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Standardized food governance? Reflections on the potential and limitations of chemical-free shrimp

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ABSTRACT

Multilayered conformity-assessment systems (MCASs) are becoming an increasingly prominent governance mechanism in food and agriculture. MCASs maintain their legitimacy through the use of scientific norms and practices, as well as multiple tiers of oversight. The purported outcome is standardized conformity-assessment practices, and thus, standardized food and production practices regardless of location or producer. This article examines the ability of MCASs to enforce one form of zero tolerance standards: organics (i.e., zero-synthetic chemicals). The focus is on the governance of organic standards in the rural Indonesia, where the idea of zero tolerance is historically foreign. Drawing on a case study of an organic shrimp project in Indonesia, the ways that the social, economic, and cultural conditions of the global South affect the operations of a MCAS and the capacity of the MCAS to adapt to such conditions are examined. My findings raise questions as to the capability of MCASs to ensure standardized food governance globally.

Introduction

Food has become a highly globalized commodity. Among other things, this means that food produced in one country is increasingly consumed in other countries. Consequently, there is significant need to harmonize food safety and quality standards, which tend to vary from country to country, and develop enforcement mechanisms that can be applied consistently at the global scale. This has led to a proliferation of standards and certification to govern food and agricultural production practices and product quality (Bartley, 2007; Bernstein and Cashore, 2007; Busch, 2011; Hatanaka et al., 2005; Mutersbaugh et al., 2005; Reinecke et al., 2011). However, as standards and certification have become increasingly prevalent, the need to regulate and govern them has also emerged. The result is the development of "multilayered conformity-assessment systems" (MCASs), which consist of multiple tiers of auditing practices.[1]

MCASs have been embraced by many national governments, promoted through the World Trade Organization, and are increasingly becoming de facto mandatory in most economic sectors, including food and agriculture (Hatanaka et al., 2012; Hatanaka and Busch, 2008; Loconto and Busch, 2010). The legitimacy of MCASs as a governance mechanism lies in their use of: (1) scientific norms and practices, and (2) multiple tiers of oversight – usually via audits. Specifically, MCASs, first, seek to embed their practices in scientific norms and practices, such as disinterestedness, replicability, and validity (Bain et al., 2010; Gibbon and Ponte, 2008). Second, in having multiple tiers of oversight in place, not only the producers at production sites, who are the typical auditees, but also certification bodies and accreditation organizations are also audited (Hatanaka and Busch, 2008). Given such oversight, MCASs are generally understood as rigorous and thorough governance mechanisms (Hatanaka et al., 2012). Furthermore, because of their use of scientific norms and practices and multiple tiers of oversight, MCASs are largely viewed as standardizing conformity-assessment practices, and thus, also food and production practices, regardless of location or producer.

Today, most zero tolerance standards, including organics, are governed using MCASs (Busch, 2011; Konefal and Busch, 2010; Loconto and Busch, 2010). This article examines the ability of MCASs to enforce one kind of zero tolerance standards: organics (i.e., zero-synthetic chemicals). Generally, organic farming excludes, or strictly limits, the use of synthetically manufactured chemical inputs, in addition to antibiotics and genetically-modified organisms. However, it should be noted that the definition of organic farming is highly contested (see IFOAM, 2013), and varies from country to country and organization to organization. In particular, the kinds of chemicals allowed and the threshold levels

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[1] MCASs are a component of a large system of governance: "tripartite standards regimes." In brief, tripartite standards regimes consist of both standard-development and conformity-assessment subsystems. See Hatanaka et al. (2012) and Loconto and Busch (2010) for more discussion of tripartite standards regimes.

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of chemical use varies.[2] This indicates that similar to most other zero standards, while organic standards do not completely prohibit the use of synthetic chemicals, they are commonly perceived as doing so by many consumers. Drawing on a case study of an organic shrimp project in Indonesia, the ability of MCASs to ensure conformity with standards in the rural global South, where the idea of zero tolerance is historically foreign, is analyzed.

Generally, once standards are developed, MCASs entail three processes: the communication, implementation, and enforcement of the standards. Communication entails informing producers of the standards, as well as soliciting feedback; implementation is the process of producers putting the standards into practice; and enforcement is the process of auditing not only producers, but the whole conformity-assessment mechanism. In contrast to conventional understandings, where each of these processes is often assumed to be relatively straightforward, I contend that in practice they are quite complex. Drawing on symbolic interaction theories and science and technology studies, I examine the ways that the social, economic, and cultural conditions of Indonesia affect the capacity of the organic MCAS to effectively ensure the communication, implementation, and enforcement of the organic standards. Specifically, my findings indicate that the communication, implementation, and enforcement of standards are affected by the social, economic, and cultural specificity of particular places. Thus, if they are to be an effective form of governance on a global scale, MCASs have to shift from highly bureaucratized and standardized practices towards ones that allow for more adaption to cultural differences and variations in political economic conditions. In concluding, I propose such a shift entails greater inclusion of local actors in MCASs and more emphasis on building relations of trust.

