CH08 - Sustainability standards and certification for agriculture: an overview

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Abstract:

The number of sustainability standards and certifications applied in agricultural supply chains has grown considerably in the past decade, creating confusion for consumers and challenges for producers, particularly small-scale producers in developing countries. This chapter provides an overview of the range of sustainability standards that have emerged, who has developed them, their content and rationale. It also explores how companies select the standards they use, and how this is changing. Recent choices made by brands and retailers accentuate some of the challenges associated with standards for smallholders and further contextualises the mixed picture concerning impacts on smallholders. The chapter provides a summary of implications of sustainability standards, including how they may contribute to improved practices, but highlights limitations of standards on their own as a tool to hold business to account, stressing the importance the overall sustainability strategy of the company, and its commitment to sustainability.

Key words:

Sustainability, smallholders, supply chains, standards, sustainability strategy

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1. Introduction

The number of sustainability standards and certifications applied in agricultural supply chains has grown considerably in the past decade. A recent United Nations report suggests that there are in the region of 450 voluntary sustainability standards, most covering agricultural commodities (UNFSS, 2022). This chapter provides an overview of the range of sustainability standards that have emerged, who has developed them, their content and rationale. Concerns have been raised as to whether sustainability standards create barriers to inclusion and in fact limit the benefits of incorporation in so-called modern markets for smallholders. Ultimately, standards need to be considered both in terms of the standards system of which they are only one part and the wider social and institutional context in the country of production. Too often standards are regarded as 'off the shelf' supply chain management tools that ignore the interface with local context and the market power of those who choose to use them.

This chapter starts by presenting a framework to help navigate the array of standards that exist, drawing on reports by international organisations as well as academic sources and critique from a range of disciplines, largely in the social sciences and business studies. It then explores how retailers and brands select the standards they use, and how this is changing. Recent choices made by brands and retailers accentuate some of the challenges associated with standards for smallholders and further contextualises the mixed picture concerning impacts on smallholders. The chapter provides a summary of implications of sustainability standards, including how they may contribute to improved practices, but highlights limitations of standards on their own as a tool to hold business to account or indeed to drive a shift to a more sustainable future.

2. What are sustainability standards?

It is useful to start by exploring a definition of standards They are 'agreed criteria…by which a product or a service's performance, its technical and physical characteristics, and/or the process, and conditions, under which it has been produced or delivered, can be assessed' (Nadvi and Wältring 2002:6). Standards have been developed by businesses to facilitate trade, helping to determine price and define contract terms as they convey valuable information between buyer and seller. For example, for centuries there have been standards for the weight of a sack for commodities such as flour, the permitted level of impurities in that bag of flour, or the size of a particular component in a mechanical device. Standards are there to protect the consumer, especially food or product safety standards. They show conformity with a set of expectations meaning that business is transacted more quickly, with fewer questions raised by the buyer. As Oakley and Buckland (2004: 132-3) put it standards 'are about circumspection, practical guidance and measurement that allow good practice to be understood and repeated'. It is a language and set of practices that business understands and is used to working with.

The growth of global supply chains and the increasing phenomenon of global sourcing, facilitated by liberalisation and de-regulation (Utting, 2005) created a gap between the regulatory environment and business norms of companies sourcing goods from around the world and that of their suppliers (Dicken, 2014). Competitive pressures and the desire to cut costs, drive efficiencies, and diversify the supply base have motivated the development of sourcing strategies, but have left businesses exposed to new risks. Businesses with brands to protect recognised that they needed to respond to, and manage, ethical risks associated with poor working conditions and impacts of poor production practices on the environment, not least because of the expectations of stakeholders (Busch and Bain, 2004). As business became more concerned with sustainability, the idea of a 'standard' to convey expectations with respect to production practices, inputs and outputs emerged as an idea

that, whilst not completely new, accelerated as a governance tool amongst non-governmental organisations and policy groups particularly from the 1990s. According to the International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling or ISEAL Alliance (2016:5), sustainability standards are:

'A set of criteria defining good social and environmental practices in an industry or product supply chain. They are market-based tools and interventions seeking sustainability and development outcomes…They fall within the subset of 'voluntary' and 'private' standards but with a clear sustainability goal in their mission'.

In this definition, social standards are firmly within the scope of sustainability standards that are defined broadly to encompass social wellbeing and social justice aspects as well as environmental aspects of sustainability. Various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) promote sustainability standards to business as tools not only to manage supply chains, but also tools to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (WWF and ISEAL Alliance, 2017). However, as will be shown below, sustainability standards may engage with different aspects of sustainability or have different emphases and have different origins and systems for accountability.

As Bush et al. (2015) explain, standards have become a tool for governance *in* supply chains (enabling companies to claim a certificate and benchmark their own practices), *of* supply chains (whereby companies set expectations of their suppliers) and *through* supply chains (whereby civil society actors use standards as a means of making businesses accountable). In this chapter, the focus is on standards that are explicitly applied to the supply chain referring to those that are focused on governing of supply chains, but also recognising that several standards originate from processes of governing through standards. Standards that are about information sharing or transparency, e.g., Global Reporting Initiative (or GRI) or broader sets of principles that are part of public-private partnerships such as the Global Compact), both of which operate at a broader level than the supply chain, are out of the scope of this chapter. Similarly, environmental management systems that are applied at the single organisation level rather than the supply chain level are not part of this review.

