THEMATIC REVIEW

Producer Inclusion in Voluntary Sustainability Standard Governance

December 2023

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IISD's SSI Thematic Review: Producer Inclusion in Voluntary Sustainability Standard Governance

December 2023

Written by Sara Elder

All photos taken in Uganda by Nasawali Phame as part of the Sustainable Rice Platform

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Huong Ngo, Co-Founder of VietFarm, Center for Development and Integration

Hermogene Nsengimana, Secretary General, African Organization for Standardization

Trustea

Executive Summary

Sustainable development in agriculture hinges upon appropriate engagement with and the support of producers. Studies tell us that producer inclusion in voluntary sustainability standard-setting organizations (VSSSOs) typically occurs much less—and less robustly—than is possible. Yet producer inclusion is critical for progress toward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, generates benefits for producers, and maintains the relevance and legitimacy of VSSSOs.

This report analyzes the current state of producer inclusion in voluntary sustainability standard (VSS) governance by looking at the governance systems criteria of six VSSSOs operating in the agricultural sector—African Organisation for Standardisation, Better Cotton, Fairtrade International, Rainforest Alliance, Trustea, and VietFarm.

The report aims to help VSSSOs identify how they can include a greater quantity and breadth of producers in their governance and enhance democratic processes available to producers contributing to their governance. It presents a framework for evaluating whether and how a VSSSO includes producers in its governance, an empirical description of how six VSSSOs include producers in their governance systems, and a set of recommendations for how VSSSOs can increase producer inclusion.

Some progress has already been made—half of the VSSSOs we reviewed reserve seats for producers on their board of directors/stakeholder council, and four out of six reserve seats for producers on their standards development committees. When producers have seats, they often also have votes but rarely veto power. All of the VSSSOs except one have grievance committees and grievance mechanisms, and they disclose their grievance policies. Half of the VSSSOs involve producers in monitoring and evaluation processes through self-assessment and reporting using digital tools. VSSSOs tend to be transparent with their decision-makers and policies.

More needs to be done to give producers seats, votes, and veto power on VSSSO governing bodies and to support subsidiary governance structures such as regional and subregional producer networks. There also remains a gap in the transparency of governing body decisions, as well as monitoring and evaluation policies and procedures to understand in detail how producers are involved in setting agendas and their agency over the data collected.

The following recommendations draw upon insights from our analysis of the literature, benchmarking, and interviews.

Give Producers Decision-Making Power in the Highest Governance Bodies:
VSSSOs should reserve seats for producers and design voting procedures to give producers decision-making power in their general assemblies (when applicable) and on their boards of directors/councils.

Support Producer-Led Networks: VSSSOs should support collective action and create opportunities for producer representation and coordinated producer participation by integrating producer-led networks in their governance structures.

Increase Transparency of Governance Decisions: VSSSOs should increase transparency in executive decisions by publishing summaries of meeting discussions and decisions, especially those that affect producers.

Provide Pre-Meeting Capacity-Building and Preparation Sessions for Producers: VSSSOs should support producer participation in VSS governance through training and preparation before governing body meetings to bring them up to speed and provide background on essential issues.

Ensure Producers Are Engaged in Standards' Consultation Processes: VSSSOs should ensure that standards' consultation processes are accessible and producers are nominated as experts in the standard-setting committee.

Give Producers a Seat and a Vote on Grievance Committees: VSSSOs should require that producers have a share of seats and votes on their grievance committees.

Publish Grievance Decisions: VSSSOs should increase the transparency of grievance decisions for accountability of the fair conduct of grievance processes and outcomes.

Give Producers Agency Over Their Data: VSSSOs should give producers a vote on what data to collect and access to that data.

Create Systems for Open Communication Between Producers and VSSSO representatives: VSSSOs should establish open avenues for communication between the VSSSO and producers where information flows in both directions to shape both goals and outcomes.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ARSO	African Organisation for Standardisation
ITC	International Trade Centre
NGO	non-governmental organization
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
VSS	voluntary sustainability standard
VSSSO	voluntary sustainability standard-setting organization

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Voluntary Sustainability Standard-Setting Organizations and Producer Inclusion

Voluntary sustainability standards (VSSs) are "standards specifying requirements that producers, traders, manufacturers, retailers, or service providers may be asked to meet, relating to a wide range of sustainability metrics" (United Nations [UN] Forum on Sustainability Standards, 2013). These metrics include respect for human rights, worker health and safety, and environmental impacts, among others. Voluntary sustainability standard-setting organizations (VSSSOs) develop, manage, monitor, and review VSSs. In this report, we examine VSSSOs operating in the agriculture sector specifically.

VSS-compliant products have gained significant market share in some agricultural commodities. Over a quarter of global cocoa production and more than a fifth of world coffee production is now VSS-compliant (Meier et al., 2020). As a result of this market penetration, VSSSOs have become players in influencing the governance of those global agricultural value chains—setting, monitoring, and verifying compliance with sustainability requirements for agricultural production and trade (Fuchs et al., 2011). In some cases, VSS compliance has become a de facto requirement for producers to access certain markets (Henson & Humphrey, 2010; Nabeshima, 2023), and businesses increasingly use VSSs to fulfill legal requirements for due diligence (UN Conference on Trade and Development, 2022).

VSSSOs typically have multistakeholder structures and processes that help maintain their legitimacy as non-state initiatives in global economic governance (Cashore, 2002; Schepers, 2010). Stakeholders can include retailers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), industry associations, producers, researchers, consumers, or others (van der Ven, 2022).

This report looks at whether and how VSSSOs include producers in their internal governance systems. We use the term producer to refer to farmers, farm workers, factory workers, and others who contribute physical labour (versus management or capital) to produce VSS-compliant products (see Bennett, 2017).

Studies tell us that producer inclusion typically occurs much less—and less robustly—than is possible. Past research suggests that producers generally lack influence in global VSSSO governance (Bennett, 2017; Cheyns, 2014; Renckens & Auld, 2019), though there is variation among them, with some VSSSOs being more inclusive than others (Raynolds et al., 2007). Previous studies have found that international VSSSO boards of directors tend to be composed of more business actors than producers (Bennett, 2017; Potts et al., 2014). Several studies show that VSSSOs can end up privileging stakeholders such as businesses, government aid agencies, and big corporations by giving them greater access to decision-making processes (Carmin et al., 2003) or by not creating structures to balance stakeholder power (Brown, 2008, p. 62).

Regional and national VSSSOs have emerged in the Global South, partly as a reaction to the general lack of voice

for local interests, including producers, in international sustainability standards (Bitzer & Marazzi, 2021). These standards take advantage of growing South–South trade and markets outside of Western buyer demands, giving producers an opportunity to market domestically and with neighbouring countries (Turley et al., 2022; Voora et al., 2023). Regional and national standards based in the South tend to emphasize farmer acceptance and provide a locally applicable and economically feasible alternative for producers compared to international standards (Schouten & Bitzer, 2015; Sun & van der Ven, 2020). The expected result is the greater inclusion of producers, especially smallholders (Hidayat et al., 2018; Higgins & Richards, 2019; Wijaya & Glasbergen, 2016), yet few studies have examined the degree of producer inclusion in regional and local standards bodies. Bitzer and Marazzi (2021) studied the case of Trustea, an Indian sustainability standard and verification system for the tea sector, and found that it faces many of the same challenges related to producer inclusion as international VSSSOs.

Existing research identifies several ways in which producer inclusion occurs or can happen, including through their representation in governance structures, balanced decision-making processes, and support for their participation in these processes (Bennett, 2017).

VSSSOs can create inclusive governance structures, including producers as representatives in their internal governance bodies, such as general assemblies and boards of directors. Producers are a heterogeneous group, and the degree of attention VSSSOs give to producer farm size, gender, and other intersections determines the extent of representation for these groups (Molenaar & Heuvels, 2020). Some VSSSOs have put measures in place to balance the voice of stakeholders based in the Global South and Global North on their stakeholder councils (e.g., the Forest Stewardship Council) (Dingwerth, 2008). Fairtrade International moved to 50% producer ownership in 2013, which means producers have a 50% say in decision making in the general assembly and the board of directors (Bennett, 2016). It is also important for VSSSOs to distinguish between the needs of producers in the Global North versus the Global South, interregional differences, smallholders versus big producers, farmers versus agricultural workers, and other potential compounding differences. These groups can often have conflicting interests, such as in the case of farmers versus workers (interview data).

Consultation practices matter—and so does whether producers have votes and veto power in decision-making. Types of engagement, knowledge, and communication practices can also determine the level of producer involvement in more subtle ways (Cheyns & Riisgaard, 2014). The extent to which standards are tailored to producers' conditions and local context also affects producer participation (Molenaar & Heuvels, 2020).

Producers, especially smallholder farmers, may not always be inclined or have the time to participate in VSS governance unless they feel their efforts are being compensated, whether financially or in terms of tangible results of their contributions (Molenaar & Heuvels, 2020). Producer representatives must be able to secure funding to attend meetings (Sexsmith & Potts, 2008), for example, and be sufficiently informed

to contribute to discussions with a full understanding of the implications of their decisions (Bitzer & Marazzi, 2021). Producers face limitations in time and resources and may elect to invest those in the viability of their farming operations. There are ways to try and offset these challenges; for example, Fairtrade International supports producers with financial resources and the training and organization of regional producer networks.

1.2 Why Producer Inclusion in VSSSOs Matters

Extant research suggests that producer inclusion is desirable for three key reasons: it underpins global economic justice and sustainable development, generates benefits for producers, and maintains the relevance and legitimacy of the VSSSO.

First, inclusion is a fundamental principle of sustainable development. The capacity for self-determination is a human right (UN, 1948) and a cornerstone of sustainable development (UN, 1992; von Moltke, 1995). Participatory governance across VSSSOs offers a path to help ensure that the "needs of present and future generations" are met by including those needs and interests within their decision-making, standard-setting, and implementation processes (UN, 1992).

Second, inclusion is a means to achieve sustainable development through generating benefits for producers. Sustainable development in agriculture hinges upon appropriate engagement and support of producers. The inclusion of producers is important for the democratic process and linked to addressing UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as poverty reduction (SDG 1), gender equality (SDG 5), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), justice and strong institutions (SDG 16), and multistakeholder partnerships (SDG 17) (Bennett, 2024).

Producer inclusion in governance can generate benefits for producers, including empowerment, skills development, and capacity building, and result in higher levels of commitment in implementation and greater producer satisfaction with policies and programs (Bain, 2010; also see Fischer, 2012). Bacon (2010) showed in his research that VSSs are more likely to benefit producers when producers have a voice in VSSSO governance. On the other hand, based on Brown (2008), Bennett (2017) argues that when producers are excluded from VSSSO governance, VSSSO policies are shaped by other groups to their own benefit, which may reduce benefits for producers.

