

Advancing Producer Engagement

Insights and recommendations for voluntary sustainability standard-setting organizations

Sara Elder
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Introduction

Voluntary sustainability standards (VSSs) aim to foster sustainability through practices that align with social, environmental, and economic principles. Yet producers—the farmers and workers at the heart of these systems—often remain at the margins of decision making. This commentary report is written for voluntary sustainability standard-setting organizations (VSSSOs) to guide more effective engagement with producers and their organizations.

The analysis is based on two round table discussions with VSSSO representatives (11 participants representing seven organizations) and grounded in a review of the latest research on community and producer engagement. The round tables provided a forum for participants to engage in open dialogue and share their experiences, challenges, and aspirations regarding producer engagement, while also producing reliable and valid data on engagement practices and innovations.¹

Many VSSSOs have identified the importance of producer engagement but continue to look for ways to move it forward in practice. This report defines engagement, describes its value, and synthesizes round table findings to identify current engagement practices and recommend specific actions for improvement. It aims to support VSSSOs in identifying, developing, and adopting measures that enable greater producer inclusion in the implementation of VSS-compliant practices.

1. What Is Producer Engagement?

Producer engagement refers to the processes through which producers—often smallholders or farmers in global supply chains—are meaningfully involved in the design, implementation, and

¹ See Ørngreen & Levinsen (2017) for more information on workshops as research methodology.



evaluation of standards, programs, or policies that affect their livelihoods. This engagement can range from the passive receipt of information to active co-creation and leadership in decision-making processes (Arnstein, 1969; International Association for Public Participation, 2024). Collaborative engagement methods that systematically involve stakeholders are more likely to generate positive results (Reed et al., 2018). Moreover, inclusion is a cornerstone of sustainable development (United Nations, 1992) and is increasingly recognized as essential for the legitimacy, effectiveness, and sustainability of VSSs and other sustainability initiatives (Bennett, 2017; van der Ven, 2022).

The spectrum of producer engagement can be understood as a continuum, often adapted from Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of participation" and more recent engagement frameworks (Cornwall, 2008; International Association for Public Participation, 2024; Pretty, 1995). This spectrum includes informative, consultative, collaborative, and empowering forms of engagement, each with increasing degrees of producer influence and agency:

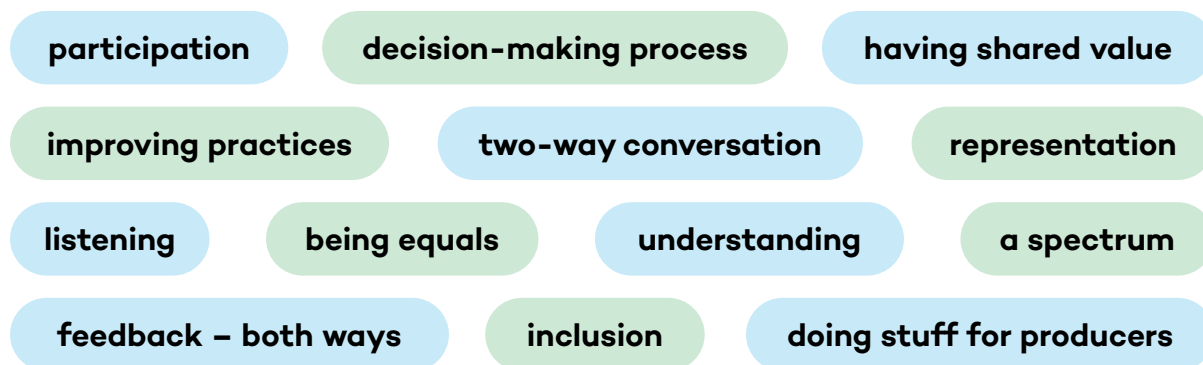
- **Informative** engagement involves the one-way dissemination of information from organizations to producers. This level seeks to raise awareness or ensure compliance but does not solicit input and typically occurs after a decision has already been made and cannot be changed (Reed et al., 2018). Providing information is foundational but insufficient for participatory development, as it maintains power asymmetries and limits producers' agency (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).
- **Consultative** engagement collects input, feedback, or preferences from producers, often through surveys, focus groups, or meetings. While it recognizes producers' perspectives, decision-making power typically remains with the initiating organization. Consultation can enhance responsiveness but risks being extractive if not linked to clear mechanisms for influence (Cornwall, 2008).
- **Collaborative** engagement entails shared decision making, co-design, and mutual accountability. Producers actively participate in defining problems and co-creating solutions alongside other stakeholders. This level requires trust-building, recognition of diverse knowledge systems, and longer-term relationship investments (International Association for Public Participation, 2024).
- **Empowering** engagement aims to build the capacities of producers and their institutions to lead, govern, and benefit from sustainability initiatives. It includes support for producer organizations, leadership development, and systemic shifts in power relations (Chambers, 1994). Empowerment is both a process and an outcome and is critical to equitable and transformative change (Scoones & Thompson, 2009).