3. A framework to understand sustainability standards

At their most basic, sustainability standards are tools that companies use to manage their supply chains, or more precisely set expectations for their suppliers with regards to environmental and social practices. However, how are the criteria that form the basis of these standards identified and specified? Who sets these standards? In what ways do they differ? Moreover, why are there so many?

In the agri-food sector sustainability standards seem to proliferate. There are some with a high level of consumer recognition, associated with a certificate or label such as Fairtrade. But there are increasing numbers of labels making claims about sustainability to the consumer and also several standards that are less visible to the consumer, but are increasingly used by business in their engagements with suppliers. In the early 2000s policy makers, especially those involved with promoting trade and international market access as a vehicle for development, were concerned about how standards proliferation created barriers for producers in developing countries. This was both in terms of setting expectations for compliance and demonstrating this compliance in the first place, and also where producers were selling to multiple buyers this meant a proliferation of audits and paper-trails, sometimes with conflicting requirements (Giovanucci and Ponte, 2005; Seville et al., 2010).

Initiatives for standards convergence were created to share good practice and create forums for determining minimum expectations, or even aspirations. The ISEAL Alliance was established in 2002 with the aim of creating a solid foundation for collaborative working between third party certification and standards organisations, creating credibility tools and platforms for shared learning. Founder members included Fairtrade International, the Rainforest Alliance and IFOAM, the body representing the global organic movement. Large companies organised through the Consumer Goods Forum set up the Global Social Compliance Programme (GSCP) in 2009 with the 'aim of harmonising existing efforts and deliver a common, consistent and global approach across sectors for the continuous improvement of working and environmental conditions in global supply chains' (https://www.theconsumergoodsforum.com/social-sustainability/sustainable-supply-chain-initiative/faq/). A reference code was developed against which members could benchmark their own standards. However, whilst this reference code still exists, in 2017 this approach was replaced by the Sustainable Supply Chain Initiative (SSCI), which focused on guidance for practice rather than standards. The ISEAL Alliance is still highly influential in the standards' debate and practice.

Standard setters 'offer different yet similar and mutually recognized standards that are close substitutes' (Reinecke et al. 2012: 805). Sustainability is an issue on which there is agreement about what we need to achieve, but not how to get there, meaning that in standards development, choice and application there are roles played by 'ideologies, values' and different understandings of what is legitimate (ibid: 810). Moreover, the sustainability standards landscape is not static, but is dynamic with features, say Reinecke and colleagues, of a market in which companies choose standards not necessarily on what is technically the 'best' but what meets their needs at a particular time and in relation to specific pressures. There is conflicting evidence as to whether the market for standards leads to a race to the bottom or to the top (Fransen et al., 2019), with some commentators suggesting this might be related to both sectoral characteristics (e.g., consumer concerns, structure of the chain) as well has the governance models adopted (Ponte, 2014).

This part of the chapter seeks to provide insight into the standards landscape, drawing on scholarship and empirical evidence to clarify and provide ways of understanding the diversity of sustainability standards. The resultant framework is proposed to place individual standards on a map or to navigate around a complex standards landscape asking the basic, but inter-connected questions of what, who, why and how:

- **Who** established the standard
- **What** does the standard cover? Which aspects of sustainability does it **focus** on? How wide is its **scope**?
- **Why** did this standard get developed? What is the underlying **orientation**?

3.1 Who established the standard?

A key distinguishing factor between different standards is the type of actors or organisations that develop them and govern their operation. The most visible standards in agriculture and land management since the mid-1990s have been those developed by multi-stakeholder organisations, often dubbed voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) usually associated with third party certification processes, for example, Fairtrade International or Rainforest Alliance. These are often associated with the processes of governing *through* standards in which civil society, often in partnership with business, creates a standard that they then lobby for business to adopt, and offer independent verification, and usually a consumer facing label or certificate. Whilst VSS were developed with companies or industry bodies as part of a broad coalition of stakeholders, their

origins lie in a critique of both the lack of effective transnational regulation and the limitations of private sector regulation or standards developed by companies themselves, which were seen as just about brand protection (O'Rourke, 2003). VSS have a focus on changing practices, not just recognising and assuring good practices, aiming to use the market as a mechanism for change, through a process sometimes known as non-state market driven governance (Auld et al., 2008). This embodies the idea that a standard outlining good practice, verified by a certificate or label aimed at consumers, might be a mechanism for protecting the environment and defending social and economic rights of producers and workers. Giovanucci and Ponte went so far as to suggest that in the coffee sector 'sustainability standards can play a key role for addressing inequalities, and indeed genuinely fomenting sustainability, in the coffee trade and even more broadly in international trade' (2005: 299).

Also technically voluntary, but compulsory for producers wishing to sell to the particular company there are private company standards. Vermeuelen (2015) calls these 'Do it yourself' standards where a company has its own standard that it applies to its suppliers, thereby exercising governance *of* its supply chain. This kind of standard is not usually associated with a consumer-facing label, and the standard often remains a business-to-business (B2B) communication, though details of such schemes often appear in annual sustainability reports directed at investors (KPMG, 2008). These standards may be developed in collaboration with civil society, but they are proprietary instruments, sometimes with an associated trademark.

As noted above, private standards have roots in communications about delivery and payment terms and quality and food safety expectations. Global food retailers have long had their own internal standards, often rooted in food safety legislation and due diligence requirements. Examples include Nature's Choice (Tesco), Filières Qualité (Carrefour), Field-to-Fork (Marks & Spencer) and Filière Controlleé (Auchan) (Henson and Humphrey, 2010). These tended to be checked by internal sourcing or purchasing teams supported by quality assurance. When pressed in the 1990s to show sustainability or ethical credentials often companies added extra responsibilities to these teams who would need to acquire the requisite skills and knowledge (Barrientos and Smith, 2007).