It follows that the greater inclusion of producers may help VSSSOs achieve their stated missions to generate benefits for producers. The below excerpts are taken from the mission statements of the VSSs covered in this report:

- "Our mission is to help cotton communities survive and thrive…."
- "Our mission is to … empower producers to combat poverty, strengthen their position and take more control over their lives."
- "to … improve the lives of farmers"
- "for the benefit of farmers"
- "… a fair and competitive market, which both producers and consumers can equally benefit from"

Third, producer inclusion can help keep VSSSOs relevant. Involving those with knowledge closer to the issue at hand (Fischer, 2012) can strengthen VSSSOs' capacity to promote sustainable agriculture through practices that are relevant to farmers' context, priorities, and needs (Wong, 2012). In some cases, producers may advocate for more lenient standards to accommodate various implementation challenges (van der Ven, 2022); this dialogue is critical to arriving at standards that encourage more sustainable agricultural production while still being achievable. While VSSSOs used to demonstrate credibility by showing they were not influenced by producers, this has fallen out of fashion (Bennett, 2016), and VSSSO legitimacy is now derived from taking a multistakeholder approach that necessarily involves producers (van der Ven, 2022).

It can take longer—and therefore more time, energy, and resources—to make decisions when there are more diverse actors involved in the VSSSO, especially when trying to reach a consensus on issues such as the design of standards. There can be tension between making decisions in a timely manner, advancing on an issue, and developing standards requirements to meet priorities (Riisgaard et al., 2020). While these trade-offs cannot be dismissed, the benefits of producer inclusion can be significant.

1.3 Report Objectives and Contributions

This report analyzes the current state of producer inclusion in VSS governance by looking at the governance systems criteria of six VSSSOs. It updates previous studies of global VSSSOs (Bennett, 2017; Potts et al., 2014) and extends this research to a new wave of national and regional VSSSOs.

This report is not meant to single out VSSSOs in terms of good and bad but rather to identify what VSSSOs are doing, with a view to learning and sharing what appears to be working and what needs further attention. Our main goal is to help VSSSOs identify how they can include a greater quantity and breadth of producers in their governance and enhance democratic processes available to producers contributing to their governance.

In this report, we examine national, regional, and global VSSSOs' internal governance to

1. assess the extent to which six VSSSOs cover indicators of producer inclusion in their governance systems and
2. identify ways VSSSOs can increase the inclusion of producers.

The report is primarily aimed at VSSSOs, contributing

- a summary of arguments that suggest that the broad and deep inclusion of producers in VSSSO governance systems contributes to sustainable development outcomes;
- a framework for evaluating whether and how a VSSSO includes producers in its governance;
- an empirical description of how six VSSSOs include producers in their governance systems; and
- a set of recommendations for how VSSSOs can increase the inclusion of producers in their governance systems.

2.0 Methods and Analysis

2.1 Case Selection

In this report, we examine six VSSSOs operating in the agricultural sector—the African Organisation for Standardisation (ARSO), Better Cotton, Fairtrade International, Rainforest Alliance, Trustea, and VietFarm. Using academic and grey literature, we identified a list of five criteria for case selection: (i) the VSSSO is operational, (ii) it sets standards for agricultural products, (iii) the standards are applied to producers, (iv) the standards are verified or certified by a third party, and (v) compliance is communicated to consumers with a label. Based on these criteria, we selected three often studied and well established international agricultural VSSSOs—Better Cotton, Fairtrade International, and Rainforest Alliance—that have production sites in at least two regions. To gain insight into the governance structures and processes of regional and national VSSSOs, as well as the more often studied global VSSSOs, we also selected a regional VSSSO—the ARSO—with standards limited to production in a single region and two national VSSSOs—Trustea and VietFarm—that limit production sites to a single country. In all cases, the standard-compliant products may be either sold domestically or exported internationally. Table 1 provides an overview of the key characteristics of the selected VSSSOs, including membership, mission, date founded, and sites of production, as well as the products they cover.

Table 1. Overview of VSSSOs included in the report

VSSSO/VSS	Overview
ARSO/EcoMark Africa	**Membership:** Representatives of National Standards Bodies of African countries **Mission statement:** "To facilitate African industrialization and intra-African and global trade by providing harmonized African standards and conformity assessment procedures that promote sustainable development" (ARSO, 2020). **Year founded:** 1977 **Sites of production:** Regional (43 countries in Africa) **Number of certified production units:** Ten EcoMark Africa-certified firms (ARSO, 2023) **Certifiable products:** Aquaculture (tilapia, African catfish), agriculture (bananas, cereals, cocoa, coconut [fresh], coffee, cotton and fibres, floriculture products, flowers, food and beverages, fruits, honey, nuts, other products, palm oil, plants, rice, rubber, soy, spices, sugar, tea, textiles/ garments, vegetables), wild fish, forestry products, bamboo

VSSSO/VSS	Overview
Better Cotton	**Membership:** Producer organizations; civil society; retailers and brands; suppliers and manufacturers; and associates **Mission statement:** "Our mission is to help cotton communities survive and thrive while protecting and restoring the environment" (Better Cotton, n.d.). **Year founded:** 2005 **Sites of production:** International **Number of certified production units:** 2.4 million farmers have a licence **Certifiable products:** Cotton
Fairtrade International	**Membership:** Producer networks and national fairtrade organizations[1] **Mission statement:** "Our mission is to connect disadvantaged producers and consumers, promote fairer trading conditions, and empower producers to combat poverty, strengthen their position, and take more control over their lives" (Fairtrade International, n.d.). **Year founded:** 1997 **Sites of production:** International **Number of certified production units:** 1.8 million farmers and workers **Certifiable products:** Cereals, cocoa, coffee, cotton and fibres, food and beverages, fruits, honey, nuts, rice, spices, sugar, tea
Rainforest Alliance[2]	**Membership:** Not a membership-based organization **Mission statement:** "The Rainforest Alliance is creating a more sustainable world by using social and market forces to protect nature and improve the lives of farmers and forest communities" (Rainforest Alliance, 2023a). **Year founded:** 1987 **Sites of production:** International **Number of certified production units:** 4 million farmers and workers (Rainforest Alliance, 2021) **Certifiable products:** Bananas, cereals, cocoa, coconut (fresh), coffee, flowers, fruits, nuts, palm oil, plants, spices, tea, vegetables

[1] National Fairtrade organizations license the Fairtrade logo on products and promote Fairtrade in their country.

[2] Rainforest Alliance merged with UTZ in 2018 (Rainforest Alliance, 2020a).

VSSSO/VSS	Overview
Trustea	**Membership:** Not a membership-based organization **Mission statement:** "To sustainably transform the Indian tea industry for the benefit of consumers, workers, farmers, and the environment by - verifying tea producers against a world-class sustainability code of conduct - working with the tea industry to address key sustainability challenges such as food safety, stagnating yields, pest and disease control, living wages, worker welfare and equality, preservation of biodiversity, and improvement of livelihood of smallholders" (Trustea, 2023a). **Year founded:** 2013 **Sites of production:** National (India) **Number of certified production units:** 92,000 small tea growers verified and 650,000 workers (Trustea Sustainable Tea Foundation, 2022b) **Certifiable products:** Tea
VietFarm	**Membership:** Not a membership-based organization **Mission statement:** "VietFarm's mission is to contribute to the promotion of agricultural products in Vietnam with a commitment to produce sustainable values that meet international standards and thereby create a fair and competitive market, which both producers and consumers can equally benefit from" (VietFarm, 2018a) **Year founded:** 2018 **Sites of production:** National (Vietnam). **Number of certified production units:** 27 certified producer cooperatives (871 producers) (interview data) **Certifiable products:** Coffee, floriculture products, flowers, food and beverages, fruits, nuts, other products, spices, tea

Note: Certifiable products source - International Trade Centre (ITC), 2023, interview data.

2.2 Data

The report uses data from the ITC Standards Map, VSSSO documents, interviews, and a focus group. The ITC Standards Map is a database of approximately 1,650 baseline indicators created to provide free, accessible, verified, and transparent information on sustainability standards. The ITC is a multilateral agency with a joint mandate with the World Trade Organization and the UN through the UN Conference on Trade and Development. ITC develops its Standards Map indicators with expert consultation and enters the data based on official information provided by the standards organizations. The data is reviewed by independent experts, and then the VSSSO checks and completes the information before it is reviewed and published by ITC on the Standards Map. We selected indicators from the ITC Standards Map that related to our analytical framework (Section 2.3). Where the ITC Standards Map did not have indicators aligned with our

Box 1. Scope of review

This report covers six standards initiatives operating in the agricultural sector ranging from national to international. Here we list the VSSSO, the version of the standard included in the analysis, and the date of the last update in the ITC database.

- ARSO – *African Eco-Labelling Standard ARS/AES 01(E) First Edition* 2014 (Updated November 2021)
- Better Cotton – *Better Cotton Principles and Criteria* v.2.1 (Updated June 2022)
- Fairtrade International – *Fairtrade Standard for Smallscale Producer Organizations*, 03.04.2019 v.2.2 (Updated January 2021)
- Rainforest Alliance – *2020 Rainforest Alliance Sustainable Agriculture Standard: Farm Requirements* v.1.1 (Updated November 2021)
- Trustea – *Trustea Standard for Sustainable Tea* v.3 (Not available in StandardsMap)
- VietFarm – *VietFarm Standards* v.01.08.2018 (Updated January 2022)

See Table 1 for an overview of the VSSSOs' main characteristics.

analytical framework, we created our own. This method allowed us to take advantage of the existing database while not missing important indicators of producer inclusion. We used data extracted from the Standards Map database in July and August 2022. Box 1 provides details of the standard versions and when the data was entered into the Standards Map.

We also analyzed VSSSO websites and documents between January and August 2023 to obtain details about their governance structures and decision-making processes and procedures. These included lists of governance body and committee members, such as biographies of board members, as well as organization constitutions and bylaws, standards requirements, standards development and revision procedures, grievance management policies, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) guidelines, and other documents. The review of these documents provided qualitative information on the VSSSO organization and policies and procedures. It allowed us to assess the indicators in our framework that are not available in the ITC Standards Map and fill in data missing from the ITC database.

Between January and August 2023, we also conducted eight in-depth semi-structured interviews with staff and representatives of standards bodies, a focus group with eight representatives of VSS' setting bodies and membership groups, and three expert interviews. We conducted interviews by video call using general questions following the analytical framework, as well as specific questions designed to fill in gaps in our analysis of Standards Map data and VSSSO documents. The focus group was also conducted online and involved an introduction to producer inclusion and

Box 2. Who is a producer?

In this report, we use the term "producer" to refer to farmers, farm workers, factory workers, and others who contribute physical labour (versus management or capital) to produce VSS-compliant products (see Bennett, 2017). Following Bennett (2017), we distinguish between producers who contribute their physical labour to produce VSS-compliant products versus owners or managers who contribute capital and not labour. This allows us to focus on those who are disproportionately affected by VSSs compared to other actors in the value chain (Dingwerth, 2008). Under this definition, a business association of factories in the Global South is not considered a producer; neither is an NGO in the Global North that represents smallholder farmer interests. However, VSSSO definitions of "producer" do not always differentiate between labourers and owners. As seen in the definitions below from the VSSSOs covered in this report, a VSSSO may count agribusiness owners as producers (e.g., the Rainforest Alliance definition).

