



4.6 Exploring the impacts of certification systems

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Businesses, NGOs and government agencies invest significant resources in certification systems that promise to promote environmental and social stewardship. Labels for products as diverse as furniture, food, electronics and buildings indicate the preferred status of items that meet standards of environmental sustainability, energy conservation or social justice. But as labels proliferate, businesses and consumers are confused about how to understand and compare the current and potential impacts of certification systems for global supply chains.

Regulators and foundations want to know whether these systems are achieving sustainability objectives and, how to improve their performance where necessary. Manufacturers and marketers require this information to support business decisions, including those relating to corporate social responsibility. Some people also worry that certification systems promoting sustainability in one realm may mask unsustainable practices in another. For instance, consumers and companies wonder whether sustainable forestry certification sufficiently promotes biodiversity conservation and fair labour practices.



REGULATORS AND FOUNDATIONS WANT TO KNOW WHETHER THESE SYSTEMS ARE ACHIEVING SUSTAINABILITY OBJECTIVES AND HOW TO IMPROVE THEIR PERFORMANCE.

In late 2009, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Walton Family Foundation, and MARS, Inc. contributed financial backing for an independent assessment of the impact and performance of certification systems in achieving more sustainable production and consumption. A neutral third party, RESOLVE, Inc., provides facilitation and organizational support for a 13-person steering committee, comprised of representatives from multinational corporations, leading environmental NGOs, certifying organizations, universities and scientists.¹

The committee will draw on its multi-stakeholder, multi-disciplinary composition to identify and review key questions and evidence. It will focus on understanding and

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identifying complex but important causal relationships that have been uncovered by existing scholarly research and publications, while benefitting from the rich experience and conventional wisdom of practitioners. The committee will identify gaps and under-explored research questions relevant to the practice of sustainable certification. The diversity of the group will the study to examine broader questions than would otherwise be possible and to provide a range of perspectives in analyzing the findings.

The committee will soon commission “desktop reviews” of certification within three sectors: forestry, fisheries and agriculture. (A fourth review will explore cross-sector issues such as business incentives for incorporating certification schemes and how voluntary mechanisms relate to non-voluntary mechanisms such as government regulations.) The forestry review will examine environmental, social, and economic problems related to the sector to identify what is and isn’t known about the historical, current and potential impacts of forest certification programmes (e.g., Forest Stewardship Council and Programme for the Endorsement of Certification) in promoting sustainable forest management. The review will explore both the direct impacts that certification may have in improving harvesting practices and its indirect impacts when combined with other voluntary and regulatory approaches.

These reviews will inform the steering committee as it identifies hypotheses about the factors that affect the performance of certification schemes. The committee will then commission original research to assess these hypotheses and will ultimately issue a report summarizing its findings and highlighting high-priority areas for continued research. This report will seek to identify the conditions that enable or constrain the uptake of certification schemes within certain sectors. It will also highlight opportunities (including research needs) to more effectively leverage voluntary systems in a way that further promotes sustainability.

The committee hopes the findings will inform corporate and consumer choices and foundations’ grant decisions. It also hopes to assist certifiers seeking to refine their systems and government agencies who want to be involved through substantial purchases and regulation of these systems. The ETFRN community can expect the findings to offer insights about how to utilise and supplement certification of forestry to further promote biodiversity and other sustainability goals.

For more information

For information, or to register to receive updates, please visit the project web site (<http://assessment.resolv.wikispaces.net/Assessment+of+Standards+and+Certification+Systems>) or contact Abby Dilley at www.resolv.org.

Endnotes

1. The members of the steering committee are Mike Barry (Marks & Spencer), Scot Case (Terra Choice), Ben Cashore (Yale University), Jason Clay (World Wildlife Fund), Michael Fernandez (MARS, Inc.), Neil Hawkins (Dow Chemical Company), Louis Lebel (Chiang Mai University), Tom Lyon (University of Michigan), Patrick Mallet (ISEAL), Peter Melchett (Soil Association), Michael Vandenberg (Vanderbilt University), Jan Kees Vis (Unilever) and Tensie Whelan (Rainforest Alliance).