Within the agricultural commodity and beverage sector, private company standards covering a range of sustainability issues have evolved from a focus on quality assurance. Nespresso's AAA Sustainable Quality programme was launched in 2003. As the name says, initially the programme focused on coffee farmers delivering the requisite quality and a continuous improvement process, and with stronger, more direct ties between the brand and the producers from whom they purchased coffee. By 2011, Nespresso sourced more than 60% of its coffee from around 45,000 farmers who belong to the AAA Programme (Reinecke et al., 2012). Given climate change and other environmental changes affecting yields and susceptibility to pests and disease, companies like Nespresso want to ensure more secure access to supply. In developing their standard and their engagement strategy with their suppliers, they have drawn on the expertise of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the Rainforest Alliance and Technoserve and global traders (Alvarez et al., 2010).

Whilst having a proprietary standard is important for many companies, linked to quality expectations and reputation management, some companies recognise that there are benefits in working with other companies across a sector or multiple sectors. Such collective initiatives are sometimes created with the aim of limiting standards proliferation, or failing that, to create a benchmark that conveys an understanding of expected practice across the sector, against which private, single company, standards can be compared. This was the origins of the Global Coffee Platform that has evolved from the work and membership of the 4C Association that established a

'common code for the coffee community' that acted as 'a baseline sustainability reference for the coffee industry' (Ugarte et al., 2017: 53).

Such initiatives tend to emerge in sectors where companies may be sourcing from the same pool of suppliers, as in coffee, or the initiative is focused on topics that are considered 'pre-competitive' that may relate to the institutional or infrastructural landscape in a country of origin.[1] In such cases, action by one company to improve supplier practices may benefit other companies so without collective action there is a danger of free riding which might become a disincentive for action by a single company. Many agri-food companies, especially those engaging in such collective initiatives are increasingly recognising that setting standards for suppliers alone will not deliver the improvements needed for environmental and societal sustainability and for the sustainability of their own operations, both materially and in response to societal expectations. Also, companies recognise that they lack the scientific knowledge and expertise with regards to the nature and scale of sustainability challenges, especially with regards to environmental degradation and seek to collaborate with universities and other sources of knowledge generation (Friedberg, 2017). The GCP now works through 'public-private platforms in coffee producing countries, and through thematic work streams at a global level, focussing on climate smart agriculture, economic viability, gender and youth' (Ugarte et al., 2017: 53).

A long-standing grouping of food and agriculture companies with a focus on pre-competitive topics is the Sustainable Agriculture Initiative Platform (known as the SAI Platform, https://saiplatform.org/). Established in 2002, with roots in discussions between Danone, Nestlé and Unilever, its original focus was sustainable agricultural practices in arable in the European Union (EU) and United States (US), given that they were already collaborating through the emerging Roundtables on tropical products such as oil palm and soy (SAI Platform, 2022). Membership has grown to over 150 of the largest food and agriculture companies across 30 countries, covering a vast array of production systems. Like many other collective initiatives, its focus is the development and sharing metrics covering both good practices and outcome measures. It has a specific focus on commonalities rather than differentiation through a consumer-facing label or standard, working on the development of sustainability metrics with the aim of driving continuous improvement.

Collective standards initiatives across the cocoa sector have origins in attempts to combat forced labour and child labour spearheaded by the World Cocoa Foundation (Nelson and Phillips, 2018). In addition, facing quality and supply issues because of climate change as in the coffee sector, there have been collective industry efforts to work on more sustainable and climate resilience cocoa production practices. Some collective initiatives have decided to concentrate all their energies on sharing good practice and tackling the root causes of the problems faced by the sector. With roots in a shared code, the Ethical Tea Partnership no longer promotes or audits its own collective standard, it works in partnership with development bodies and governments to support capacity building measures including those associated with climate adaptation (Ethical Tea Partnership, 2021) and the adoption of 'living' wages (Malawi Tea 2020, 2017).

Collective standards have some similarities to VSS established by MSIs in that they are created by more than one entity, and increasingly involve measures to build capacity and respond to processes beyond a single site of production or value chain that affect the achievement of their standards. However, in contrast to VSS that tend to originate in the third sector, collective initiatives tend to be

[1] Note that anti-trust laws prohibit collaborations that may restrain competition, including the exchange of information concerning individual prices, rates, coverages, market practices, claims settlement practices, or any other competitive aspect of an individual company's operation.

business led, though they may involve NGOs in an advisory capacity. Whilst they have an important function in generating collective action, some have been critiqued for an overly strong focus on production. For example, the collective actions at landscape level in cocoa might 'help sustain the industry under deteriorating conditions' but fail to understand the underlying issues, especially with respect to the vulnerability of smallholders, limiting longer term transformation (Nelson and Phillips, 2018: 252). Moreover, where the focus is on metrics to drive continuous improvement in production practices amongst the supplier base, there may be less attention paid to the supply chain relations that may facilitate or constrain change.

