



Co-constructing sustainability: Agencing sustainable coffee farmers in Uganda



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ABSTRACT

This article explores the sustainability initiatives undertaken in a non-certified market involving an indigenous Southern firm and smallholder coffee farmers in Uganda. In response to recent calls, we take a performative approach to sustainability and employ an agencing lens to ask the question: how are sustainable coffee farmers constituted in concrete situations, and what role do they play in co-constructing sustainability? The ethnographic study undertaken reveals the proactive and interactive participation of farmers in co-constructing sustainability. Also unveiled, are the continuous and iteratively emergent agencing processes involving firms, farmers, and market devices, which collectively create variably-agenced sustainable farmers who perform diverse versions of sustainability.

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the achievement of sustainable coffee value chains and the role that upstream actors play in this regard. The coffee market is important because it is one of the largest commodity markets (Ponte, 2002) involving over 25 million smallholders, yet many of them struggle to make a living from coffee (Fairtrade, 2017; Mojo et al., 2017). At the same time, it also generates a significant amount of waste material both as solids (i.e. coffee pulp) and liquids (i.e. processing effluent), thus negatively impacting on ground/surface water pollution and river eco-systems via leaching and run-off (Kebede et al., 2010). Therefore, the goal of achieving a sustainable coffee sector is important for both planet and producers. No universal definitions of sustainability exist (Warner, 2007; McMorrnan et al., 2014), however, a popular description of sustainability from the World Commission on Environment and Development emphasizes meeting the social, environmental and economic needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Consequently, some definitions place emphasis on one dimension over another (Kirwan et al., 2017; Luke, 2005) and others refer to a balance between the 3 dimensions (see for example Morito, 2002 as cited in Loconto, 2014). This is compounded by the realization that a balance between the idealized 3 pillars of sustainability is notoriously difficult to achieve (Epstein and Buhovac, 2014; Visconti et al., 2014). In attempting to move beyond this impasse there have been increased calls

for research to consider the efforts to reorganize market relations and incorporate network-models based on greater levels of co-operation and integration between partners (Jaffee, 2007; Warner, 2007; Vurro et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2012).

Notwithstanding these macro level considerations, conventional research on sustainability has come under increased scrutiny for failing to account for micro level, context-specific concerns of actors (Warner, 2007; Loconto and Simbua, 2012; Doherty and Huybrechts, 2013). This scrutiny has led to recent calls for a more performative definition of sustainability (Melo and Hollander, 2013; Loconto, 2014), which accounts for a more situational explanation of sustainability and its achievement. Furthermore, while over 60% of world coffee production is sold from non-verified or non-certified sources (Levy et al., 2015), a disproportionate level of research has been given to understanding formal fair trade and organic certification within the coffee industry (Lyon and Moberg, 2010; Reinecke et al., 2012; Tallontire and Nelson, 2013). This has led to a shortage of evidence concerning the route towards a more sustainable global coffee value chain outside of the certified coffee market (Kolk, 2013). This is a problem for three reasons. One, there is a recognition that the product-based certification system remains primarily on Northern-based standards. Moreover, this has implications for Southern producers as it is likely to raise barriers to market entry (Raynolds et al., 2007). Secondly, such systems are limited in their scope of initiatives, that is to say focusing on improving product characteristics rather than attempting to strengthen social-

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based objectives (Doherty and Huybrechts, 2013). Thirdly, they lack focus on the producer's voice, often ignoring the ways in which they exercise agency (Melo and Hollander, 2013). In this paper, we specifically address these shortcomings in the extant literature, by examining more closely the multiple practices of sustainability and how it is organized and performed (see Warner, 2007; Loconto and Simbua, 2012; Doherty and Huybrechts, 2013).

Building on the work of Vorley, del Pozo-Vergnes and Barnett (2012), we focus on the initiatives of a Southern-based entrepreneur with a vision to bring about a distinctive version of a sustainable coffee market. From this perspective, we consider the efforts of an indigenous Ugandan roaster and exporter of coffee, involving farmers in South Western Uganda and reflect upon the active role of smallholder coffee farmers in co-constructing sustainability, which also works for them. Specifically, this emerges in a distinctive version of sustainable farming that balances between environmental, social and economic concerns, but with farmers gaining greater control over their own economic livelihoods. In doing so, we draw from the insights and experiences of farmers to explore how they negotiate with, transform, and ultimately construct a distinctive version of sustainability which responds to societal expectations.

