(Self)-assessment guide of the implementation of a Participatory Guarantee System

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Preamble

Purpose of the guide

This guide questions the relevance and appropriateness of implementing a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) in a given context and with a given user's community.

The PGS is understood here as defined by IFOAM in 2008: "*Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) are locally focused quality assurance systems. They certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange.*" (Annexe 1 and 2, key elements and characteristics of PGSs according to IFOAM). Thus, this participatory certification is based on the assessment of professionals by their peers (producers, craftspeople, etc.) and sometimes their community (buyers, distributors, local associations, etc.) to ensure compliance with the commitments of the specification(s). The assessment is usually done *in situ* where the activity takes place, followed by a local committee review which collectively gives an opinion on the award of the label for each participant.

The award of the label is materialised by the granting of a certificate which gives the right to use the logo and its name for goods and services whose production practices have been controlled and meet the corresponding specifications.

The PGSs have mainly been developed to promote agroecological or organic farming practices. This may have led to a bias in the construction of the questions of this guide, which may not entirely correspond to the application of the guide in other areas (eco-construction, eco-tourism, etc.). The questions can be adapted accordingly.

Finally, beyond the PGS itself, this guide can also be used for other forms of self-organisation, based on the exchange of knowledge, the promotion of practices or autonomy. The questions will then have to be adapted to these cases.

Use of the guide

The arrowed tree facilitates the assessment of the situation by asking a set of questions to consider the relevance and appropriateness of setting up a PGS. Some questions may not be relevant in certain situations and will not be considered.

Please note that this guide is not hierarchical according to the questions order. It could be read in a different order.

This guide is not prescriptive and is not intended to decide whether to set up a PGS or not, but to provide a framework for reflection and points of attention prior to such an initiative.

It is important to take into account the points of attention. They may lead to not recommending the implementation of a PGS if the difficulties raised cannot be resolved.

In some cases, known alternatives are suggested to users.

Each positive answer guides you to the next question with the dotted lines. (For all negative answers, read the attention point and continue to the next question with the dotted lines).

Contents

OBJECTIVE OF THE PGS

The objective of certification is to guarantee information on the quality of a good or service.

If the objective is not to 'guarantee' information about a product or service, but to only create knowledge exchange within a network of stakeholders based on a peer-to-peer approach, we do not speak of a Participatory Guarantee System, but rather of a participatory system of knowledge exchange.

Using a PGS to generate this information only makes sense in certain cases:

- economical motivation: there are no other kinds of certification (or at a exorbitant cost beyond the reach of the participants)
- political motivation: for instance militant position to mark opposition to fee-based certification when applied by third party
- cognitive motivation: to generate information and knowledge on practices between the stakeholders of the system, thanks to permanent exchanges, if these are not available elsewhere. This enables professionalisation or dissemination and promotion of practices
- social motivation: to create a social link between the stakeholders in the system, generating solidarity mechanisms for example, if this does not exist elsewhere
- territorial motivation: in order to create a dynamic in a declining territory thanks to all the previous motivations
- legal motivation: when the standard is mandatory but public services are not able to ensure compliance with the regulations. Legalise the marketing of products or legalise the stakeholders who produce them (legitimacy over land, etc.). Avoiding permits or other costly or excessive controls (risk of sanctions, risk of rejection, racketeering).

It is often the combination of these motivations, and the lack of possible alternatives, that makes the implementation of a PGS a relevant choice.