A final comment to make regarding the origin of standards is that most purport to be 'global' or 'universal', but most standards derive from companies or stakeholders in the Global North. There are of course long-standing standards from the Global South, often oriented at differentiating a country's exports to northern markets such as the Kenya Flower Council (Said-Allsopp and Tallontire, 2015). Others have emerged in direct competition with so-called global standards, especially where a country dominates production as has been seen with the development of standards for palm oil in Indonesia and soy in Brazil (Hospes, 2014). More recently, sustainability standards have started to emerge in regional markets in the Global South, such as in East Africa, often related to the formalisation of supermarket supply chains (Turley, 2022).

3.2 What does the standard cover?

As noted above, there is significant agreement on the nature of sustainability problems, but less consensus on how to resolve them. We see an increasing number of standards often in the same sector and competing in the same markets e.g., in coffee and chocolate we see VSSs such as Rainforest Alliance, UTZ and Fairtrade as well as private company and collective standards; in flowers there are VSS and collective standards at international and national levels. That said, there is increasing consensus on the content of sustainability standards, or at least what might be included as criteria if not how these are monitored or verified through an audit process. Sustainability standards cover at least two of the three pillars of sustainability, that is they cover social and environmental issues, and sometimes economic, though the latter dimension is usually less explicit in most standards. Table 1 provides an overview of general patterns of inclusion and exclusion, which to some extent are informed by global normative frameworks agreed at United Nations level and increasingly by guidance from 'meta standards' organisations such as the ISEAL Alliance or the Global Social Compliance Programme (Reinecke et al.,2012).

Since the early 2000s, there has been increased consensus that standards should cover internationally agreed International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conventions that have the status of core labour rights (Barrientos and Smith, 2007). However, the extent to which they cover the complexity of sustainability is limited at best. Sustainability standards criteria tend to focus on inputs and outputs with respect to environmental issues, lacking 'ecological thinking and literacy' (Milne and Gray, 2013: 24) and with limited engagement with environmental conventions such as on biodiversity or climate (Smith et al., 2019). However, in recent years several standards bodies and groups of companies have begun to consider how to work on issues at the landscape level, for example water stewardship and spill-over impacts of agricultural operations on regional land use patterns (ISEAL, 20022a and b).

On social issues there is a focus on codified rights as opposed to processes right associated with building up social capital (Said-Allsopp and Tallontire, 2015). The economic dimensions of sustainability are rarely covered explicitly or are merged with social criteria, such as minimum

wages. In only a few cases are wages expressed as living wages (e.g. the Ethical Trading Initiative's Base Code), though there has been considerable momentum to push for living wages and incomes in a number of sectors in recent years, for example driven by the Living Income Community of Practice, https://www.living-income.com/. Only Fairtrade standards cover price issues separate from issues of quality and whilst trading relations are covered in the Fairtrade trader standards e.g., payment and credit terms and length of contract, they are notoriously difficult to implement (Doherty and Davies, 2013).

Table 1: Criteria found in sustainability standards in food and agriculture

Pillar of sustainability	Typically included criteria	Less developed or emerging areas
Social	ILO Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work: [2] **1.** freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining; **2.** the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour; **3.** the effective abolition of child labour; **4.** the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation; and **5.** a safe and healthy working environment Other specific working conditions linked to health and safety as relevant to the sector	Process rights such as the right to collective bargaining and freedom of association may exist on paper but less respected in practice
Environmental	Pesticide use Water use	Landscape impacts/ impacts beyond the site of production Climate adaptations Biodiversity
Economics	Price usually associated with quality except for fair trade standards Quality specification	Value addition Supply chain relations Living wages/ income

Source: compiled by author

[2] Originally adopted in 1998 and revised in 2022; reproduced from https://www.ilo.org/declaration/lang--en/index.htm%5D

Numerous detailed critiques exist of sustainability standards content, for example Ponte (2019: 214) who argues that sustainability standards 'focus on the manifestations rather than the root of the problem', rarely covering 'systemic and structural' issues such as inequality and supply chain power relations. Improvements tend to occur 'unit-level' and it is difficult to account for 'overall' reductions in for example child labour or damage to the environment.

3.3 Why did the standard get developed?

The reasons for the establishment of sustainability standards, and why they vary in their scope is addressed by a vast literature. The purpose of the sustainability standards is considered here in two ways, firstly their level of stringency, and secondly their engagement with a theory of change.

Based on detailed empirical analysis of the vast array of sustainability standards in the cut flower sector, at national and international levels, Riisgaard (2011) developed a simple typology of standards. Type 1 standards were identified as schemes that weigh size over principles i.e., they were keen to be inclusive across the sector and create a benchmark standard. These standards tended to be about risk management and with respect to labour rights covered outcome standards that provided basic protections such as health and safety. Examples included GlobalGAP, most retailer standards examined and the Kenya Flower Council's standard. In contrast, there were schemes she dubbed Type 2 standards that were more concerned about maintaining principles rather than growing the membership. Adopters of this type of standard wanted to differentiate themselves in the market. In terms of social standards content, these standards tend to focus more on enabling rights, and have a closer relationship with the labour rights movement. In the floriculture sector examples included Flower Label Programme and Fair Flowers Fair Plants as well as Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance.

This analysis focusing on 'stringency' provides insight into the overall ethos of a standards body, or what it is trying to achieve. In the past decade, there has been an increased popularity in the use of theory of change as a model to explain in more depth the rationale behind the content of and overall approach to implementing a sustainability standard. Theories of change have roots in international development and aid planning, based on the argument that you have to know where you want to go and the assumptions that you are making about the processes of change in order to better understand and account for impact (Valters, 2015). The ISEAL Alliance advocate making a theory of change explicit, expressed as 'Defining the Intended Change', as part of their work on good practice in impact assessment (ISEAL Alliance, 2014).

