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Sustainable Commodity Governance and the Global South

Introduction to a special issue of *Ecological Economics*

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Abstract

This is the introduction to a special issue on ‘Sustainable Commodity Governance and the Global South.’ A broad range of transnational governance initiatives have emerged to respond to social and environmental challenges caused by commodity production. These initiatives – like voluntary sustainability standards and certifications – tend to target commodity producers in the Global South, but are overwhelmingly initiated and managed by organizations from the Global North. The agency and initiative of Southern actors in addressing sustainability challenges in their own backyards remains under-examined. In this introductory paper, we outline a typology of how commodity producers, civil society groups, and governments in the Global South have responded to the challenge of sustainable commodity production. Drawing inductively on the contributions to this special issue, we argue that Southern actors either participate in transnational governance, reinterpret it in their own context, or create their own initiatives entirely. The capacity of actors in the Global South to exert meaningful influence over sustainable commodity governance is relevant to ongoing debates in ecological economics about whether environmental and social goals can be achieved by working within global value chains or whether a wholesale reconfiguration of the global economy is required.

1. Introduction

Rising levels of global consumption have precipitated a range of escalating sustainability challenges around the world, including deforestation, water pollution, biodiversity loss, food insecurity, and hazards to worker health and safety (Garnett et al., 2013; Tilman et al., 2011). Many of these challenges are associated with the production and distribution of export commodities including: coffee, cocoa, gold, sugarcane, seafood, tea and timber. To date, efforts to address these challenges have frequently taken the form of voluntary sustainability standards, a form of transnational governance (TG) that entails the creation of quasi-authoritative rules that transcend national borders.¹ Many efforts to promote TG seek to embed social and environmental stewardship norms within global value chains of commodity products (Schouten and Glasbergen, 2011). While these initiatives are often intended to respond to sustainability crises in the Global South, they are overwhelmingly initiated and managed by actors and organizations in or from the Global North.² Accordingly, a disproportionate amount of the research on TG for sustainable commodities has focused on Northern actors, with a particular emphasis on forestry and fisheries schemes in developed countries (Cashore, Auld, and Newsome 2004; Gale and Haward 2011; Gulbrandsen 2010). By contrast, the agency and initiative of Southern actors in addressing sustainability challenges in their own backyards has received less scholarly attention (Cashore et al. 2006a, 2006b). This special issue seeks to correct this imbalance by asking: how have actors in the Global South responded to sustainability challenges associated with commodity production and consumption? And to what ends?

Answers to these questions are important. TG's project of re-embedding the economy within larger societal and biological systems is at the core of the field of ecological economics. However, the normative assumptions embedded within most transnational governance schemes are contentious. Conventionally, the concept of transnational governance is premised on the idea that a global transition towards sustainability can be achieved through existing economic institutions (Cashore 2002; Bartley 2007; Graz and Nölke 2008). Put differently, TG assumes that one does not have to dismantle global value chains in order to live within planetary boundaries and address social challenges, but rather, find new means through which to manage

¹ Many terms have been used to conceptualize voluntary sustainability standards. Examples include: private authority (Cutler et al., 1999; Green, 2013; Hall & Biersteker, 2002), private governance (Auld 2014; Auld, Renckens, and Cashore 2015; Bernstein 2014; Falkner 2003; Fransen 2011; Fransen and Conzelmann 2015), private regulation (Bartley, 2003, 2007; Büthe, 2010), non-state market-driven (NSMD) governance (Bernstein, 2011; Bernstein & Cashore, 2007; Cashore, 2002; Cashore et al., 2004), private standard-setting (Büthe & Mattli, 2011; Mattli & Büthe, 2005), rule-setting transnational governance (Andonova et al., 2009; Kalfagianni & Pattberg, 2013), transnational business-governance (Eberlein et al., 2014), transnational new governance (Abbott et al. 2015; Abbott and Snidal 2010; van der Ven 2019), information-based governance (Bullock 2017) and voluntary environmental programs (Potoski & Prakash, 2005, 2010). We use "transnational governance" as the most encompassing term.