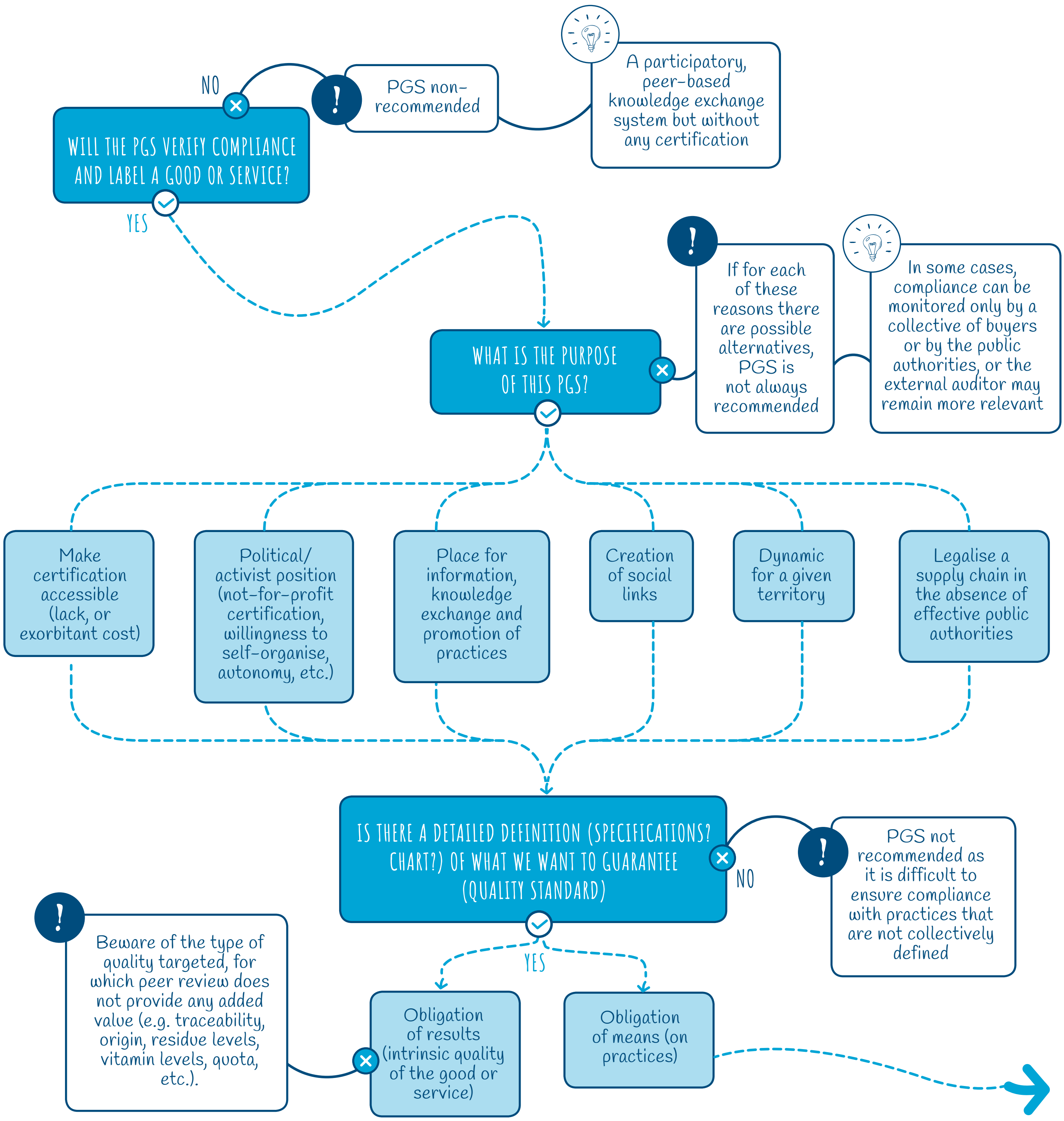
However, it should be kept in mind that other mechanisms are possible and sometimes better suited to the situation. For instance, the information of a quality standard on a product and service may be generated by the creation of a brand with an internally controlled code of conduct by an employee. A guarantee system can also be based on the control of practices by a collective of buyers, or through a quality observatory by a system where buyers rate producers. When the quality standard is compulsory, control is often carried out by the public authorities. The latter also intervene through fraud repression if false claims are made on a product or service. Finally, the guarantee may be provided by an external auditor (third party certification) when it is more convenient (distance between peers or with the rest of the community (buyers, etc), speed and immediacy of the certification, etc).

Information on the quality targeted for products or services, usually a quality standard, must be clear and therefore well defined, for example through a charter and/or specifications.

If there is a need for a guarantee system, it is because this information cannot generally be observed directly on the finished product sold, either because the standards are based on obligations of means (e.g. production practices, origin of production); or because the standards are based on obligations of result but cannot be directly observed by the buyer (e.g. residue rate).

Beware of the type of quality targeted whose peer review does not bring any added value (e.g. traceability, territory, residue levels, vitamin levels, etc.). If peers are reduced to controlling each other on invoices or test reports, chances are it will result in little internal motivation and much conflict.

A participant will more easily disclose a no-compliance if he/she expects advice and support to improve his/her practices (Trust as a PGS key element: a no-compliance is the result of an involuntary act related to a difficulty rather than a deliberate act of cheating).



SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL AND ECONOMICAL CONTEXT

Economic incentives

The PGS can certify different types of goods and services. A distinction can be made between those that are produced by the producers themselves and those that are taken from nature by hunting, collecting or extraction.

For the goods and services produced, the initial community that has put in place social and ecological commitments in its way of producing often manifests the need to differentiate itself from the conventional market through a label and thus create added value to cover the costs of their production.

! When this need does not exist, there is a high risk of low motivation to participate in the PGS.

For harvested goods from nature, an initial community that shares the need to collectively manage the common resource to avoid its disappearance or appropriation often also has a need to signal this sustainable management effort with a label to differentiate itself from the conventional market and create added value to cover the costs of this management.

! If this need is not shared, there is a high risk of low motivation to participate in the PGS.

When the targeted quality is already in place by the initial community, its valuation is simplified.

! Conversely, when it is not yet implemented, care must be taken to anticipate production and transaction costs (transport, storage or other specific logistics, etc.) as well as acceptability by other stakeholders in the system.

Finally, it is important to evaluate whether the economic context is favourable, with, for example, the existence of a production basin dynamic involving different types of operators, the possibility of a short supply chain with local distribution outlets and/or the existence of a demand among consumers or users, which would motivate them to pay for the guarantee of the desired quality

! On the other hand, beware of economic obstacles that may be too heavy to overcome: if the sales channel does not exist or if the volumes produced are too low to generate a specific channel, if the range of production is too diverse or too small, if it is impossible to create a sales outlet or if the channel is too long and generates too many transaction costs.

Environmental, social and health incentives

In general, the pursued quality standard implies social, health or environmental benefits to the initial community who implement the practices.

! If this is not the case, the economic motivation alone may appear fragile and sometimes unstable.

Social incentives

If there are active or traditional forms of collective action, it is interesting to build on these forms or mechanisms to construct the PGS organisation.

! It is more complicated to create a PGS in contexts where no collective action of any kind exists. Similarly, past conflicts between participants can generate strong mistrust in the collective. These aspects need to be understood in order to create the incentives to invest together.