There are differences between theories of change adopted amongst members of ISEAL that operate in similar or the same sectors, which may account partly for the persistence of so many sustainability standards. Table 2 compares the Fairtrade smallholder theory of change with the UTZ standard[3] with respect to two aspects: firstly their vision and secondly, the impacts envisaged. Fairtrade International focuses on decision-making and the security of workers and smallholders at the centre of their vision of sustainability, whereas UTZ focuses on crops and the environment and income, with improved agricultural practices at the farm level being the main driver for increases in income (though there is some role noted for the buyer in capacity building). Whilst both theories of change refer to improved incomes for farmers, the route by which they aim to achieve this outcome differs.

[3] Formerly independent, UTZ is now part of the Rainforest Alliance, https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/utz/

With UTZ, the focus is on investment in building up capacity to ensure maintenance of quality and improve yields, which will hopefully lead to increased incomes. The Fairtrade route to impact engages with a broader set of mechanisms linked to rural livelihoods, social dynamics related to gender and inter-generational inequalities and reducing environmental vulnerability. This difference might be attributed to UTZ's roots in good agricultural practices that have been developed within industry, originally as risk management reduction for quality and safety, which were then extended to environment and worker health and safety whereas Fairtrade has origins in the trade justice and international development movement and advocating for producers.

Table 2: Comparison between theories of Change for Fairtrade and UTZ

Standard	Impacts (envisaged)	Vision	Reference
Fairtrade (Small Producer Organisations, simplified)	• Improved household income, assets & standard of living • Less risk & vulnerability, increased food security • Improved access to basic services Increased environmental sustainability & resilience to climate change • Inter-generational sustainability of rural communities • Increased cooperation & gender equality within communities Increased dignity, confidence, control & choice • Enhanced influence & status of small producers • Fairer & more sustainable trading system	"A world in which all small producers and workers can enjoy secure and sustainable livelihoods, fulfil their potential and decide on their future"	Fairtrade Theory of change 2018 (Fairtrade International, 2018)
UTZ theory of change	• Improved livelihoods of farmers, farm workers and families • Long term viability of the sector • Safeguarding natural resources	Sustainable farming is the norm Better crop Better income Better environment Better life	UTZ theory of change 2017, as represented in Ingram et al. (2017).

Source: compiled by author

The theory of change focus for some of the collective initiatives can be less clear-cut. SAI Platform's focus on metrics, rather than standards to be met, 'assumes that incentives will come in the form of discovered efficiencies and improved relations with supply chain customers', argues Friedberg (2017: 1392). She goes on to say that this needs empirical evidence, as well as more clarity on the theory of change approach being used. She states: 'The fact that metrics-based governance expects

suppliers to both report on and somehow improve their performances—often without promise of monetary gain— raises the obvious question of how that is supposed to happen' (Friedberg, 2017: 1392).

Exploring sustainability standards through the questions of who develops standards, what they cover and why they were developed can help observers to navigate the huge variety of sustainability standards that have emerged. What standards look like on paper however, is only part of the story; we also need to consider how they are used in practice. In the next section, how companies choose to use different kinds of standard in practices is explored and critiqued.

4. Sustainability standard selection by companies

Given the variety of sustainability standards that exist, how do companies choose between them, or even decide to use standards in the first place? In the past fifteen years sustainability standards and related tools have been used not only with respect to high value products with high consumer visibility, but also to staple crops such as maize and those ingredients with multiple uses, so called *flex crops* such as oil palm and soy. Indeed, part of the business benefits of using sustainability standards that the ISEAL Alliance promotes to companies include their 'contribution to supply chain coordination, followed by supply chain risk management and supply chain transparency and traceability' (Molenaar, 2022: 18). Ultimately, companies wish to demonstrate that they are responsible businesses to their shareholders and to ensure their own resilience in the face of environmental challenges that threaten productivity and availability. Increasingly governments and regulators are also creating drivers for the adoption of sustainability standards in certain sectors such as biofuels. The EU Renewable Energy Directive makes specific reference to the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and the Roundtable on Responsible Soy as indicators of sustainable sources (Ponte, 2014). The choice by companies about whether to commit to a sustainability agenda, their priorities and the tools to use, as well as how well they implement these elements will vary according to the mix and strength of the external pressures on the business and their internal drivers.

Multi-stakeholder approaches are 'increasingly being seen as the most legitimate private rule-makers' (Cheyns and Riisgaard, 2014: 409) and in the eyes of many consumers, these are the 'best' standards. In the early 2000s, concerns were raised about the content of MSI standards and the extent to which the 'right' issues were being prioritised or whether topics were 'cherry picked', privileging the concerns of consumers over those of producers (Giovanucci and Ponte, 2005; Tallontire et al., 2014). However, further rounds of standards' revision in the wake of stakeholder engagement and impact assessments have led to improvements, especially to the MSI standards aligned to bodies such as the ISEAL Alliance.

However, legitimacy or the 'best' sustainability practice are not always the prime motivation for standards adoption. Moreover, third party or collective standards do not exist in all sectors, and in many markets, there is minimal consumer or civil society pressure that sets expectations on the approaches to use. Indeed, a company's approach to managing the supply chain is not all about communicating, or responding to consumerism: '[M]any studies also show that firms are not that directly worried about lessening sales as a result of NGO shaming tactics' (Fransen, 2019: 796). In choosing the tools to use, many companies are as concerned about relationships with suppliers as they are with consumers. Where there are environmental or land pressures on agricultural

production, sustainability standards may be used to improve practices and secure access to produce through creating more direct and stable relationships with suppliers.

