Article

Nature and Space

EPE: Nature and Space
0(0) 1–20

DOI: 10.1177/25148486211014505
journals.sagepub.com/home/ene
SAGE

How to govern a sustainable supply chain: Standards, standardizers, and the political ecology of (in)advertence

Matthew Archer
Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

Abstract

There is an ambivalence within political ecology about whether the unequal power relations that emerge from many development projects are intended or unintended. This ambivalence is a result of an empirical focus on the effects of these programs on target communities, as opposed to an empirical focus on the people who are responsible for developing those programs. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork among people tasked with designing, promoting, and enforcing sustainability standards in global agricultural supply chains, I argue that the empowerment of multinational corporations and well-funded environmental NGOs that characterizes market-oriented sustainability programs is, in fact, intentional. This intention reflects the belief among sustainability professionals that the intersection of western scientific expertise with the dynamics of "the market" is the most effective way to promote sustainability in global supply chains, and to generate global sustainability in a more general sense. Concepts like "stakeholder engagement" and a commitment to flexibility and accommodation in the development and adoption of social and environmental standards are examples of what I call euphemistic sustainability, which shifts critical attention away from a balance of power that is increasingly tilted toward private interests, even as that imbalance remains an intended outcome of non-state market-driven governance systems like ostensibly voluntary sustainability standards.

Keywords

Sustainability, standards, governance, stakeholders, political ecology, intentionality

Corresponding author:
Matthew Archer, Copenhagen Business School, Frederiksberg, Denmark.
Email: mbarcher@protonmail.com

Introduction

In the context of global agricultural supply chains, sustainability certifications and other market-oriented sustainable development initiatives seem to benefit multinational corporations (and their investors) much more than the marginalized producers and threatened ecologies they nominally target. Fair trade certification schemes, for instance, help retailers communicate and more effectively advertise the sustainability of their products for so-called ethical consumers (Sylla, 2014), while also providing these companies new ways to manage their risks, collect data about production processes, and develop new marketing schemes (Dolan and Humphrey, 2004; Fortin, 2013; Freidberg, 2003). As Elizabeth Fortin points out,

> [t]he ability of players to take advantage of these opportunities . . . depends upon the size of their operations, where they are positioned within global commodity chains, their ability to draw upon requisite technological and financial capital and the presence or absence of supportive material and institutional infrastructures (2013: 568)

suggesting that it is not only corporations that benefit from certification schemes at the expense of farmers, but major multinational corporations in particular who stand to benefit the most. These certification schemes and the standards on which they depend are ostensibly voluntary, but as more companies commit to sourcing exclusively from certified sustainable farms, producers have little choice other than to pursue certification, often at a huge, if not overwhelming, cost.

The ubiquity of sustainability certifications has had a significant effect on the governance of global agricultural supply chains, shifting the power to control who can access and exploit various resources (natural resources, financial resources, political resources, cultural resources, etc.) even more toward already powerful non-state actors such as multinational corporations and the banks that invest in them. Work in international political economy and economic geography has shown how neoliberal sustainability initiatives like voluntary certification schemes further concentrate the power to extract surplus value from producers and other supply chain actors in the hands of "lead firms" (Ponte, 2019). These schemes enhance, rather than contest, the power of lead firms to "not only [define] the product and process parameters to be met along the value chain but also [establish] systems to monitor and control compliance" (Dolan and Humphrey, 2004: 502). At the same time, these shifting power relations provoke new forms of co-operation, co-option, and resistance (Besky, 2014; Naylor, 2019; Sen, 2017). Companies attempt to neutralize critiques of this worsening power imbalance by highlighting the fact that most of these certification schemes are developed through so-called multi-stakeholder initiatives, where diverse communities who affect or are affected by these companies and their actions (to adapt Freeman's classic definition of the stakeholder) are "consulted" and "engaged" to come up with mutually beneficial solutions. Never mind that it is the most powerful of these stakeholders (i.e., corporations, well-funded international organizations, etc.) who not only maintain their right to determine what counts as a sufficient level of engagement, but also control the venues where that engagement takes place and are native speakers of the language that will be used to assess and evaluate its outcomes (Archer, 2020). Ultimately, these certification systems reinforce, and in some cases exacerbate, unequal power relations between multinational corporations and international organizations based in the West, on one hand, and producers in the Global South, on the other. Narratives of participation and engagement that underlie so-called multi-stakeholder initiatives may help hide the fact that these schemes contribute to increasingly unequal power relations, but they do not mitigate it; nor do they imply that these shifts are unintentional.

Reflecting on the relationship between sustainability certifications and what Hornborg (1998) has called "ecologically unequal exchange," Jutta Kill argues that these schemes:

> serve not only as a corporate strategy to respond to negative publicity, but ... help maintain the net inflow of energy and materials from the periphery at low prices that is necessary for the maintenance of the social metabolism of the centre. By presenting products and modes of production that have fallen into disrepute in a key consumer market as a changed, now acceptable choice for consumption and trade, voluntary certification schemes ... help corporations maintain or expand market share for products that involve ecologically destructive practices ... [T]hese certification schemes have (inadvertently?) helped tilt the balance of power even further in favour of corporate interests. (Kill, 2016: 444)

Kill's provocative parenthetical—"inadvertently?"—is both disconcerting and critical, raising important questions about agency, intention, and responsibility in multi-stakeholder efforts to render global supply chains more sustainable, as well as questions about the methods used to study these processes, which rest of this essay will start to answer. I draw on a series of more than 60 interviews conducted primarily between summer 2018 and spring 2020 with a group of people I refer to, following Brunsson and Jacobsson (2010), as "standardizers," that is, people who work to develop, promote, and enforce standards. I also draw on limited participant observation, including a week I spend shadowing an impact evaluation manager at a standards development organization in spring 2020, attendance at the COTECA (coffee, tea, and cacao) expo in Hamburg in fall 2018, and numerous site visits to standards development organizations, tea shops, and trading firms in Europe, the UK, and the US. This work builds on a longer-standing interest in "sustainability professionals" more generally, including a year of ethnographic fieldwork in different organizations in and around Geneva, Switzerland, that I conducted between September 2015 and August 2016. My more recent research focused primarily on the development of sustainable agriculture standards, and it was conducted as part of a collaborative, multi-sited project that sought to better understand the role that sustainability certifications play in the governance of global agricultural supply chains, with a specific empirical interest in Kenyan tea production. My interlocutors worked for standards development organizations, multinational corporations, tea and coffee traders, certification bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to address social and environmental issues on or around sites of tea production, and even a few local tea shops; and they were based primarily in Denmark, England, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States.