We advance similar approaches taken in rural studies (see for example Konefal and Hatanaka, 2011) to reveal the iterative processes unfolding in the co-construction of sustainability; and also, to develop the research on agencements (see Le Velly and Dufeu, 2016 for a more extensive discussion), by illuminating the ongoing efforts to reshape 'sustainability agencements' through agencing processes. In this paper, we conceive the achievement of sustainability agencements as dependent on the realization of an actor-network to perform sustainable farming practices. We follow Cochoy (2014) in conceiving this actor-network as an agencement – a composite consisting of heterogeneous elements including humans, and material and technical devices which flexibly adjust to one another and act collectively (Çalışkan and Callon, 2010: 9). Specifically, our study focuses on the 'agencing' action which affords agency by "setting-up', arranging, or combining a set of given elements" within the agencement (Cochoy, 2014: 117). Perceived as "strategies for realising sought-after economic agencies" (Callon (2009) as cited by Araujo and Kjellberg, 2009: 201), we consider agencing as contributing to create 'agenced sustainable farmers' who then can perform sustainability. Moreover, agencing, through the collective effort of heterogeneous actors, sets processes in motion (Cochoy, 2014; Cochoy et al., 2016) which equip farmers to construct sustainability. Hence, this study uses the agencing lens to explain how 'sustainable' coffee farmers are constituted in concrete situations, and what role these farmers play in co-constructing sustainability.

The article now proceeds by providing an overview of the underpinning literature on sustainability, performativity and agencing, and then discusses the adopted methodology which uses an ethnographic approach, supported by in-depth interviews and visual research methods. Next, our findings and discussion highlight the performative sustainability mechanisms practiced by farmers, highlighting agencements and the market devices used to create and shape sustainability. Finally, our conclusions discuss the implications of our findings for both practice and theory.

2. Performative and agencing approaches to sustainability

2.1. Sustainability as performative

A performative definition of sustainability allows for the notion of 'sustainability as practiced', including the emergence of multiple, connected and context-specific understandings of the notion; for example, sustainability can be understood to concurrently mean market access or a project's longevity to different actors (Loconto, 2010, 2014). Recent research emerging from within rural studies employ similar approaches to investigate sustainability and alternative, Third-Party Certification

(TPC) markets (Konefal and Hatanaka, 2011; Le Velly and Dufeu, 2016). Here, Konefal and Hatanaka (2011) call for a more embracing perspective of TPC which reconciles the views of Northern and Southern actors in particular (see also Reynolds et al., 2007; Loconto, 2010), and accounts for the lived experiences of Southern producers (see Martin et al., 2015). In their portrayal of farmers as marginalized, (Konefal and Hatanaka (2011): 126) reveal that, TPC standards enact performatively and construct realities through continuous processes of "politicking, maneuvering, and negotiating" between Southern actors and the Northern counterparts. Our study builds on Konefal and Hatanaka (2011) work to illuminate the mutual adjustments in particular between objects, market devices and farmers acting to perform sustainable coffee farming. In this regard, we conceive farmers as active participants in co-constructing sustainability.

Concurrently, within the coffee sector, there have been increased calls for more visibility surrounding the everyday practices of smallholder farmers (see Carrier, 2010; West, 2010). This focus is particularly important given that smallholder farmers appear reluctant to engage with external sustainability initiatives, and have been found to prefer local interactions where possible (Martin et al., 2015). It seems appropriate then to take a performative approach to sustainability which contributes to illuminate the diverse contexts, actors and interactions involved in constructing sustainability, and to the unfolding transformations enabled.

We therefore pursue a broader understanding of the nature and context of the sustainability practices of coffee farmers. To help ensure a deeper appreciation of the concrete practices of, and actual representations of, smallholder farmers, we place greater attention on the interactions between people, things and their contexts, and take a performative approach to understanding sustainability (Carrier, 2010; Konefal and Hatanaka, 2011; Melo and Hollander, 2013; Loconto, 2014). We add to Loconto (2014) work which, while shedding light on the interactive role of small farmers in shaping sustainability, remains silent on how agencies develop the capacity to act, and therefore contribute to co-construct sustainability. To help realize these contributions, we draw on the market studies literature; agencing, to be precise.

2.2. Agencing market actors

The increased attention given to market studies has been underway for nearly a decade now. Since Araujo (2007), a number of scholars have been invited to consider a new set of concerns and a new set of market actors heretofore marginalized from view (Cochoy, 2014). Central to the premise, and informed by both Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, amongst others, is the understanding that agency is collective and is understood through the notion of 'agencement': a composite consisting of heterogeneous elements including humans and (material and technical) devices which adjust to one another and act collectively (Çalışkan and Callon, 2010: 9). Within agencement studies, both humans and non-humans participate in action. According to (Muniesa et al. (2007): 2), market devices – "material and discursive assemblages that intervene in the construction of markets" – act and cause others to act. Likewise, (Andersson et al. (2008): 68) suggest that "rather than focusing on what actors are in principle, the study of market practice directs attention to the many practical forms in which market actors appear". Importantly, this perspective offers a framework to consider how market agency is achieved, without resorting to models based on either actor's cognitive capacities (Andersson et al., 2008) or their ethical values assumptions (Holt, 2012) in bringing about sustainable market forms.

Following Cochoy (2014) request to consider new concerns, and a new set of market actors often marginalized from view, this study focuses on a group of farmers who, in their quest to attain sustainable livelihoods, interact with many varying market agencies and exhibit differential agency in different situations (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2006; Andersson et al., 2008). In so doing, we approach the collective

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