The ITC Standards Map data used in the benchmarking analysis reports is based on VSSSOs' own definitions of producer. For our analysis of the share of producers' seats in VSSSO governing bodies, when members were listed on VSSSO websites as producer representatives, we used that to calculate the share of seats. When members were not identified as producer representatives, we read their biographies and considered them producer representatives when they met our definition of a producer. It is important to note that producer representatives may also have additional interests in industry or NGOs. Given that VSSSOs' own definitions of "producer" can be broader than ours, and producers can have other interests, the results presented in this report likely overestimate producers' inclusion in VSSSO governance.

VSSSO definitions of producer

ARSO: We could not find an available definition of producer.

Better Cotton defines a producer as "the unit of licensing and can be either a Producer Unit for Smallholders (SH) or Medium Farms (MF) or an individual farm in the case of Large Farms (LF)." Better Cotton additionally defines farmers as "people of any gender, background and identity who share farming duties and decision-making responsibilities. Tenants and sharecroppers are also considered farmers if they share input costs and are primarily responsible for production practices. … Smallholders (SH) are defined as farms with a farm size typically not exceeding 20 hectares of cotton which are not structurally dependent on permanent hired labour. Smallholders are grouped into Producer Units for licensing purposes" (Better Cotton, 2023a).

Fairtrade International defines small-scale producers as "farmers who are not structurally dependent on permanent hired labour and who manage their production activity mainly with family workforce." Workers are defined as "all workers including migrant, temporary, seasonal, sub-contracted and permanent workers. Workers are waged employees, whether they are permanent or seasonal/temporary, migrant or local, subcontracted or directly employed. Workers include all hired personnel, whether they work in the field, in processing sites, or in administration. The term is restricted to personnel that can be unionised and therefore middle and senior and other professionals are generally not considered workers" (Fairtrade International, 2019).

Rainforest Alliance defines a producer as "a person who owns and/or operates an agricultural enterprise, either commercially or to sustain him or herself or his/her family," and workers as those "who labour in return for a monetary amount" (Rainforest Alliance, 2023d).

Trustea defines small tea growers as "farmers having own or leased land for tea leaf production and supply the produced leaf to the tea manufacturing factory (10.12 hectors [sic] of area)" (Trustea Sustainable Tea Foundation, 2022a).

VietFarm defines small producers as "those farming less than 3 hectares of land or have an average annual income of less than 500,000,000 VND [USD 21,100]" (VietFarm, 2018b).

then a facilitated discussion. We transcribed recordings of the interviews and focus groups and coded the interview responses to the principles of inclusion in our analytical framework. In many cases, interviewees consulted their colleagues and provided additional details and comments in follow-up email correspondence. Three of the six standards organizations analyzed provided feedback on a draft of this report to ensure factual correctness and fill data gaps. Interviews also helped confirm discrepancies between what is outlined in governance documents and what is practised.

2.3 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework is based on the participatory governance literature (Fischer, 2012; Foweraker & Krznaric, 2000, 2001; Lee, 2013). We identified four principles of participatory governance relevant to producer inclusion in standards governance and design: representation and equal distribution of power (to influence decision making through voice, vote, and veto), participation, transparent exchange of knowledge and information, and the decentralization of decision-making processes (subsidiarity) (Fischer, 2012; Foweraker & Krznaric, 2001). We additionally drew on previous research on VSSSO governance (Bennett, 2016, 2017; Guarin et al., 2022; Molenaar & Heuvels,

2020; Schleifer et al., 2019) to develop a set of indicators to benchmark what counts as inclusive of producers for each principle relevant to VSSSOs. Where there were ITC Standards Map indicators aligned closely with these indicators, we used them to allow the use of data in the ITC Standards Map. Indicators that are not in the ITC Standards Map database are identified in tables by an asterisk (*).

To examine how VSSSOs include producers in their organizational governance, we use Kaplinsky and Morris's (2001) classification of governance functions as executive (operation), legislative (rule setting), and judicial (compliance). VSSs are also involved in M&E processes that inform governance decisions.

2.3.1 Governance Dimensions

2.3.1.1 Executive Governance

The highest governance bodies of a VSSSO are responsible for the operation of the standard, including general management as well as market development, capacity building, financing, and monitoring and ensuring compliance. In membership-based organizations, the general assembly is technically the highest authority, as it elects the board or council; typically, however, VSSs' boards of directors or councils perform most of the executive decision making for the general operation of the standard.

Producer representation in executive decision-making bodies is about their right to be in the room. It signals their ownership, buy-in, and involvement in organizational management (Potts et al., 2014). Producer participation in executive governance is about producers' formal capacity to have a say in governance decisions through voting rights—for example, whether producers are formally involved in electing the VSSSO's board or council members; voting on decisions related to membership issues and annual financials (through votes in the general assembly); or the organization's strategy, structure, and policies (through votes on the board or council). Transparency in VSS governance structures, decision-makers, and policies and procedures helps VSSs build trust with producers. It informs producers' decisions and allows them to hold the organization accountable. Subsidiarity of executive decision-making bodies refers to governance structures that allow decision making based closer to the location where the decision is likely to have an impact. It may not translate directly into integrating producer interests and needs, but it does open up the potential for this integration into VSS governance and design to occur. Thus, when VSSSOs account for subsidiarity in their governance structure and are intentional about the representation of local interests, they may be more inclusive of producers.

2.3.1.2 Legislative Governance

VSSSOs undertake legislative functions when they set rules and rule-making processes that can influence how value chains are governed. This typically occurs through the standards development committees or sometimes the secretariat. The standards set through these processes may affect production practices, information sharing, pricing, and organizational management (Sexsmith & Potts, 2008).

Producer representation in legislative governance is about whether they have seats

on the standards development committees of VSSSOs, which coordinate the standards development process and make decisions regarding standards content and criteria. Producer participation in legislative governance refers to whether they have voting rights on standards development committees and in standards review processes and decisions. Producers tend to participate in standard setting in two main ways: consultation on draft standards and voting on approval of final draft standards on standards committees. Transparency of standard-setting decision-makers, policies, and procedures provides an avenue through which producers can keep standards accountable.

Subsidiarity in legislative decision making refers to the extent to which VSS criteria and implementation are customized to the local context and capacity and account for the needs and interests of producers in multiple regions and countries with varying socio-political, economic, and geographic conditions (Potts et al., 2010). While there are costs to operating multiple versions of standards, benefits include criteria adapted to producer conditions and local sustainable development priorities that are more likely to be adopted and have an impact (Potts et al., 2010). Given that producers are a heterogeneous group, separate criteria and approaches for smallholder producers are also important to help address their distinct capacities and needs. Smallholder farmers often have limited income and lack access to credit as well as land and inputs, have limited access to training, and face long distances to markets. Tailoring standards to the smallholder context can make it easier for them to comply with VSS practices and improve equity and sustainability impacts.

2.3.1.3 Judicial Governance

Judicial governance concerns the resolution of complaints or appeals against decisions made regarding the standard-setting procedures or operations of the certification program, including audit procedures, non-compliance, and certification status. Grievances are typically submitted by a stakeholder, brought to the VSSSO's grievance committee, and processed through a grievance mechanism. Decisions made by the VSSSO grievance committee inform the VSSSOs' approach to remedy, scope, and continuous improvement.

Producer representation in judicial governance refers to whether they have seats on the grievance committee. Producer participation in judicial governance refers to producers' voices in decision-making processes related to the resolution of complaints or appeals and the settlement of disputes. Transparency is one of the criteria for effective grievance mechanisms established by the UN Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights (UN & UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2011). The transparency of grievance mechanism decision-makers, decisions, and processes is important for accountability in the fair conduct of grievance processes and scrutiny of their outcomes (Wielga & Harrison, 2021). Subsidiarity of judicial decision making is especially important for accessibility, another of the UN Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights' effectiveness criteria for grievance mechanisms (UN & UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2011). When VSS grievance mechanisms are localized, they are more likely to be known to producers and have fewer barriers to access.

2.3.1.4 Monitoring and Evaluation

VSSSOs typically have formal M&E systems that are used to evaluate the impacts of their VSS on producers and production practices and build in feedback loops that inform governance decisions.

Producer representation in M&E refers to whether producers have a formal seat or role on any M&E committee or in M&E processes. Producer participation in M&E indicates the involvement of producers in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data related to compliance, impacts, and continuous improvement. Producer participation in M&E activities is increasingly recognized as critical to the adoption and implementation of M&E recommendations.

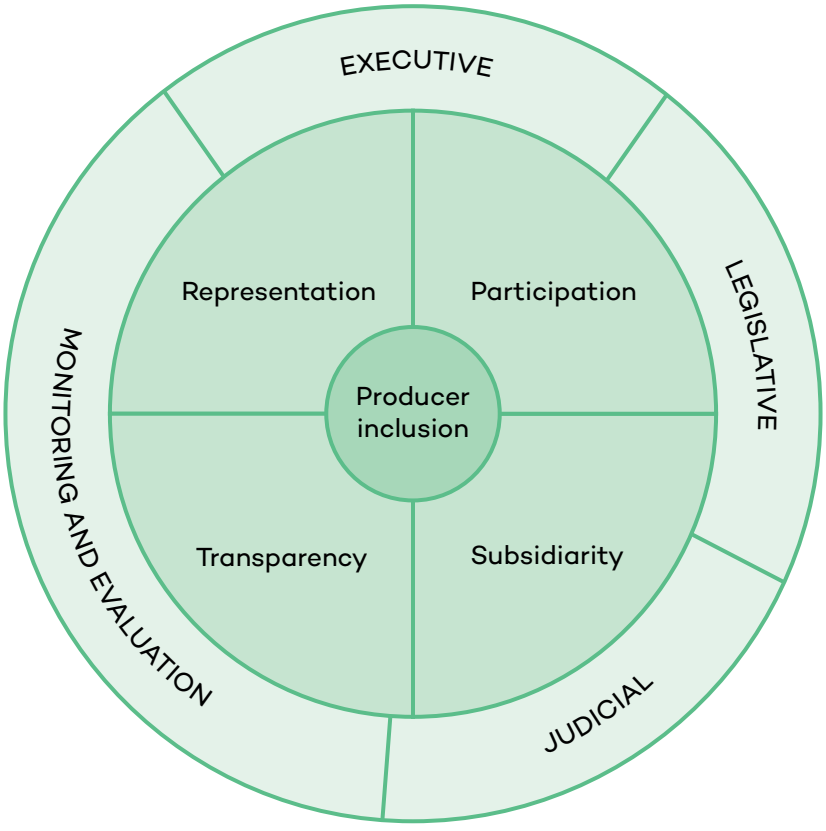
Transparency of M&E requires stakeholders, including producers, to be aware of the purpose, process, and methodology of M&E activities, as well as the evaluation results and how learning will be applied. Transparency of M&E builds trust and credibility of the VSS and enables evidence-based decision making. Subsidiarity of M&E refers to the level of local ownership over M&E activities.

2.3.2 Principles of Inclusion

2.3.2.1 Representation

Producers are represented via seats in governing bodies and committees. This is about producers' right to be in the room.

