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# MOVING FORWARD ON THE POINT OF VOLUNTARY SUSTAINABILITY CERTIFICATIONS

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AN INVITED RESPONSE TO Bennett, E. A. 2021. Voluntary Sustainability Certifications: What is the Point? *Global Justice and Human Rights Journal Review* 1(4), 18-23.

## ABSTRACT

In her review, Bennett asks ‘what is the point’ of voluntary sustainability standards, if it is not to improve sustainability on the ground. While my book’s problem-solving approach did not yield itself to answering this question, I introduce some recent answers to this question that is currently discussed in a vibrant academic debate. In addition, I defend the usefulness of voluntary simplicity as a way forward and suggest two additional future research streams that may help to tackle systemic sustainability problems in global commodity trade.

IN ADDITION TO eloquently and generously summarizing the contributions of my book “Selling Sustainability Short? The Private Governance of Labor and the Environment in the Coffee Sector”, for which I would like to thank her, Bennett makes two critical interventions that I would like to respond to.

First, she argues that one of the potential ways forward that I sketch out in my conclusion – voluntary simplicity, or getting consumers to

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purchase less coffee of higher quality at a greater price – is unlikely to be an effective solution toward improving the sustainability of commodity production. I agree with her point insofar that voluntary simplicity alone cannot be the answer. Yet, I would still argue that the two subcomponents that voluntary simplicity implies—namely lower per-capita volume demand and higher per-unit willingness to pay—need to be crucial components of solutions moving forward, not just in coffee but in many other consumption goods as well.

Consumers in the Global North have a disproportionately high ecological footprint, much of which is linked to the products they consume (and often import) (Delabre et al., 2021; Hoang & Kanemoto, 2021). Even in the absence of sustainability standards, lower aggregate demand would decrease the pressure on global agricultural productivity and/or area expansion for coffee as well as other commodities. On the flipside, rebound effects—where the increased sustainability of products incentivizes higher consumption rates—can decimate potential sustainability gains from changed production methods (Saey-Volckrick, 2020).

In addition, increasing global prices for commodities produced by smallholder farmers and marginalized communities is a *sine qua non* to achieve living and prosperous incomes. Consumer goods manufacturers often make the argument that many consumers are highly price-sensitive to changes in daily consumption goods, and that therefore manufacturers are unable to raise prices at the retail end. Surely, one needed step towards systemic transformation is therefore changing the perception of consumers what the true—or fair—price for agricultural products should be. The fact that this aim has been a founding motivation behind the Fairtrade movement, which kickstarted the subsequent development of competing certifications, should not detract from its importance.

On the other hand, Bennett is right in pointing to the need to scaffold such behavioral changes—and campaigns to incentivize them—with rules or guidelines to ensure that the purchased coffee contributes to the prosperity of the farmers who grew it and the natural environment surrounding it. Recent movements, such as Direct Trade coffee, that

have sought to distance themselves from bureaucratic certification schemes have encountered similar challenges. As MacGregor et al. (2017) find, Direct Trade companies in the United States ended up distancing themselves from the ‘direct trade’ term due to co-optation. Meanwhile, companies in Scandinavia created new private standards to institutionalize ‘direct trade’ in a move that mimics the institutionalization of sustainability certification. Thus, it is true that the balance between trust, regulatory rigor, and user friendliness of the alternative marketing system is a challenge that unites old and new systems operating within a predominantly neoliberal global commodity system. Nonetheless, adjusting demand-side expectations of reasonable rates of consumption and prices to be paid can only contribute toward improved socio-economic and environmental outcomes on the ground.

In Bennett’s second critical intervention, she suggests that my results show that attaining sustainability may not be the point of voluntary sustainability certifications. Yet, she notes that “*Selling Sustainability Short* does not explicitly answer [the] question” of what the point is instead. I agree with that assessment. The reason my book stops where it does is, in part, its philosophical and ontological approach. I explicitly take a problem-solving approach, which assesses institutions’ problem-solving potential and goal attainment as defined—as closely as possible—by stated or explicit institutional goals (Bernauer, 1995; Young, 2011). This starting point shaped the book’s research approach, organization, and results. However, other ontological approaches and more critical perspectives have existed in this debate for a long time, as I show alongside my co-authors in the piece “Private regulation, public policy, and the perils of adverse ontological selection” (Grabs et al., 2020). In that piece, we argue that it is essential to take into account a wide variety of academic perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of what voluntary sustainability certifications can or cannot do.

Indeed, Bennett’s question, ‘if not sustainability, then what is the point’ of certification schemes is increasingly in the focus of the academic debate. A recent panel at the International Studies Association, which I co-organized together with Benjamin Cashore, asked this exact question and hosted scholars that used a variety of metaphors and

analytical frameworks. Inter alia, scholars have argued that private governance may be viewed as a myth (showing a disconnect between what these systems have achieved, or might be reasonably expected to achieve, and prevailing practitioner and scholarly expectations) (Dietz et al., 2021; cf. Boiral & Gendron, 2011; Delabre et al., 2020), a zombie idea (an unsuccessful policy which refuses to die) (Peters & Nagel, 2020), or an empty or decoy institution deliberately designed not to deliver (Dimitrov, 2020, 2021). Others have suggested that voluntary sustainability certifications suffer from a panacea mindset approach (being seen as a simple formulaic policy prescription believed to solve a given problem in a wide range of contexts, regardless of their actual consequences) (Akporiaye & Webster, 2021; Young et al., 2018) or a good governance norm complex, where simultaneous, but conflicting beliefs (e.g. in the importance of procedural norms and substantive outcomes) lead to paradoxes and prevent effective problem-solving (Cashore et al., 2021; Cashore & Nathan, 2020). These ideas are vibrantly discussed in an academic debate that will continue over years to come. Still, I believe it is important to have answered the first question—do these schemes do what they set out to do?—in order to be able to ask the question—if not, then why do they stay?

In addition to the growing critical debate on what the point of certification systems is, I foresee two other future research areas that will continue to hold importance in the voluntary sustainability governance field. One, I believe it is still important to rigorously evaluate the advances and impacts of alternative private and public-private governance strategies that follow in certifications' footsteps, ranging from jurisdictional approaches to direct trade or profit sharing along the value chain. This is important not only to identify potential innovations, but also to provide a credible evidence base to support or disprove assertions that self-regulation or voluntary action is sufficient to tackle complex sustainability problems.

Another research area, which in recent years has received relatively little attention, is a more fundamentally normative approach to the question on how global commodity production should be organized, and—irrespective of current political feasibility—to what extent states and international organizations should be called upon to reverse the

neoliberal and free trade dynamics that have characterized commodity markets since the International Commodity Agreements collapsed at the end of the Cold War. If, as we increasingly find, private and voluntary initiatives are little more than band-aid solutions that are unable to tackle systemic problems, then why not design new systemic blueprints? For instance, given the systemic nature of commodity boom and bust cycles and resulting price troughs in free markets, why not rethink how to make global supply management more effective and equitable than in past iterations?

Each of these three research streams— identifying the political and sociological reasons why certification schemes persist despite their failures; rigorously assessing the implementation and effects of new initiatives; and designing new blueprints for global production and consumption—will necessarily rely on different ontological approaches, methods, and individual scholars. I look forward to continuing to work within the growing interdisciplinary academic community studying private, public, and hybrid sustainability governance to tackle these questions.

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