

Are multi-stakeholder initiatives for sustainable agriculture really as inclusive as they claim?

Policy Brief by Lone Riisgaardⁱ, February 2016

A number of multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) and commodity roundtables have been created since the 1990s to respond to the growing criticism of agriculture's social and environmental impacts. Driven by global-scale private actors, these initiatives are setting global standards for sustainable agricultural practices. MSIs base their legitimacy on a claim of balanced representation of, and participation by, all categories of stakeholders. Recent research however cautions, that for several reasons we have to be critical of the optimism surrounding MSIs.

A special issue of the journal "Agriculture and Human Values" ⁱⁱ edited by Emmanuelle Cheyns and Lone Riisgaard discuss state of the art knowledge related to the main paradoxes of MSIs - namely their willingness to be "inclusive" while at the same time having exclusionary effects. The exclusionary effects are due in part to interactions with existing political economic contexts and embedded power inequalities, as well as more subtle manifestations of power linked to the favoring of some forms of knowledge and engagement over others. In this policy brief we outline the main paradoxes identified and discuss their policy implications.

Governing through voluntary private standards—rather than through public regulation alone—has emerged as the dominant form of regulation in the early twenty first century. This has had wide-ranging consequences for the actors affected by this regulation. At the same time, private standard-making is being reshaped by the rise of transnational multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs), which are increasingly being seen as the most legitimate private rule-makers.

Particularly in the field of agricultural sustainability, MSIs—including commodity roundtables— have proliferated since the 1990s in response to growing criticism directed at the negative environmental and social impacts of large-scale agriculture. Based on a rationale which focuses on government failures to address these issues, particularly in the Global South, NGOs and other organizations have encouraged companies to participate in private multi-stakeholder schemes to set global sustainability standards, monitor compliance, and certify "good" agricultural practices for a variety of commodities such as coffee, palm oil, soy, biofuels, sugar cane, cotton, flowers, aquaculture, and beef.

MSIs are also a response to growing criticism of the non-inclusive nature of most previous private sustainability standards.ⁱⁱⁱ This criticism has been directed at the exclusionary effects of agricultural sustainability standards on producers in the Global South and on marginalized actors, especially smallholders and workers. Many standards initiatives have begun to recognize exclusion as a problem and now seek to make their standards more inclusive at the levels of standard-setting, certification, and auditing. This has resulted in a virtual explosion of MSIs. To date, however, little research has been conducted on how effective MSIs have been in remedying exclusion.

The special issue of Agriculture and Human Values on which this policy brief is based therefore addressed two key research questions:^{iv}

- 1) do MSIs decrease or reinforce existing power inequalities and exclusion mechanisms at the local level?
- 2) What vision of sustainability is supported by MSIs and which are excluded?

It is important to note, that the special issue looked at inclusion and exclusion effects of MSIs, not at MSI achievements related to scaling up the reach of sustainability regulation, their ability to regulate otherwise unregulated areas nor did it compare their inclusion/exclusion effects to those of unilateral business standards. Given these caveats, the special issue demonstrates clearly that there are good reasons to be critical of the optimism surrounding MSIs which are most often seen as the most important alternative to corporate self-regulation through codes of conduct and to the perceived lack of regulatory capacities of governments.

There are three main reasons behind this argument:

1. MSIs are not independent of national and local contexts. On the contrary, MSIs and their standards interact with the local political and economic contexts and are often “seized” by powerful actors embedded in hierarchical local power structures. The result is often a reinforcement of existing local power inequalities.

This is illustrated clearly in the study by Köhne (2014)^v which shows that in the case of the roundtable on sustainable palm oil (RSPO), land conflicts are eventually solved only if more powerful players help rural communities strengthen their bargaining position. To gain access to the RSPO in matters of land conflicts, local communities have to team up with local NGOs. The local NGOs, in turn, team up with international NGOs who, if they are able to, link local cases to international concerns or company brand images to gain bargaining power, which can be employed in the specific local land conflict. However, as noted by Köhne, there are an estimated 600 palm-oil-related land conflicts in Indonesia. Only very few of these are likely to successfully rely on this process. Thus local power inequalities and access to resources are very influential in determining the possibilities different stakeholders have for enacting the rules created by the RSPO.

2. Even in supposedly inclusive and balanced forms of regulation such as MSIs, traditional categories of power linked to economic resources and actor strategies are still at play and thus MSIs do not always achieve their deliberative democratic ideal. The supposedly technical and apolitical consensus reached often conceals asymmetries of power and structural inequalities, and exposes disadvantaged groups to greater manipulation and control.

Selfa et al. (2014)^{vi} for example illustrate how the Bonsucro standard for sustainable sugarcane engages in Colombia with deeply entrenched historical patterns of inequitable land ownership. Their analysis reveals how public policy in Colombia strengthens the ability of large-scale sugarcane producers to intensify and extend their control over land and water resources in order to benefit from biofuel development. Large-scale sugar mills and processors are turning to Bonsucro certification to increase their control while providing assurances that their actions are socially and environmentally responsible. By attempting to be apolitical and neutral, with a strict legalistic and scientific focus, Bonsucro actually exacerbates the existing unequal access to land in Colombia precisely because it does not address issues of inequality.

3. In MSIs, the exercise of power also operates in less visible ways by favoring some forms of knowledge and modes of engagement over others. As a result, forms of engagement and knowledge favored by more marginalized actors are sidelined. This exclusion relates to alternative discourses, for example, by promoting private regulation rather than mandatory regulation. It also relates to the exclusion of some definitions of sustainability by promoting intensification of production rather than alternative models of production. Finally, it relates to the exclusion of some issues, for example, by standards addressing the health and safety of workers or the improvement of yields rather than claims around solidarity aiming at a greater equality in access to resources or the independence of small farmers.