Transitioning along this spectrum toward collaborative and empowering forms of producer engagement comes with several advantages. First, it increases the relevance of VSSs, helping to design standards that reflect on-the-ground realities, making them more applicable, feasible, and impactful (Longo, 2016; Stibbe & Prescott, 2024). Second, it fosters accountability and trust between producers and other actors in the value chain, improving legitimacy and buy-in (Glasbergen, 2018; Longo, 2016). Third, empowering engagement contributes to broader development outcomes, such as improved livelihoods, organizational capacity, and agency among producers (Narayan et al., 2000; Stibbe & Prescott, 2024).



Engagement that involves producers not only as compliers but also as creators of sustainability solutions supports a move toward equitable and resilient value chains.

Figure 1. Round table participant responses to the question: What does producer engagement mean to you?



Source: Author's elaboration based on round table responses.

2. What Is “Good” Producer Engagement? Core principles

Transparent

Transparent engagement means producers clearly understand the purpose, scope, process, and expected outcomes of engagement. Open communication about goals, timelines, decision making, and constraints is essential (Mikesell et al., 2013; Reed et al., 2018). Accessible, honest information about who is involved, how input will be used, and who will make final decisions requires being explicit about who sets the terms of engagement, who benefits, and how power circulates within the process (Cornwall, 2008). Transparent engagement builds trust by preventing hidden agendas and surprises, which helps maintain engagement over time.

Inclusive and Representative

Effective engagement must include a diverse range of voices, particularly those historically marginalized or disadvantaged in decision-making processes, like small-scale farmers (National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation et al., 2009). This diversity includes attention to gender, ethnicity, class, and power dynamics within producer or community groups. Representation should not be simply symbolic; it must ensure that engaged actors can influence outcomes. Engagement processes must recognize and value local knowledge systems, lived experience, and community-defined priorities (Chambers, 1994; Scoones & Thompson, 2009). Inclusive and representative engagement helps ensure that decisions reflect the needs and realities of the broader farming community—not just the most powerful actors.



Supported

Effective engagement ensures producers have the resources, capacity, and opportunity to participate meaningfully (Reed, 2008). This includes technical training, institutional support, and leadership development, as well as financial or logistical support. Supporting producers helps level the playing field so producers can engage on equal terms and avoid tokenistic consultation.

Influential

Engagement is designed so producers' input has real influence on decisions. Meaningful engagement involves co-design, joint planning, and shared accountability between external actors and producers or community members (Pretty, 1995; Schouten & Glasbergen, 2011). Power is redistributed through mechanisms that enable mutual decision making (Schiavo, 2021). Shared decision-making encourages participation by demonstrating that producer perspectives genuinely shape policy, programs, or standards.