² "Global South" and "Global North" are contentious terms that have been conceptualized in different ways over time. These terms were originally articulated to describe the economic disparity existing between countries located in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. Today, "Global South" refers broadly to the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania (except Australia and New Zealand) and is correlated with terms like "Third World" or "Periphery" to denote regions outside Europe and North America that are mostly low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized. According to Dados and Connell (2011), the term Global South functions as more than a metaphor for underdevelopment by referencing an entire history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change through which large inequalities in living standards, life expectancy, and access to resources are maintained.

them. This approach has previously been characterized as “progressive incrementalism” and is premised on the idea that norms can be embedded in global value chains as part of a multi-step pathway towards transformative change (Cashore & Howlett, 2007; Judge-Lord et al., 2020). Critics of progressive incrementalism point out that TG confronts numerous ontological and epistemological assumptions. For example, the very fact that many TG systems consciously use the term “commodities” in reference to trees, plants and animals gestures to a worldview rooted in neoclassical economics (Ims et al., 2015).

The alternative to TG is a wholesale rethinking of existing economic institutions, or indeed, of the human relationship to nature and science more broadly (Spash, 2013). As Fontana and Sawyer (2016), Kallis (2011, 2018), and many others have argued, the ecological problems we currently face may well be inherent to capitalism, the premise of continuous economic growth, and the current globalized system of commodity production. Scholars within the “degrowth” camp see little value in tinkering around the margins of the global economy and consequently, little value in voluntary sustainability standards that work within existing economic paradigms. One critique is that TG, inasmuch as it focuses exclusively on regulating the production of goods, does nothing to address the rising tide of consumption that threatens to overrun important planetary boundaries (Dauvergne 2016; Ponte 2019). Concurrently, other researchers have questioned the transformative capacity of voluntary standards in achieving more sustainable production for millions of smallholders in the Global South since the design of sustainability standards rarely considers the conditions and interests of these producers (Bailey et al. 2018; Glasbergen 2018). Ecological economists who support degrowth argue that transformations require nothing less than a wholesale shift away from existing growth-oriented global economics, even if the prospects for such a paradigm shift remain bleak (Buch-Hansen, 2018).

Thus the normative question that is at the core of ecological economics – should humans follow a multiple step pathway aimed at embedding norms within existing market structures, or reject market institutions as inconsistent with meaningful environmental reforms – is also at the core of the TG literature. While the question can and has been addressed by scholars of normative business ethics (Singer, 2018; Singer & van der Ven, 2019), it is also an empirical question (Weiss & Cattaneo, 2017). Arguments for or against progressive incrementalism must be rooted in robust evidence and sophisticated theoretical frameworks of past and prospective impacts. Unfortunately to date, there are no straightforward answers to the simple question of whether, when, and how TG initiatives have or could impact meaningful environmental outcomes. As observed elsewhere, environmental impacts are often over-determined and difficult to link to any particular governance intervention (van der Ven & Cashore, 2018). In the case of commodity production, the social and environmental impacts of TG are mediated, to a large extent, by how it interacts with producers, governments, civil society groups and other stakeholders in the major production markets it seeks to govern (Cashore et al., forthcoming; Distelhorst et al., 2015). To understand whether TG offers a viable pathway to an economy that is embedded in planetary limits, we must first understand its empirical impacts to date, and extrapolating from this, its potential role in future transformations.

Here then, is where this special issue can contribute to the broader debate between progressive incrementalism versus degrowth. The papers in this SI seek to empirically evaluate and theorize the impacts of TG on the dense layering of institutions that surround sustainable commodity

governance. What is clear from this special issue is that the impacts of TG can only be ascertained through its interactions with other forms of sustainable commodity governance. If TG substitutes for actions that would have otherwise been taken by states, local governments, or collectivities of producers, then it contributes very little by way of additional environmental impacts. However, if it fills a governance vacuum or catalyzes new and complementary forms of governance, then it may indeed be a worthwhile approach. A focus on how voluntary sustainability standards interact with stakeholders in the Global South and whether some interactions can lead to better environmental and social outcomes enriches this broader debate on both sides.