Focusing on these relatively powerful actors working in organizations based in Europe and the US, what Laura Nader (1972) has referred to as "studying up" (see also Souleles, 2018), helps us better understand the intention behind the design and adoption of sustainability standards. Understanding the motivations of standards developers is important to understand the intentionality of these outcomes. As I argue in this article, if certification schemes have indeed "helped tilt the balance of power even further in favor of corporate interests," then it is because this outcome is a fundamental part of the way these schemes were designed from the outset. Focusing on the group of people who are responsible for designing these standards helps resolve the ambivalence among political ecologists about the (in)advertence of the outcomes of these and other market-oriented sustainability initiatives, which, in the context of global value chains, tend to empower multi-national corporations and other already powerful organizations. An examination of intentionality, moreover, is an important step toward recent attempts in political ecology and cognate fields to conceptualize power more explicitly (Dallas et al., 2019), especially in the context of considerations of individual agency (Svarstad et al., 2018; see also Paulson et al., 2003). I show how the increasingly unequal power relations engendered by many contemporary sustainability initiatives, especially sustainability standards, is often an objective of these programs and the people who design them, an intention that is reflected in their belief that belief that markets, in combination with modernist, western technoscience, are capable of generating the most efficient, and therefore most sustainable, outcomes.

The next section provides some background information about the importance of sustainability certifications in global agrocommodity supply chains. Because my research among standards developers was conducted in the context of a larger project that looked specifically at the Kenyan tea industry, I refer to this particular case throughout the article as an example; however, it is worth noting that hardly any of my interlocutors work exclusively in (or on) the tea sector, and even fewer work exclusively with Kenyan tea, which suggests that my results are more generally applicable. After that, I review some of the literature on the relationship between sustainability standards and governance, focusing on explanations for why certification schemes continue to proliferate despite their apparent failure to generate positive social and environmental impacts. This is followed by an explication of the political ecology of (in)advertence, where I show how political ecology's ambivalence about the distinction between the intended and unintended outcomes of development projects raises a number of important methodological and theoretical questions that need to be addressed, especially in the context of increasingly powerful corporate and corporate-adjacent actors. This ambivalence stems from political ecologist' empirical focus on specific projects (i.e., specific certification schemes, specific conservation initiatives, specific corporate sustainability programs, and so on). The penultimate section proposes what I call "euphemistic sustainability," showing how standardizers talk about "stakeholder engagement" and their commitment to "flexibility" as a way to obscure their otherwise fairly apparent intention to "tilt the balance of power even further in favour of corporate interests," an intention that is motivated by their belief that "the market"—and the corporations that embody it—can deliver global sustainability.

Sustainable tea

Except for water, tea is the most widely consumed beverage in the world. It is also one of the most standardized, especially when it comes to voluntary sustainability standards like the Rainforest Alliance's sustainable agriculture standard or sustainability programs like the Ethical Tea Partnership, which makes it a good reference for understanding the relationship between standards and governance in the context of other global supply chains. In Kenya specifically, more than 80% of the tea produced is Rainforest Alliance certified, which is significant since Kenya, despite being the world's fourth largest producer of tea, it is the world's largest exporter by volume. (Countries like China and India, which produce more tea, also consume much more tea domestically.) Most of the tea Kenya exports is produced through the cut-tear-curl method, which yields the kind of tea that ends up in tea bags sold under brand names like Lipton, PG Tips, Tetley, etc. Because much of the tea produced in Kenya ends up in these kinds of supermarket brands (rather than in specialty tea shops, where sustainability certifications are less important than ensuring high quality), Kenyan tea producers must ensure that their tea is able to be sold in bulk on international markets to diverse buyers. Multinational corporations like Unilever (Lipton, PG Tips), Twinings and

Tata Global Beverages (Tetley, teapigs) dominate these markets, controlling a significant portion of the world's tea production, processing, and export.

Because of that, when Unilever announced in 2009 that it would only purchase its Lipton tea exclusively from Rainforest Alliance-certified sources, Kenyan producers had little choice but to pursue certification. As a representative from the Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA) explained it to me at an industry expo in 2018, this required substantial investments in training, equipment, and audits, but also required producers to build and maintain new infrastructures to keep certified and non-certified tea separate both physically and in their records. It is not always clear that these investments are worth it. Blackman and Rivera (2011), for example, find only limited evidence to support the hypothesis that the social and environmental benefits of certification for producers are positive. A more recent review of nearly 200 studies on the impacts of certification on the social and economic welfare of producers and hired labor in developing countries finds evidence that certification systems have a positive effect on the price of certified agricultural products, but have no significant effect on household income or assets (Oya et al., 2018), suggesting that middlemen benefit more from certification than farmers. Riisgaard and Okinda (2018: 57) find that Fairtrade certification has "failed to benefit poor wage workers" in the Kenyan tea industry. The continued fetishization of sustainability certifications hides the fact that the companies demanding certification are typically unwilling to pay for the costs of complying with the requisite standards (Freidberg, 2003), making it even harder for producers to enjoy the ostensible benefits of certification.

A study by the IIED (Keeley and Blackmore, 2012) found that certification can benefit farmers through a number of different pathways, including upgrading (improving the quality of their products by complying with various standards), receiving a premium for certified products, taking advantage of training opportunities that help improve farm management strategies, and facilitating stronger trade relationships with brokers and buyers. In my own research, however, interlocutors have questioned each of these benefits. When I asked a Dutch tea trader if there was any relationship between sustainability and quality, for instance, he responded with an emphatic *no*. When I asked the sustainability manager at a British tea importer what she thought the best sustainability standard was, she had trouble coming up with an answer, but mentioned Fairtrade specifically as one of the worst standards, because it offers a premium to farmers but then doesn't actually let them decide how they want to spend it, leaving that up to a local management committee. Although researchers at Wageningen University found that Kenyan tea farmers who received training from either the Rainforest Alliance and/or the KTDA's farmer field schools (FFS'; Waarts et al., 2012) experienced some benefits, an activist I spoke with who has been studying the Kenyan tea industry for nearly two decades expressed serious concerns about these findings, suggesting that, because the researchers relied on both Unilever and the Rainforest Alliance for access to their field sites and informants, farmers were less likely to be critical of the training programs in their interviews and survey responses. Interestingly, Waarts et al. (2012) found that in terms of income, which is the most important benefit of certification from the perspective of farmers themselves, the income of farmers who received no training increased more between 2010 and 2012 than farmers who received resident assistant (RA) training, and only slightly less than those who had RA and FFS training or those with only FFS training. Overall, then, there is mixed evidence that sustainable agriculture standards have any positive impact on the lives and livelihoods of farmers. And yet, corporations and corporate-adjacent NGOs continue to promote them. The next section explores why that may be the case.

