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Smallholders do not Eat Certificates

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ABSTRACT

Voluntary standards and certification schemes aim to play an important role in the creation of a more sustainable production of agricultural commodities in the South. In this paper, we contend that most studies on the sustainability of these certifications take the objectives of voluntary standard-setting and certifying arrangements as the reference point, thereby implicitly accepting a problem definition that is not necessarily aligned with the needs, interests and preferences of the smallholder producers in a developing context. Based on the results of a four years research project on coffee and palm oil smallholders and certifications in Indonesia, this paper questions the transformative capacity of the standards and certifications regarding a more sustainable agricultural production. This capacity is located at the interface of the global demands, which are channeled down from the top of the value chain, and the local context where local producers take their decisions. Based on the empirical research it is argued that voluntary standards and certifications pave the way for a more sustainable agricultural production, but are not necessarily the right way forward to a more systemic change.

1. Introduction

Private sustainability certification has become a widespread form of governance over agricultural production. Since the mid-1990s, millions of smallholder farmers in agricultural commodities such as coffee, cocoa, and palm oil, have been confronted with a growth of sustainability standards which are intended to change their production methods into a more sustainable direction. Most of these schemes are initiatives of Northern-based multinationals and international NGOs, often in a form of a collaborative arrangement. Although participation in the schemes is voluntary, the standards and certification schemes have gradually put more pressure on the producers of agricultural commodities, de facto defining mandatory requirements to enter (parts of) the international market.

Regarding coffee, for example, there are many different sustainability standard setting schemes with different levels of ambition, different criteria, and different leading actors. New standards and certifications are often introduced in response to already existing ones and may spread from one value chain to another, for instance, from coffee to tea and cocoa. Recently, the schemes also became more comprehensive, in the sense that they expand an original narrow focus (i.e. organic, social or ecological) towards a broader set of standards that connect social, environmental and economic issues (Vermeulen and Kok, 2012; Glasbergen and Schouten, 2015).

By the time of their initiation, the private schemes could be regarded as rather new governance models aimed to function as innovators in agricultural value chains. They assume that attention to the social and environmental aspects of production will create value for farmers and society. Although different schemes opt for different strategies, their theory of change heavily relies on the supposition that farmers should be trained in good agricultural practices and managerial matters, including the formation and management of well-functioning farmer groups, to realize a more sustainable agricultural production process. This is assumed to increase the quantity and improve the quality of their production which will expand their access to the global market, hence increasing the smallholders' competitiveness. It is suggested that this will ultimately improve farmers' income and their living conditions.

A second route through which certification supposedly benefits the farmers, regards the relation between the schemes' governance model and a liberal democratic mentality. Information about the ethical aspects of production is provided to consumers, usually in the form of a label. Consumers are supposed to be willing to pay more for certified products and they usually expect that the additionally paid price will trickle down to the farmers and assures a more environmentally friendly and socially responsible production process. Thus, it is through the market mechanism, particularly the expectation that a consumer market can be created, that new, more sustainable management practices and trade are promoted.

Most research on private standards and certifications has taken a policy-driven or interventionist approach. This implies that previous research mainly starts from specific standards and certification schemes

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and aims to answer the question how these schemes unfold in practice, to what extent they can realize their objectives, and what the impacts are. As per our view, such research implicitly accepts the problem definitions of the initiators of the standards, who are external actors to the farmers' specific realities and opportunities. Recommendations for improvements generally address the question how governance through the instrument of certification can be improved. The relevance or desirability of certification as an instrument is therefore hardly scrutinized.

In our research, we added a different perspective. In this *problem-driven* approach the smallholder farmers' values and interests will be put center stage. This implies that we take the problems they face in their daily practices, their socio-economic relations, and their institutional context as a starting point, asking the question what values the certification schemes create for the farmers and what their relative contribution is to the inducement of a more sustainable livelihood (Bitzer and Glasbergen, 2015). This also opens opportunities for a broader reflection on conditions levering livelihood improvements of the farmers than only through the initiatives of Northern-based initiatives.

Based on results of a research project in Indonesia on sustainable palm oil and coffee certification this paper takes as a premise that sustainability should not only include environmental issues, but also social and economic imperatives. We particularly question if and to what extent global sustainability standards and certifications can serve as 'truly' transformative mechanisms for all parties involved, and, especially for the smallholder farmers at the bottom of the supply chain. It is argued that the private initiatives pave the way for a more sustainable production of agricultural commodities, but that they are not necessarily the right way forward to induce a systemic sustainable change. After the explication of our research perspective (Section 2), a justification of the methodology of the research project (Section 3), the presentation of the main findings of empirical research (Section 4), and an analysis of public responses to private certification (Section 5), we will discuss conditions to enable a more sustainable agricultural production beyond certification (Sections 6, 7 and 8).