2. State of the Literature

This is a timely intervention into the literature on voluntary standards for sustainable commodity governance for three reasons. First, it reflects a broader turn in the TG literature towards examining the impacts, both positive and negative, of various governance systems on sustainability outcomes (Carlson et al., 2018; Garrett et al., 2016; Heilmayr & Lambin, 2016; van der Ven & Cashore, 2018). When voluntary sustainability standards were still in their infancy, much of the scholarly work about them attempted to explain how systems of non-state governance could emerge and gain the political authority necessary to govern (Bernstein and Cashore 2007; Cashore 2002; Cashore, Auld, and Newsom 2004; Green 2013). However, now that the voluntary standards sector has “grown up” and, in some cases, covers up to a quarter of global commodity production (Lernoud et al. 2018; Potts et al. 2016), there is a growing interest in determining where and how they are impacting environmental, social, and economic outcomes (Blackman & Naranjo, 2012; Grabs et al., 2020; Lambin et al., 2014, 2018; Ruyschaert & Salles, 2014; Sovacool et al., 2016; van der Ven, 2019).

This interest is driven, in part, by the recognition that much of the literature on voluntary sustainability standards and TG has become too inward facing, focused on questions that are primarily of academic interest instead of on the contribution of TG to broader sustainability outcomes (Cashore & Bernstein, 2018; Dauvergne, 2016; Dauvergne & Lister, 2013; van der Ven et al., 2018). If TG is to remain relevant, both as an instrument of governance and an object of scholarly analysis, then further attention must be turned to its impacts. This implies shifting attention to how materiality affects implementation and focusing on how variables like the local political context, social norms, and the competing concerns of Southern commodity producers affect the ability of relevant transnational governance schemes to achieve their stated impacts (Bartley, 2018; Glasbergen, 2018; Tampe, 2016). It is therefore impossible to fulfill the promise of “the impacts turn” in transnational governance without a corresponding shift in analytic focus towards the Global South. An understanding of how producers, governments, regulatory intermediaries, and civil society groups in the Global South respond to TG is necessary for ascertaining whether it can meaningfully address the lofty social and environmental challenges that confront commodity production.

Second, this special issue speaks to an emerging area of interest in global sustainability governance on the topic of public and private governance interactions (Cashore et al., forthcoming; Marques & Eberlein, n.d.; Renckens, 2020, 2020). Given that the range of private organizations involved in the provision of public goods has increased in recent years, a growing

body of scholarship interrogates the implications of privatization for the conventional instruments of governance, namely states (Andonova et al., 2017; Carodenuto, 2019; Eberlein, 2019).³ The implications of such interactions for advancing sustainable development seem particularly important in developing countries, which are often facing more serious environmental and social challenges than their Northern counterparts (Henson and Humphrey 2010; Manning et al. 2012; Andonova and Sun 2019). Whereas some see the potential for complementary interactions wherein private governance fills regulatory gaps left by states (Börzel & Risse, 2010) or becomes stronger in the presence of domestic regulatory institutions (Amengual, 2010; Tzankova, 2020), others see the potential for substitution and competition with more stringent public-sector responses (Bartley, 2005; Locke, 2013). Still others see both dynamics at play, but changing over time in the context of particular interactions (Knudsen & Moon, 2017; Cashore et al., forthcoming). The various ways TG interacts with local governments and stakeholders in the Global South affects its ability to achieve its stated objectives, and consequently, its value as a broader project for transitioning towards a more sustainable economy.

Third, the literature on the role of the Global South in confronting ecological crises requires an update in light of the evolving global public domain and shifting patterns of global trade (Ruggie, 2004). The failure of top-down neoliberal development agendas to improve the environmental conditions and livelihoods of people in the Global South has helped foster the erosion of Northern experts' authority and led to a growing push to foster bottom-up country-level ownership of sustainable development policies (Best, 2014). This push for local-ownership occurs in parallel to increasing South-South trade flows (Schleifer & Sun, 2018). As the emerging BRICS economies consume more and more commodities, global value chains are shifting to place economic leverage into the hands of lead firms located in emerging economies (Gereffi, 2014). For commodity producers, this can often mean a shifting set of sustainability requirements. Consumers and lead firms in emerging economies tend to be less interested in Northern-developed transnational governance initiatives (Schleifer, 2016). Furthermore, producers in the Global South seem to be suffering from fatigue owing to the disproportionate burden of certification costs placed on them through such schemes (Bennett, 2017; Beuchelt & Zeller, 2011) or a problem definition that is not necessarily aligned with their needs, interests and preferences (Glasbergen 2018). There remain, however, significant incentives for sustainable production for both Southern producers and consumers, not the least of which is the long-term viability of some commodities.

