

## **‘Roundtabling’ and the governing of sustainability**

*The increasing willingness of public authority to delegate social and environmental regulation to the private sector has led to the establishment of a large number of voluntary standards, labels and certifications on sustainability in the past few decades. In the agro-food and forestry sectors, many of these have taken the form of ‘stewardship councils’ and ‘sustainability roundtables’ that explicitly signal their multi-stakeholder nature and have established sizeable shares in the market for ‘sustainable products’. In ongoing research on sustainability certification in the fishery, aquaculture and biofuel industries, I examine what impact these private initiatives have on ‘sustainability’ outcomes, equity and market access, and the role that regulation can play in this process.*

### **Institutional features**

A particular set of institutional features is used by ‘stewardship councils’ and ‘sustainability roundtables’ (SRs) to establish a legitimate presence as a governance instrument in commodity trade, to fend possible criticism, and to ‘sell’ their systems to potential users of certifications and labels. These include: (1) an executive board or a board of directors; (2) an assembly or council, often with specific chambers that represent different stakeholder interests; (3) technical advisory committees of appointed experts; and (4) an executive director with support staff that handle the day-by-day operations. This institutional and governance setup is meant to ensure (if not just signal) a degree of professionalization, participation of relevant stakeholders in key decision-making processes, and transparency. SRs are also becoming ever more sophisticated in how they facilitate formal participation of relevant stakeholders and how they manage processes and use technologies that ensure some provision of input into deliberations even from more marginalized actors. Yet, these actors find it difficult to shape outcomes, as process consultants use the expedients of urgency, reaching consensus, and pragmatism to steer guidelines and standards in specific directions, and to define categories of ‘stakeholders’ and acceptable formats of engagement.

### **Roundtabling**

The concept of ‘roundtabling’ captures a specific way of setting up, managing and especially marketing the governance of sustainability and the dynamics of change within this setup. A now substantial literature often refers to ‘multi-stakeholder initiatives’ (or MSIs) in denoting this group of approaches to sustainability. The term aptly captures their institutional qualities, but does so statically. The term signaled something distinctive in the emerging debate on private authority in the 1990s, but since most private or hybrid sustainability initiatives have come to incorporate some multi-stakeholder features in one way or another, it now refers to the ‘new normal’. The concept of ‘roundtabling’ better emphasizes the current process of fitting a variety of commodity-specific sustainability situations into a form that not only ‘hears more voices’ (as in ‘multi-stakeholder’) but also portrays to give them equal standing at the table of negotiations (roundtable), thus raising higher expectations in terms of accountability, transparency, inclusiveness and ‘proper’ democratic process.

**More democratic and inclusive?**

In ongoing research, I examine to what extent the process of 'roundtabling' has facilitated the successful establishment of more democratic and inclusive initiatives in the 'sustainability certification marketplace', given that they compete with other schemes that are top-down, less democratic, leaner, quicker, more commercially aggressive, and more tuned in with industry interests. I am doing so by examining the market for sustainability standards in several industries through three main forms of competition: over securing enough suppliers that can meet the requirements of certification; over finding a retail market for certified products; and over securing support from, and alliances with, influential NGOs, other civil society groups, and if applicable, the public sector. I have shown that successful SRs, those that establish substantial shares in the sustainability certification market, take indeed some multi-stakeholder form at one point or another in their development, but do not go through a deep process of 'roundtabling'. Successful SRs are in fact more top-down and more commercially aggressive, and more tuned in with industry interests than SRs that have gone through a more thorough process of roundtabling. More commercial variants do not attempt to give equal voice to stakeholders, and adopt seemingly inclusive procedures and institutional features late in the standard development and certification process, sometimes even ex-post or as an afterthought.

**Is roundtabling counter-productive?**

This raises the issue of whether 'roundtabling' is actually leading to counter-productive outcomes for ensuring sustainability in agriculture and forestry in competitive certification markets. The ever more complex web of institutional and governance features, development and managerial systems, time- and resource-consuming meetings, and the enactment of procedures to meet codes of good practice in standard setting and management slow down processes, add costs, and create stakeholder fatigue. All of this is opening space for mainstream competitors to establish substantial presence in the market for sustainability certifications. These initiatives also tend to more easily discriminate against small players and actors in developing countries.

**A role for regulation? Lessons from the biofuel industry**

Sustainability certification has been recently mandated by regulation in the EU for biofuels. This is the first time this happens in the agro-food and forestry sector, creating a de-facto captive market for sustainability. Still, EU regulation could have required a minimum set of standards on the quality of procedures, participation, transparency and accountability of EU-recognized certification initiatives – it did not. These features would have assured a far more democratic process, more meaningful participation from feedstock producers in the South (especially smallholders) and a more equitable distribution of benefits. EU regulation, however, limited itself to indicate what parameters of sustainability should be included in certification systems (and especially GHG emission reduction). As a result, the most business-friendly, top-down and global North-focused biofuel certification scheme has monopolized the market thus far. This was a lost opportunity and does not bode well for the future of sustainability in agriculture and forestry. It also places doubts on whether there is political support for regulation that can claw back some power from private authority and/or shape multi-stakeholder initiatives to deliver common welfare gains for all players in global value chains.

**Further reading:**

Stefano Ponte and Emmanuelle Cheyns (2013) 'Voluntary Standards and the Governance of Sustainability Networks', *Global Networks* (forthcoming in February)

Stefano Ponte, Peter Gibbon and Jakob Vestergaard (eds) (2011) *Governing through Standards: Origins, Drivers and Limitations*, Palgrave MacMillan: London and New York

Stefano Ponte (2012) 'The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and the Making of a Market for "Sustainable Fish"', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, Vol. 12, No. 2-3, pp. 300-315

Stefano Ponte (2008) "Greener than thou: The Political Economy of Fish Ecolabeling and its Local Manifestations in South Africa," *World Development*, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 159-175

Copenhagen Biofuels Research Network <http://cobren.wordpress.com/>

Sustaining Ethical Aquaculture Trade (SEAT), FP7 project on sustainability in global value chains for aquaculture products [www.seatglobal.eu](http://www.seatglobal.eu)