Standards, stakeholders, and the governance of global supply chains

The role of voluntary sustainability standards in the governance of global agricultural supply chains has attracted a lot of cross-disciplinary attention, much of which has revolved around growing power imbalances between the many different actors involved in the multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSI) that generate these standards (Ponte, 2019; Ponte et al., 2010). Cashore (2002), for instance, theorizes the "the emergence of NSMD [non-state market-driven] governance systems and the conditions under which they may gain authority to create policy," which represents a "[trend] towards more flexible and market-oriented policy instruments" (pp. 505–507). Standards play a key role in these systems, which are developed collaboratively by numerous actors operating in multi-stakeholder initiatives, including industry associations and NGOs (Van der Ven et al., 2018). Within these systems, the role of the market is to link regulated products produced at one end of the supply chain with downstream purchasers. The authority of these systems is located in the market transactions that constitute the supply chain and is granted by external audiences who evaluate these systems as economically beneficially, morally right, or conventionally accepted. Finally, within these NSMD governance systems, compliance with standards has to be independently verified, typically by professional auditors (Cashore, 2002: 511–513).

There is more to the story, however. As Loconto and Busch (2010) observe, auditors themselves have to be independently verified or accredited, leading to what they refer to as tripartite standards regimes (TSRs) that consist of standards developers, certification bodies, and accreditors. In an insightful analysis of the shifting politics of organic certifications, Fouilleux and Loconto (2017) have extended this work in an important direction, arguing that, because the standards at the heart of TSRs constitute market rules, "the construction of a TSR is simultaneously the construction of a market for organic products and for organic TSR services, i.e., all types of activities related to standard-setting, certification, and accreditation." As organic standards get brought into the increasingly competitive market of more general sustainability standards (i.e., the kinds of standards I study), their politics, which we were originally conceptualized as an alternative to capitalism, are consequently brought more in line with the market-oriented politics of contemporary sustainability. "The discussions become restricted to 'marketable' or 'market-compatible' dimensions and objects, specifically in terms of what can be standardized and audited and how" (Fouilleux and Loconto, 2017; see also Fouilleux, 2012). This leads to what Fouilleux and Loconto (2017) call a "competition regime of governance," which "has had the effect of limiting the political debates to predominantly trade and market-compatible options... because the structures of the TSR constrain the direction in which both the debate and the acceptable activities are able to go."

What we have, then, is a governance system in which regulatory authority has shifted to the market transactions that constitute the supply chain, a techno-economic and geopolitical relationship that is regimented by a coterie of non-state actors ranging from multinational corporations and their investors to influential sustainability NGOs who are committed to a mythic ideal of market competition and efficiency. In this context, the rapid growth of sustainability certifications, both in terms of the popularity of certifications in general and the number of competing certification schemes that exist in the market, "has created a positive feedback loop, driving the processes of institutionalization in governance bodies, strengthening the hand of new larger corporate players who are best able to meet the new demand, and paving the way for capture" (Jaffee and Howard, 2010). It would be one thing if this corporate-friendly regime were achieving its development goals—improved farmer livelihoods, reduced deforestation, etc.—but there is little evidence to suggest that they are;

if anything, the evidence points to the contrary. Multinational corporations like Unilever and Tata Global Beverages, in particular, end up wielding more and more power as global supply chains come to be governed by so-called voluntary sustainability standards (Ponte, 2019, see also Dallas et al., 2019).

There are at least two explanations for this. First, according to Van der Ven et al. (2018), these NSMD governance systems often come with various "loopholes" that are built into certification schemes, which powerful actors like multinational corporations are able to exploit. In some cases, these loopholes are fairly blatant. Companies can use subsidiaries or contractors to do things that would otherwise render them non-compliant, they can do something bad immediately before the point in time they are supposed to start being good, or they can take advantage of ambiguous terms and phrasings in the rules themselves. Although Van der Ven et al. (2018) find limited evidence that there are explicit loopholes in the UTZ standard (recently acquired by Rainforest Alliance) when compared with the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and the Roundtable on Responsible Soy, powerful cocoa industry actors in Côte d'Ivoire who consulted in the development of the UTZ standard were nevertheless aware that it would apply from 2005, and "may have accelerated deforestation in anticipation of UTZ's land conversion cut-off date".

A second explanation is that these schemes are the result of what people regularly refer to as "multi-stakeholder initiatives" (see De Bakker et al., 2019 for a recent review). The point of multi-stakeholder initiatives is to give everyone who is affected by the initiative a seat at the table, advancing principles of participatory, democratic governance, even as the power to govern shifts from the state to other actors in NSMD governance systems. However, the narratives of participation and inclusion that underlie MSIs also obscure fundamental power imbalances between different stakeholders, much like the stakeholder concept more broadly (Archer, 2020). Even in the case of relatively local MSIs like Trustea, a standard developed ostensibly by and for Indian tea producers, the inextricable links between global and domestic production networks makes it difficult to ensure that the resulting initiatives reflect the interest of producers (Langford, 2019).

Moreover, MSIs dilute the responsibility for both the positive and negative consequences of the programs they develop, allowing guilty actors to shift the blame onto others when something goes wrong, or take undue credit when something goes right. Michiel Köhne (2014), for instance, has shown how Petral, a large palm oil plantation owner, was essentially able to use the RSPO as a shield in its shady, and sometimes violent, dealings with smallholder farmers living on and around a plantation it purchased. Theorizing MSIs as assemblages, he argues that:

> MSI governance is concurrently co-produced at different sites that are, on the one hand, characterized by power inequalities between conflicting actors and that are, on the other hand, interlinked by needs for evidence production. The way in which these inequalities shape actors' access to an MSI affects how they use the assemblage as a resource for their cause. Because the use of an assemblage is at the same time the constitution of the assemblage, the governance produced by the assemblage is also affected by these inequalities. This means that what shapes the social and environmental significance of MSI governance are not so much its formal policies and instruments, but the unequal power relations in which actors negotiate concrete disputes. (Köhne, 2014: 477)

Petral's relatively powerful position with this particular MSI, especially when compared with smallholder farmers and the local NGOs representing their interests, helped legitimize their collaboration with the RSPO. By claiming that they were following RSPO guidelines in their negotiations with smallholders, Petral was able to claim that they had done what they were supposed to do (and what they had committed to doing), effectively delegitimizing the smallholders' position and implying that it was not Petral's fault that the disputes with stakeholders were unresolved (Köhne, 2014). Powerful corporate actors are also able to wield their influence to mobilize MSIs against potential threats. According to Delabre and Okereke (2020: 651), "[c]ompanies are able to influence local leaders' positions and approaches to consultations, and in some cases, use coercion and threats to secure the acquiescence of local leaders," and "participation" is often experienced by less powerful stakeholders as "top-down and controlled". Even when companies do something blatantly wrong, game theoretical models of the benefits of being part of a club suggest that blame is attributed not to individual actors, but to the club in general, further benefiting actors who are most likely to perform poorly (Zeyen et al., 2016).

