Voluntary Sustainability Standards and Export Promotion

Insights from their integration in Vietnam, Namibia, Suriname, and Mozambique

SSI REPORT

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International Institute for Sustainable Development

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Photo: iStock

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

1.0 Introduction

Jules Sedney Haven, the main cargo seaport of Suriname. (Leonid Andronov/iStock)

Market access is vital for countries' economic development, as access to foreign markets brings important resources and stimulates investment, job creation, and local economic growth by facilitating the export of goods and services (World Trade Organization, 2024). Governments increasingly recognize the need to promote trade in goods produced through environmentally responsible practices and sustainable life cycles, while also safeguarding the welfare of local producers and workers. Several factors drive this shift, including public and corporate commitments to strengthen sustainability across value chains, growing global demand for sustainable products, and new legislation from major importing countries and regions. Notable examples include the European Union Deforestation Regulation and the European Union (EU) Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, which require companies to identify, prevent, and address adverse environmental and social impacts across high-risk supply chains such as wood, cocoa, and soy (Sarmiento, 2025; Verma, 2024).

Governments in developing countries and regions are adopting a range of measures to ensure exported products meet sustainability-related market requirements, while also expanding trading opportunities for producers, women, and micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises. One such measure is the adoption of voluntary sustainability standards (VSSs), which help businesses and consumers verify that products or their ingredients are produced using sustainable practices. In turn, VSSs can support compliance with increasing sustainability market requirements.

In this context, many developing countries are recognizing VSSs and integrating them into trade policies—including export measures—to facilitate market access for small-scale producers, women, and micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, while helping them align their goods and production processes with global sustainability requirements and promoting sustainable development (Bermúdez, 2021). Such measures may include providing financial support to help producers access certification or requiring compliance with specific certifications or practices to obtain export licences.

Despite this adoption, literature and evidence on the use and benefits of VSSs in export-promotion measures are limited. The available evidence examines the trade-related benefits of using VSSs, with many studies highlighting context-specific rather than generalizable results (Fernandes Martins et al., 2022; Marx et al., 2024; Meemken, 2020; Oya et al., 2018; Traldi, 2021). The information available on how these standards have been used to support the

export of more sustainable products, or on how VSSs are integrated into export measures, is anecdotal and outdated. There is also little documentation on the benefits for the parties involved, as well as on VSSs' use and effectiveness.

This policy brief examines how integrating VSSs into national regulatory and sectoral systems can drive export-promotion outcomes. It provides insights into why and how governments in developing countries are developing measures to support the use of VSSs in key domestic sectors to promote the export of more sustainable products and support producers in adopting and maintaining more sustainable production practices. The brief presents examples from four countries that have integrated or supported the use of VSSs for export promotion, highlighting lessons learned, benefits for producers, key successes and challenges, and emerging best practices.

This report concludes with actionable recommendations for policy-makers to effectively address emerging challenges and risks linked to the use of VSSs in export-promotion measures and the broader implications of evolving sustainability-related policies in importing countries.

2.0 Leveraging VSSs for Export Promotion

2.1 Why Governments Are Using VSSs in Export Measures

VSSs establish requirements for actors across the value chain in relation to a broad set of sustainability criteria (United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards, 2013). Put simply, VSSs can be considered sustainability systems designed to help producers and other economic actors achieve sustainable development objectives (ISEAL, 2023). These systems typically include a combination of elements, such as sustainability production requirements, mechanisms to verify compliance with these requirements, producer-focused support services, capacity-building training, and impact monitoring (Sarmiento et al., 2025).

A growing number of governments in developing countries are adopting VSSs and integrating them into trade policy, such as export-promotion strategies, to boost the export of sustainable products, with a particular focus on sectors vital to economic development, including agricultural, horticultural crops, and fisheries (Bermúdez & Sarmiento, 2023). This integration may require local producers, operators, and exporters to meet the requirements of specific VSSs and adopt measures to facilitate their uptake.

Integration is seen as a means of accessing sustainability-driven markets and advancing agricultural practices that deliver tangible benefits to local producers and value-chain actors. The expected growth in global demand for VSS-compliant products is fuelled by their increasing incorporation into policy frameworks, such as trade agreements and sustainable procurement, and the shift in global consumer preferences toward sustainability (Kemper et al., 2024).