The increase in South-South trade coupled with the emphasis on bottom-up approaches to sustainable development policy have placed renewed agency into the hands of Southern actors. Producers have responded by opting out of expensive governance schemes. Governments have responded by launching their own voluntary or mandatory standards. Civil society and industry groups have responded by launching capacity building initiatives or certification schemes that take a less prescriptive approach to steering the behavior of commodity producers. Yet outside of a relatively small body of literature (e.g. Hatanaka 2010; Hospes 2014; Schouten and Bitzer 2015; Wijaya and Glasbergen 2016), there has been little scholarly analysis of "homegrown" solutions to sustainable commodity governance in the Global South. This special issue addresses

³ See also a forthcoming special issue on this topic in *Regulation & Governance* edited by Benjamin Cashore, Jeremy Moon, Jette Steen Knudsen and Hamish van der Ven.

this lacuna by systematically identifying the types of homegrown responses that exist and assessing their prospects and limitations.

3. Contributions

We envision a number of practical and theoretical contributions to sustainable commodity governance. These include a typology of homegrown commodity governance initiatives in the Global South as well as a frank assessment of their potential and limitations in responding to sustainability challenges. The typology will be derived inductively from the diverse set of cases presented in the special issue papers which transcend regions, commodity types, and modes of governance, thereby allowing a broad but nuanced understanding of how Southern actors have responded to the challenge of sustainable commodity production. Our goal is to develop a set of testable propositions encapsulated in a causal framework that identifies the likely responses of Southern actors to the challenges of sustainable commodity production under particular conditions.

Through cases in this special issue, we identify three types of responses in the Global South. First, Southern actors *participate* in TG initiated in the Global North, but often do so in a very limited way due to various structural barriers. Two of our contributors present novel data to assess these barriers, including the disproportionate cost borne by Southern producers and the dearth of Southern voices in the rule-making and conformance assessment processes (Renckens & Auld, 2019; Schleifer et al., 2019). Second, due to variable local contexts, Southern actors can *reinterpret* transnational rules developed mainly by Northern actors through applying them in different ways at the point of implementation. This type of phenomena is common when Southern producers face multiple overlapping rules from public and private organizations. Several studies in the special issue show how the local context in Southern producer countries affects the on-the-ground impacts of TG as Southern actors have the agency to implement voluntary standards according to their interests (Cashore & Nathan, 2020; Macdonald, 2020). Lastly, Southern actors can *create* their own initiatives at the domestic or local levels to address the gaps left by Northern-developed TG. This type of responses is illustrated by cases of Nicaraguan coffee farmers, Sri Lanka's tea industry, South American and African gold miners, and Asian aquaculture producers, who pioneer their own forms of sustainable commodity governance as supplements or alternatives to existing TG (Bloomfield, 2020; Sippl, 2020; Starobin, 2021; Sun & van der Ven, 2020).

Figure 1 depicts the spectrum of Southern responses to sustainable commodity governance covered in this special issue. We inductively draw on the papers in the special issue to propose three sets of variables that may affect which response Southern stakeholders pursue. The first is the material power of Southern actors, which can determine their capability or access to necessary resources for influencing transnational schemes or launching their own initiatives (Bartley 2018). The second is the nature of the problem; many sustainability challenges offer no win-win solutions since the priorities of Southern actors differ from those of stakeholders in the North (Bernstein & Cashore 2018; Glasbergen 2018). This incompatibility can generate incentives for Southern actors to provide locally-adapted solutions or refuse to participate in Northern-developed schemes. Third, social norms associated with commodity production in different Southern producer countries can influence responses to sustainability challenges. Here

we emphasize the role of domestic context in shaping how actors respond to the challenge of sustainable commodity governance (Bernstein & Cashore 2007). Our framework thereby accounts for the role of power, interest, and ideas in conditioning the behavior of Southern stakeholders on sustainability governance and reflects the three paradigms of regime theories in the global governance literature (Hasenclever, Mayer, and Rittberger 2000). We contend that their interaction shapes Southern actors' agency and approach to sustainable commodity governance, and encourage future research to apply this framework.

In sum, this special issue provides a broad assessment of how actors in the Global South have responded to the challenge of sustainable commodity governance in the context of a rapidly shifting world economy and a fragmented global governance architecture (Biermann et al. 2009; Tran et al. 2013).