Thus far we have illustrated how MSIs often serve to reinforce existing power inequalities and how the reduction of perspectives in MSIs exclude alternative perceptions. In the face of these limitations of MSIs, scholars have suggested alternative but complementary approaches. Such approaches – outlined below – could form the basis of alternative policies and support by actors such as donors, governments, NGOs and businesses.

Since MSIs reproduce existing structural inequalities, approaches which create counter-hegemonic power could be encouraged. Several paths have been suggested, such as advocating for coalitions outside the MSIs (for example, international coalitions of smallholders or trade unions, alternative standards or NGO campaigns); advocating for multi-scale alliances with powerful players (for example marginalised small producers allying with international NGOs) both in and outside MSIs; or advocating for stricter mandatory laws by governments.

Another proposal for improving the MSI format is by acknowledging that MSIs are political, by highlighting the interests that are at stake, and by taking steps to address the power inequalities. In this approach the problems of vulnerability or inequalities are not eliminated; however they are brought to center stage.^{vii} Other scholars have advocated for more vigorous and genuine forms of debate and cooperation and for forms which open up to people affected in their real lives.^{viii} Cheyns (2014)^{ix} for example shows the crucial role that some local Indonesian NGOs play in favoring and accommodating the voices of rural communities in the RSPO, by being close to them and by restoring their dignity through a work of solicitude and care. This was crucial to prepare affected people for public speaking in the context of the RSPO.

Scholars have also highlighted the possibility for marginalized groups to move outside MSIs, to find forums where it is possible to participate through other modes of engagement, for example where participants share the same concerns and address a common cause around issues of inequality and injustice. This is the case of international groups of smallholders or trade unions or solidarity–economy approaches, challenging the terms of trade and aimed at transforming the livelihoods (and value-chain positions) of smallholders and workers.^x

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ⁱⁱ This policy brief is based on a special issue of *Agriculture and Human Values* called 'The exercise of power through multi-stakeholder initiatives for sustainable agriculture and its inclusion and exclusion outcomes' edited by Cheyns, E & Riisgaard, L (2014) *Agriculture and Human Values*, vol 31, nr. 3, 31(3), Particularly the Introduction to the symposium'. By Cheyns, E & Riisgaard, L pp. 409-423. Other contributions to the special issue include:

"Marking the success or end of global multi-stakeholder governance? The rise of national sustainability standards in Indonesia and Brazil for palm oil and soy" by Otto Hospes

"Making "minority voices" heard in transnational roundtables: the role of local NGOs in reintroducing justice and attachments" by Emmanuelle Cheyns

"Depoliticizing land and water "grabs" in Colombia: the limits of Bonsucro certification for enhancing sustainable biofuel practices" by Theresa Selfa, Carmen Bain, Renata Moreno

"Multi-stakeholder initiative governance as assemblage: Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil as a political resource in land conflicts related to oil palm plantations" by Michiel Köhne

"Battlefields of ideas: changing narratives and power dynamics in private standards in global agricultural value chains" by Valerie Nelson, Anne Tallontire

“Fairtrade, certification, and labor: global and local tensions in improving conditions for agricultural workers” by Laura T. Raynolds

“Governance in the age of global markets: challenges, limits, and consequences” by Lawrence Busch

ⁱⁱⁱ See e.g. Gibbon, P., and E. Lazaro. 2010. Global agro-food standards and Africa: An introduction. In *Global trade and agro-food standards: challenges for Africa*, ed. P. Gibbon, E. Lazaro, and S. Ponte. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan. Or Ponte, S., P. Gibbon, and J. Vestergaard (eds.). 2011. *Governing through standards: Origins, drivers and limitations*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

^{iv} The insights related in the special issue were based on original research on the following MSIs: the roundtable on sustainable palm oil (RSPO), the roundtables on sustainable soy (RTRS), the Bonsucro (sugarcane sustainability standard), Fairtrade labelling organisations international, the Flower label program (FLP), Good agricultural practice (GAP), the Horticultural ethical business initiative (HEBI), Milieu programma sierteelt (MPS), and the Ethical trading initiative (ETI).

^v Michiel Köhne (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

^{vi} Theresa Selfa, Carmen Bain, Renata Moreno (2014). Depoliticizing land and water “grabs” in Colombia: the limits of Bonsucro certification for enhancing sustainable biofuel practices. *Agriculture and Human Values* 31 (3)

^{vii} see e.g. Fraser, N. 1990. Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text* 25(26): 56–80. Or Edmunds, D.D., and E.E. Wollenberg. 2001. A strategic approach to multi-stakeholder negotiations. *Development and Change* 32: 231–253.

^{viii} See e.g. Bühler, U. 2002. Participation “with justice and dignity”: Beyond the “new tyranny. *Peace, Conflict and Development* 1: 1–16. Or Thévenot, L. 2014. Making commonality in the plural, on the basis of binding engagements. In *Social bonds as freedom: Revising the dichotomy of the universal and the particular*, ed. P. Dumouchel, and R. Gotoh. New York: Berghahn.

^{ix} Emmanuelle Cheyns (2014). Making “minority voices” heard in transnational roundtables: the role of local NGOs in reintroducing justice and attachments. *Agriculture and Human Values* 31 (3)

^x See e.g. Valerie Nelson, Anne Tallontire (2014). Battlefields of ideas: changing narratives and power dynamics in private standards in global agricultural value chains. *Agriculture and Human Values* 31 (3)