To sum up, a non-state market-driven system of governance has emerged that shifts the balance of power from the state to organizations in the private sector and to a lesser extent civil society. What little power civil society organizations might have had is eroded by the market logics that dominate sustainability discourse and the reframing of goals and strategies within these ostensibly multi-stakeholder initiatives in terms of corporations' financial performance (their "bottom lines"). Tripartite standards regimes, which are riddled with easily exploitable loopholes, lie at the heart of this NSMD governance system, developed through multi-stakeholder initiatives that dilute responsibility and empower already powerful corporate actors to continue acting in their own interest. But the issue of intentionality remains unaddressed, specifically whether, to what extent, and by whom certification systems are designed to shift the balance of power in favor of corporate actors. I turn to these questions in the next two sections.

The political ecology of (in)advertence

Unintended consequences?

An ambivalence about the extent to which the political consequences of various kinds of neoliberal sustainability initiatives are intentional is pervasive in political ecology. This is due, at least in part, to the characteristic empirical focus of political ecology. Specifically, by focusing on the effects of sustainability programs on communities mostly in the Global South who are seen as relatively marginalized or disempowered, political ecologists and scholars working in cognate fields have left the question of intentionality largely unexamined.

To support this claim, I begin with a review of a few classic works of political ecology before turning to more recent considerations, both empirical and conceptual, of the consequences of (sustainable) development. Ferguson's (1994) influential notion of anti-politics turns on the observation that, even when development projects fail to achieve their stated goals (such as poverty reduction, in Ferguson's case), they often leave new infrastructures of governance and control in their wake, "side effects" that more immediate concerns regarding poverty and other development challenges tend to obscure and depoliticize. "[P]lanned interventions," he argues, "may produce unintended outcomes that end up, all the same, incorporated into anonymous [later, following Foucault, 'authorless'] constellations of control . . . that turn out in the end to have a kind of political intelligibility"

(Ferguson, 1994: 20). Reflecting on the specific case of a poverty alleviation project in Lesotho, he claims that:

> intentional plans interacted with unacknowledged structures and chance events to produce unintended outcomes which turn out to be intelligible not only as the unforeseen effects of an intended intervention, but also as the unlikely instruments of an unplotted strategy . . . [O] utcomes that at first appear as mere "side effects" of an unsuccessful attempt to engineer an economic transformation became legible in another perspective as unintended yet instrumental elements in a resultant constellation that has the effect of expanding the exercise of particular sort of state power while simultaneously exerting a powerful depoliticizing effect. (Ferguson, 1994: 20–21)

In the space of just a few paragraphs summarizing his book's main argument, Ferguson establishes the tension between "intentional plans" and "unintended outcomes" as an important component of the anti-politics machine. In her work on dispossession in Indonesia, Tania Murray Li (2007) frames her intervention around a similar tension. "Many parties," she argues, "share in the will to improve. They occupy the position of trustees, a position defined by the claim to know how others should live, to know what is best for them, to know what they need" (Li, 2007: 4). These trustees do not seek to dominate the people they're trying to help, but to "enhance" and "direct" their "capacity for action," and Li (2007: 5) insists "[t]heir intentions are benevolent, even utopian. They desire to make the world better than it is." Calling for a "Gramscian approach [that is] alert to the constellations of power in particular times and places," Li (2007: 26–27) summarizes the main observation of her research: "improvement programs may inadvertently stimulate a political challenge." Some of the "unintended effects" of the development projects Li (2007) examines include displacement of highlanders by resettling them in valleys with insufficient land base for settlement and the empowerment of local coastal elites to dispossess highlanders under the guise of more economic land use.

In a similar vein, Escobar (1995: 44) argues that the determination of what counts as a "legitimate" development issue often depends on "relations, for instance, between what experts say and what international politics allows as feasible . . .; between one power segment and another (say, industry versus agriculture); or between two or more forms of authority." These kinds of relationships, he argued, "regulate development practice" not only by including "new objects under [developmentalism's] domains," but also, and perhaps fundamentally, by excluding certain objects, in particular the people who "development was supposed to be all about". Escobar continues:

> Development was—and continues to be for the most part—a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach, which treated people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of "progress." Development was conceived not as a cultural process (culture was a residual variable, to disappear with the advance of modernization) but instead as a system of more or less universally applicable technical interventions *intended to deliver some "badly needed" goods to a "target" population*. It comes as no surprise that development became a force so destructive to Third World cultures, ironically in the name of people's interests. (1995: 44, emphasis added)

For Escobar, development interventions become a destructive force despite their intention to "deliver some 'badly needs' goods to a 'target' population".

In all of these cases, there seems to be a force driving development toward an inevitable, or at least unsurprising, conclusion. And yet, there remains a degree of ambivalence regarding the intentionality of these conclusions, despite at least half a century of evidence suggesting that modernist, and especially market-driven, development strategies inexorably reflect the interests of powerful organizations like international development agencies and multinational corporations (see, for example, Blaikie, 1985; Nkrumah, 1965; Scott, 1998). Frank De Zwart's (2015) cautionary distinction between unanticipated consequences and unintended consequences is important here. He traces the conflation of "unanticipated consequences" and "unintended consequences" through an intellectual history of the work of Robert Merton, who proposed the notion of "unanticipated consequences" in the 1930s but, by the 1960s, was using it synonymously with "unintended consequences," eliding a distinction between a consequence that is not foreseen (which, by definition, is also unintended) and a consequence that is not "purposed". In many academic analyses of the unintended consequences of various policies, according to De Zwart, the people responsible for designing and implementing those policies often come across as naïve because the consequences of their policies are presented as an effect of "error, ignorance, or blindness" (p. 295). In reality, he argues, the actors "must often make 'difficult' choices—difficult precisely because they foresee unwelcome effects. Conflating 'unintended' and 'unanticipated' obscures this" (De Zwart, 2015: 293).

Is it possible to think of these consequences as unanticipated when the literature on modernist and market-driven (sustainable) development has so clearly and consistently documented them? One might object that academic political ecology and cognate fields are somewhat far removed from the practice of development, and that development agents might actually not anticipate these power shifts. However, one of my most vivid memories from my fieldwork among sustainability professionals in 2015 and 2016 is a conversation with an interlocutor who, at the time, was a sustainability consultant for the tire industry. He asked me whether I had ever read Ferguson's *Anti-Politics Machine* and proudly declared that not only was it one of his favorite books, but that it had really changed the way he thought about the world. Many of my interlocutors had master's degrees in environmental studies or sustainable development and were no doubt familiar with these kinds of critiques, so the notion that they do not anticipate the political effects of their interventions is unfounded, and if they do in fact anticipate these effects, it seems inaccurate to say they are unintentional. De Zwart (2015) proposes the category of "unintended but anticipated" outcomes, which "often concern controversial and political sensitive issues, and the connotation of 'unanticipated' that sticks to 'unintended' makes it possible to expose, discuss, or correct such issues without imputing blame or getting into painful discussions about responsibility" (p. 294). We might also consider negative outcomes that are both anticipated and intended, but nevertheless minimized in various ways, such as a smallholder farmer losing her sustainability certification because an auditor discovered she was cultivating household crops too close to a river, which some standards prohibit. Although standardizers themselves would usually agree that decertification, but rather than contesting the logic behind these outcomes—an outcome, as it were, that will likely increase in frequency as audits become more automated with the adoption of new monitoring and surveillance technologies—they take a rules-are-rules approach, viewing these outcomes as something of a necessary evil (Archer, in press).