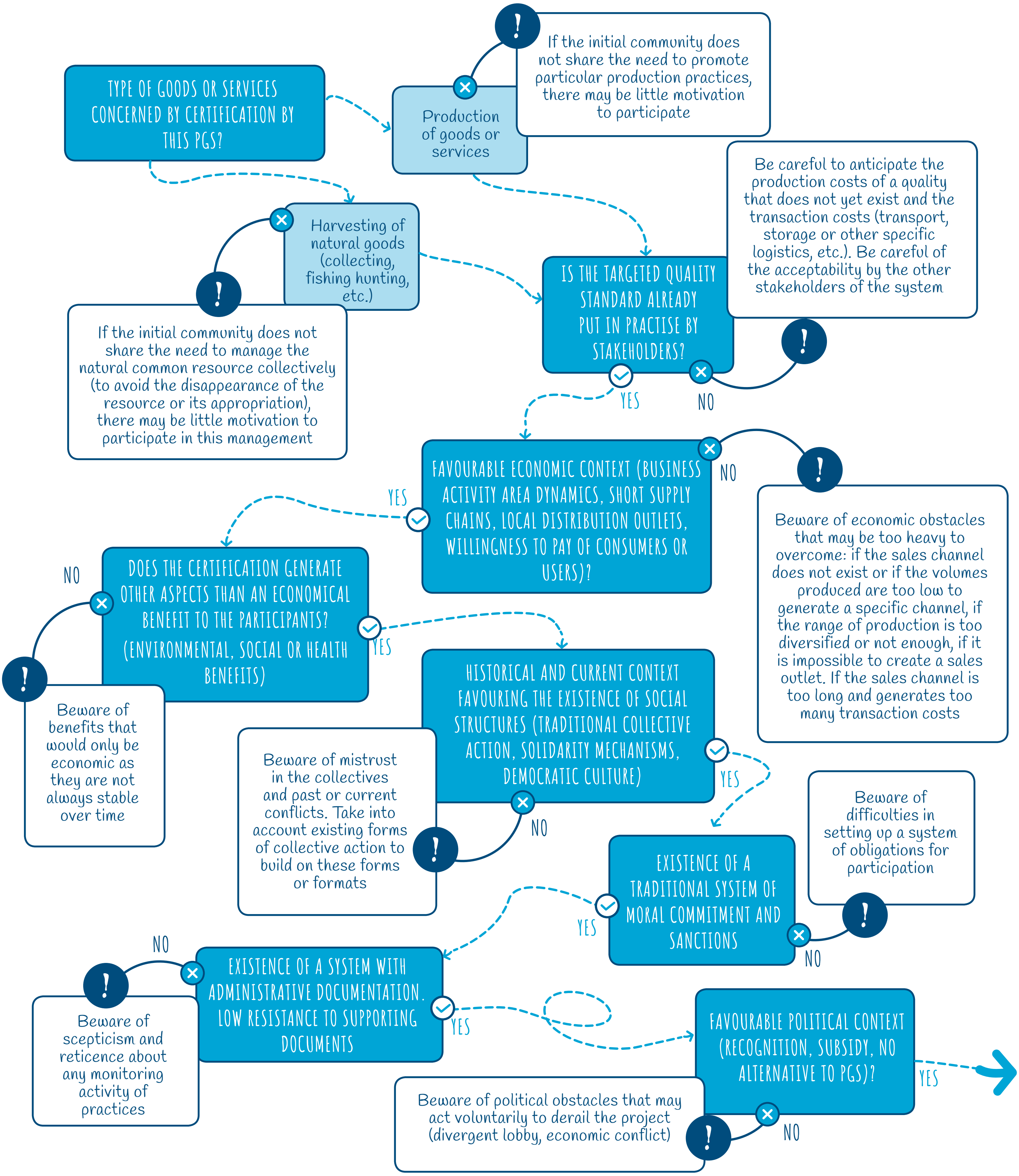
If there are socially accepted forms of moral commitment or application of sanctions, it is interesting to refer to them when constructing the management mode of the PGS.

Finally, if there are already socially administrative documentation systems accepted in other fields (invoices, certificates, etc.), it does facilitate the implementation of the PGS, even if the bureaucracy must be reduced to a minimum.

Political incentives

Without being decisive, political contexts favourable to PGS (recognition, subsidy, etc.) are strong assets for its implementation.

On the other hand, it is not uncommon to encounter political obstacles that may act voluntarily to derail the project (divergent ideology, lobby and economic conflict). These should be identified in advance, so that they can be taken into account.



INITIATORS

When the prospect of implementing a PGS and/or when the quality standard to be achieved is established or chosen by internal stakeholders (i.e. those who will apply it), the launch of the project is facilitated.

However, in many cases, the quality standards and the PGS project come from external actors (NGOs, public authorities, universities, etc.) to promote practices that have a general interest objective (health, environment, or food safety, for example). It is therefore essential to have a possible appropriation by internal actors.

! Without a voluntary approach, the project is doomed to failure because it relies on the participation of stakeholders.