4. Brief overview of the papers

The nine papers in this special issue investigate the engagement of Southern actors in sustainable commodity governance from a range of theoretical and methodological perspectives. Several papers focus on the engagement of Southern stakeholders with transnational private governance. Using data from the International Trade Center's Standards Map, Schleifer et al. (2019) provide a global overview on the involvement of Southern stakeholders in transnational private governance organizations (TPGOs). They examined the proliferation, inclusivity, and distribution consequences of 47 TPGOs in 12 commodity sectors in the top 10 developing country producers. The findings show that the existing TPGOs face enormous challenges in supporting sustainable commodity production in the Global South due to limited proliferation in many producer countries, the lack of involvement from producer groups in decision-making, and compliance costs to be largely borne by producers without adequate support instruments.

Renckens & Auld (2019) explore the North-South imbalances in the rule-making, adoption, and verification processes of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) – the leading certification scheme for sustainable fisheries. By investigating MSC audits of 312 fisheries between 1999 to 2015, the authors find that early choices around the structure and composition of internal governance bodies created a Northern bias between the MSC and well-established Northern-based auditors on conformance assessment. They also show the limited success of the MSC in mitigating Northern dominance and enhancing uptake amongst Southern fisheries, despite the scheme's attempts to change assessment procedures for data-poor fisheries.

Tampe (forthcoming) further investigates the implementation process of transnational sustainability certification by cocoa producers in Northern Brazil, assessing how certified producers can turn standards into their daily practices. Drawing on participant observation and semi-structured interviews, her micro-level analysis finds that in order to transform governance rules into habitual practices, Southern producers need to follow a self-guided, two-step process by first creating and linking elements of a practice, and second, supporting internalization of that practice. Through this novel, practice-centered lens, the study reveals the importance of internal organizational mechanisms of Southern producers in the rise of sustainable commodity governance.

In addition to Southern actors' engagement with transnational governance, the special issue also included papers investigating the rise of sustainable commodity governance initiated by Southern producers. Sun & van der Ven (2020) examines the emergence of sustainable aquaculture governance in three major Southern producer countries: Thailand, Vietnam, and China. Their comparative research inductively identifies two types of homegrown governance in the Global South – standards and capability-building – and assesses the conditions leading to each type. The findings suggest that homegrown standards are likely to be developed by Southern governments through a top-down approach while inclusive capacity-building programs tend to be initiated by less powerful, non-state actors such as NGOs and producer groups.

Sipli's (2020) contribution to this SI examines the interaction between Northern and Southern sustainability certification schemes in the artisanal and small-scale gold mining sector. Specifically, Sipli investigates the tumultuous relationship between Fairtrade International and the Southern-based Alliance for Responsible Mining. She finds that the interaction between these two certification schemes varied over time, from an initial period of cooperation to stiff competition and a move to undercut Fairtrade through a competing standard with lower barriers to entry. Sipli notes that the move to create a homegrown alternative to Fairtrade occurred through a combination of ideational misalignment and growing material power amongst gold producers. In this case, the outcome is not entirely favourable for the sustainability of artisanal and small-scale mining sector.

Starobin (2021) offers another example of how Southern sustainable commodity producers may choose to avoid Northern-developed sustainability standards and go their own way. Her contribution to this special issue examines the case of "beyond organic" cultivation approaches in Nicaragua, including permaculture, biodynamic farming, and agroecology. Through extensive ethnographic field work and interviews with producers, Starobin finds that despite being "certification worthy," many producers avoid Northern-developed sustainability standards out of a concern for high compliance costs. Instead, Nicaraguan producers have launched a homegrown certification alternative known as the "Grupo de Promocion de Agricultura Ecologica (GPAE) marca de confianza" with a goal of selling more goods locally and to niche trusted producer communities.