Responsive

Engagement should be seen as a long-term process rather than a one-off intervention. Trust and legitimacy are built over time through consistent interaction, responsiveness, and honouring commitments (Bitzer & Glasbergen, 2015; van der Ven, 2022). Continuous improvement involves regularly evaluating and refining engagement strategies to ensure they remain effective and responsive to stakeholder needs. Responsive engagement strengthens trust and demonstrates respect for producers' time, experience, and knowledge.

Figure 2. Principles to better engage with producers



Source: Author.

3. Why Do VSSSOs Engage With Producers?

VSSSOs recognize producer engagement as a cornerstone of their efforts to promote sustainable practices and effective standard adoption. Six round table participants categorized current engagement practices as informing or consulting, while the rest saw their engagement as involving and collaborating with producers. Yet ultimately, nine participants expressed their



aim as collaboration and empowerment, one as involving, and one as consulting; none stated that they aim to only inform.²

VSSSOs prioritize producer engagement for several key reasons:

- **Because producers are key stakeholders:** VSSSOs recognize that producers are key players in their systems. VSSSOs prioritize producer engagement because producers are essential stakeholders whose actions determine the success of sustainability standards.
- **To understand real-world challenges faced by producers and shape realistic, context-sensitive policies and standards:** Producers working in diverse environments, particularly in the Global South, encounter unique challenges that must inform the development of sustainability standards. Their firsthand experiences and knowledge enable VSSSOs to create standards that are not abstract policies but practical, achievable, and grounded in local reality. By actively listening to producers, organizations can ensure that these standards reflect the complexities of local contexts and foster genuine sustainability.
- **To support standard adoption, compliance, and outcomes:** Engagement ensures that producers receive the necessary support, including training and resources, to implement standards effectively. By fostering shared commitment and trust, VSSSOs can enhance adoption rates and compliance, ultimately leading to more impactful and equitable sustainability outcomes.
- **To embed producer voices in governance and strategic decision making:** Producers are more than implementers—they are key stakeholders whose insights and expertise enrich governance processes. Meaningful engagement allows their voices to be heard, ensuring policies and strategies are co-created and hold greater legitimacy. This inclusion strengthens the connection between VSSSOs and producers, fostering mutual accountability and shared ownership.
- **To grow the market share by actively enabling producers to meet sustainability standards and access certified markets:** Through deliberate support and capacity building, VSSSOs ensure that producers are equipped to comply with standards, thereby unlocking access to lucrative certified markets. This approach not only empowers producers but also strengthens the competitive position of VSSSOs in the global market, driving broader market expansion and visibility for sustainable practices.

4. VSSSOs' Current Engagement Practices

In this section, we identify VSSSOs' current producer engagement practices and the challenges to advancing producer engagement in collaborative and empowering practices. This information was gathered in two virtual round table discussions with VSSSO representatives.

VSSSOs employ a range of practices to engage with producers. The depth and nature of engagement differ across organizations, spanning the spectrum from informing and consulting to collaborating and empowering producers. Below, we describe current practices

² Note that this is from the VSSSO participants' point of view, and future work could look at the perspective of producers themselves to understand better what they see as collaborating and empowering engagement.



that VSSSOs report using to engage and how they are applied in practice, highlighting their associated benefits and the ongoing challenges. Although these practices were discussed during the round tables, it does not imply that all VSSSOs are implementing each one. Instead, the analysis presents a variety of methods used to engage with producers. These are not the only mechanisms, and not all VSSSOs will utilize every one of them.

Structured Platforms for Dialogue

What it is	Formal mechanisms to support producer organizations and create a structure and space for ongoing communication.
How it is done	In some cases, VSSSOs have set up regional producer networks, national producer platforms, and commodity-specific product groups. These platforms support frequent, structured interactions and allow producers to share feedback, raise concerns, and co-create solutions with VSSSO staff and partners. Regular meetings, facilitated sessions, and capacity-strengthening workshops are used to maintain momentum. Round table participants stressed that supporting frequent dialogue requires time and effort.
Benefits	These platforms help enable real-time issue identification and build producer trust, advancing the principle of responsive engagement by ensuring ongoing dialogue and timely action. By creating space for producers to co-create solutions, the platforms also strengthen influential engagement, as producer feedback is integrated into decision making. The consistent, structured interactions also promote transparency.