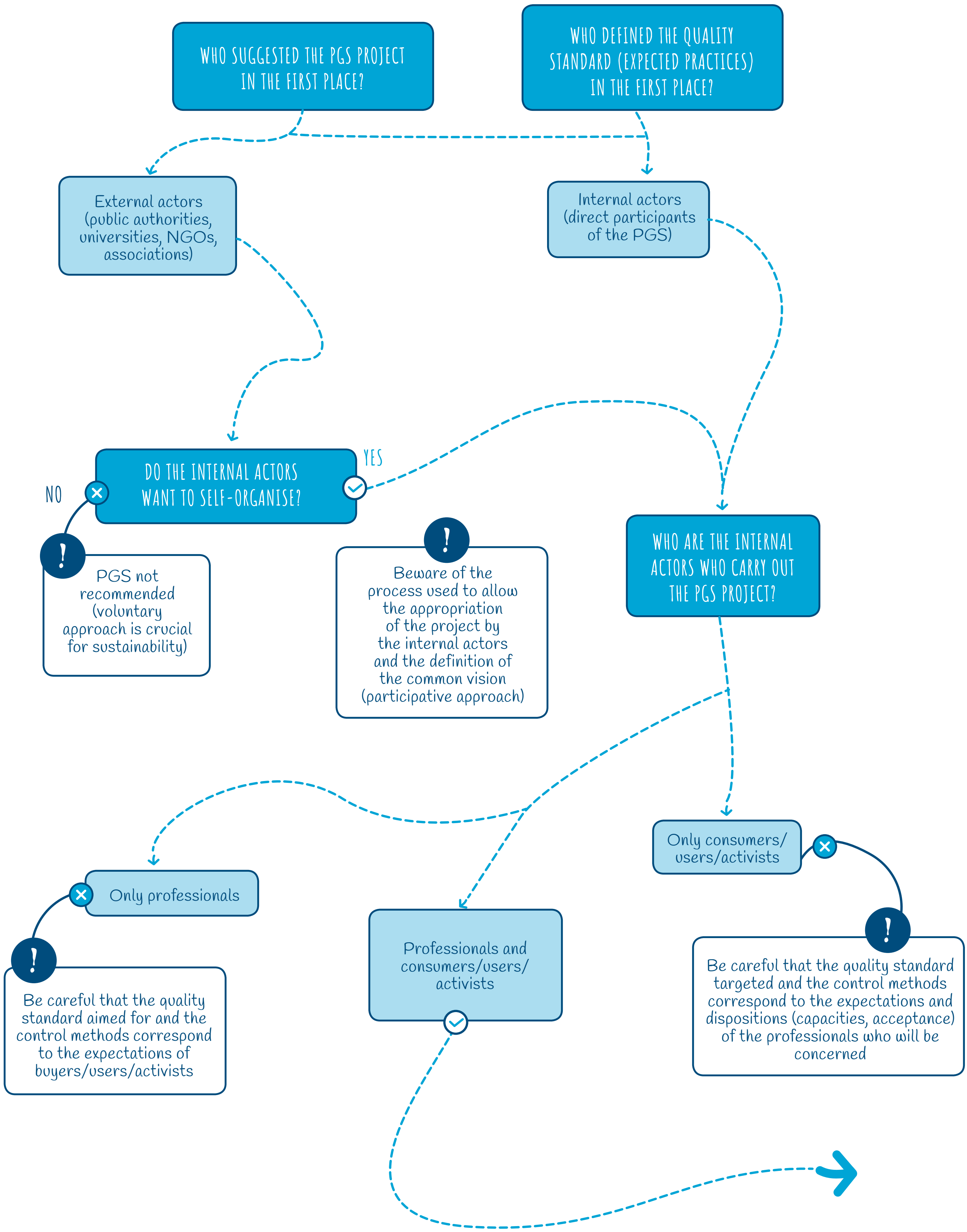
Thus, it is common for organisations initiated and maintained by external actors to be dormant (or passive) because they may have been established with the sole purpose of attracting external support (funding). If the initiative is driven by external actors, such as development programmes, it is necessary for internal stakeholders to have a common understanding of the autonomy needed to implement democratic decisions, and of the possible organisational problems that this may entail.

! In order for this appropriation to take place at best and in a homogeneous way among internal actors, it is important to use participatory approaches and democratic tools that take into account diverse opinions (e.g. consent, majority judgment).

The composition of internal stakeholders should also be as representative as possible of the different interests:

! If the buyers/users are absent from the elaboration of the common vision, care should be taken that the quality standard targeted and the control modalities correspond to the expectations of buyers/users and that there is a higher willingness to pay for this quality standard.

! If the professionals are absent from the elaboration of the common vision, be aware of the propensity to adopt new practices (capacity, social acceptance, etc.) from the professionals who will be concerned.