Whilst third party certified standards offer benefits to businesses, many of which have adopted them as tools to manage sustainability and to communicate this, critiques of the mainstreaming of VSS highlight that even if such standards are chosen, stringency in application or the planned benefits resulting from the standard body's theory of change approach depend on how they are used. However, this an area ripe for more research.

A recent analysis of company choices of standards, based on a range of case studies of multi-national companies sourcing agricultural products, identified key factors influencing choice of 'instrument', including different types of standard, as well as investment and capacity building or alternatively, avoiding sourcing from a location (Rueda et al., 2017). This first highlights the importance of the sustainability issues faced in the production location including the level of risk, especially environmental risk, the visibility of that risk, the availability of technology and knowledge to deal with the issue and the overall regulatory framework in that region. A second consideration is the extent of leverage a specific company has over its suppliers, which affects whether a company adopts its own approach to embedding sustainability standards or works with others. A third factor is characteristics of the market, including the extent of brand recognition and consumer facing communications as well as the significance of origin or 'terroir' for the consumer experience.

The resulting decision-tree the authors produce helps explain why chocolate producers have tended to adopt cross-industry collective initiatives as they are sourced from scattered suppliers over whom they have limited leverage. Multi-stakeholder standards were more common where there was a product with limited transformation from producer to consumer, and where there was good traceability capability, such as in the banana supply chain. Companies developed their own standards where there was a concern for quality and a desire to develop closer links with suppliers, such as with Starbucks Café Practices. Based firmly on commercial criteria, this analysis misses out the values of the buying company beyond market success and survival, and focuses on environmental decision-making, not social criteria, but helps illustrate the factors that are routinely taken into consideration.

Whether a company uses a VSS with third party certification, participates in a collective industry initiative or uses its own private standard, the link to the company's values and its over-arching sustainability strategy is an important indicator of its potential to initiate and deliver longer-term change. There may be trade-offs between implementing the principles underpinning the standard and business interests, with operation of purchasing practices and the exercise of supply chain power eroding sustainability benefits for the supplier (Doherty and Davies, 2013; Ponte, 2019). In other circumstances, a standard may be central to supplier engagement and overall company strategy. In her analysis of UK retailers use of Fairtrade standards Smith (2010) argued that some used the standards in an arms-length way, passing on the standards' requirements to actors further upstream whereas other retailers used Fairtrade as part of their overall supply chain strategy, making 'category shifts' so that all a certain product category rather than just some individual lines were certified, often combining this with capacity development. Similarly, other supermarkets have used a 'sharing' strategy in applying standards, whereas others have been characterised as 'pushing' a standard and associated expectations onto producers (Muller et al., 2012).

However, it is important to remember that the adoption of standards is not static, and companies may shift their approach in response to contextual factors, e.g. consumer demands, or internal company strategy. An increasing trend in some markets is companies dropping VSS, especially

Fairtrade, in favour of their own company standards. Since around 2016, a number of companies that had previously made very public affiliations to Fairtrade announced changes to their approaches. The first high profile company to do this was Cadbury (a brand now owned by Mondelez) who worked out a deal with the Fairtrade Foundation so that the traceability requirements would not be quite so strict (Doherty, 2016). In 2017, the UK supermarket Sainsbury's decided that it would no longer buy its tea for its 'Red Label' line from on Fairtrade terms, though they were keen to still buy from the same farmers, establishing their own Fairly Traded scheme, a private standard. This proved controversial. Fairtrade supporters highlighted the potential for confusion amongst consumers confusion about the claims on the packaging and the underlying practices. Fairly Traded is very similar, but not identical to, to Fairtrade, and developing a bespoke retail standard rather than engaging with Fairtrade as an independent standard led to concerns about the benefits it delivered to producers and the future of the Fairtrade standard (CAFOD, 2018). There were also objections from the farmer co-operatives supplying tea, worried that they would no longer have a say in the use of the 'social premium' from sales (Fairtrade Africa, 2018).

Sainsbury's produced a report on the outcomes their new approach in which they tried to address some of the concerns from the wider sustainability standard community about the legitimacy of the company's 'do-it-yourself' approach, building on an earlier study that set out their sustainable sourcing strategy (Sainsbury's, 2019). They stressed improvements in transparency in their tea supply chain from East African suppliers, a sector that has been critiqued for poor transparency (see for example Dolan, 2008). They also referred to generating a better understanding of challenges faced by small producers, and that quality and environmental practices by producers had improved. Bringing standard setting in-house might be perceived as part of organisational learning and development of the sustainability strategy with respect to agricultural sourcing. However to date, they have not rolled this approach out to other commodities.

Nevertheless, this case illustrates some of the decision-making behind the use of internal company standards, a concern to have closer relationships with suppliers and to link standards' use to a company's strategy, rather than rely on policy instruments governed externally. Scrutiny is therefore needed not only of the specific standards but also a company's approach to sustainability more broadly, and if it is integrated within their overarching business strategy and the extent to which it is linked to organisational transformation and a vision of sustainable development as opposed to company focused sustainability (Schaltegger et al., 2012). More fundamentally, one might ask if a company is motivated by 'the business case' or whether its strategy is linked to a broader understanding of the company's relationship with society or as a corporate citizen, that is its understanding of corporate social responsibility (Garriga and Melé , 2004; Sheehy, 2015).

