

BOOK REVIEW

Sustainability Certification Schemes in the Agricultural and Natural Science Sectors

Outcomes for Science and the Environment

FIRST EDITION

■ Melissa Vogt, ed.

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Aimed at advanced students, researchers, sustainability professionals, and development practitioners, the book offers a comprehensive roadmap for assessing the utility of voluntary sustainability certification schemes. Drawing on case studies covering nine agri-food and natural resources commodities, Melissa Vogt and co-contributors assess social, cultural, and environmental outcomes for farmers in developing countries and provide a range of recommendations to further strengthen their value and sustainability impacts.

Voluntary certification schemes (VCS) in the agri-food and natural resources sector have multiplied over the past decade. This should come as no surprise considering the global scale of the challenges, including food and water security, climate change, forest conservation, and resource use. From mangroves to mining, from human rights to deforestation, we increasingly rely on public-private partnerships and multi-stakeholder initiatives to pool resources and systematize supply chains. But how effective are these collaborations and what are we learning? Multi-stakeholder certification schemes today are widespread; however, despite the efforts of organizations such

as ISEAL and ISO to bring much-needed rigor and good governance to the core of such schemes, the value of VCS in delivering sustainable impacts for producers, society, and the environment has been questioned.

This book investigates the origins of agri-food sustainability certification schemes and their outcomes. Emerging from a legacy of economic and production drivers over the past 30 years, certification has assumed a growing role as a form of transnational governance in transforming business practice across diverse commodity chains. With a wide range of business models and operational scales, certified labels have brought

awareness and willingness to pay among consumers. However, measurement of social and environmental benefits of adopting best practice as codified in various standards has not kept pace; without effective monitoring, some schemes have been accused of greenwashing.

Aiming at advanced students, researchers and sustainability professionals, this book brings together the perspectives of 32 contributors, comparing the drivers, mechanisms, and legitimacy of nine selected VCS in the agri-food and natural resources space, with the aim of assessing outcomes for science, society, and the environment. Vogt's interest in sustainability outcomes go back to 2006 when she had contributed as a consultant in higher education, and most recently, as an academic based at the University of New South Wales, Australia.

With 13 chapters divided into six sections, the book contextualizes the topic with an introduction to the evolution and maturation of sustainability certification over the past 30 years, commenting on their sources of influence. Vogt continues in chapter 2 with an overview of cultural considerations. The following parts examine four broad themes through their treatment under specific certification schemes across nine agri-food and natural resource sectors: animal well-being, farmed seafood, ocean fisheries, biochar, forests, coffee, roses, biofuel, and gold. Biodiversity outcomes are considered via the case of the Forest Stewardship Council or FSC certification. Part 3 then considers the question of standard development, using biochar and animal welfare certification as case studies, and part 4 examines industry and certification-specific reviews, drawing on examples from farmed seafood, biofuel certification in the European Union (EU), and the Marine Stewardship Council. Part 5 then addresses the critical question of inter-operability and mutual recognition, using several examples from the mining, coffee, and floriculture industries. The book concludes with a summary of outcomes for society and the environment, based on evidence from the nine agri-food commodities studied, together with challenges and recommendations.

Vogt argues that VCS have assumed a global transnational governance role, filling gaps and

weaknesses in national legislation. In so doing, VCS have positioned themselves politically as authorities on multifaceted globalized production systems, empowering large companies to gain market access and set the terms of trade and allocation of natural resources, particularly water. The basis for this legitimization is questioned, with the authors revealing varying levels of transparency, democracy in decision-making, methodological robustness, independence and utility for small farmers, as well as perverse incentives for positive audits. Critically, across all schemes reviewed, Vogt and her co-authors point to a general lack of evidence for positive sustainability outcomes even when private sector interests and influence are moderated through governmental participation, e.g. in the public-private governance arrangement or PPGA on biofuels in the EU.

Market competition between VCS has led to a "race-to-the-bottom", incentivizing producers to shop around for the easiest and cheapest route to certification and creating barriers to interoperability and mutual recognition. Nevertheless, Vogt argues in favor of continuous strengthening of VCS as a "work-in-progress" through further studies of social and environmental impacts that will allow weaknesses to be addressed. Finally, while VCS have historically served to fill gaps in national governance, Vogt argues for the need to strengthen stakeholder capacity to limit the scope of diverse roles currently filed by VCS.

While it would certainly have been useful to include key commodities such as palm oil and soy in the scope of the analysis, the book's comparative approach offers readers a comprehensive overview of parameters that define utility and allow VCS scheme owners to draw lessons even beyond the immediate sectoral scope. Though chapter summaries throughout would have made such lessons more accessible, the extensive annotation and bibliography for each chapter provide ample guidance for curious students and practitioners alike. Readers may also like to dip into Schmitz-Hoffmann et al. (2014) and Marx et al. (2015) for an excellent overview of the basic concepts of VCS.

Readers should also consider the broader context of international governance of VCS, particularly the role of standard-setting bodies such as ISO and ISEAL in providing best-practice guidance for governance and integrity of commodity standards (Willer et al. 2019). The UN Forum on Voluntary Sustainability Standards or UNFSS—a joint initiative of the Food and Agriculture Organization of UN, UN Environment Programme, UN Industrial Development Organization, International Trade Centre (ITC), and UN Conference on Trade and Development—is an important global forum aimed at providing information, analysis and discussions on voluntary sustainability standards at the inter-governmental level. On the other hand, the ITC standards map allows online comparison of over 210 sustainability standards, codes of conduct and audit protocols addressing sustainability hotspots in global supply chains.

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Sustainability standards and certifications are voluntary guidelines used by producers, manufacturers, traders, retailers, and service providers to demonstrate their commitment to good environmental, social, ethical, and food safety practices. There are over 400 such standards across the world. The trend started in the late 1980s and 90s with the introduction of Ecolabels and standards for Organic food and other products. Most standards refer to the triple bottom line of environmental quality, social and economic sustainability. Start by marking "Sustainability Certification Schemes in the Agricultural and Natural Resource Sectors: Outcomes for Society and the Environment" as "Want to Read".

This book provides a balanced critique of a range of international sustainability certification schemes across nine agricultural and natural resource industries. Certification schemes set standards through intramarket private and multi-stakeholder mechanisms, and while third-party verification is often compulsory, certification schemes are regulated voluntarily rather than through government. This book provides a balanced critique of a range of international sustainability certification schemes across nine agricultural and natural resource industries. Because existing schemes remain fragmented on what constitutes a sustainable food and agriculture system, SAFA aims to fill the gap between specific sustainability tools, while fostering partnerships for the long-term transformation of food systems. Such sustainable development (in the agriculture, forestry and fisheries sectors) conserves land, water, plant and animal genetic resources, is environmentally non-degrading, technically appropriate, economically viable and socially acceptable. (FAO Council, 1989). It builds mainly on existing sustainability schemes, creating opportunities for enterprises to use existing data and combining efforts with other tools and sustainability initiatives.