Regardless of the intentionality behind these outcomes, what this discussion shows is that there is a need to examine the design of standards and other sustainability programs, in addition to focusing on the communities those programs affect. Doing so yields interesting results, which can be seen by comparing two fairly recent analyses of WWF-led conservation projects, one in The Gambia (Crow and Carney, 2013) and one in Japan (Claus, 2020). In their analysis of mangrove conservation efforts in The Gambia, Crow and Carney (2013) show how the WWF's focus on commercializing oyster production as a conservation strategy undermined its goal of conserving threatened mangroves. Because the project was "entirely production oriented and ignores the ways in which oysters are prepared for market, the new emphasis on commercializing oyster culture through local women may actually accelerate degradation of the very mangrove forests the GSFP aims to conserve" (Crow and Carney, 2013: 277). Specifically, the commercialization of oyster farming pushed local women to travel deeper into mangroves and chop off the mangrove roots harvest oysters more efficiently, which caused permanent damage to the mangroves. At the same time, if a tacit objective of the project was to create neoliberal subjects who are subjugated to the demands of increasingly transnational oyster markets, then it was, in fact, rather successful.

Claus (2020) also analyzes a WWF-led conservation project, this one designed to conserve a rare coral reef in Okinawa, which she assesses as relatively effective in terms of social and environmental justice, as well as meeting its conservation goals. Like many accounts of conservation projects led by transnational NGOs, Claus's account begins by describing a tension between the WWF conservation strategy of creating national parks and the alienating effect of these parks on local residents. Ensuing negotiations between coastal residents and outsider conservationists led to a reconsideration of "the role of environmentalists, researchers, and community members" and "the positionality of conservations and the hierarchies of knowledge within which environmental justice is produced," provoking a "[radical reimagining of] the colonial and paternalistic logics that previously ordered their work in Okinawa" (Claus, 2020: 6). However, this positive outcome was not just the result of an intrepid group of local residents facing down the colonial vestiges of an influential conservation organization, but also depended on a specific actor within the WWF, namely a new center director. As an outsider and as a "charismatic leader," the new director "was not grounded in the traditions or customs of the transnational conservation establishment, nor was he uncritical of natural science perspectives" (Claus, 2020: 87 and throughout chapter 3), traits that helped facilitate the emergence of a successful conservation strategy that reflected the interests of diverse groups.

Reading these two analyses together highlights the necessity of distinguishing between the structural or systemic force that seems to inevitably generate certain political consequences, and the intentionality of specific people responsible for designing and implementing these programs. Building on this substantial body of work that has examined the strong tendency of market-oriented conservation and development projects to lead to particular outcomes, I turn now to an analysis of the individual beliefs, motivations, and intentions of the people who design, market, and enforce these projects, focusing specifically on the development and revision of voluntary sustainability standards. But, rather than focusing on the effects of an organization's "charismatic leaders," I focus instead on the group of people Porter (1995) has described as "weak elites," professionals who derive their authority in large part from processes of quantification and who carry out much of the work that Martin French (2014) refers to as "informatics practice".

Advertent inadvertencies

Roland (a pseudonym) works for an organization that develops standards for different products and processes, and he recently helped manage the development of a new sustainability standard for cocoa production. It was a multi-stakeholder initiative *par excellence,* involving representatives from European chocolate producers, retailers, industry groups, NGOs, producer country governments, and academia. When I asked him what distinguishes his organization from other organizations that develop sustainability standards, he told me that his organization was more inclusive, "more open to interested parties". He listed a few benefits of this kind of inclusivity: The more stakeholders who participate in the development of a standard, the more likely they are to adopt the standard once it is published. Wider participation, for Roland, leads to greater transparency, and it is easier to see who is asking for the standard to include specific provisions, which prevents corporations in particular from weaving in precisely the kinds of loopholes that Van der Ven et al. (2018) theorize as a key explanation for the apparent failure of many NSMD governance schemes, including sustainability standards.

However, behind this rosy narrative linking multi-stakeholder initiatives with democratic governance, transparency, and better coverage is a more disconcerting motivation, which is to make producers "understand that it's beneficial for them". A few minutes later, Roland tells me how unfair it is that European governments collect more income in value added taxes (VAT) on a bar of chocolate than a farmer in Africa makes from selling the beans used to produce it. He then proposes that VAT revenues should be redirected to producers, not out of charity or even a sense of fairness or justice, but rather "so they learn that it's good to produce things, that they can make their own money. That's what we have to teach them." Not only do producers need standards, they also need a strict auditing and certification system, preferably one that's automated so they will not be able to cheat on compliance checks. He complains about the system now, which relies on infrequent human audits, "because the day after you have been auditing, the children can be in the field again." He proposes a technologically advanced system based on constant reporting and monitoring, where an algorithm can alert auditors of potential problems that they can go check out in person, similar, he says, to the way a bank monitors for credit card fraud.

It is important to understand this mindset. Roland imagines himself, in collaboration with companies, governments, and scientists from Europe, in a position to "teach" and convince producers that a system of governance (a system that is essentially prefigured by the dynamics of an all-knowing, all-powerful market) is good for them. In contrast to the picture he paints about the broad participation this kind of multi-stakeholder initiative involves, he later admits that "the committee making those standards . . . are mostly experts participating. They are coming from accreditation bodies, certification bodies, and they are earning money from doing this, and they don't want to change." The mythical stakeholder has vanished, along with representatives from producer country governments and industry associations. And despite what he had told me about the tendency of producers who had participated in the development of standards to subsequently adopt those standards, he later claimed that "it's up to the market to decide what [producers] are going to do," before admitting that the proliferation of a particular standard "depends on the big players on the market. If the five big players are saying ok we go for [this standard], then [everyone] will go for that, because the market drivers will go for that." Recalling the pressure the Kenyan tea industry felt to adopt the Rainforest Alliance standard after Unilever committed to purchasing all their tea from Rainforest Alliance certified sources, it would seem that Roland's diagnosis of the cocoa sector applies to other commodities, as well.

Roland's description of the benefits of consulting diverse stakeholders supports Delabre and Okereke's (2020: 656) argument that "participation is a mechanism for legitimization of corporations' pre-defined plans," allowing companies to make "superficial changes to prevent more substantial ones" under the guise of engagement and accommodation. Ultimately, they argue, "[t]he 'end goal' for a discussion is already envisioned before discussions start by those controlling the participatory spaces." The constellation Roland describes is one in which corporations are invested with the power to lead multi-stakeholder initiatives toward outcomes that benefit them. This is not an unintended outcome, but a goal from the outset, or at the very least an unchallenged assumption about the way the system works. The constellation is far from authorless. In fact, Roland occupies not only the role of author (as a Western "expert" involved in developing the standard), but also editor (as a facilitator of the standard development process) and publisher (as an employee of the organization that eventually publishes the standards he helps develop).