5.Standards and smallholders

The companies managing supply chains and adopting standards do not necessarily do this with the needs, livelihoods or experiences of smallholders in mind. As examined throughout this chapter, sustainability standards are focused on governance of supply chains (whereby companies set expectations of their suppliers to minimise the risk of being exposed to poor practice and to move towards more sustainable practices), and through supply chains (whereby civil society actors use standards as a means of making businesses accountable) (Bush et al., 2015). Further, sustainability standards were not designed with a specific focus on the needs and capacities of smallholders, with notable exceptions such as Fairtrade's standards for Small Producer Organisations (providing a framework for smallholder empowerment through their organisations) and Bon Sucro which has the same core criteria, but has fewer overall requirements for smallholders (Elder et al., 2021). Rarely do the governance structures of standards bodies include the voice of producers, on any scale, even in

MSIs (Bennett, 2017). The structures and processes of some sustainability roundtables create barriers for smaller scale actors and those from the Global South (Ponte, 2014: 269) and exclusion of smallholders from direct representation is sometimes justified on the basis that the subject matter is too technical (Tallontire et al., 2014).

Smallholders have been involved in global markets for over a century, with ties and relationships developed during the colonial era. Smallholder producers, usually defined as having two hectares or under, are an important part of the global food system, supplying at least 35% of global food calories (Lowder et al., 2021), though if 'family farms' are included, as much as 70% of global food calories and a third of global crops (Guarin et al., 2022) arise from these micro and small businesses. However, as Guarin et al. (2022) point out, over the past twenty years many supply chains have been managed more directly by buyers (e.g., coffee and cocoa), or new 'tightly structured chains' have been created, such as for fresh vegetables and fruit. As discussed in this chapter and elsewhere in this volume, engagement in so-called 'modern markets' requires conformity to a range of standards. These include sustainability standards and quality and food safety standards, as well as meeting the price and logistical requirements of buyers, many of which require access to documentation and formal management control systems that many, if not most, smallholders do not possess, and where benefits tend to accrue based on economies of scale. Many international development institutions, such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), have been concerned as to whether standards contribute to a barrier to entry, creating exclusion for some from such markets, thus limiting trade and sustainable development.

There is an increasing volume of evidence being generated on the sustainability impacts of standards, particularly concerning the VSS associated with third party certifications rather than private company standards (Thorlasken et al., 2018). However much of the evidence is skewed to certain commodities or regions, for example Nelson and Pound's review of impact studies on Fairtrade (2009) highlighted that much of the evidence was on coffee from Latin America. Similarly, a study for the FAO on the inclusion of smallholders in chains requiring standards noted that much of the evidence is concentrated on standards such as Global GAP, Fairtrade and organic standards (Loconto and Dankers, 2014).

It has proved difficult to generalise from studies, but often the results have been less positive than many standard setters or development bodies would like (UNFSS, 2022). To some extent this a reminder that inclusion in markets requiring sustainability standards, and by default meeting them, does not necessarily equate to longer term benefits from them for all supply chain actors (Loconto and Dankers, 2014). Moreover, the way that standards are implemented may not have developmental narratives in mind (Nelson and Tallontire, 2014). Others have noted that impact assessment methodologies are not always sensitive or robust, especially given the many variables they have to be taken into consideration (Ruben, 2017) and given considerable study design and sampling challenges (Meemken, 2020). For example, many studies focus on adoption of established good practices as a proxy for impact (Thorlasken et al., 2018). Similarly, they might highlight the processes that standards-related compliance might engender, which then may lead to development processes such as access to resources, development of skills and the strengthening of farmer (and worker) organisations so that they can better articulate members' needs (Elder et al. 2021). Moreover, most studies lack consideration of how different supply configurations or the role of farmer organisation might affect outcomes (Meemken, 2020).

A feature of many studies of impacts of standards on smallholders is that environmental and labour practices might be improved, but often costs increase more than income, limiting opportunities for poverty reduction at household level (Oya et al., 2018). Frequently benefits that are harder to quantify or are less directly comparable may be cited, such as having longer term or more reliable linkages with buyers as compared to the open market. Similarly, standards engagement, when accompanied by training and donor-funded projects to support producers, can generate benefits

that go beyond impacts that can be attributed to standards-related compliance, as has been shown in the Tanzanian tea sector by Loconto (2014). Increasingly it is being recognised that to understand the impacts of standards there is a need to take into account the actions of actors in the supply chain and also national level actors and institutions (Tallontire et al., 2011; Guarin et al., 2022). Often there is much potential in standards engagement, but the implementation process, and support provided can be key.

Indeed, standards compliance can be challenging, but a recent study has revealed unexpected benefits of standards, specifically Fairtrade standards. A study conducted for Fairtrade International by Günther et al., (2022) demonstrated that smallholders with Fairtrade certification were more resilient in the face of the shock of the Covid-19 pandemic. This was attributed to economic criteria in the standard (e.g., minimum price and longer-term contracts) combined with the experience of certification processes which meant that farmer groups had greater organisational capacity that helped with adaptation. The benefits of organisations forming into groups to facilitate both standards compliance, and to articulate the voice of small farmers can also come into play in such challenging situations (Nelson et al., 2016). It is increasingly clear that standards by themselves do not bring benefits to smallholders: realising benefits requires a supportive institutional context, both in the country of production and of consumption and along the supply chain (Krauss and Krishnan, 2021). Often the issue is not whether the implementation of standards criteria themselves might lead to positive outcomes, but who is implementing them, how they work with smallholders and listen to their concerns.