Inclusive Governance

What it is	Integration of producers into governance bodies and decision-making processes within the standard-setting organization.
How it is done	Producers are given meaningful roles in governance structures, including board representation—sometimes comprising up to 50% of board members—with weighted voting systems to ensure their perspectives influence key decisions. Advisory committees and working groups also include producer representatives to shape standards and strategic directions.
Benefits	Integrating producers into governance builds legitimacy and equity by embedding producer voices into decision making, advancing the principle of inclusive and representative engagement. Board representation and weighted voting systems contribute to producer perspectives being influential, shaping the strategic direction of standards.



Localized Engagement

What it is	Field-level engagement tailored to the local realities, languages, and needs of producer communities.
How it is done	VSSSOs employ regional staff and local partners to engage with producers directly. They note that even when regional staff live in producer communities or nearby, that does not mean that they have fingers on the pulse; they have to carve out the time and space to sit under a tree for an hour and have intentional conversations with producers to know what is happening. Materials are translated into local languages, and engagement formats are adapted to local norms. Cost-effective outreach—such as radio broadcasts, WhatsApp groups, and community meetings—is used to increase accessibility.
Benefits	Regional and community-level engagement enhances the relevance and accessibility of engagement by adapting to local languages and contexts, furthering the principle of inclusive engagement. Grounding interventions in local realities and building local trust support responsive engagement.

Consultation and Feedback Loops

What it is	Producers' involvement in shaping standards and implementation through structured feedback mechanisms. Producers are consulted during standards development and on-the-ground project design, with feedback loops to integrate their insights into global policies and local projects.
How it is done	During standards revision or project design phases, VSSSOs hold consultation sessions, surveys, and field visits with producers. Feedback is systematically gathered and analyzed, with explicit loops to communicate back how producer insights have influenced policy and programmatic decisions. Some VSSSOs also publish consultation summaries and invite further comment.
Benefits	Consultation and feedback loops support transparency by explicitly sharing how producer feedback influences decisions. The iterative process also strengthens producer confidence and makes producer input more influential. When this process results in more context-specific and implementable policies, projects, and standards, it advances the principle of responsiveness.



Open Communication and Non-Compliance Forums

What it is	Safe spaces for producers to engage in open, non-punitive dialogue with standard bodies and peers.
How it is done	VSSOs run listening pilots, organize peer-to-peer exchanges, and establish farmer-led advisory committees to share experiences and perspectives. These forums are distinct from compliance monitoring and focus on mutual learning, trust building, and surfacing systemic challenges without fear of penalty.
Benefits	This process builds mutual trust, surfaces hidden barriers, and fosters innovation. It encourages honest feedback and collaboration.

Tangible Support and Benefit Sharing

What it is	Provision of direct support that makes engagement immediately valuable for producers.
How it is done	Producers receive training in sustainable practices, business skills, and market requirements. VSSOs offer support for market access, farm inputs, or price transparency. Mobile-accessible resources and apps are developed to support real-time decision making in the field, particularly for smallholders.
Benefits	Tangible support and benefit-sharing provide concrete value to producers, advancing supported engagement by ensuring they have the resources to participate meaningfully. Training and access to inputs also strengthen producers' capacity to act as influential partners in sustainability efforts.

Recognition and Motivation

What it is	Celebrating producer contributions and sharing successful stories to foster motivation and visibility.
How it is done	VSSOs organize award programs, showcase producer stories in newsletters or videos, and facilitate participation in international events or learning exchanges. These efforts validate producers' efforts and build a sense of shared identity within the VSS community.
Benefits	Celebrating contributions builds morale and visibility, which advances inclusion and representation. Validating diverse producer voices also demonstrates responsive engagement by recognizing and valuing producers' efforts, strengthening their identification with the standard system, and encouraging continued engagement.