Figure 1. A framework for producer inclusion in VSS governance



Source: Author's elaboration

Table 2. Indicators for measuring the extent of producer representation in VSS governance

Governance dimension	Indicators
Executive	• **Producer representation requirement**: Whether there is a formal requirement reserving seats for producers in the highest governing bodies: the general assembly (applicable to membership-based VSSs) and the board of directors/stakeholder council. • **Producers' share of seats**: Share of seats held by producers in these governance bodies.
Legislative	• **Producer representation requirement**: Whether there is a formal requirement for producer representation on the standards development committee. • **Producers' share of seats**: Share of seats held by producers on the standards development committee.
Judicial	• **Producer representation requirement:** Whether there is a formal requirement for producer representation on the grievance committee. • **Producers' share of seats:** Share of seats held by producers on the grievance committee.
M&E	• **Formal producer representation requirements:** Indicates the formalization of producer representation in M&E processes and decisions.

Decisions of VSSSOs affect a range of actors along the value chain whose perspectives should be represented in standards governance. Producers should be fairly represented in organizational governance as key stakeholders affected by VSSs and VSSSO decision making.

We examine VSSs' application of the principle of representation through the indicators listed in Table 2.

2.3.2.2 Participation

Producers have an opportunity to participate in VSSSO governance decision-making processes and influence decisions. This is about producers' formal capacity to influence by vote.

Producers must have an opportunity to participate in discussions and decision-making processes in a way that balances their influence against the interests of more powerful stakeholders. Having the opportunity means having governance policies and processes that ensure a balance of perspectives in decision making. If influence is proportional to the degree to which a stakeholder is impacted by these policies and processes, this means producers should have more right to participate than others.

We examine VSSs' application of the principle of participation through the indicators listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Indicators for measuring the extent of producer participation in VSS governance

Governance dimension	Indicators
Executive	• **Producers' share of votes:** Share of votes held by producers in each governance body. • **Producer veto power:** Producers can stop a decision from being approved either because approval is required from their membership category or because they hold enough votes to prevent it.[3] • **Policies to balance stakeholder decision making:** Policies and procedures aimed at balancing stakeholder power in decision making. • **Selection procedures:** How board or council members are chosen.
Legislative	• **Inclusiveness of standards development:** Which stakeholders can participate in the standard-setting process. • **Directly affected stakeholders:** Stakeholders directly affected by the standard have opportunities to participate in standard setting. • **Producer engagement in standard setting:** Ways in which producers are engaged in standard-setting and review processes. • **Producers' share of votes:** Share of votes held by producers on the standards development committee. • **Producer veto power:** Producers can stop a decision from being approved either because approval is required from their membership category or because they hold enough votes to prevent it.
Judicial	• **Producer engagement in complaints and dispute resolution:** Whether producers are engaged in grievance mechanism processes and decisions. • **Producers' share of votes:** Share of votes held by producers on the grievance committee. • **Producer veto power:** Producers can stop a decision from being approved either because approval is required from their membership category or because they hold enough votes to prevent it.
M&E	• **Multistakeholder participation in M&E activities:** Indicates whether multiple stakeholders are engaged in monitoring and evaluation activities. [4]

[3] See the definition of veto power in Bennett (2017).

[4] The ITC Standards Map does not have data available specific to producer participation in M&E activities.

Table 4. Indicators for measuring the extent of transparency in VSS governance

Governance dimension	Indicators
Executive	• **Disclosure of decision-makers**: Publicly available lists of governance body members. • **Disclosure of decisions**: Publicly available governing body meeting minutes. • **Transparency of governance**: Publicly available governance structure and processes to maintain accountability of governance bodies.
Legislative	• **Disclosure of decision-makers**: Publicly available lists of standards committee members. • **Disclosure of decisions**: Publicly available standards committee meeting minutes. • **Transparency of processes**: Publicly available standard-setting processes and procedures.
Judicial	• **Disclosure of decision-makers**: Publicly available lists of grievance committee members. • **Disclosure of decisions**: Publicly available grievance decisions. • **Transparency of processes**: Publicly available grievance processes and procedures.
M&E	• **Reporting of monitoring results**: Publicly available report disclosing monitoring results. • **Reporting M&E results to producers**: M&E findings are shared with producers.

2.3.2.3 Transparency

Public disclosure of decision-makers, systems, policies and procedures, and data is an important tool for enabling participatory governance.

Governance structures, delegates, and standard-setting procedures should be transparent. Standards organizations can support balanced representation and participation when they disclose the names of board/council and committee members, policies, and proceedings.

We examine VSSs' application of the principle of transparency through the indicators listed in Table 4.

2.3.2.4 Subsidiarity

Governance occurs at the most local level that is still effective at efficient and impactful decision-making.

Subsidiarity is the principle that centralized rule-making and implementing organizations should only perform those tasks that cannot be performed effectively at a more local level (von Moltke, 1995). The principle is closely

linked to participatory governance and the idea that organizations are most likely to address local interests and needs and be more effective when they are developed with local participation.

We examine VSSs' application of the principle of subsidiarity through the indicators listed in Table 5.

Table 5. Indicators for measuring the extent of subsidiarity in VSS governance

Governance dimension	Indicators
Executive	• **Subsidiarity of governance structure**: The VSSSO has decentralized local governance bodies.
Legislative	• **Local interpretation of standards**: The VSS has procedures and guidance for applying or interpreting requirements for local context. • **Local indicator development**: The VSS has locally adapted indicators based on local and regional contexts. • **Separate standard for smallholders**: Standard criteria differentiate between small and large farms. • **Stepwise approach**: The VSS supports access for smallholder producers by combining lower initial requirements with higher requirements to be met over time.
Judicial	• **Localized grievance mechanisms**: Availability of grievance mechanism close to producers' location. • **Policies and decisions in different languages**: Grievance mechanisms are offered in multiple languages.
M&E	• **Localized M&E activities**: Indicates the level of producer involvement and agency in M&E activities and data.

3.0 Benchmarking Producer Inclusion in VSSSO Governance

In this section, we examine the VSSSOs against the four principles of producer inclusion in terms of the four main governance areas: executive, legislative, judicial, and M&E.

3.1 Executive Governance

Summary

Half of the VSSSOs—Better Cotton, Fairtrade International, and Trustea—reserve seats for producers on their boards of directors/stakeholder council and have a greater portion of seats occupied by producers (ranging from 25%–37%) than the VSSSOs without reserved seats for producers. These same VSSSOs give producers a vote and have voting procedures to balance decision making, but only Fairtrade International gives producers veto power. All but VietFarm publicly disclose the names of their board of directors/stakeholder council members; however, none of the VSSSOs make board/council meeting minutes publicly available. While the national and regional VSSSOs can be seen as operating with greater subsidiarity in their governance structures, Fairtrade International delegates funds and decision-making power on capacity building and services to three regional producer networks. There remains an opportunity for increased producer inclusion related to seats, votes, veto power, public disclosure of decision making, and structures supporting subsidiarity.

3.1.1 Producer Representation in Executive Governance

Four VSSSOs included in the study—ARSO, Better Cotton, Fairtrade International, and VietFarm—are membership-based organizations and have general assemblies. All six VSSs have boards of directors or a stakeholder council. The stakeholders represented in the general assemblies and boards of directors/stakeholder councils vary by VSSSO. As mentioned, ARSO members are national standards bodies. Better Cotton categorizes its members as producer organizations, civil society, suppliers and manufacturers, retailers and brands, and associates (Better Cotton, 2023c).

Fairtrade International has regional networks of producers, as well as national Fairtrade organizations composed of Fairtrade licensees and civil society from that country. Rainforest Alliance calls itself "an alliance of farmers, forest communities, companies, and consumers" (Rainforest Alliance, 2023a). Trustea classifies its stakeholders as producers, small tea growers, bought-leaf tea factories,[5] tea packers and buyers, civil society, and academia (Trustea, 2023b). VietFarm is hosted by the rural not-for-profit Centre for Development and Integration in partnership with Green Fair Trade, Vectra International, Vietnam Services Social Enterprises, and Irish Aid (VietFarm, 2023; interview data).

[5] A tea factory that sources at least two thirds of its tea leaf requirement from other tea growers.

Table 6. Producer representation in general assemblies and board of directors/councils

Indicator	Better Cotton	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance	ARSO	Trustea	Viet-Farm
General assembly*	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes[a]
Representation requirement*	Yes[b]	Yes	Not applicable	No	Not applicable	No
Producers' share of seats*	<1%	50%	Not applicable	0%	Not applicable	-[c]
Board of directors/stakeholder council						
Type*	Stakeholder council	Board of directors	Board of directors	Council	Stakeholder council	Board of directors
Representation requirement*	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Producers' share of seats*	≥25%[d]	36.6%	10%	None	36.6%	-

* The indicator is not available in the ITC Standards Map.

[a] Called the VietFarm Alliance.

[b] Better Cotton requires representation from all the member categories in order to have a quorum for the general assembly to make any decision (interview data).

[c] In all cases, "-" indicates missing data/no information found.

[d] Producers have three seats out of 12 member-represented seats; there are also three independent seats, which may or may not be filled. An independent seat could also represent producers (interview data).

Table 6 shows that producer representation in general assemblies varies in both shares of seats and formalized positions for the four membership-based VSSs covered by this study, ranging from 0% to 50% across ARSO, VietFarm, Better Cotton, and Fairtrade International. ARSO membership is open to African countries through their national standards bodies or departments dealing with standards and quality (Kithome, 2022). As such, producers do not have a share of seats (or formal positions) in ARSO's general assembly. Detailed information is not available on the composition of the VietFarm Alliance, which acts like a general assembly. As of September 2023, just 18 of Better Cotton's 2,627 general assembly members (or 0.7%) are producer organizations (interview data). Fairtrade International's general assembly has the highest share of seats and reserved positions; the standard weights seats, so three producer networks in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have 50% representation and 21 national Fairtrade organizations have 50%[6] (Fairtrade International, 2023c).

[6] Country-level organizations typically in consuming countries open to Fairtrade-licensed businesses and brands, as well as civil society organizations.

Table 6 also shows that producer representation on the boards of directors or stakeholder councils ranges from a zero to one third share of seats, with formal requirements for producer representation for three of the examined VSSs. As ARSO's council is composed of national government representatives elected by its general assembly, it does not include producers. A council of voluntary members manages VietFarm; it is unclear whether this includes producer representation. Better Cotton and Fairtrade International both require producer representation on their council/board; producers have a share of 25% and 36.6% of seats, respectively, and are elected by the general assembly (Fairtrade International) or their own membership category (Better Cotton). Trustea's secretariat appoints stakeholder council members with the intention of covering all major stakeholders in the tea industry, including producers. While 10% of the Rainforest Alliance board of director members are producers themselves or work for a producer organization, they represent themselves as individuals, and there is no formal producer representation requirement reserving seats for producers (interview data).

In both the general assemblies and boards of directors/councils, producer representation is higher among those VSSSOs that have a policy formally instituting positions for producers. This is especially evident in the case of Better Cotton, where producers have 25% of the seats on the stakeholder council according to policy but make up less than 1% of the membership. Even when council members are appointed and not elected, as in the case of Trustea, the formal requirement to include producer representation on the council has resulted in producers having a third of council seats. Those without a formal structure institutionalizing positions for producers in their governance body tend to have lower direct representation of producers.