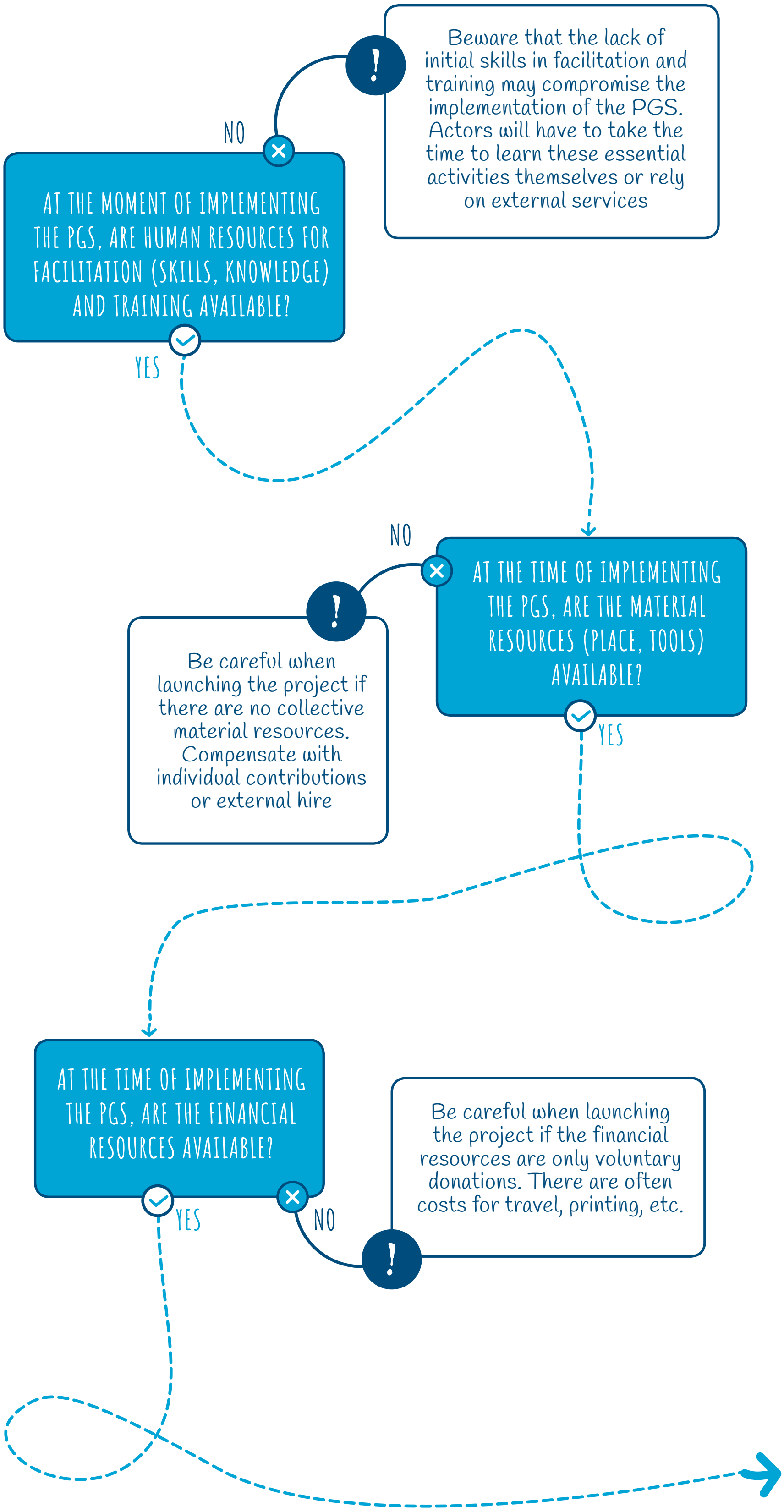

WHO SUGGESTED THE PGS PROJECT IN THE FIRST PLACE?
WHO DEFINED THE QUALITY STANDARD (EXPECTED PRACTICES) IN THE FIRST PLACE?
External actors (public authorities, universities, NGOs, associations)
Internal actors (direct participants of the PGS)
DO THE INTERNAL ACTORS WANT TO SELF-ORGANISE?
NO
YES
PGS not recommended (voluntary approach is crucial for sustainability)
Beware of the process used to allow the appropriation of the project by the internal actors and the definition of the common vision (participative approach)
WHO ARE THE INTERNAL ACTORS WHO CARRY OUT THE PGS PROJECT?
Only consumers/ users/activists
Only professionals
Professionals and consumers/users/ activists
Be careful that the quality standard aimed for and the control methods correspond to the expectations of buyers/users/activists
Be careful that the quality standard targeted and the control methods correspond to the expectations and dispositions (capacities, acceptance) of the professionals who will be concerned

LAUNCHING RESOURCES

At the start of the project, resources are often more easily provided by external stakeholders who are specialized to support development projects (NGOs, public authorities, universities, etc.).

If the internal stakeholders do initiate the project, it is important to have a certain number of resources available:

- Human resources for facilitation (skills, knowledge) are essential because it is a question of facilitating decision-making to choose the operating methods of the PGS and even the development of a common vision.
- The availability of material resources (place, tools) must be diagnosed beforehand to know where the collective workshops can take place and what tools will be needed for facilitation (table, sheets, etc.).
- Finally, financial resources can be useful if it is necessary to pay for external services (human resources, material resources, meals, etc.) or to compensate participants for their transport, for example, to attend the workshops.


AT THE MOMENT OF IMPLEMENTING THE PGS, ARE HUMAN RESOURCES FOR FACILITATION (SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE) AND TRAINING AVAILABLE?
NO
Beware that the lack of initial skills in facilitation and training may compromise the implementation of the PGS. Actors will have to take the time to learn these essential activities themselves or rely on external services
YES
AT THE TIME OF IMPLEMENTING THE PGS, ARE THE MATERIAL RESOURCES (PLACE, TOOLS) AVAILABLE?
NO
Be careful when launching the project if there are no collective material resources. Compensate with individual contributions or external hire
YES
AT THE TIME OF IMPLEMENTING THE PGS, ARE THE FINANCIAL RESOURCES AVAILABLE?
YES
NO
Be careful when launching the project if the financial resources are only voluntary donations. There are often costs for travel, printing, etc.

