



Tropentag, September 20-22, 2023, hybrid conference
“Competing pathways for equitable food systems transformation:
Trade-offs and synergies”

Complying with the voluntary sustainability standard: How ready are Thai sugarcane farmers?

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Abstract

In recent years, voluntary sustainability standards (VSS), such as Bonsucro, have gained increased recognition among stakeholders in the global sugarcane supply chain. This is because responsible sugarcane production is increasingly being called for by the market. However, the adoption of the Bonsucro standard in Thailand, the third-largest exporter of raw sugar, has been rather slow, with only a small fraction of sugarcane farms in Thailand being certified. For this reason, it is necessary to understand the challenges that Thai sugarcane farmers face when it comes to adopting sustainable practices. To this end, 200 cane farmers in Kanchanaburi province were randomly selected. Farmers of four different farm sizes were interviewed, including very large (>80 ha), large (32–80 ha), mid (10–32 ha), and small-scale (<10 ha) farmers. It was revealed that mid and small-scale farmers in the area were facing many economic and social challenges that hindered them from obtaining Bonsucro certification. For example, they lacked legal rights to use land and water for their cane cultivation, which made them ineligible for certification. Many smallholder cane farmers still had to practice pre-harvest burning and hired labour from neighbouring countries due to their limited access to machine harvesters. Additionally, smallholder farmers did not have the financial means to cope with the rising production costs arising from adopting sustainable practices. Farmers with large and very large farms did not encounter these problems and could obtain certification, but they lacked incentive to do so because certified sugarcane could not secure a premium price in Thailand. Policy recommendations are presented and then discussed.

Keywords: Bonsucro, sugarcane, Thailand, voluntary sustainability standard