According to our analysis, both external and domestic factors can shape VSS integration in export-promotion measures, as explained below.

2.1.1 External Factors Influencing the Use of VSSs for Export Promotion

External factors influencing the use of VSSs in export-promotion measures may stem from conditions, incentives, or demands originating outside the producing country. They can be driven by the decisions or influence of external actors, such as importing countries—for example, through importing-country demands and regional strategies or initiatives.

Importing Country Demands

Export-oriented sectors often depend on access to markets in Europe, North America, and, increasingly, Asia, where consumers, retailers, and regulators are demanding stronger assurances that imported products comply with specific environmental and social standards. Governments in exporting countries may encourage local producers to adopt or align their practices with VSSs to meet the expectations of these markets or to show that their production systems align with the sustainability criteria demanded abroad. In some cases, importing countries may demand compliance or give preferential treatment to products that

are certified under specific VSSs or that meet aligned sustainability criteria as a condition for access to their markets.[1]

This trend is evident in North–South trade relations, where Northern markets have often been at the forefront of defining and applying sustainability requirements in trade. In response, many exporting countries have adapted production systems and trade policy frameworks, often incorporating support for VSS adoption into broader export-promotion strategies. These developments reflect a shift in global markets, where sustainability attributes are increasingly treated as prerequisites, and non-compliance can lead to the loss of market share or exclusion from supply chains. A clear example of this shift is the EU Deforestation Regulation, which states that products derived from covered commodities may only be placed on the EU market if they meet strict deforestation-free requirements (Sarmiento, 2025).

Regional Strategies or Initiatives

Along with demands from importing countries, regional sustainability initiatives can also shape the use and integration of VSSs in countries' trade policies. Regional organizations or economic blocs may develop sustainability frameworks, strategies, or harmonized standards that encourage member countries to integrate VSSs into their domestic policies. These initiatives may define regionally accepted sustainability requirements that guide producers and exporters, create a common sustainability benchmark within a trade block, or facilitate intraregional trade. In some cases, regional initiatives are explicitly designed to strengthen access to external markets by ensuring that regional production systems align with international sustainability expectations.

Examples of such regional initiatives include:

- The African Organization for Standardisation's (ARSO's) sustainability standards encourage sustainable production practices across Africa. They serve as regionally recognized benchmarks that export-oriented firms can use to signal compliance with sustainability requirements in key export markets, such as the EU. These standards support sustainable development and facilitate producers' access to intraregional and global value chains, demanding sustainability in key sectors such as agriculture, forestry, and aquaculture. ARSO supports the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area by fostering the harmonization of sustainability standards and practices across African markets, reducing technical barriers to trade, promoting sustainable development, and enhancing market access (ARSO, 2026; International Organization for Standardization, 2025).
- The Pacific Organic Standard (POS) is a regional initiative developed by the Pacific Community, a consortium of Pacific governments and stakeholders, to create a regionally harmonized standard for organic production. It offers a common sustainability benchmark for producers across Pacific Island countries and recognizes

[1] Examples include South Korea's Act on the Sustainable Use of Timbers (2017), which aims to promote the trade of legally harvested timber and applies to domestic and imported timber and timber products. It formally recognizes VSSs such as the Forest Stewardship Council and the Programme for Endorsement of Forest Certification as proof of compliance with the legality requirements under the regulation (Sarmiento et al., 2025).

local participatory guarantee systems[2] to facilitate the intraregional trade of organic products. The POS also helps exporters demonstrate compliance with organic and sustainability practices required by global markets without needing to meet multiple divergent private standards. This support can lower certification costs for producers and create incentives for national governments to support POS certification programs as a gateway to high-value organic markets such as the EU and Australia (Bermúdez & Sarmiento, 2023).

- The Harmonized Guidelines for Good Agricultural Practices from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN GAP) promote sustainable agricultural production practices that help farmers meet both regional and export-market requirements for food safety and sustainability. In practice, ASEAN GAP provides a common regional reference and clarifies what "good practice" means for export-oriented agriculture in the region. This harmonization has encouraged ASEAN members such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam to align their national regulations with ASEAN GAP and to embed compliance with these guidelines into national export promotion tools (i.e., export quality marks, eligibility criteria for export support). This process reduces technical barriers to intraregional trade, as producers no longer need to comply with multiple national standards when selling across borders (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2020).