Although this dynamic manifested quite clearly in my conversation with Roland, other interlocutors expressed similar ideals. Stanley, for instance, an impact evaluation manager who works for a different standards development organization, told me during an interview that auditing is important because it generates objective data that can be used to communicate impacts to skeptical consumers. But the indicators these audits generate also serve an ancillary purpose, which is to convince producers that certification is also good for them. Implicit in this is the admission that the benefits of certification might not otherwise be obvious to those producers. It is therefore quite difficult to imagine how the consequences of NSMD governance systems, namely the way they seem to consistently "tilt the balance of power even further in favour of corporate interests" (Kill, 2016: 444), could be convincingly construed as inadvertent, or how the emergence of constellations of governance so thoroughly described in the political ecology literature could be convincingly construed as unintentional.

I argue instead that if the shifting balance of power resulting from the expansion of these governance systems can be glossed as even a little bit inadvertent, it is not because that shift was unintentional, but rather because the people responsible for designing, promoting, and enforcing these market-oriented certification schemes have collectively decided to look the other way, averting their gaze from an outcome they expect to happen, literally (or etymologically, at least) in-ad-verting, shifting the attention of potential critics toward processes (such as multi-stakeholder initiatives) and away from outcomes (such as shifting power relations). Understanding this process and the way it contributes to the emergence and reinforcement of constellations of power and control that affect the different groups are able to access and exploit not only natural resources, but also social and economic resources, should be an explicit concern of political ecology and cognate fields such as environmental anthropology and development studies.

When standardizers turn away from the social and political consequences of standardization, they downplay the effects that these increasingly unequal relations of power have on the actors they are ostensibly trying to help, the communities toward whom they have directed their "will to improve," the people with whom they have established a patronizing trustee–beneficiary relationship. But inadvertence is not a passive phenomenon, an observation that resonates with recent critical work examining the way ignorance and uncertainty can be strategically wielded by different actors in their claims to power (Eren, 2017; McGoey, 2012; Zeng et al., 2016), especially in global agrocommodity supply chains (Freidberg, 2017). In the next section, I describe some of the euphemisms standardizers use to downplay the effects of their interventions by drawing critical attention elsewhere, returning the discussion presented earlier about loopholes and stakeholder management by analyzing standardizers' concerns with flexibility and engagement.

Euphemistic sustainability

During a week of participant observation at an organization that develops sustainability standards, I was standing in line at the upstairs coffee machine when I heard two people talking about their organization's changing relationship with the public sector, on one hand, and the private sector, on the other. They had just learned in a team meeting that their access to one particularly important stream of public funding was drying up, and Simon, one of the speakers on whom I was eavesdropping, felt as if he had been "stabbed in the back". Later that day, I went over to his desk and introduced myself, admitting that I had overheard part of his conversation that morning and asking if he'd care to elaborate. I told him I was there to study the role of sustainability standards in the governance of global tea supply chains, only to learn that he was one of the people in his organization tasked with promoting the standard to tea producers and retailers. Most of the people he interacts with are procurement and sustainability managers in large, typically multinational corporations. I asked how companies express their concerns about new standards, and he responded by describing a consultative process where corporations are clearly the most influential actors. Big companies like Unilever and Tata Global Beverages, he said, "tend to see [standards development organizations] too much as a service provider rather than a sustainability partner," and they treat them as such. Corporations become clients that sustainability organizations have to appease in order to stay afloat, especially in the increasingly competitive market for sustainability standards (see Reinecke et al., 2012). As an example of how this dynamic plays out, he told me that companies had opposed the suggestion that future versions of the standard include provisions on pesticide use, arguing that although the geophysical characteristics of some places (like Kenya) afford farming with relatively low pesticide use, other places (like India and China) have to deal with more pests, and they need to use pesticides in order to maximize output and efficiency. "As soon as it touches their bottom lines, then it gets trickier." Although smaller companies might push for more progressive revisions, such as high premiums for certified products that go straight to the farmer rather than to local boards that control how these premiums are spent, bigger companies decide to "shut the door on that, then we can't really do it". Ultimately, he said, everyone needs to be more "flexible" and willing to "accommodate" different viewpoints.

The way corporations express their concerns is also interesting. Although company representatives participate actively in both public consultations and invited discussions, they often communicate through more informal channels, as well, emailing individual employees of sustainability organizations with their concerns and discussing them over the phone, or even over coffee or lunch if they happen to work in the same city or if they find themselves attending the same industry conference. Without looking at his phone or computer, Simon was able to rattle off the names and email addresses of a number of corporate contacts who might be willing to sit down with me for an interview, suggesting that his interaction with them is relatively frequent. These informal communication channels between corporate actors and sustainability professionals stand in stark contrast to the way producers are able to express their own grievances and concerns. A few days after I talked with Simon, I went to the building's cafeteria to get a coffee. A screen and projector had been set up, where an employee was just starting to give a presentation to a small group of visitors, who I later learned were cocoa farmers from Côte d'Ivoire. I got my coffee and left, but about an hour later, I saw the group heading out with the person who had been giving the presentation. In an interview that afternoon, I asked why the group had been here, to which my interlocutor, Martha, responded that "stakeholder engagement" was a normal part of the revision process, so producers could become acquainted with any significant changes to the standard before they have to be implemented. Similar to Roland in the previous section, however, Martha made it clear that the relationship between her colleague and the visiting farmers was not a relationship between equal stakeholders, but more like a teacher and students. The visitors were not being consulted, but were being informed; they were not being asked to contribute to the development of a revised sustainability standard, but told what would be expected of them once the standard was implemented.