Interviewees mentioned the practical concerns and trade-offs of running an organization with stakeholders that have competing interests. Decisions made at the executive level are, in many ways, a balancing act among these different stakeholders. An interviewee explained that their multistakeholder governance system is not fast, but "then the implementation is very easy because, by that time, you have aligned all the various stakeholders into that vision" (interview data).

3.1.2 Producer Participation in Executive Governance

Table 7 displays the share of votes producers have on the general assemblies and boards of directors/stakeholder councils of the VSSs examined, which ranges from zero to 50%. Fairtrade International weights the votes of its three producer networks in the general assembly at 50% of the vote and its producer representatives at 50% of the board of directors' vote. Better Cotton requires 30% of all the members voting (in-person or by proxy) in each of its five member categories—civil society, retailers and brands, producer organizations, suppliers and manufacturers, and associate members—in addition to a simple majority to pass decisions in its general assembly. The Better Cotton Council seeks to make decisions by consensus; if consensus is not reached, a double majority is required with approval from half of the members present and at least one council member

Table 7. Producer voting rights in general assemblies and boards of directors/councils

Indicator	Better Cotton	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance	ARSO	Trustea	Viet-Farm
General assembly						
Producers' share of votes*	%[a]	50%	-[b]	0%[c]	-	-
Veto power*	Yes[d]	Yes	-	No	-	-
Board of directors/stakeholder council						
Selection of board/council members*	Elected by general assembly	Elected by general assembly	Selected by board	Elected by general assembly	Appointed by Secretariat	Elected by members
Producers' share of votes*	≤25%[e]	50%	10%[f]	None	36.6%	None
Veto power*	No	Yes[g]	No	No	No[h]	No

* The indicator is not available in the ITC Standards Map.

[a] Unable to calculate share: General decisions of the Better Cotton general assembly are made by simple majority (50% + 1) of all members plus 30% of all members in each category (i.e., 30% of all producer members).

[b] "-" indicates missing data/no information found.

[c] Voting rights are restricted to national members.

[d] General decisions are made by simple majority (50% + 1) of all members plus 30% of all members in each category (i.e., 30% of all producer members).

[e] General decisions are made by double majority: a simple majority plus at least one council member from each membership category with more than one organization on the council. Changes to statutes and bylaws require two thirds of council members plus at least one from each membership category with more than one organization on the council.

[f] General decisions are made with a 75% vote of all directors present with a quorum. Changes to statutes and bylaws require 75% of the entire board.

[g] General decisions require a simple majority; changes to statutes and bylaws require 75%.

[h] General decisions require a simple majority; changes to statutes and bylaws require a double majority: a simple majority of the members of the council present, and at least one council member of each membership category that has more than one organization on the council. In the case of a tie, the council chairperson has a casting vote (interview data).

of each membership category that has more than one organization on the council. Rainforest Alliance and Trustea require a 75% vote and 50% plus 1, respectively, on their board/council and follow one representative/one vote without weighting across different stakeholder types. Rarely do producers also have veto power. Of the six VSSs examined, only Fairtrade International gives producers veto power, both in its general assembly and its board of directors.

Table 8 shows that all six VSSs allow stakeholders to participate in or provide

Table 8. Balance of decision-making power in the highest governance body of VSSs

Indicator[a]	Better Cotton	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance	ARSO	Trustea	VietFarm
Stakeholders can participate in governance [700124]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Voting procedures to balance decision making in governance [700125]	Yes	Yes	Yes	No[b]	Yes	No
Existence of clear and public policies or procedures to ensure that no interest group can dominate decision making [709013]	No	Yes	Yes	-[c]	Yes	No
Procedures require balanced participation of constituencies representing economic, social, and environmental interests in decision making [709017]	No	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	No

[a] Number in brackets refers to the ITC indicator code.

[b] Voting procedures balance the representation of government members but not across stakeholders, including producers.

[c] "-" indicates missing data/no information found.

formal input on their governance. Four have voting procedures that aim to balance representation of stakeholder interests so no one interest can predominate decision making; for example, to pass a motion, Better Cotton and Trustea both require approval from all membership categories with more than one organization on the council in addition to a majority vote. ARSO balances across its government members but not across stakeholder groups, including producers, and VietFarm does not provide information on how decisions are made. Just three of the examined VSSs—Fairtrade International, Rainforest Alliance, and Trustea—have policies and procedures in place that aim to ensure no interest group can dominate decision making and that there is

balanced participation of economic, social, and environmental interests.

Selection procedures regarding who sits on governance bodies matter as they determine who is involved in deciding who directs the organization. Board members are elected by general assembly members for those organizations that have general assemblies. When producers have seats in the general assemblies, they also have some say in the election of board members. For the VSSs without general assemblies, board or council members are selected by the existing board/council members or appointed by their staff or secretariat. When members of the board or council are not elected, VSSs may need to take other measures to be accountable to stakeholders, especially producers who adopt the standard. When a board can veto decisions made by other VSS committees (e.g., the Rainforest Alliance board can overturn standards committee decisions), this can undermine the apparent representativeness of other committees of the same organization. Thus, it is critical that VSSs include producers in their highest governance bodies.

Voting policies and procedures are important ways in which VSSs balance stakeholders' interests. Producers' share of seats is not directly translatable into a share in decision making; voting rules may give producers more or less say in decisions than indicated by their share of governance body seats. We found two cases where the VSS's voting procedures give producers more say than indicated by the producers' share of seats. Though Better Cotton's website categorizes just 17 of 2,519 members as producers, general assembly decisions require the approval of 30% of all members in each membership category (producers are one category of five). Producer representatives account for a third of seats on Fairtrade International's board of directors, but they have 50% of the vote.

In many cases, decisions by VSS governing bodies are made by consensus and do not require a vote. That said, voting policies are important to institutionalize producer input and balanced decision making. The VSSs examined encourage decisions to be made by consensus, and voting rules are in place for instances when consensus cannot be reached. In cases where producers do not have veto power, even when there is no consensus, there may not always be a vote if producers see they are clearly going to lose the vote and thus see no point in voting. Our interviews suggest that, in practice, decisions are typically made by consensus; Fairtrade International estimates that more than 90% of decisions made by its board were unanimous and did not go to a vote (interview data).

3.1.3 Transparency in Executive Governance

Table 9 shows that five of the six VSSs publicly disclose a list of members of their general assemblies and boards of directors/ councils (VietFarm being the exception). Governance body meeting minutes are generally not available, so information on debates and decisions is not accessible. Fairtrade International posts minutes from meetings of its governance oversight committee but not from meetings of the general assembly or board of directors.

In terms of governance structure and accountability, all six VSSs offer information

Table 9. Transparency of decision-makers, decisions, and governance structure

Indicator[a]	Better Cotton	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance	ARSO	Trustea	Viet-Farm
Decision makers						
List of general assembly members [2330]	Yes	Yes	-[b]	Yes	-	-
List of board/ council members [2329]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Decisions						
Board/council meeting minutes*	No	No	No	No	No	No
Governance committee meeting minutes*	-	Yes	-	-	-	No
Governance structure and accountability						
Scheme structure availability [700110]	Yes publicly	Yes publicly	Yes publicly	Yes publicly	Yes publicly	Yes publicly
Governance body review [700121]	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	-	-
Policy for handling disputes and complaints by members/ participants related to governance and executive functions [700146]	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No

* The indicator is not available in the ITC Standards Map.

[a] Number in brackets refers to the ITC indicator code.

[b] "-" indicates missing data/no information found.

on their organizational structure, including an overview of the different governance bodies that manage and govern the scheme. All three international VSSs also have procedures in place to periodically review the organization's governance processes and practices. For example, Fairtrade International has a governance committee tasked with overseeing governance and making recommendations to the board and general assembly for improvements in governance structures and processes (Fairtrade International, 2018). However, none of the regional/national VSSs have any information available to indicate that they conduct governance body reviews. Only half of the VSSSOs reviewed—Better Cotton, Rainforest Alliance, and ARSO—have clearly available policies specific to handling complaints and disputes related to the organization's governance.

Knowing who sits on the governing bodies helps producers understand the perspectives at play in decision making. While share of seats and participation in governing bodies are important, interviewees also emphasized the importance of who holds those seats—that is, who represents and participates on behalf of a typically heterogeneous group of producers. It is an ongoing challenge for VSSs to incorporate the diverse and sometimes competing views of producers, from workers and smallholder producers to large-scale producers (interview data).

3.1.4 Subsidiarity of Executive Governance

As summarized in Table 10, the VSSs covered in this report are structured in different ways that affect the subsidiarity of their main governance bodies. As national standards, Trustea and VietFarm's governing body members represent national stakeholders in their respective countries. As such, executive power lies by default at the national level. ARSO, structured as an intergovernmental organization, brings representatives of national standards bodies together to make decisions. Of the international VSSs, two operate at the global level without a specific approach to subsidiarity for producer representation in governance. Fairtrade International, on the other hand, has built subsidiarity into its governance structure, with three regional producer networks in Africa and the Middle East, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean that represent producers in the general assembly and have decision-making power on capacity building and services to producers in their

Table 10. VSSs' organizational approach to subsidiarity

Indicator	Better Cotton	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance	ARSO	Trustea	Viet-Farm
Subsidiarity of governance structure*	No	Regional producer networks	No	Regional standard	National standard	National standard

* The indicator is not available in the ITC Standards Map.

regions. Forty-three percent of Fairtrade International's global expenditure is distributed to the three networks to build professional teams and fund producer support services (Fairtrade International, 2022a; interview data).

3.2 Legislative Governance

Summary

Four of the six VSSSOs—Better Cotton, Fairtrade International, Rainforest Alliance, and Trustea—reserve seats for producers on their standards development committees, with participation ranging from 8% to 37.5%. Among these, Better Cotton, Rainforest Alliance, and Trustea specify that there must be seats for both small and large producers. While all the VSSSOs provide an opportunity for affected stakeholders to participate in standard setting and have public standard-consultation processes, just half give producers a vote on the standards development committee, and only Fairtrade International gives veto power to producers. All six VSSSOs have transparent consultation and standard-setting processes, but only half—Better Cotton, Fairtrade International, and Trustea—publish a summary of stakeholder comments and how they were addressed in the final standards documents. In terms of subsidiarity in standard setting, all six VSSSOs have local interpretations of standards, all but Better Cotton have distinct national standards, and four (excepting ARSO and VietFarm) have distinct criteria for smallholder producers and their associations. The main gaps in terms of coverage for producer inclusion in legislative governance are giving producers seats and especially votes and veto power in standard-setting committee decisions.

3.2.1 Producer Representation in Legislative Governance

Table 11 shows that all of the VSSs examined have a standards development committee. Four of the six VSSs reserve seats for producers on the standards development committee. Better Cotton and Rainforest Alliance require a minimum of two producer representatives, Fairtrade International saves a seat for each of its three producer networks, and Trustea requires at least one producer organization representative. For standards development, ARSO has technical committees led by a National Standards Body as the secretariat (government) and another stakeholder (which could be a producer) as convenor; this leadership is elected by members of the technical committees based on expertise and leadership skills (interview data). VietFarm's standards development committee comprises members of its council, as well as experts and other stakeholders; it does not reserve seats for producers (interview data). Producers' share of seats on standards committees for those VSSs that have a producer representation requirement ranges from 8% to 37.5%.

