

'Beyond the chain': landscape approaches to sustainability in the coffee sector

Neilson Jeffrey¹ (jeffrey.neilson@sydney.edu.au), Bienabe Estelle², Tran Thi Minh Ngoc³

¹ University of Sydney, Darlington, NSW, Australia ; ² CIRAD, Montpellier, France ; ³ World Agroforestry Research Centre, Hanoi, Vietnam

Rationale:

Livelihoods and environments in coffee-producing regions are increasingly affected by various modes of social and environmental governance enacted by large coffee companies along global value chains (Grabs, 2020). It is therefore important to understand the shifting sustainability strategies of leading coffee firms (Ponte, 2019). For the last two decades, such governance was dominated by third-party sustainability standards, whereby individual farms within particular supply chains were audited for their compliance to farm-level standards (Dietz et al., 2021). There are, however, indications that new mechanisms may be emerging that extend "beyond the chain" to operate at landscape scales.

Methods:

This research commenced with a content analysis of publicly available documents and reports from the top ten global coffee roasters. The primary material consisted of annual reviews, corporate sustainability reports, corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports, environmental and supply chain policy documents, primary websites, and media releases. 90 documents were selected for analysis, and reviewed for specific initiatives, sustainability themes, and governance mechanisms. This content analysis was then complemented with initial field observations and stakeholder interviews in Vietnam.

Results:

Corporate sustainability strategies are exerting a powerful influence well beyond their immediate supply chains. Our analysis resulted in a five-fold typology of corporate governance mechanisms for sustainability: i) direct action by lead firms; ii) empowerment of traders as agents of change; iii) use of supply chain standards; iv) engagement with development agencies and NGOs; and v) public-private partnerships. Our findings provide evidence for the heightened engagement by lead firms beyond the chain and into the broader production landscape.

Conclusions & Perspectives:

We are seeing lead firms attempt to address sustainability-related challenges by trying to tackle problems of inequality, environmental degradation, and community improvement (e.g. through healthcare and educational initiatives). Mechanisms that involve more wide-ranging engagement with producing landscapes, and enrolling multiple actors within those landscapes, are on the ascendancy, thus contributing to a phenomenon of commodity-centric landscape governance. While this development suggests a heightened lead firm influence over livelihoods and environments in coffee-producing regions, the implications and effectiveness of this development require further research.

References:

1. Dietz T, Grabs J, & Chong AE (2021). Mainstreamed voluntary sustainability standards and their effectiveness: Evidence from the Honduran coffee sector. *Regulation & Governance*, 15(2): 333-355.
2. Grabs J (2020). Assessing the institutionalization of private sustainability governance in a changing coffee sector. *Regulation & Governance*, 14(2): 362-387.
3. Ponte S (2019). *Business, power and sustainability in a world of global value chains*. London: Zed Books.