Filling Gaps and Removing Traps in the Use of Voluntary Sustainability Standards

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Abstract

Voluntary or private sustainability standards cover a large number of tropical products and are increasingly important in global markets. The rapid spread of voluntary sustainability standards is sometimes erroneously interpreted as a sign of increased sustainability in the food system. Yet, the actual impact of such standards matters. There is a potential trap that private standards satisfy consumers' demand for more ethically and sustainably produced food products and fulfil companies' sustainable sourcing strategies while not actually contributing to improved sustainability in global food systems — thereby merely easing consumers' conscience, diverting donor money to certification programs and extracting rents from food supply chains through expensive monitoring systems. Despite substantial research efforts on this topic, important knowledge gaps remain to be filled. This presentation highlights the results from recent research on the sustainability impact of voluntary sustainability standards, with evidence from different tropical countries and sectors. The presentation includes a focus on all three components of sustainability, including social, economic and environmental issues and sustainability trade-offs. The research findings, along with earlier findings described in the literature, entail important implications towards farmers, food companies, standard-setters, policy-makers, donors and consumers on how to avoid the above-mentioned trap of widespread use of private standards without actual improvement in food system sustainability. Finally, the presentation points to some remaining research gaps that need to be addressed in order to develop a more effective system of private standards.

Keywords: Monitoring, sustainability standards

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