In some cases, when producer representation is formally required, it also accounts for differences between large and small producers. For example, Better Cotton and Rainforest Alliance each reserve one of the two producer seats on its standards development committee for a large producer and the other for a small producer representative. Trustea saves a seat for producer organization representatives of estates and bought-leaf factories.

It is important to note that some VSSSOs permit representation substitution on their standards development committees, which allows another party to represent producers. For example, producer representatives do not necessarily have to be producers themselves but can be someone "closely linked to an organization working with producers" (Rainforest Alliance, 2018). And while policies may state that a committee should represent all stakeholder categories equally, the small print notes that in some cases this may be superseded by "the need to incorporate technical expertise" (Better Cotton, 2021).

3.2.2 Producer Participation in Legislative Governance

Table 12 shows that all the VSSSOs covered in this report engage producers in their standard-setting and review processes to some extent. All six provide opportunities for any interested stakeholder to participate in the standard-setting process, specifically for stakeholders who are directly affected by the standard. They all engage producers via consultation on draft standards, and four of the six give producers on their standards committees voting rights (not ARSO or VietFarm). Producers' share of votes for those VSSs with producer representatives on their standards committees, and for which we have data, ranges from 8% to 50%. Fairtrade is the only VSS that gives producers 50% of the

Table 11. Producer representation on standards development committees

Indicator	Better Cotton	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance	ARSO	Trustea	Viet-Farm
Standards development committee*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Producer representation requirement*	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Share of producer seats on standards development committee*	22%	37.5%	20%	None	8%	-[a]

* The indicator is not available in the ITC Standards Map.
[a] "-" indicates missing data/no information found.

vote, which gives them veto power to stop a motion from passing.

Our review of standards development procedures provides additional details on how VSSSOs engage producers in consultation processes. All six VSSSOs have a public consultation process through which the draft standard is posted on the VSSSO's website for 60 days, and any interested stakeholder, including producers, can provide feedback via an online form. ARSO shares the draft standard with national bodies for national consultations where they coordinate public comment in their respective countries by key stakeholders, including producers. The

Table 12. Producer participation in standard setting

Indicator[a]	Better Cotton	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance	ARSO	Trustea	Viet-Farm
Standards development committee*	All stake-holders	All stake-holders	All stake-holders	All stake-holders	All stake-holders	All stake-holders[b]
Directly affected stakeholders have an opportunity to participate in standard setting [700134]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Producer engagement in standard-setting and review processes [no ID]	Consulta-tion and voting rights	Consultation and voting rights	Consulta-tion and voting rights	Consulta-tion	Consulta-tion and voting rights	Consul-tation
Producers' share of votes on the standards development committee*	-[c]	50%	20%	-	8%	-
Veto power*	No	Yes	No	-	No	-

* The indicator is not available in the ITC Standards Map.

[a] Number in brackets refers to the ITC indicator code.

[b] Via public consultation on draft standards.

[c] The Better Cotton Council approves the final standard based on the recommendation of the standards committee. No information was found on the standards committee's decision-making procedure. In all cases, "-" indicates missing data/no information found.

VSSSOs typically announce the public consultation via their website, emails, and newsletters; interviewees explained that their staff will also contact producer groups directly to request their participation.

Our document review reveals that four of the six VSSs—Better Cotton, Fairtrade International, Rainforest Alliance, and Trustea—also conduct stakeholder mapping to identify individuals or groups likely to be affected in some way by the standard and directly seek their input, proactively engaging underrepresented stakeholders and disadvantaged groups. Specific activities undertaken to engage stakeholders include in-person workshops and meetings, the translation of standards drafts, and interviews. Trustea is the only VSS examined that formally states in its standards development policy that the standards committee must evaluate if the views of all key stakeholders are represented and take mitigation measures if needed before the standard is finalized. Interviews suggest that included in these additional efforts are activities designed to increase the participation of producers and their organizations in the consultation process.

From the producer's perspective, it may be worthwhile to engage in the consultation process as there is evidence that producer contribution via consultation can have an impact on standards design; van der Ven (2022) found that comments from small and medium-sized enterprises, including producer cooperatives, are more likely to result in a change to a standard than comments from industry and NGO stakeholders. In our focus group with VSSSOs, there was a general perception that engagement with producers in consultation is easier in countries where agricultural sectors are highly organized, such as tea in India and coffee in Colombia.

VSS documents reveal that the VSSs require standards to be reviewed at least every 5 years, except VietFarm, which is reviewed every 2 years. However, interviewees stressed the importance of developing systems for regular, open, two-way communication between producers and standards governance bodies. Fairtrade standards development involves qualitative input from producer networks at the research stage prior to formal consultation. Fairtrade International collects feedback from producer networks about the application of the standard in practice and evaluates it up to one year after implementation (Fairtrade International, 2020). Trustea has created an informal channel of inputs apart from the formal alignment within the governance structure; it has appointed a staff member in each of the three largest tea-growing areas in India whose job is not linked to compliance; rather, their role is to talk to people and understand what is happening on the ground, what is working, and what is not working (interview data). This role is supported by a distinct stakeholder engagement policy (Trustea, 2023c).

Reflecting on the VSSs' procedures for standard setting and revision, it is critical to note that, Fairtrade International aside, the board or council has final approval of the standard, based on the recommendation of the standards committee—underscoring the importance of producers having a say in those higher governing bodies.

3.2.3 Transparency in Legislative Governance

Table 13 shows that all the VSSs except VietFarm publish the names of their standards development committee members on their websites. Half of them—Better Cotton, Fairtrade International, and Trustea—also publish an online synopsis of stakeholder comments submitted during the consultation process and how they were addressed in the standards document. Fairtrade International additionally publishes the minutes of the standards committee discussion, its decisions, and corresponding rationale on its website. All six publicly disclose their standard-setting and consultation processes (except for ARSO on consultation); information on how they set standards and consultation is detailed in policy documents available for download or outlined on their web pages.

Table 13. Transparency of standard-setting decision-makers, decisions, and procedures

Indicator[a]	Better Cotton	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance	ARSO	Trustea	Viet-Farm
Decision makers						
List of standard-setting/review committee members [2328]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Decisions						
Standards committee meeting minutes and/or records*	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Governance structure and accountability						
Standard-setting process transparency [700133]	Yes publicly	Yes publicly	Yes publicly	Yes publicly	Yes publicly	Yes publicly
Standards consultation transparency [700135]	Yes publicly	Yes publicly	Yes publicly	No	Yes publicly	Yes publicly

* The indicator is not available in the ITC Standards Map.

[a] Number in brackets refers to the ITC indicator code.

3.2.4 Subsidiarity in Legislative Governance

Table 14 shows that the VSSs all have a way of interpreting standards in the local context—either country-specific standards, a procedure to develop a local version of the standard, or guidance for how to interpret and apply global requirements at a local level. All standards but Better Cotton adapt indicators to local and regional contexts. Table 15 shows that five of the six VSSs have separate requirements for smallholders. Better Cotton and Fairtrade International have distinct requirements for smallholder producers and their associations, while Rainforest Alliance and Trustea require smallholders to comply with a subset of their general criteria (as opposed to having a separate standard altogether). Similarly, out of VietFarm's 105 requirements, 22 are developmental requirements for smallholders (interview data). ARSO does not separate requirements for smallholders; instead, it relies on a maturity model approach to certification with four performance levels (bronze, silver, gold, and platinum), and smallholders can enter at the lowest level of bronze. Five of the six VSSs take a continuous improvement approach to certification, which allows producers to meet increasingly advanced targets over time.

Document review and interviews revealed that the VSSs take different approaches to interpreting and applying their standards locally, within their distinct national/regional standards, local interpretation of global principles, and the assurance process.

Developed as distinct national standards in part as a response to the need for more localized standards systems, the Trustea and VietFarm standards are adapted to their national contexts. A main aspect of ARSO's mandate is to harmonize national standards across Africa; this process typically references a national standard that is adapted and harmonized to suit the region. Interestingly, national and regional standard development processes do not mean standards requirements are necessarily developed from the bottom (local) up; they may prioritize international and regional standards as references when available (interview data). The national/regional VSSSOs—ARSO,

Table 14. Local adaptation of standards

Indicator[a]	Better Cotton	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance	ARSO	Trustea	Viet-Farm
Local interpretations of standards [700140]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Local indicator development—national/regional standards [3949]	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

[a] Number in brackets refers to the ITC indicator code.

Trustea, and VietFarm—explained in interviews that their technical teams often start drafting standards requirements by reviewing well-known international standards and then adapting them as needed to suit the local context: "Normally, we try to reference some of the existing [international] standards and try to see how they best fit the African situation" (ARSO interview). Fairtrade International develops regional and country prices and criteria for specific products grown primarily in a specific region, while most criteria are global (ITC, 2023).

Neither Better Cotton nor Rainforest Alliance develops national or regional standards. Instead, Better Cotton provides a document on its website with guidance on procedures to adapt its global production principles and criteria to local contexts without creating a separate standard (Better Cotton, 2016). Better Cotton also provides direct guidance and capacity-building support to project partners (interview data). Rainforest Alliance accounts for context through its risk-based assurance process, which uses data from the certification process to create risk maps indicating the level of risk related to key sustainability issues (such as deforestation) in a particular country (interview data). Where an issue is high risk, auditors will emphasize that requirement on the checklist more than other aspects. Otherwise, Rainforest Alliance consults experts on regions as needed for specific cases in standards development.

VSSs seemingly recognize the need to differentiate by farm size to address differences in producer context. The share of tea grown by small farmers in India is rising (Bhattacharjee, 2022), so this is something Trustea has intentionally addressed through its standard, according to Trustea's director, who says small growers produce 51% of tea in India and 65% of the tea grown in the country is Trustea-compliant (interview data). Trustea has created a simplified standard for smallholders with only the requirements that apply to them and provides videos walking them through the requirements to be part of Trustea in all 23 languages in India (interview data). While ARSO and VietFarm do not have distinct criteria for small producers, that does not necessarily mean they are not localized to the smallholder context. ARSO has a maturity model, as explained below, and VietFarm says one of its aims is promoting a "sustainable environment for producer groups and small-scale farmers." Its requirements apply to "smallholders, cooperatives, cooperative

Table 15. Requirements for smallholder producers

Indicator	Better Cotton	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance	ARSO	Trustea	Viet-Farm
Separate requirements for smallholders*	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Continuous improvement*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-[a]

* The indicator is not available in the ITC Standards Map.
[a] "-" indicates missing data/no information found.

groups, production groups, alliances, unions, medium and small sized enterprises, commercial units and distributors of products certified under VietFarm" (VietFarm, 2018b).

