

Chapter 3

Global Certification Systems of Key Importance in the South African Fruit Industry's Access to International Markets

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ABSTRACT

The chapter focused on assessing the nature of voluntary sustainability standards (VSSs) that affect South Africa's producers of horticultural produce (fruits in particular) destined for markets within Europe and Africa. Eight VSSs affecting South Africa's fruit trade with Europe and within Africa under food safety and traceability themes were identified. The outcomes of global certification as a requirement to participate in global international markets are outlined, with a specific focus on the implication of these standards for smallholder farmers. Given the independent nature of the end goals from the institutions responsible for these VSSs, it becomes problematic and impractical to argue that VSSs that focus on similar thematic areas, e.g., GLOBALG.A.P. Crops and IFOAM, be merged into one standard. Thus, it is prudent that smallholder producers outrightly identify a specific target market and the corresponding standard requirements such that activities are undertaken in accordance with what the market needs.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The last two decades witnessed unprecedented changes in the agro-food sector through the proliferation of private and voluntary sustainability standards (VSSs) which are influencing international

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agricultural trade. Whereas food safety and traceability-related VSSs are enforced in agro-food markets globally, the implementation of some environmental, sustainability, and labor-related standards is not yet very strict in developing economies, especially in developing countries. Some voluntary standards combine a mixture of food safety, environmental, and social dimensions, while an inherent emphasis is being given to product traceability. Consequently, standards affect not only the safety of final products but also the whole organization of the supply value chain. This significant change raises new opportunities and challenges for small export-oriented farmers in developing countries and has implications for agricultural development programs and policies for local farmers who ought to be benefiting.

It is noteworthy to point out that these certification schemes are mainly driven by private and non-governmental market organizations, which often fill the gaps that governments and international institutions are not willing or unable to regulate (Brandi et al., 2015; DeFries et al., 2017). While the rationale behind certification is clear. Evidence of its benefits is mixed. For example, through certification, producers receive premiums and other benefits for following sustainability criteria set by a certifying entity. A number of agricultural export-oriented tropical crops are of particular interest for certification programs. DeFries et al. (2017) provided reasons behind the establishment of certification programs. First, due to a lack of interest by the government to prioritize sustainable production or an inability to enforce environmental and labor regulations, non-governmental organizations have taken advantage of the gap to develop markets for certified products. Second, while there has been a noticeable reduction in poverty levels, the majority of people live in rural areas. Therefore, improving the livelihoods of farmers and laborers in rural areas while ensuring adequate working conditions is critical in ensuring sustainable supply chains. Third, due to the tradable nature of most tropical crops, certification of these commodities has contributed to the revenues in international supply chains. However, the challenge that remains is to ascertain whether the benefits of VSSs are realized among rural smallholder farmers.

The success of certification programs often rests on the criteria chosen as they relate to environmental, economic, and social sustainability. While empirical evidence indicates that certification may provide benefits in line with sustainable goals, results indicate that certification is not an absolute solution to improve social outcomes and the overall incomes of smallholder farmers. There is growing literature that flags the concerns with VSSs, particularly on their applications to smallholder farmers. Farmers are generally faced with high transaction costs and operate in an environment characterized by information asymmetry that may contribute further to their exclusion from supply value chains which are concentrated in the hands of large and wealthier farmers (Brandi et al., 2015), and non-government organizations (NGOs) and private sector entities from the North that serve their own interests and promote their priorities (Schleifer, 2016).

The implementation of these standards has, in many instances, followed policy-driven or interventionist approaches with the main actors, in this case, North-based multinational corporations and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) pursuing the “benefits of certifications” without a full understanding of the realities facing the smallholders on the ground. According to Glasbergen (2018):

Most studies on the certification sustainability of these certifications take the objectives of voluntary standard-setting and certifying arrangements as the reference point, thereby implicitly accepting

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