice II: PGS, Participation and Society

1. Participation: How to achieve a qualitative and quantitative high degree of participation in PGS? What are challenges?
2. Society: How to build up societal structures for self-organized systems of guarantee, evaluation, control?
3. Infrastructure: What are necessary coordinative infrastructure, resources, workforce for self-organized participatory systems?

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