

A glass globe with a world map, reflecting a forest scene, resting on moss.

Developing Countries in International Trade Studies



UNITED NATIONS



Better Trade for Sustainable Development: The role of voluntary sustainability standards



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations constitutes the most important and comprehensive global sustainable development agenda for the next decade. It is known for its far-reaching and ambitious vision with its 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) and 169 targets that are listed as part of the so-called “universal policy agenda” (United Nations, 2015). In the 2015 Agenda, and especially in SDG 17, international trade is singled out as a key policy instrument to contribute to all other SDGs. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development defines international trade as “an engine for inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction, [that] contributes to the promotion of sustainable development”. In order to become a ‘sustainable engine’ one approach that seems to be increasingly used is to internalize social, economic and environmental concerns in international trade. This can be done by many different means and policy instruments and tools. In this report we focus on a specific tool, namely Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) which comprise of certification schemes, labeling programs and private standards. VSS aim to make global value chains, from producer to consumer, more sustainable by taking into account social and environmental requirements in the production process. VSS also often link developing countries (where many producers are based) to developed countries.

This report discusses in-depth the possibilities and limitations of VSS to make international trade more sustainable, in particular with regards to developing countries development opportunities. We first introduce the key concepts of trade, global value chains, sustainable development, their interrelatedness and their importance for developing countries. We focus on the rise of international trade and the changing nature of trade which is characterized by the dominance of global value chains. The emergence of global value chains allows producers in developing countries to be integrated in global economic dynamics which can contribute to their economic development. In addition, global value chains allow for the diffusion of social and environmental standards throughout production processes. VSS play an important role in this diffusion of social and environmental standards. We argue that global value chains can be governed in a way which enhances economic, social and environmental ‘upgrading’, i.e. a process by which negative social and environmental consequences are addressed in global value chains and which contributes to better protection of social and environmental standards. We show that upgrading through the governance of global value chains directly allows producers in developing countries to access global markets and reap their potential benefits contributing in this way to economic development in developing countries.

Then, the study zooms in on the role of VSS and shows that in order to consider VSS as tools for making value chains more sustainable it is important to understand that the concept of VSS captures a diversity of initiatives. And that not all VSS are equal in terms of design and effectiveness. We also discuss the drivers for VSS adoption in order to better understand their potential as tools for social and environmental upgrading of producers in developing countries. The report highlights that the use of VSS is driven by multiple drivers which influence the uptake of VSS. In addition, we also show, importantly from the perspective of developing countries, that this uptake is uneven and that there are several barriers to VSS uptake which specifically play out in the context of developing countries which do not always have the resources and capacity to comply with sustainability standards. These barriers relate to the costs involved in obtaining VSS, a lack of incentives, a governance gap and a distrust towards VSS. Some possible approaches to address these barriers are presented and discussed.

The report also focuses on the impact of VSS on the ground, mostly in developing countries. The more profound this impact is, the more VSS contribute to improved trading relations and facilitate sustainable development. From a policy perspective that aims to improve and foster more sustainable trade relations, especially between developing and developed countries, it thus presents a pivotal issue to assess the extent to which VSS indeed reach the goals that motivated their creation. In their theories of change, VSS define the causal

steps (impact pathways) which, they theorize, lead from standard development to tangible changes towards more sustainable modes production at the ground level of certified production.

The study is concluded by policy recommendations. We argue that the potential of VSS to make trade more sustainable relies on two crucial components: first they need generate a substantial impact on the ground with regard to key sustainability parameters (impact-dimension). Second, in order to enhance their impact they need to be widely used (adoption-dimension). In order to improve on both dimensions, we discuss in the recommendations four more structural approaches/transformations which can be considered for enhancing the potential of VSS. First, we introduce the supporting role of donors and multilateral organizations. Second, we focus on the further integration of VSS in public policies. Third, we discuss actions to further harness the market-based potential of VSS by providing more transparency to consumers. And fourth, we consider strengthening the empowerment potential of VSS to create stronger incentives for producers and other actors to use and adopt VSS.

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