Trust Building and Relationship Management

What it is	Building long-term relationships to overcome power asymmetries and instability caused by turnover.
How it is done	Regular, transparent communication between producers, buyers, and standard-setting bodies is prioritized. VSSOs train field staff in participatory methods and relationship-building skills while also supporting joint planning and open data sharing to improve accountability and responsiveness.
Benefits	Long-term relationships can reduce power asymmetries through open communication, directly advancing transparent engagement. Long-term relationship building shows responsive engagement, while participatory methods support producers' influence in decision making.

Collaborative Problem Solving

What it is	Producers are involved not just as participants but as partners involved in identifying and addressing complex issues beyond compliance.
How it is done	Producers are invited to co-design pilot initiatives, identify local priorities, and engage in adaptive management processes. These collaborative approaches have enabled producers to take on leadership roles in tackling challenges such as climate risks or living wages alongside VSSOs.
Benefits	Involving producers as partners advances the principle of influence. Jointly addressing challenges demonstrates responsive engagement, fostering innovation and strengthening the capacity of the system to respond to systemic issues.

Peer Learning and Knowledge Exchange

What it is	Opportunities for producers to learn from one another and experiment with new practices.
How it is done	VSSOs facilitate model farm visits, exchange visits between producer groups, and support innovative pilots. These initiatives allow producers to test new techniques, compare results, and transfer successful practices within and across regions. Peer-learning activities like model farm visits and pilot projects serve as effective vehicles for innovation and capacity building.
Benefits	Peer learning strengthens ownership of best practices and leadership, advancing supported engagement. Facilitating knowledge exchange across diverse groups also builds inclusive and representative engagement. Producers experimenting and innovating together further enhances influential engagement.



5. Engagement Challenges

VSSSOs identified several challenges that they face in advancing collaborative and empowering engagement aligned with the principles of good engagement.

Limited Tangible Benefits

Producers often must comply with standards to maintain market access, even when those standards do not align entirely with their needs or realities, are expensive to implement, and do not come with financial benefit. This can undermine their autonomy and lead to disengagement. When engagement activities require additional resources, time, and effort from producers without any benefit, producers may choose not to engage.

Reaching Marginalized Voices

Participation can remain skewed toward well-resourced, organized producers or intermediaries, such as cooperatives, which may not fully represent smallholders or marginalized voices. Women, Indigenous producers, and geographically remote farmers often face systemic barriers to participation.

Limited Direct Access

VSSSOs frequently rely on intermediaries, such as cooperatives or farm managers, which can dilute or distort producer voices. Many producers are not directly engaged in decision-making forums. Large numbers of producers, the heterogeneity of producers, multiple commodities, and country contexts make this challenge even greater.

Logistical Barriers

Participation barriers remain significant, particularly for smallholders who face costs for travel, meals, lost farm labour, or internet access. Language, technical jargon, and formal documentation can exclude smallholders and marginalized producers, limiting genuine dialogue.

6. Recommendations to Strengthen Producer Engagement

Most round table participants acknowledged that their current practices are falling short of their aspirations for producer engagement. Below, we provide priority recommendations for VSSSOs to strengthen engagement with producers following the principles of good engagement.

Transparent

Clearly communicate institutional commitment to producer engagement. This could include messaging from the top of the organization (CEO, VP levels) that producer engagement is a priority in terms of staff time and resources, clear communication of the goals of producer engagement, key groups to engage, engagement structures, and how producer input will be used.



Share results and raw data with producer communities. They have many ideas for how to use this information in their own project development, fundraising, and negotiations with government agencies and buyers. Ensure follow through and be sure that you do exactly what you say you will in terms of timing and process when it comes to data validation and sharing with communities. Design data collection tools and database systems using a data-sharing perspective that involves producers to move from data extraction toward data sharing.