The remaining sections of the article are organized accordingly. First, the two primary characteristics of MCASs—the use of scientific norms and practices and multiple tiers of oversight—are outlined. Additionally, drawing on theories of symbolic interaction and science and technology studies, limitations to globally standardized forms of governance are discussed. Second, an overview of the organic shrimp project in Indonesia is provided. Third, the methods used to gather data on the organic shrimp project and its MCAS are presented. Fourth, the communication, implementation, and enforcement of the standards in the organic shrimp project are examined. In particular, the emphasis is on how the local culture, the geography of the region, and political economic conditions affected each of these processes and often undermined the effectiveness of the MCAS. In concluding, I discuss the capacity of MCASs to effectively govern in the global South, the implications of my findings for zero standards, and possibilities for more effective governance.

Multilayered conformity-assessment systems, standardization, and difference

For most of the twentieth century, states governed food safety and quality by developing and enforcing regulations. However, with the twin processes of neoliberalization and economic globalization, much of the regulation of food is shifting to the private sphere (Busch, 2010; Clapp and Fuchs, 2009; Hatanaka and Busch, 2008; Higgins and Lawrence, 2005; Mutersbaugh et al., 2005). Consequently, food and agriculture is increasingly governed using a variety of non-state forms of governance that are characterized by "neo-corporatist regulatory frameworks involving non-binding standards and rules, public–private co-operation, self-regulation" (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004, p. 276). Put differently, regulation has become a shared effort between supply chain actors, governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private regulatory bodies (e.g., certification and accreditation bodies) (Swyngedouw et al., 2002). One outcome of the shift from government to governance has been the advent and proliferation of MCASs to ensure compliance with regulations and standards (Busch and Bain, 2004; Carnoy and Castells, 2001; Mutersbaugh et al., 2005; Taylor, 2005).

MCASs have two primary characteristics: (1) the use of scientific norms and practices, and (2) multiple tiers of audits. The idea of science-based governance has been used in many industries, including food and agriculture, for some time (Jasanoff, 1990; Tanaka, 2005). For example, food safety and quality have long been governed through science-based frameworks. However, with the shift towards governance, scientific norms and practices have become more prominent in the regulation of food and agriculture (Marsden et al., 2010). In part, this is because MCASs, and the various private bodies that compose them, need to actively establish and maintain legitimacy more so than governments, who derive legitimacy from their sovereign authority (Bernstein and Cashore, 2007; Tamm Hallstrom and Bostrom, 2010). One way that MCASs have sought to accomplish this is through the use of scientific norms and practices (Bain et al., 2010; Gibbon and Ponte, 2008).

Generally, in MCASs conformity-assessment procedures are designed to be objective, transparent, and replicable. To accomplish this, first, those who do the audits (e.g., certification bodies, accreditor organizations, and accreditation associations) are independent of those being audited (Fagan, 2003; Tanner, 2000). As a result of such independence, auditors are considered disinterested in the outcomes of audits, and consequently, are viewed as objective evaluators. Second, the product or process that is being audited must be measureable, and thus, audits are based on tangible evidence (Power, 1997). Additionally, this tends to mean that measures are quantitative, as this is thought to minimize subjectivity and inconsistencies. Third, that which is being audited must be clearly identifiable. That is, it must be objective in the sense that it is, at least in principle, independently verifiable. These three characteristics—objectivity, measurement, and verification—function to legitimate MCASs as an effective governance mechanism.

The second characteristic of MCASs is the use of multiple tiers of oversight, where not only the producers, but also certification bodies and accreditation organizations also undergo audits. Fig. 1 depicts a typical MCAS. Generally, a MCAS consists of three, but increasingly four, tiers of audits. At the first tier, an internal control system (ICS) audits producers to ensure that they are in compliance with the standards. At the second tier, a certification body audits the ICS to ensure its inspection processes are effective. As certification has become increasingly common, and there is significant variation with respect to the work of certifying bodies and what is certified (Busch, 2011; Cochoy, 2002), a need to regulate certification bodies and their practices has emerged (Hatanaka and Busch, 2008). In response, a third tier of conformity assessment has developed. At the third tier, an accreditor organization sets standards for certification bodies to verify that specific standards have been met, and audits certification bodies to ensure the competency of their practices (Cashore et al., 2004). As accreditation provides certification bodies with legitimacy, an increasing number of certification bodies have begun to seek accreditation from multiple accreditor organizations. For example, the International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC) and the International Accreditation Forum (IAF) claim that "[s]ince 2003, the number of newly established accreditation bodies has grown by almost 40%" (Pierre and Facklam, 2008: 1). Similar to the earlier need to regulate certification, with the proliferation of accreditor bodies

[2] In the US, for example, zero tolerance generally means compliance with the regulations and policies set by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and/or Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Specifically, the USDA organic label indicates that the product has 95% or more organic content, and thus 5% can consist of non-organic materials (USDA-AMS, 2013).