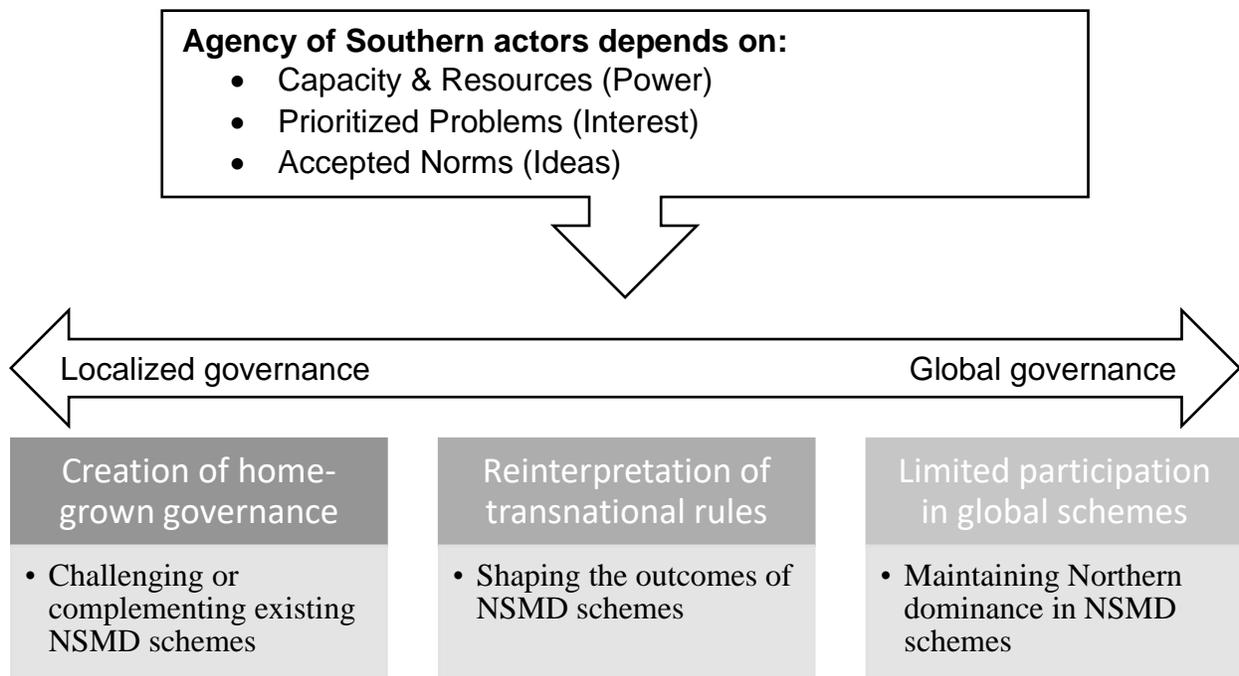
Lastly on the theme of interaction between voluntary sustainability standards and states in the Global South, Macdonald (2020) examines the interaction between Northern-based sustainability standards for palm oil with domestic regulatory authorities in Indonesia. Drawing on fieldwork on complaints handling procedures in the RSPO, Macdonald challenges the idea of a simple dichotomy between 'collaborative' or 'conflictual' state and market interactions. Instead, she argues that both conflict and collaboration are observable and that the potential of these interactions to improve sustainable commodity governance depends less on their character, and more on how they reshape the motivations, capacities, and legitimacy claims of competing regulatory coalitions.

Two papers in this SI ask broader questions about the value of transnational sustainability governance in the Global South. Cashore & Nathan (2020)'s contribution to this special issue asks why, given a dearth of positive impacts, decision-makers continue to put faith in transnational finance and market driven governance in the Global South. The authors explain the

persistence of these types of interventions with reference to a ‘good governance norm complex’ wherein governors over-emphasize procedural credibility, capacity building, and balance between economic and environmental priorities. The result, they argue, is a misplaced faith in the ability of TG to generate environmental impacts. The argument is developed in the context of forest legality verification in Cambodia. The authors conclude that attempts to impose one-size-fits all solutions to sustainability challenges without carefully considering local context and history are doomed to fail. Cashore and Nathan’s analysis augers towards a greater role for Southern commodity producers in controlling their own destinies.

Bloomfield (2020) challenges the conventional narrative that increased South-South trade weakens demand for sustainable primary commodities because buyers in the Global South care less about sustainability. Through an in-depth analysis of Ceylon tea production, Bloomfield finds that, in some cases, selling to Southern markets can actually help producers improve the sustainability of their commodities. There are a number of mechanisms through which this happens: by allowing producers new opportunities to differentiate their products and control their brand identities, by offering an exit option from the downward price pressures in Northern markets, by facilitating forward integration strategies through lower barriers to entry, and by allowing more egalitarian terms of trade. A key implication is that certification to Northern-developed voluntary standards like Fairtrade or Rainforest Alliance may not always be the best option for improving sustainability.

Figure 1 An analytical framework on Southern actors’ responses to sustainable commodity production



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