Simon's claim that standards (and standardizers) have to flexible and Martha's description of a brief presentation as an example of stakeholder engagement are cases of what I call euphemistic sustainability, the use of words like "stakeholder engagement," "flexibility," and "accommodation" to refer to relationships that might be more honestly conceptualized as stakeholder management, loopholes, and capitulation. These "fuzzwords"—as Andrea Cornwall (2007a) has labeled popular words like participation, sustainability, gender, empowerment, and so on—rely on euphemism. In an extended analysis of the concept of gender wielded by development officials, she observes that:

> 'gender' gained salience within development when it began to take the shape of an acceptable euphemism that softened 'harder' talk about rights and power. In the process, its usage has become at times almost banal, leaving little scope for evoking either the outrage of injustice or indeed the entrenchment of inequity within the very workings of the development industry—let alone in the everyday lives of the people about whom development agencies profess to be concerned. (Cornwall, 2007b: 70)

The reduction of words from buzzwords to fuzzwords, she argues, is what allows the words to "comfortably [accommodate] so contradictory a range of potential agendas and outcomes" (Cornwall, 2007b: 70). The same can be said of words like stakeholder engagement, flexibility, adaptability, accommodation, and so on, words that are ubiquitous in the negotiations surrounding NSMD governance systems like sustainability standards, and words that help obscure the increasingly unequal power dynamics between different stakeholders by turning our attention toward "softer" questions of participation and inclusivity and thus away from the "harder" questions not only of power and rights, but of corruption, (neo) colonialism, etc. These euphemisms often accompany critiques of the standards development process. In many interviews, they followed admissions that companies have outsize influence, or that the executives of large standards organizations often have close ties to the private sector executives whose organizations they are meant to be regulating, or that standards developers themselves have to adopt the logic of these companies in order to stay relevant in an increasingly competitive standards market. By offering these diagnoses and then immediately reframing them as instances of "being flexible" or "engaging stakeholders" or "adapting" to the demands of the market, euphemistic sustainability blunts an otherwise quite sharp, and quite emic, critique of the standards development process, including an otherwise quite frank account of its reliance on, and perpetuation of, unequal power relations.

This kind of euphemistic sustainability also hides sustainability professionals' sometimes paternalistic view of the people they are interested in helping. The belief among many development agents that the beneficiaries of their programs are backwards, lazy, and ignorant is not a recent observation (see, e.g., Blaikie, 1985), and has even been suggested as constitutive of developmentalist expertise and power (Hobart, 1993). Thus, while it is not surprising that my interlocutors often believe they know better than producers how to improve the latter's lives and livelihoods, it is nevertheless disconcerting when this belief intersects with their conviction that the invisible hand of "the market," embodied in the profit motive of corporate actors, can lead to the kinds of social and environmental impacts they hope to generate. Euphemistic sustainability helps keep people turned away from the political consequences of NSMD governance systems; it helps make those effects appear inadvertent, even as it remains an implicit goal.

Conclusion

At one point during our conversation, Roland observed that producers in Europe were subjected to a different set of standards than producers in the Global South. In places like Denmark and Germany, he said, farmers are able to plant crops right up to the edge of nearby rivers, but many sustainability standards prevent farmers in the Global South from planting vegetables, even for household use, in these same riparian zones. Reflecting on this, he noted that "the colonial times are not over, in that way." Southern producers "don't think we respect them in the same way. And I could feel that during the meetings, that we had to be very careful that what we were doing should not be the second step of colonialism, that we were just making requirements for them." This struck me as a surprisingly frank assessment of the relationship between standardizers and the producers their standards seek to govern. But Roland immediately followed this up by saying, "They should understand that [certification] is beneficial for them." For Roland, and for many of the other people I have interviewed and observed who are involved in the development and promotion of sustainable agriculture standards, the goal of stakeholder engagement when those stakeholders are marginalized farmers is to teach farmers what's good for them, to convince them to adopt standards that were designed with only a superficial consideration of their concerns and experiences in a process that values the interests of corporations above everyone else, including scientific experts, development consultants, and, of course, farmers. When they engage corporations as stakeholders, however, it is less about convincing them to adopt standards or demonstrating the benefits of certification, but to define the contours of neoliberal sustainability, to stake out the limits of what can (and cannot) be done.

In this article, I have sought to show how the constellations that emerge as a result of these schemes' ubiquity are not authorless and how the changes in governance that are associated with these constellations are not unintentional, by studying their authors and learning about their intentions. I showed how they believe corporations and private sector-adjacent organizations are better equipped to solve sustainability problems (problems they also believe they are better equipped to define, two beliefs that are of course related). In light of these beliefs, it makes sense that they also believe that corporations and international organizations should be endowed with the power to lead efforts to devise and implement those solutions, and it makes sense that they would work to create a world where those power relations exist. The claim that the empowerment of multinational corporations and well-funded sustainability organizations is an unintentional side effect or a consequence of authorless constellations of power and control becomes untenable when we view these constellations from the perspective of their authors, who express their intentions rather clearly.

Political ecology is concerned with the way differences in power determine differences in access to (and control over) not only natural resources, but also social and economic resources, and vice versa. As sustainability standards and other technologies of neoliberal sustainability governance continue to tilt the balance of power even further in favor of private interests, it is important to consider whether these shifting power relations are really an unanticipated and inadvertent side effect, or if these systems were designed to precipitate those shifts from the outset. Conceptually, this means distinguishing more clearly between different scales of analysis, that is, between the individuals who design and promote sustainability standards; the organizations they work for, with, and against; and the systems of production, exchange, and governance in which these individuals and organizations are embedded. Put differently, it means distinguishing between the seeming inevitability of certain kinds of programs to lead to certain kinds of outcomes, on one hand, and the extent to which the people responsible for designing, promoting, implementing, enforcing, and evaluating those programs anticipate those outcomes and intend for them to manifest. On a methodological level, this means political ecologists and scholars working in cognate fields need to engage more explicitly and more systematically with interlocutors working in these kinds of organizations (corporations, development banks, environmental NGOs, etc.), who spend their working lives developing the sustainability programs that target the groups who political ecologists have typically studied. Of course, political ecology—"an ecumenical home for those interested in and concerned about how politics, economics, culture and ecology come together often in unjust ways as well as how best to fight such perceived injustice" (Bryant, 2015: 20)—is exceedingly well-positioned to adapt.

Highlights

- Interviews with people responsible for designing, promoting, and enforcing sustainability standards reveal that unequal power relations between corporations and farmers are not necessarily unintentional.
- Standardizers use euphemistic language to obfuscate the political consequences of standardization without negating them.
- Political ecologists should give the same ethnographic attention to private sector and private sector-adjacent actors in order to understand their intentions vis-à-vis sustainability programs.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Sayd Randle, Martin Skrydstrup, and Hannah Elliott for helpful comments on previous versions of the article, and to Rosemary Collard and two anonymous reviewers for constructive feedback on earlier drafts. Research for this article was conducted as part of the SUSTEIN research project at Copenhagen Business School.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Research for this article was funded by the Danish Independent Research Fund (Grant Number 7023-00115AB).

ORCID iD

Matthew Archer https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1510-414X

References

Archer M (2020) Stakes and stakeholders in the climate Casino. *GeoHumanities* 6(1): 171–187.

Archer M (in press) Imagining impact in global supply chains: Data-driven sustainability and the production of surveillable space. *Surveillance and Society*.

Besky S (2014) *The Darjeeling Distinction: Labor and Justice on Fair-trade Tea Plantations in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Blackman A and Rivera J (2011) Producer-level benefits of sustainability certification. *Conservation Biology* 25(6): 1176–1185.

Blaikie P (1985) *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries*. London: Longman.