2. Putting Smallholders Center Stage

Research on private standards and certifications mainly uses two lenses, operationalized in the concepts of effectiveness and impacts.

Research on the effectiveness of the arrangements covers various attributes. For example, Reinecke et al. (2012) and Kolk (2013) stress the multiplicity and plurality of the market of standards, and the need for more complementarity between the many coffee standards to advance the market from niche to mainstream. A second category of studies, particularly on palm oil certification, stresses the creation of democratic legitimacy as a condition for an effective arrangement (i.e. Von Geibler, 2013; Schouten and Glasbergen, 2011, 2012; Ponte and Cheyns, 2013; Marx, 2013). A third set of studies focus on the interactions between public and private regulations that are assumed to influence effectiveness (i.e. Auld, 2010; Henson and Humphrey, 2010; Overdevest and Zeitlin, 2012; Gulbrandsen, 2014).

Although most of the effectiveness studies take a critical view on the arrangements, they are critical in a specific way, as they particularly stress issues of process management. Remarkable, is that the perspective of those who are addressed by the standards and certifications, and are supposed to change their practices, the millions of smallholders in a development context, are mainly out of the scope of these studies.

Attention for the addressees of certification is a little bit stronger in a separate, but related set of studies analyzing the impacts of voluntary standards and certifications. Next to general studies about the uptake of the schemes, thus their success in bringing producers in, there are many case studies in specific geographical areas or related to a specific certification scheme. Research questions in this set of studies address the adoption rate of standards (small-scale fruit and vegetable farmers in Thailand: Kersting and Wollni, 2012), and whether standards meet their objectives (literature on this question is particularly rich for Fair Trade, see: Valkila and Nygren, 2010). Subsequently, impact studies investigate the effects of certifications (Ruben and Zuniga, 2011; Elder et al., 2012), and the extent to which they benefit the farmers (e.g. Ruben and Fort, 2012; Chiputwa et al., 2015).

The results of these somewhat scattered impact studies are rather inconclusive up to now. Empirical studies and review reports even show contradictory results. Some find positive social-economic and environmental effects, while others conclude that these effects are insignificant, highly variable, or even negative. Moreover, there is an ongoing debate about the methodological trustfulness of this type of impact-studies (for a review paper see Blackman and Rivera, 2011; Bitzer and Glasbergen, 2015; Van Rijsbergen et al., 2016.).

The epistemology of most research on certifications can be questioned. Both the effectiveness and impact studies take a specific perspective and truth-seeking angle, as there is a strong tendency to put the certifications at center stage. This may be considered a rather logical conceptualization as private regulation is a relatively new phenomenon. We want to know how it develops, what it strives for, and how it performs. But we might question what we really know when we frame the research question in that way, and when we put certification as central as we do in this kind of research? Why are we doing this research? And whom do we serve with it? Of course, this research is of importance for the schemes themselves. It might help them to improve the implementation of their objectives. Those who favor a more sustainable agriculture will also be interested as the private sustainability standards and certifications are serious attempts to bring sustainable change in a developing context forward. We could even argue that it also benefits the smallholders themselves as the results of this research may help to develop more appropriate standards. Governments from developed and developing countries generally take a more wait-and-see approach and may also benefit from additional knowledge in this field.

However, we suggest that with this perspective the researches implicitly accept the problem definition of the voluntary standards. Recommendations mainly regard improvements within the context of certification, whereas improvements outside certification may in practice stronger contribute to improvements in the farmers' livelihoods than certification itself.

In this paper, the lenses of effectiveness and impacts are used too, but we expand this scope to the role of certification within the context of governance for a more sustainable agricultural production in the South. According to our view, the vital question is not how to optimize certification, but how to realize a sustainable agriculture that improves the livelihood of farmers (with or without certification). Therefore, we formulated the following preconditions for our empirical research and the reflection on the results:

First, we understand sustainability standards and certifications as external initiatives from the top of the value chain, which are channeled downwards to the bottom of the chain as new conditions for production (see also Van Dijk and Trienekens, 2012; Vellema et al., 2013). Smallholders who are addressed by the schemes will understand them as external imputes to change that interfere with their locally embedded practices, rules and institutions (Schouten et al., 2016; Ros-Toonen et al., 2015).

Second, we focus on how smallholder farmers struggle with the external pressures put on them and the uncertainties about the positive contributions that voluntary standards and certifications may provide to their livelihood. At the bottom of the chain the smallholder producers need to make sense of the standards, decide on how to response, and handle them, given local social-economic circumstances and preferences (see also Marin-Burgos et al., 2015).

Third, we focus on the interaction between the private schemes and political processes. Although private and public actors are participants in the same dialogue on what sustainability implies, they may have

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