6. Conclusions

The origins of sustainability standards lie in the expansion of global souring in the food system, offering a form of 'control from a distance' (Gibbon and Ponte, 2005). Over the past decade for sustainability impacts to be achieved, organisations and the buyers that work for them, have recognised the need for greater visibility of the supply chain, particularly making efforts to get closer to the producer as environmental challenges have accelerated. It remains the case that retailers often do have visibility much beyond their first-tier suppliers, especially in supply chains that depend on commodity traders with limited capability to trace the product to source. As Friedberg quotes from her reading of the Walmart-led Sustainability Consortium's activities: "If you can't manage what you don't measure, you definitely can't manage what you can't even see" (2017: 1398).

There are many expectations placed on sustainability standards in the food and agriculture sector. For some they are emblematic of good practices, demonstrating companies' contributions to the sustainability, especially with respect to the Sustainable Development Goals and are presented as a tool to enhance trade and hence broad-based economic development (UNFSS, 2022). However, sustainability standards are by definition exclusionary, they set out what is necessary to merit a certificate or label, often in niche destination markets, and compliance may be a requirement to sell produce to a particular buyer that uses sustainability standards to manage its supply chain. This can be problematic for smaller producers and for development, especially where expectations of compliance are not accompanied by support to achieve compliance (Loconto and Dankers, 2014). Moreover, certification with sustainability standards can erode producer incomes and resilience where efficiency pressures and poor supply chain management practices undermine the capacity of producers to address underlying technical and social issues (Oxfam, 2010) and add to the margins of buying companies where risks and compliance costs are pushed onto suppliers (Ponte, 2019).

This chapter demonstrates that there are no easy answers regarding the impacts of standards in the agri-food sector; sustainability standards are applied in highly complex and contested contexts.

However, this examination, asking simple questions of who establishes standards, what they cover and the rationale for the standard, together with considerations of how companies choose standards seeks to provide routes into understanding the complexity, going beyond the claims on labels and marketing blurbs. These questions help us to consider what might be a plausible pathway to generating sustainability benefits, of what kind and for whom.

A standard's goodness of fit into the sustainability strategy or indeed underlying values of companies buying produce is emerging as an important factor, together with understanding of the practices and priorities of producers, seeing standards as part of wider systems, at company, chain and institutional scales. If standards are to deliver benefits, it is crucial to make them more relevant to farmers, so that they can see the benefits financially as well as in terms of protecting their environment and community. However, what may become more important for sustainability than standards setting out criteria for products might be sets of expectations for companies themselves, and considerations of how company practices interact with national level institutions to support social and environmental sustainability. The adoption of sustainability standards on the basis of 'the business case' and the sustainability of the buying company may drive compliance but it may bring fewer lasting benefits than an approach to standards development and adoption that is based on a broader understanding of a company's responsibility to society.

7. Where to look for further information

United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS)

https://unfss.org/

The UNFSS 'helps producers, traders, consumers, standard-setters, certification-bodies, trade diplomats, non-governmental organizations and researchers to talk to each other, find out more about Voluntary Sustainability Standards and influence decision makers at the intergovernmental level' and aims to provide impartial advice on VSS, including where they may disrupt trade or cause specific challenges to small producers.

Regular overviews of the range of standards in operation and trends can be found in the biennial flagship reports of the United Nation Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS) https://unfss.org/home/flagship-publication/

UNFSS holds regular webinars on a variety of topics related to sustainability standards.

It also commissions and publishes useful reports such as its October 2020 report linking sustainability standards to the Sustainable Development Goals and their specific targets, https://unfss.org/2020/10/13/linking-voluntary-standards-to-sustainable-development-goals/

ISEAL Alliance

https://www.isealalliance.org/

The ISEAL Alliance is a membership organisation of sustainability standards bodies. ISEAL is concerned with assuring the credibility of the standards of its members, and has developed a series of good practice guides, including on standards development and on impact assessment.

Considerable evidence about the effectiveness of sustainability standards is collated by the ISEAL Alliance's Evidensia website, https://www.evidensia.eco/ which is supported by a range of international donors.

The State of Sustainability Initiatives

https://www.iisd.org/ssi/

The State of Sustainability Initiatives (SSI) is long-standing initiative of the International Institute for Sustainable Development in Canada, with roots in a series of multi-stakeholder meetings (2003-2006) on sustainable commodities production and trade, known as the Sustainable Commodity Initiative (SCI). SSI has the support of multi-lateral and bilateral development agencies. It undertakes research on voluntary sustainability standards with the aim of supporting 'better environmental and social performance in important commodity sectors'. It produces regular surveys of sustainability standards, their effectiveness and with respect to trends in specific sectors.

Sustainable Food Lab

https://sustainablefoodlab.org/

The Sustainable Food Lab is a non-profit organisation, established in 2004 with members from the private sector together with scientific institutes, foundations and NGOs. It takes a whole systems approach to deliver programmes that focus on developing solutions through collaborative pre-competitive projects (e.g. on regenerative agriculture and living income), development and testing of tools and frameworks (for example of greenhouse gas emissions calculations, to support sustainability practices by smallholders).

Research Network Sustainable Global Supply Chains

www.sustainablesupplychains.org/

This a network funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and hosted by four scientific and research organisations. It collates research papers by leading scholars on global supply chains, with special section on sustainability standards, making them publicly available.

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