2.1.2 Domestic Factors Driving the Use of VSSs for Export Promotion

Domestic factors influencing the use of VSSs in export-promotion measures are shaped by national priorities and locally identified needs, whether aligned with sustainability goals or aimed at scaling up VSSs that already cover important economic or export-oriented sectors.

Sustainability Objectives of Producing Countries

In this case, the use of VSSs in export-promotion measures forms part of a broader national sustainability strategy aimed at transforming production practices into key value chains and supporting local producers who implement more sustainable production practices.

Governments may also view the adoption of certain VSSs as a pathway to access new markets where they have limited commercial relations or to expand opportunities in existing ones. As an example, Madagascar's Ministry of Agriculture has developed a national strategy for organic certification to reach high-value niche export markets (Katto Andrighetto, 2020). Similarly, national standards, such as Indonesia's VSS for palm oil (Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil), have been developed to (i) promote more sustainable palm oil production, (ii) support smallholders, and (iii) improve the acceptance and competitiveness of Indonesian palm oil in both domestic and international markets. The Indonesian government also

[2] Participatory guarantee systems are locally focused quality assurance systems that certify producers based on the active participation of stakeholders. They are built on a foundation of trust, social networks, and knowledge exchange. For more information, see https://www.ifoam.bio/our-work/how/standards-certification/participatory-guarantee-systems

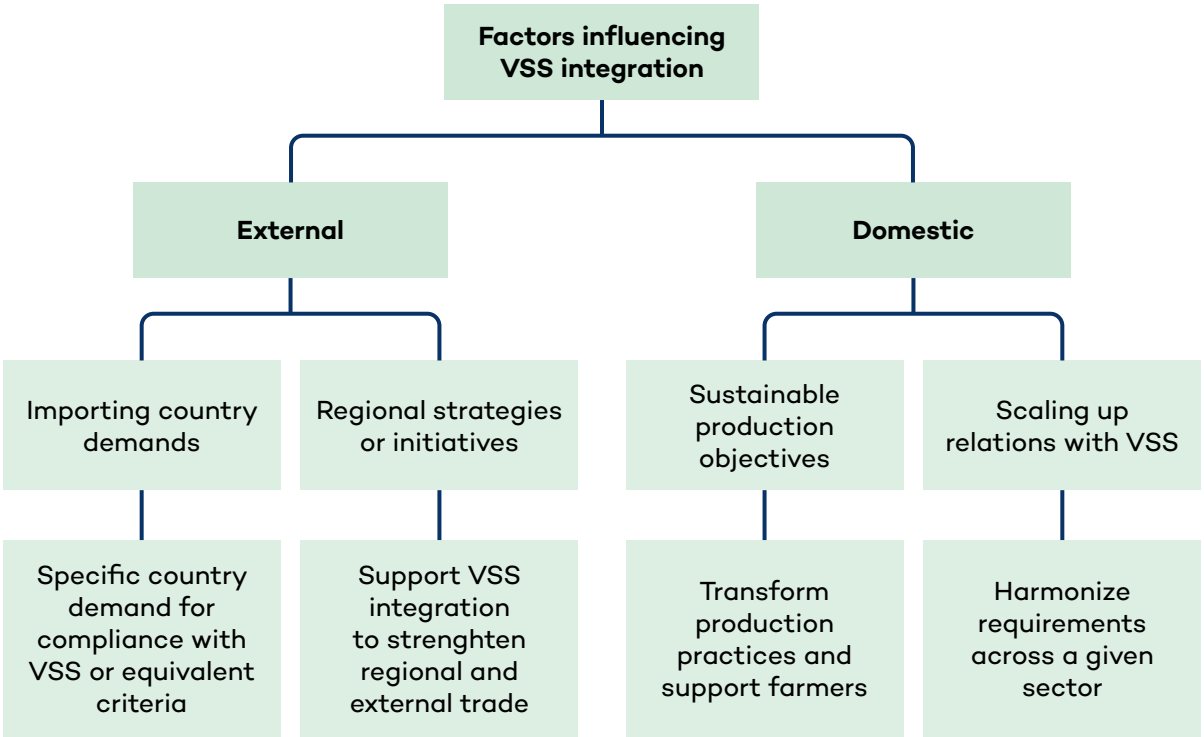
provides financial support to help smallholders obtain Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil certification (Indonesia Palm Oil, 2025).