Five out of the six VSSSOs take a continuous improvement approach (data is missing for VietFarm), which combines lower initial requirements with higher requirements to be met over time. This can improve accessibility for smallholder producers. ARSO, for example, has designed its standards with a maturity model that allows smallholder producers to meet minimum requirements initially and then other requirements over several specified periods (interview data). Fairtrade International distinguishes between core requirements, which producers must meet to be certified, and development requirements that aim to encourage producers to develop beyond the core requirements (Fairtrade International, 2023a). Trustea has mandatory criteria and other criteria that producers can meet over time (Trustea, 2023d). Better Cotton requires producer units to develop a continuous improvement plan (Better Cotton, 2023b). Better Cotton encourages and facilitates continuous improvement at the farm level as a systematic process of continuously improving management policies and practices by learning from the outcomes (interview data). Rainforest Alliance now uses smart meters, which are indicators with a target that producers set based on their own context, resources, and goals; producers decide what is needed to achieve the targets and use the smart meter indicator data to track their progress (Rainforest Alliance, 2023c).

3.3 Judicial Governance

Summary

All the VSSSOs except VietFarm have a grievance committee and a grievance mechanism, and they all disclose their grievance policies. None of them provide information indicating the share of producer seats on the grievance committee, and only Fairtrade International requires producer representation on its grievance committee (without providing details on the share of seats). The available information suggests that producers do not have a formal share of votes on any of the grievance committees. Grievance submission is typically online, free, and open to anyone but is not always provided in different languages; only Rainforest Alliance publicly discloses its grievance decisions. There is an opportunity to increase producer share of seats, votes, and access to decisions by grievance committees.

3.3.1 Producer Representation in Judicial Governance

Table 16 shows that five of the six VSSs have grievance committees but publicly disclose few details about committee members. The VietFarm Council—a body formed of volunteers that provides strategic advice to the organization—manages complaints and the grievance procedure. Through document review, we saw that all the VSSSOs investigate allegations and complaints received through their grievance submission mechanism. In some cases, the VSSSOs disclose the general composition of the committee, such as it being composed of three staff members, but in no cases do they specify whether producers are represented. As such, we were unable to ascertain the share of producers on grievance committees for any of the VSSSOs. This lack of formalized producer representation on grievance and dispute resolution committees could result in their interests or needs being left out of grievance decisions.

3.3.2 Producer Participation in Judicial Governance

Given that producers are usually not represented on grievance committees, it follows that they have limited participation in decision making around grievances. The exception is Fairtrade International, which has proportional representation on its oversight committee (interview data). By leaving producers out of addressing complaints and dispute resolution, VSSs are missing an opportunity to involve them in decisions related to remedy, scope, and continuous improvement.

3.3.3 Transparency of Judicial Governance

Table 18 shows that none of the VSSs disclose a list of grievance committee members. Better Cotton, Fairtrade International, and ARSO make grievance decisions available internally, and Trustea does not at all; only Rainforest Alliance publishes a summary of its grievance

Table 16. Producer representation on grievance committees

Indicator	Better Cotton	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance	ARSO	Trustea	Viet-Farm
Grievance committee*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Formalized producer positions*	No	Yes, proportional representation[a]	No	No	-[b]	-
Share of producers*	-	-	-	-	-	-

* The indicator is not available in the ITC Standards Map.

[a] Fairtrade International's oversight committee handles grievances elevated from FLOCERT, the global certification body for Fairtrade (interview data).

[b] "-" indicates missing data/no information found.

Table 17. Producer engagement in grievance processes

Indicator	Better Cotton	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance	ARSO	Trustea	Viet-Farm
Producer engagement in complaints and dispute resolution [no ID]	No	No	No	No	-	-
Producers' share of votes*	No	No	No	No	-	-
Producer veto power*	No	No	No	No	-	-

* The indicator is not available in the ITC Standards Map.

decisions online. Five of the six VSSs make their grievance policies and procedures publicly available on their websites, though they vary in detail.

As the VSSs do not publish grievance committee composition and decisions tend to be kept internal, the extent to which producers are represented and have opportunities to participate in judicial decision making is unclear. Only Rainforest Alliance makes grievance decisions publicly available in an annual summary report of received grievances. Several interviewees said very few grievances are received by their VSS each year, and they are typically related to certification decisions. It is unclear whether this is due to accessibility or a lack of need or interest in submitting grievances. Grievances could be a rich source of learning for VSSs, so further investigation of this is important.

Transparency of grievance mechanisms is critical to producers' ability to access them. Producer complaints and disputes can be brought to the attention of the VSS body through its online submission system, but this process often requires literacy as well as access to the Internet, which some producers may not have. This is acknowledged in grievance policies in some cases, such as Rainforest Alliance's procedure, which notes an exception to the online form can be made if the complainant is illiterate or lacks Internet access (Rainforest Alliance, 2022), but the alternative is not explained. Many of the VSSs deal with accessibility by requiring the organizations with which they work (e.g., certifiers, implementing partners) to have grievance mechanisms as the first point of contact for producers. This is discussed below under the subsidiarity of judicial decision making.

3.3.4 Subsidiarity of Judicial Governance

Table 19 shows that the four VSSs that provide information on their grievance mechanisms have a first point of contact for complaints and disputes at the local

Table 18. Disclosure of grievance committee members, decisions, and policies

Indicator[a]	Better Cotton	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance	ARSO	Trustea	Viet-Farm
Decision-makers						
Grievance committee [2327]	No	No	No	No	No	-[b]
Decisions [20904]						
Decisions available	Internal	Internal	Globally (publicly available)	Internal – respective parties only	No	No
Decisions in different languages	No	-	No	No	-	-
Policies [10903]						
Policies available	Globally (publicly available)	Globally (publicly available)	Globally (publicly available)	Globally (publicly available)	Globally (publicly available)	No
Policies in different languages	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	-

[a] Number in brackets refers to the ITC indicator code.
[b] "-" indicates missing data/no information found.

level, whether that is the certificate holder, certifying body, or local partner organization. There is no evidence that the VSSs that publish grievance decisions provide them in different languages. Half the VSSs provide policies in English only; the other half also provide them in other languages, such as French, Portuguese, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Japanese, in the case of Rainforest Alliance (Rainforest Alliance, 2023b).

A review of the VSSs' grievance policies and procedures revealed that the first point of contact for producers to bring forward complaints and disputes is typically a grievance mechanism at the level of the certificate holder, certifying body, or implementing partner organization. For example, Rainforest Alliance's standard requires large farms, group- and individual-certified farms, and supply chain operations to have a grievance mechanism in place that enables individuals, workers, communities, and civil society to submit complaints in the local languages and that offers the option to submit grievances in a format accessible to people who cannot read or have no access to the Internet (Rainforest Alliance, 2020b). The grievance mechanism must

Table 19. Subsidiarity of grievance mechanisms

Indicator[a]	Better Cotton	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance	ARSO	Trustea	Viet-Farm
Localized grievance mechanism*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	-
Decisions [20904]						
Decisions in different languages	No	-	No	No	-	-
Policies [10903]						
Policies in different languages	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	-

* The indicator is not available in the ITC Standards Map.
[a] Number in brackets refers to the ITC indicator code.
[b] "-" indicates missing data/no information found.

have a committee with at least one member/worker representative. Fairtrade International similarly requires plantations to set up grievance mechanisms for workers (Fairtrade International, 2023b), and each producer network has its own compliance committee (interview data). ARSO requires the certifying body or laboratory with a contract with the producer to have a complaint procedure specific to the management of ARSO-certified producers' complaints (ARSO, 2022). Better Cotton requires partner organizations and service providers to have their own grievance mechanisms (Better Cotton, 2022). Trustea and VietFarm have little information available on their grievance mechanisms.

Making the grievance procedure available in several languages also helps make it more accessible. Fairtrade reported an increase in grievances and complaints after changes were made to make it more accessible, including making it available in several languages, providing access to producer networks that can translate or interpret the process in another language, and making it possible to submit grievances via WhatsApp (interview data). Better Cotton has been piloting a specific project focused on workers' grievances using interactive voice response technology for grievance submissions (interview data).

3.4 M&E

Summary

None of the VSSSOs reserve a role or vote for producers in M&E processes and procedures. Available M&E policies and procedures suggest that these are managed by VSS staff and do not formally include producers, though they may be engaged alongside other stakeholders. Half of the VSSSOs—ARSO, Fairtrade International, and Rainforest Alliance—involve producers through self-assessment and reporting using digital tools. There remains a gap in the transparency of M&E policies and procedures to understand in detail how producers are involved in setting the objectives for data collection and their agency over the data collected.

3.4.1 Producer Representation in M&E

All the VSSSOs that were reviewed have formal M&E systems and processes, though in some cases, they have been implemented only recently. Trustea's M&E system started in early 2022 (interview data). Better Cotton is exploring how to expand its system to monitor impacts on producer livelihoods (interview data).

Table 20 shows that producers are not well represented in M&E decisions. Our review of available M&E policies and procedures suggests that these are managed by VSS staff and do not formally include producers. However, we did find that producers are involved in M&E activities, which is discussed in the following section.

3.4.2 Producer Participation in Monitoring and Evaluation

Table 21 shows the VSSs examined that use a multistakeholder process to collect, review, and assess M&E data. We see that multiple stakeholders are engaged in the M&E activities of the five VSSs for which we have data—Better Cotton, Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, Trustea, and VietFarm. This means they engage with a range of stakeholders, including certificate holders, companies,

Table 20. Producer representation in M&E

Indicator[a]	Better Cotton	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance	ARSO	Trustea	Viet-Farm
Formalized producer positions*	No	No	No	No	No	No

* The indicator is not available in the ITC Standards Map.
[a] Number in brackets refers to the ITC indicator code.

Table 21. Stakeholder participation in M&E activities

Indicator	Better Cotton	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance	ARSO	Trustea	Viet-Farm
Are multistakeholders engaged in M&E activities? [3574]	Yes	Yes	Yes	-[a]	Yes	Yes

[a] "-" indicates missing data/no information found.

external researchers, and possibly producers. ARSO did not share information on producer engagement in their M&E activities.

For the most part, the precise ways in which the VSSs engage stakeholders are not well documented, nor are details related to producer-specific engagement. The details that are documented in policies for the VSSs covered in this report suggest that producers participate in M&E mainly as sources and reporters of monitoring data, as opposed to being involved in determining what is measured and reported. Trustea, one of the only VSSs with a document detailing stakeholder engagement for M&E, states it engages producers and workers in its M&E procedures and activities via feedback forms, in-person meetings, interviews, online forums, and public surveys (Trustea Sustainable Tea Foundation, 2022a). VietFarm trains producers, who then conduct a self-assessment and share that information with VietFarm. Following that, VietFarm sends an assessor and monitor to the producer's site periodically and documents information in M&E field reports, with inputs from producers, as evidence for certification (interview data).

While still mainly engaged as collectors of data, there are several initiatives where producers have greater involvement in the evaluation and learning piece of VSS M&E systems; in many cases, this is linked to VSS verification and assurance systems. For example, Rainforest Alliance explains that its Farm Intelligence app helps producers make informed farm management decisions but also serves to digitize the internal audit system and collect additional monitoring data. This suggests that verification and M&E data are converging. Producers collect and share data with the VSS for registration and self-assessment, which is then used to assess compliance and for monitoring and evaluating the impacts of the program beyond individual compliance.