INITIAL COMMUNITY

The initial community includes all participants who will use the PGS in the first period of time. It may be larger than the internal stakeholders who initiated the project, as other participants may have been approached during the development of the project. It can also be composed of different types of stakeholders who will participate in field assessments, assessment committees or other decision-making bodies.

The initial community should bring together participants who find it interesting to assess each other, because they exchange knowledge or mutual support, because they get to know each other better, because they create a network in a given territory and give added value to their production.

! Conversely, when the initial community has little interest in assessing each other, either because producers are competing in the same area for the same products or because this does not lead to knowledge exchange, it may be important to expand the initial community to include other participants who can counterbalance these problems. Otherwise, PGS is not recommended.

The time distance between stakeholders themselves, or between stakeholders and the inspection/evaluation site is critical to the success of the PGS.

! If members who have to assess each other *in situ* are too far away, it is possible that stakeholders will refuse to participate. The same applies to other stakeholders (buyers, etc) who would participate in the assessment. This is also true for fishing, hunting or collecting sites that would be too far away or too difficult to access.

For example, a day's travel to and from the site and the *in situ* assessment seems acceptable. Beyond that, it requires additional time and logistics to organise overnight stays. Nevertheless, the level of acceptability for travel depends on the context and habits of the stakeholders.

When the distance between participants is significant, there are partial forms of PGS: either *in situ* assessment is carried out by a third party who is paid to travel between sites and who reports the results of his/her assessments to a committee of peers. The peers only travel for the commission, which may be chosen at a central location. Or only *in situ* assessments are carried out by the peers and the validation is then carried out by a third party paid to check the results of the assessments and award the labels.

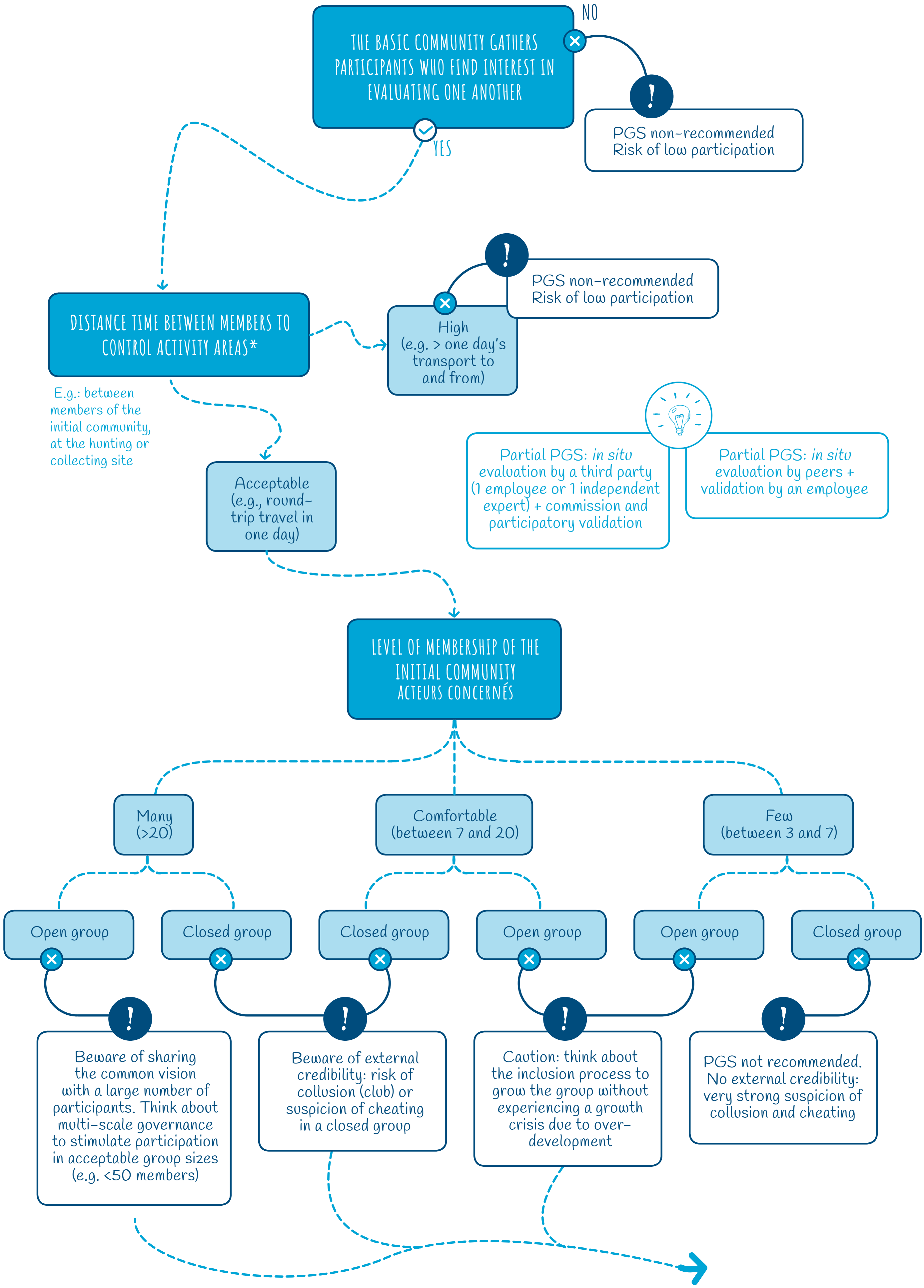
The size of the initial community is also a determinant of the success of the project.