Brunsson N and Jacobsson B (2010) *A World of Standards*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Bryant RL (ed.) (2015) *The International Handbook of Political Ecology*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Cashore B (2002) Legitimacy and the privatization of environmental governance: How non-state market-driven (NSMD) governance systems gain rule-making authority. *Governance: An international journal of policy, administration, and institutions* 15; 4: 503–529.

Claus CA (2020) *Drawing the Sea Near: Satoumi and Coral Reef Conservation in Okinawa*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Cornwall A (2007a) Buzzwords and fuzzwords: Deconstructing development discourse. *Development in Practice* 17(4–5): 471–484.

Cornwall A (2007b) Revisiting the 'gender agenda'. *IDS Bulletin* 38(2): 69–78.

Crow B and Carney J (2013) Commercializing nature: Mangrove conservation and female oyster collectors in the Gambia. *Antipode* 45(2): 275–293.

Dallas MP, Ponte S and Sturgeon TJ (2019) Power in global value chains. *Review of International Political Economy* 26(4): 666–694.

De Bakker FGA, Rasche A and Ponte S (2019) Multi-stakeholder initiatives on sustainability: A cross-disciplinary review and research agenda for business ethics. *Business Ethics Quarterly* 29(3): 343–383.

Delabre I and Okereke C (2020) Palm oil, power, and participation: The political ecology of social impact assessment. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 3(3): 642–662.

De Zwart F (2015) Unintended but not unanticipated consequences. *Theory and Society* 44(3): 283–297.

Dolan C and Humphrey J (2004) Changing governance patterns in the trade in fresh vegetables between Africa and the United Kingdom. *Environment and planning A* 36(3): 491–509.

Eren A (2017) The political ecology of uncertainty: The production of truth by juridical practices in hydropower development. *Journal of Political Ecology* 24(1): 386–405.

Escobar A (1995) *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the third world*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ferguson J (1994) *The anti-politics machine: "Development," depoliticization, and bureaucratic power in Lesotho*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Fortin E (2013) Transnational multi-stakeholder sustainability standards and biofuels: understanding standards processes. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 40(3): 563–587.

Fouilleux E (2012) Sustainable voluntary standards: Towards privatized regulation in the food and farm sector. In: *Development, the environment, and food: Towards agricultural change*. Delhi: TERI Press; pp. 215–225.

Fouilleux E and Loconto A (2017) Voluntary standards, certification, and accreditation in the global organic agriculture field: A tripartite model of techno-politics. *Agriculture and Human Values* 34(1): 1–14.

Freidberg S (2003) Cleaning up down South: Supermarkets, ethical trade and African horticulture. *Social & Cultural Geography* 4(1): 27–43.

Freidberg S (2017) Trading in the secretive commodity. *Economy and Society* 46(3–4): 499–521.

French M (2014) Gaps in the gaze: Informatic practice and the work of public health surveillance. *Surveillance & Society* 12(2): 226–242.
Hobart M (ed.) (1993) *An Anthropological Critique of Development: The Growth of Ignorance*. London: Routledge.
Hornborg A (1998) Towards an ecological theory of unequal exchange: Articulating world system theory and ecological economics. *Ecological Economics* 25(1): 127–136.
Jaffee D and Howard PH (2010) Corporate cooptation of organic and fair trade standards. *Agriculture and Human Values* 27(4): 387–399.
Keeley J and Blackmore E (2012) *Pro-poor Certification: Assessing the Benefits of Sustainability Certification for Small-scale Farmers in Asia. IIED Natural Resource Issues, no. 25*. London: IIED.
Kill J (2016) The role of voluntary certification in maintaining the ecologically unequal exchange of wood pulp: The Forest Stewardship Council's certification of industrial tree plantations in Brazil. *Journal of Political Ecology* 23(1): 434–445.
Köhne M (2014) Multi-stakeholder initiative governance as assemblage: Roundtable on sustainable palm oil as a political resource in land conflicts related to oil palm plantations. *Agriculture and Human Values* 31(3): 469–480.
Langford NJ (2019) The governance of social standards in emerging markets: An exploration of actors and interests shaping Trustea as a Southern multi-stakeholder initiative. *Geoforum* 104: 81–91.
Li TM (2007) *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Loconto A and Busch L (2010) Standards, techno-economic networks, and playing fields: Performing the global market economy. *Review of International Political Economy* 17(3): 507–536.
McGoey L (2012) Strategic unknowns: Towards a sociology of ignorance. *Economy and Society* 41(1): 1–16.
Nader L (1972) Up the anthropologist: Perspectives gained from studying up. *ERIC*.
Naylor L (2019) *Fair Trade Rebels: Coffee Production and Struggles for Autonomy in Chiapas*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Nkrumah K (1965) *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons.
Oya C, Schaefer F and Skalidou D (2018) The effectiveness of agricultural certification in developing countries: A systematic review. *World Development* 112: 282–312.
Paulson S, Gezon LL and Watts M (2003) Locating the political in political ecology: An introduction. *Human Organization* 62(3): 205–217.
Ponte S (2019) *Business, Power and Sustainability in a World of Global Value Chains*. London: Zed Books Ltd.
Ponte S, Gibbon P and Vestergaard J (2010) *Governing through Standards: Origins, Drivers and Limitations*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
Porter TM (1995) *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Reinecke J, Manning S and Von Hagen O (2012) The emergence of a standards market: Multiplicity of sustainability standards in the global coffee industry. *Organization studies* 33(5-6): 791–814.
Riisgaard L and Okinda O (2018) Changing labour power on smallholder tea farms in Kenya. *Competition & Change* 22(1): 41–62.
Scott JC (1998) *Seeing Bike a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Sen D (2017) *Everyday Sustainability: Gender Justice and Fair Trade Tea in Darjeeling*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
Souleles D (2018) How to study people who do not want to be studied: Practical reflections on studying up. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 41(S1): 51–68.
Svarstad H, Benjaminsen TA and Overå R (2018) Power theories in political ecology. *Journal of Political Ecology* 25: 350–363.

Sylla N (2014) *The Fair Trade Scandal: Marketing Poverty to Benefit the Rich*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

Van der Ven H, Rothacker C and Cashore B (2018) Do eco-labels prevent deforestation? Lessons from non-state market driven governance in the soy, palm oil, and cocoa sectors. *Global Environmental Change* 52: 141–151.

Waarts Y, Ge L, Ton G, et al. (2012) *Sustainable tea production in Kenya: Impact assessment of Rainforest Alliance and Farmer Field School training*. *LEI report 2012-043*. The Hague: LEI Wageningen UR.

Zeng L, Chatti D, Hebdon C, et al. (2016) The political ecology of knowledge and ignorance. *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 23: 159.

Zeyen A, Beckmann M and Wolters S (2016) Actor and institutional dynamics in the development of multi-stakeholder initiatives. *Journal of Business Ethics* 135(2): 341–360.