Based on the limited information we could find, the level of producer engagement in M&E varies by VSS and the avenues and activities through which they involve producers. According to an interviewee, an ongoing challenge for gaining producer participation in data collection and reporting raised in interviews is revealing non-compliance. Producers may not want to share data for fear of losing their certificate. VSSs may need to have some sort of commitment with producers to work together to remedy any issues or concerns that monitoring data reveals (interview data). Other interviewees indicated that their organizations are trying to develop open lines of regular communication with producers to create space for regular engagement and two-way feedback (interview data).

Table 22. Disclosure of monitoring findings

Indicator[a]	Better Cotton	Fairtrade International	Rainforest Alliance	ARSO	Trustea	Viet-Farm
Reporting monitoring results [700285]	Yes publicly	Yes publicly	Yes publicly	-	Yes, internally and select stakeholders	Yes publicly
Reporting M&E results to producers*	-[b]	-	-	-	Yes	-

* The indicator is not available in the ITC Standards Map.
[a] Number in brackets refers to the ITC indicator code.
[b] "-" indicates missing data/no information found.

3.4.3 Transparency of M&E

Table 22 shows that all the VSSSOs except ARSO provide publicly available information on the impact of their standards on producers and production practices. Our review of VSSSO documents reveals that they do so via dashboards and annual reports, commissioned evaluation research, and briefings.

An example of good practice in M&E transparency, Trustea has a statement on transparency and reciprocity of M&E data that commits it to sharing its M&E findings related to the standard's impacts on producers and production practices with small tea growers' associations, employees of tea estates, small tea growers, and factories. The findings are shared via in-person and online meetings. The policy includes a strategy to ensure balanced representation that includes reviewing constraints for underrepresented stakeholder groups and a strategy to strengthen their engagement (Trustea Sustainable Tea Foundation, 2022a). Other VSSs examined in this report do not have similar information available about whether they share the results of their M&E data with producers.

3.4.4 Subsidiarity of M&E

We assessed whether the VSSs have localized M&E activities to analyze the impacts of their VSS on producers and practices through document review and interviews. We found three main ways in which the VSSs are designing M&E to be more localized. First, in some cases, they delegate monitoring activities to implementing partners (Better Cotton) and producer networks (Fairtrade International), which operate closer to producers. In the case of Fairtrade International, each producer network has its own M&E staff and implements regional projects (interview data). Second, they increasingly involve producers in the collection of monitoring data via self-reporting using technological tools. For example, Fairtrade International will replace CODImpact, used by auditors, with FairInsight for data on use of the Fairtrade International premium and impact stories. Rainforest Alliance has developed the Farm

Intelligence app, which farmers and their associations can use to monitor their own performance but also share some of the data points with auditors and Rainforest Alliance (Rainforest Alliance, 2020c). ARSO also involves farmers in its M&E system through self-assessments that producers can follow (interview data). Third, we saw one case where the VSS included M&E activity to assess its support to producers specifically; Fairtrade International supports producer networks to conduct an annual survey to understand the satisfaction of producer organizations with Fairtrade services. This data is made available publicly online in reports (Fairtrade International, 2022b).

A question was raised by one interviewee about the line between engagement with producers and extraction of data from producers. The interviewee also pointed out that engagement is not separate from fair compensation for farmers. There are more opportunities to participate in data collection as VSSs proliferate, but where these do not come with benefits to producers, they could become simply points of extraction. VSSs are starting to address the issue of data ownership. Fairtrade International gives producers ownership over their data and lets them decide when to release it or whether to use it at all (interview data). Rainforest Alliance's Farm Intelligence app was developed as a standalone application to help producer groups manage their farms and groups using data; however, the certification manager can then share the data with Rainforest Alliance (Rainforest Alliance, 2020c).

4.0 Recommendations for VSSSOs

The following recommendations draw upon insights from our analysis of the literature, benchmarking, and interviews.

4.1 Executive Governance

Give Producers Decision-Making Power in the Highest Governance Bodies

What: VSSSOs should reserve seats for producers and design voting procedures to give producers decision-making power in their general assemblies (when applicable) and on their boards of directors/councils.

How: VSSSOs could have a policy formally requiring that at least one third of seats are reserved for producers. The policy could establish voting procedures that give weight to producers' votes and provide them with veto power or the ability to stop a motion from passing. VSSSOs that are membership-based could increase the share of producers in their general assemblies and boards, while those that are not membership-based could increase the share of producers on their stakeholder councils. For example, Better Cotton could increase producer representation among its members, raising their share of seats to one third of the general assembly. VietFarm and Rainforest Alliance could institute requirements for producers on their boards/councils to increase their representation and give them voting rights. Trustea could increase its formal requirements for producer representation on its stakeholder council to increase producer representation above one third of the share of seats. When the organization type does not allow for producer representation on the governing board—such as ARSO as an intergovernmental organization—other measures can be taken to include the voice of producers who implement their standard, such as by establishing producer advisory boards as noted below.

Example: Fairtrade is an example of a membership-based VSSSO that mandates producer representation and voting at 50% of all governance decisions in both its general assembly and its board of directors.

Support Producer-Led Collective Voice and Action

What: VSSSOs should support collective action and create opportunities for producer representation and coordinated producer participation to include their collective voice in the executive governance of VSSSOs by integrating producer-led organizations in their governance structures.

How: Create and/or leverage existing structures and devolve authority and financial support for groups of producers at the local, national, and/or regional levels interested in engaging in the VSSSO to come together, develop a coordinated program for producer training and capacity building, and elect and inform producer representatives to vote in VSSSO governing bodies. The composition of producer organizations should reflect the heterogeneous population of producers affected by the VSSs and elect and advise the producer representatives that sit on VSSSO governing bodies. The diversity of producers in the group should provide a nuanced understanding of the needs and interests of the various producers certified as compliant with the VSS. This will require procedures to identify the aspects of diversity that merit consideration and designing the process to ensure that producers who reflect these dimensions are part of the network. This could be a checklist to help ensure members

represent their producer base accurately, such as farm size, geographic location, gender, age (youth), commodity, whether farmer or worker, etc. It should also include procedures for the fair selection of producer representatives. VSSSOs can support producer groups by providing funding and also training in representation, participation, and transparency.

Example: Fairtrade International's system of producer networks provides an example of how regional associations of producers can be established as a core part of the VSSSO governance structure. The model of organizing along geographic lines could be adapted to context and applied to ARSO, Trustea, and VietFarm, as well as Better Cotton and Rainforest Alliance.

Increase the Transparency of Governance Decisions

What: VSSSOs should increase the transparency of executive decisions by publishing summaries of meeting discussions and decisions, especially those that affect producers.

How: VSSSOs can publish summaries of meeting debates and decisions pertaining to producers to make executive decision making transparent. This is important to maintain VSSSO legitimacy as an entity that oversees standard implementation and requires producers to be transparent in the way they operate via their certification and verification processes. VSSSOs can take precautions to anonymize names and identifying information where necessary to protect human rights defenders, such as those engaged in labour justice movements.

Example: Fairtrade International publishes summaries of its governance committee meetings; a similar template could be used for board/council meetings.

4.2 Legislative Governance

Provide Pre-Meeting Capacity-Building and Preparation Sessions for Producers

What: VSSSOs should support producer participation in VSSSO governance through training and preparation before governing body meetings to bring them up to speed and provide background on essential issues.

How: Producers must have all the relevant background information to be able to make informed decisions and offer input on draft standards. A series of pre-consultation meetings would get producer groups up to speed on key issues requiring their attention. Unbiased background evidence will be critical to enable their meaningful participation in decision making.

Example: Several social enterprises have successfully improved producer engagement at the board level through mechanisms like pre-board meetings with producers on issues to be discussed at the board meeting and training programs on board governance responsibilities for new board members representing producers (Mason & Doherty, 2016).

Ensure Producers Are Engaged in Standards' Consultation Processes

What: VSSSOs should ensure that standards' consultation processes are accessible and producers are nominated as experts on the standard-setting committee.

How: While to some extent VSSSOs already adapt consultation methods to consider producer literacy and access to the Internet, they could do more to tailor information channels to accommodate producers—for example, using WhatsApp or mobile texting apps to invite producers to provide input into consultation processes and offering interpretation services as needed to accommodate the various languages spoken by producers. VSSSOs can create guidelines that specify how to include producers in consultations and publish summaries of consultation comments and how input was addressed.

Example: Trustea has a policy document dedicated to stakeholder engagement with details on how each stakeholder type is reached. It also requires its standards development committee to evaluate if the views of all key stakeholders are represented in the consultation process and take mitigation measures if needed to ensure their input. This could be taken further to apply to various producer types and sectors.

4.3 Judicial Governance

Give Producers a Seat and Vote on Grievance Committees

What: VSSSOs should require that producers have a share of seats and votes on their grievance committees.

How: VSSSOs could increase producer engagement in complaints and dispute resolution by requiring producer representation on grievance committees. Producer representation can be assessed and monitored through the disclosure of the grievance committee composition. Names do not need to be disclosed to help protect producer representatives from any negative repercussions. Including producers on grievance committees is a way for their perspectives to be heard and incorporated into decisions on conflict resolution.

Example: Not found.

Publish Grievance Decisions

What: VSSSOs should increase the transparency of grievance decisions for accountability in the fair conduct of grievance processes and outcomes.

How: UN Grievance Procedure Mechanism provides guidance on publishing grievances and their outcomes. This step includes publishing information regularly on the number and type of grievances received, the number of grievances rejected and why, and the number of completed cases and their outcomes. This information can be communicated through annual reports, website publications, or public meetings.

Example: South Korea's Office of the Foreign Investment Ombudsman addresses grievances raised by foreign investors; its website provides an overview of grievances being resolved and anonymized examples of how grievance cases have been resolved.

4.4 M&E

Give Producers Agency Over Their Data

What: VSSSOs should give producers a vote on what data to collect and access to that data, with a view to increasing producers' benefits from them.

How: Co-creating M&E systems with producers would harness creative options

for shared information, help find common ground, and create transparency. Developing mutually beneficial formal data-sharing relationships means that producers can have a say in what is monitored. It could also give them access to their own data and, ideally, a collective pool of aggregated data that could be useful for them. Producers can also be financially rewarded for this data.

Example: LiteFarm is a free and open-source digital farm management tool co-created by producers and researchers for producers to use in farm management and reporting requirements for certification bodies. Producers have full control over their data and can request to delete their data from the LiteFarm database at any time. Fairfood and Verstegen Spices & Sauces collaborated to develop a digital blockchain platform for transparent nutmeg supply chains that allows consumers to verify whether individual producers received a quality premium. Verstegen pays a data premium of approximately 4% to participating producers.

Create Systems for Open Communication Between Producers and VSSSOs

What: VSSSOs should establish open avenues of communication between the VSSSO and producers where information flows in both directions to shape both goals and outcomes.

How: Producer networks, as recommended above, can be important avenues for creating ongoing two-way communication and feedback from producers and VSSSOs. Where producer networks are not present, having VSSSO operational staff located in places where there are have high concentrations of producers compliant with the VSS may support the development of informal and formal channels for communication.

Examples: Trustea has appointed a staff member in each of the three largest tea-growing areas in India whose job is not linked to compliance; rather, their role is to talk to people and understand what is happening on the ground, what is working, and what is not working (interview data). This is supported by a distinct stakeholder engagement policy (Trustea, 2023c).

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