! A too small number (<7 members according to our experience) can be demobilising both from an economic point of view (no recognition of a sector if too little is produced) and from a cognitive point of view (little circulation of knowledge)

! A too high number (> 20 according to our experience) can generate organisational difficulties or a shared vision in a project that is not yet consolidated. In this case, we advise to picture a polycentric management with several groups that can be brought together later.

An open community is beneficial to improve PGS's credibility and to avoid the risks of agreement and collusion that can occur in a closed community.

Nevertheless, the opening up must be gradual to avoid a too brutal growth with, for example, conversion times or mentoring system for new entrants.


THE BASIC COMMUNITY GATHERS PARTICIPANTS WHO FIND INTEREST IN EVALUATING ONE ANOTHER
NO
PGS non-recommended
Risk of low participation
YES
DISTANCE TIME BETWEEN MEMBERS TO CONTROL ACTIVITY AREAS*
E.g.: between members of the initial community, at the hunting or collecting site
High
(e.g. > one day's transport to and from)
PGS non-recommended
Risk of low participation
Partial PGS: *in situ* evaluation by a third party (1 employee or 1 independent expert) + commission and participatory validation
Partial PGS: *in situ* evaluation by peers + validation by an employee
Acceptable
(e.g., round-trip travel in one day)
LEVEL OF MEMBERSHIP OF THE INITIAL COMMUNITY
ACTEURS CONCERNÉS
Many
(>20)
Comfortable
(between 7 and 20)
Few
(between 3 and 7)
Open group
Closed group
Closed group
Open group
Open group
Closed group
Beware of sharing the common vision with a large number of participants. Think about multi-scale governance to stimulate participation in acceptable group sizes (e.g. <50 members)
Beware of external credibility: risk of collusion (club) or suspicion of cheating in a closed group
Caution: think about the inclusion process to grow the group without experiencing a growth crisis due to over-development
PGS not recommended.
No external credibility: very strong suspicion of collusion and cheating