Inclusive and Representative

Map affected producer groups, identifying priority groups and participation targets (e.g., % of smallholders, women, migrant workers, Indigenous groups). This ensures diverse producer voices are meaningfully included. This aligns with the ISEAL Code of Good Practice for Sustainability Systems,³ which requires VSSOs to carry out stakeholder mapping and to intentionally prioritize engagement with vulnerable stakeholders and underrepresented stakeholders.

Tailor engagement to the local context and priority producer groups. Create a structure that supports locally embedded engagement practices—for example, by hiring regional staff, partnering with local organizations, or institutionalizing ombudspersons for priority groups. This is crucial for tailoring engagement practices to the target producers; for example, using the appropriate messaging app to communicate with producers (e.g., in Vietnam, Zalo is more commonly used than WhatsApp).

Supported

Align engagement with real livelihood improvements. Offer practical incentives alongside engagement, such as market access support, recognition programs, and peer-learning opportunities tailored to producer needs and priorities. Co-design benefit-sharing models with producers and buyers. When engagement adds value for producers, especially the most vulnerable ones, it becomes more sustainable and can support the standard implementation and maintenance, which are costly and often imposed on producers.

Provide training on organization, leadership, negotiation, and advocacy skills. In addition to technical training to build capacity for implementing standards, focus on building the leadership, negotiation, and advocacy capabilities of producers and their organizations to enhance producers' agency and their capacity to engage. Targeting disadvantaged producer groups (versus the more well-resourced and connected producers who are likely to be the most vocal) can help to address asymmetries in engagement across heterogeneous producers.

Influential

Involve producers in the design of innovations, not only in piloting them. Co-designing solutions and initiatives with producer groups before piloting them can help ensure they are practical, relevant, and support producer livelihoods.

³ <https://isealalliance.org/what-we-do/credible-practice/iseal-code-good-practice-sustainability-systems>



Co-design monitoring, evaluation, and learning processes with producers. Doing so can help ensure that these systems reflect local priorities, knowledge, and practical realities. By involving producers in defining indicators, collecting data, and interpreting results, VSSOs can generate more meaningful, actionable insights.

Responsive

Create channels for ongoing producer engagement that are not tied to compliance and are accessible and relevant to the local context. What this looks like may range from accessible local language chat groups to local advisory groups or regular listening sessions, depending on organizational capacity and resources. For example, the World Wildlife Fund has an institutionalized ombudsperson for any community/stakeholder.

Develop indicators and monitor engagement progress and impact to support continuous improvement of engagement practices. Establish clear, context-specific indicators—such as participation rates, diverse voices, producer satisfaction, and evidence of influence on decisions—to measure the quality and outcomes of engagement. Regularly review and analyze these metrics with producer input to identify successes and gaps, and adjust strategies as needed to ensure engagement remains aligned with the principles of good engagement and is effective over time.

7. Conclusion

Producer engagement is a cornerstone of credible and effective VSS systems. But engagement is not automatic. It requires dedicated structures, resources, and a commitment to addressing power asymmetries. Meaningful engagement is neither automatic nor incidental—it requires deliberate effort, time, and trust building. VSSOs must transition from consultation to collaboration and from rule-setting to relationship building. Empowerment underpins effective producer engagement: for producers to participate meaningfully in consultation or governance processes, they must be supported to do so with confidence, knowledge, and agency. Involvement must extend across all aspects of VSS activity, from standard setting to implementation and learning, recognizing that nothing can be driven from the top down—producer engagement is not optional, but foundational. By investing in producer voices and agency, VSSOs can enhance legitimacy, sustainability outcomes, and the shared goal of equitable global value chains.



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Head Office

111 Lombard Avenue, Suite 325
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3B 0T4

Tel: +1 (204) 958-7700
Website: www.iisd.org
X: @IISD_news



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