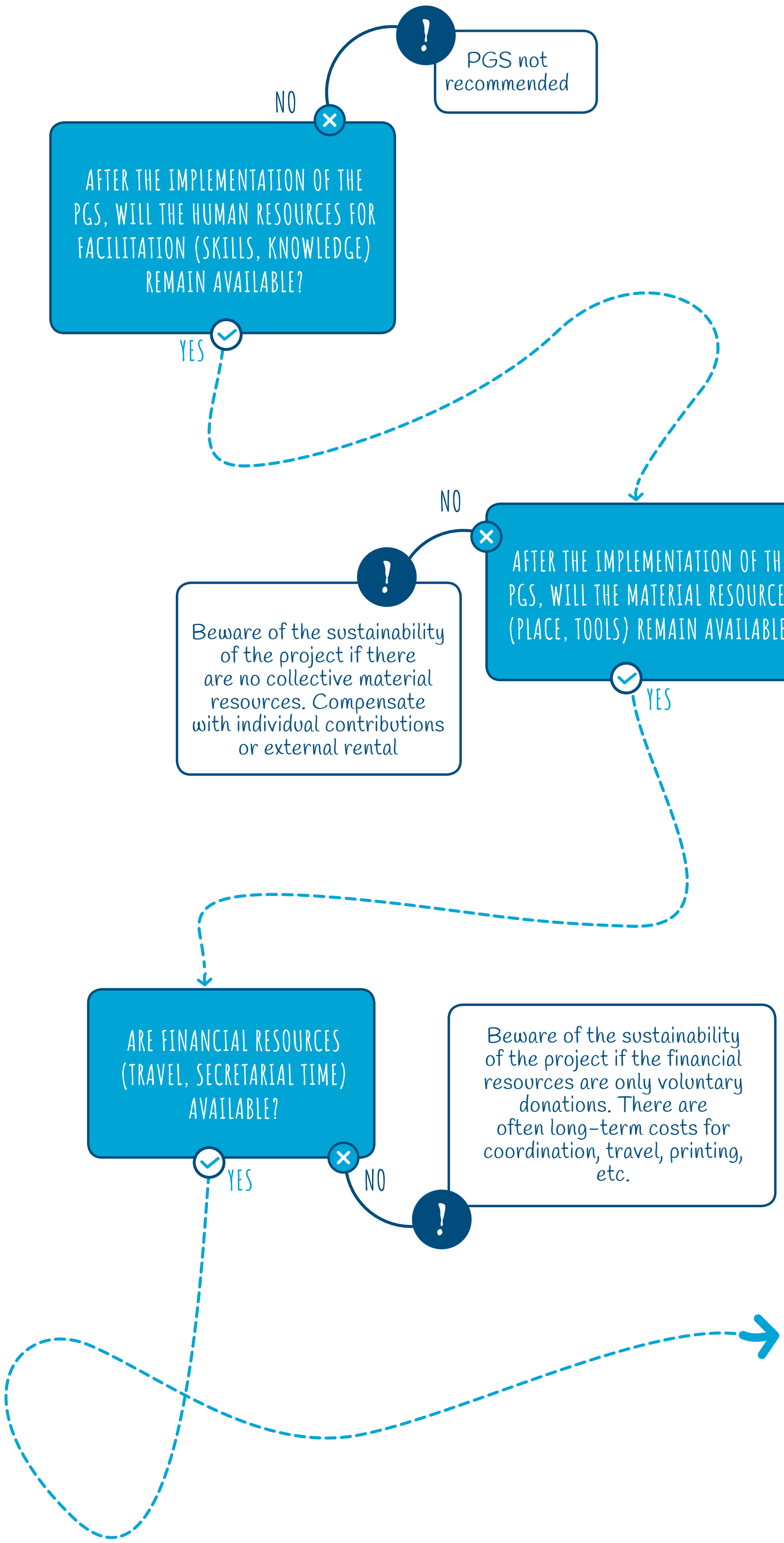
OPERATING RESOURCES

During the course of the project, it is important to have a number of available resources. At the feasibility assessment stage, it is therefore necessary to assess whether operating resources will be available when the project will start.

- Human resources for the PGS administrative tasks (skills, knowledge) are indispensable, as it is necessary to organise the peer review in the field, to organise assessment commissions, and to record decisions both on the award of the label for those participants who have obtained it and on the possible sanctions required for others, as well as on decisions concerning the operating rules. It is therefore necessary to consider the availability of human resources (volunteer or paid) to take charge of this future activity.

- The material resources (place, tools) must be available for the PGS's commissions and administrative tasks as well as the used tools (assessment forms, archives, etc.)

- Finally, financial resources can be useful if external services have to be paid for (human resources, material resources, meals, etc.) or if participants have to be compensated for their transport for *in situ* assessments for example. A business model must be thought out from the start of the project.


PGS not recommended
NO
AFTER THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PGS, WILL THE HUMAN RESOURCES FOR FACILITATION (SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE) REMAIN AVAILABLE?
YES
NO
Beware of the sustainability of the project if there are no collective material resources. Compensate with individual contributions or external rental
AFTER THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PGS, WILL THE MATERIAL RESOURCES (PLACE, TOOLS) REMAIN AVAILABLE?
YES
ARE FINANCIAL RESOURCES (TRAVEL, SECRETARIAL TIME) AVAILABLE?
Beware of the sustainability of the project if the financial resources are only voluntary donations. There are often long-term costs for coordination, travel, printing, etc.
YES
NO

Concluding notes

This guide aims to help (self)-assess the relevance and appropriateness of implementing a PGS for a given community and in a given context. The importance of understanding the context is paramount and may lead to different governance options for the standard and the verification process suggested in the document.

At the end of the (self)-assessment, it is interesting to report the results of the answers to all the questions and the points of attention, in the most appropriate way, to the concerned stakeholders (written note, oral presentation, etc.). This can guide further work.

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Annexe 1: The 6 key elements of PGS as defined by IFOAM (2008)

1. **Shared vision**: where the main stakeholders (producers, NGOs, traders, consumers and even governments) collectively support the fundamental principles that guide both the production standards and the operating rules of PGS.

2. **Participation:** Participatory certification is based on the commitment of stakeholders who are involved in the production and consumption of the concerned products, including participation in the initial design and subsequent operation of the system.

3. **Transparency of the system and its actors**: Transparency is created by the fact that all stakeholders, including producers and consumers, know and understand how the guarantee system works, including the standards, the guarantee process and how decisions are made. This implies the existence of basic documentation on the PGS and its availability to any interested partner. Commercially sensitive information that is compiled during the operation of PGS is to be treated confidentially.

4. **Trust**: The integrity basis for PGSs leans on the idea that producers are trustworthy. Thus, non-compliance is the result of an involuntary act related to a difficulty rather than a deliberate act of cheating.

5. **Learning process**: The development and verification of PGS principles and rules not only lead to credibility of the quality targeted, but also contribute to a continuous learning process that develops the capacities of the stakeholders involved. The exchange of knowledge and know-how between members is fundamental.

6. **Horizontality**: It induces equal decision-making and thus power-sharing among stakeholders. Participatory certification engages all concerned at the same level of responsibility to assess the product and its production method.

Annexe 2:
IFOAM's 10 characteristics of PGSs (2008)

1. Standards set (or chosen) by partners
2. A brand or seal (label)
3. Basic organisation (permanent collective action)
4. Appropriate for peasant agriculture (local and inexpensive)
5. Principles and values (peasant farming, organic farming)
6. System documentation and procedure
7. A signed document as a token of honour
8. Mechanisms to verify farmer compliance
9. Clear and previously defined consequences (sanctions)
10. Mechanisms to support farmers (support, coaching)

Glossary

Certification: any form of certification affixed to a product whose production and/or transformation practices have been controlled and comply with the corresponding specifications. It leads to the award of a certificate giving the right to use the logo and its name.

Guarantee system: modalities of a certification allowing to control the production and/or transformation practices and to guarantee the respect of the corresponding specifications.

Initial community: community that will participate in the first participatory certification campaign.

Initiators: stakeholders who have come up with the idea for the project.

Label: The term label has no legal meaning. We consider a label as a system made up of 2 elements: 1) a reference system with specifications and 2) a logo with its name, affixed to the products resulting from this reference system.

Participatory guarantee system (PGS): participatory certification based on the assessment by peers (producers, craftsmen, etc.) and sometimes their community (buyers, users, distributors, local associations, etc.) to guarantee compliance with the commitments of the specifications.

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