Scaling Up Relations With VSSs

Integrating VSSs into export-promotion measures often builds on standards already adopted by a significant number of local producers in key export-oriented sectors. In such cases, governments may align national regulations with sustainability standards already operating in the country to harmonize requirements for producers and exporters across a given sector and improve access to markets. For example, the Kenyan government benchmarked its mandatory national horticulture standard (KS1758), developed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development, against the Kenya Flower Council's Flowers and Ornamentals Sustainability Standard (FOSS), a private VSS that had been widely adopted by flower producers and exporters to access markets such as the Netherlands, making compliance a legal requirement to obtain export licences. This alignment has facilitated trade in sustainably produced flowers and ornamentals from Kenya, while expanding market opportunities for local producers and ensuring fair competition across the sector (Bermúdez & Ngige, 2024).

Figure 1 illustrates the various factors influencing VSS integration in export-promotion strategies. It highlights external and domestic factors influencing the integration or use of VSSs in export measures. For each factor, it provides a brief description of the motivations or incentives for governments to integrate it.

Figure 1. Factors influencing the integration of VSSs in export promotion measures



Source: Authors.

2.2 How to Integrate VSSs Into Export Measures

Beyond external and domestic influences, VSSs are being integrated into export-promotion measures in various ways. Based on our literature review, this integration typically takes one of the following forms.

2.2.1 Direct Integration of VSSs in Export Measures: Mandatory compliance

In this type of integration, governments directly incorporate a VSS that has significant influence in a specific sector in the country. In this case, legislation or export measures explicitly reference the standard, making compliance mandatory for producers to export their products and obtain export licences. Usually, this type of integration follows a collaborative approach between government authorities and standard-setting bodies, including, in some cases, the development of joint verification and certification procedures to reduce compliance costs and audit fatigue (Bermúdez & Ngige, 2024).

One example of this is Jamaica, where farmers wishing to export fresh produce—such as fruits and vegetables—to Europe have been required since 2015 to comply with GLOBALG.A.P. certification. This requirement, aligned with the Food Safety Modernization Act of 2011, aims to promote good domestic agricultural practices, as well as quality and environmental standards and guidelines for the sector. In 2016, the Jamaican government allocated about USD 100 million to support certification and promote exports of fresh produce (Marx, 2017; Ministry of Industry, Commerce, Agriculture and Fisheries, 2016; National Certification Board of Jamaica, 2025).

Kenya's horticulture sector also uses direct integration. As already noted, domestic producers and exporters of flowers and ornamentals are legally required to comply with the mandatory KS1758 standard, benchmarked against the Kenya Flower Council's FOSS, to obtain export licences (Bermúdez & Ngige, 2024)

Another example is Namibia, which is one of the case studies presented later in this report. The government expects compliance with GLOBALG.A.P.'s Primary Farm Assurance (PFA) to become mandatory in 2026 or 2027 as a minimum production standard for all Namibian horticultural products destined for export markets (Namibian Agronomic Board, 2025b).

2.2.2 VSSs Influencing Export Measures: Voluntary compliance

In this form of integration, VSSs can influence national sectoral programs or legislation relevant for export promotion, and governments can draw inspiration from their principles and criteria to adapt national policies, develop domestic standards, and offer capacity-building support to producers in their attempt to contest foreign markets. However, compliance with the standard is not a mandatory requirement for producers to export.

An example of this form of integration can be seen in Colombia, where the Colombian Agricultural Institute developed a national Good Agricultural Practices standard for agriculture in 2020. This standard was developed drawing on GLOBALG.A.P.'s Integrated

Farm Assurance (IFA) standard, an internationally recognized VSS. This alignment aimed to ensure that fruits and vegetables produced in Colombia met safety and quality requirements and to implement sanitary and phytosanitary measures to reduce disease risks, while also increasing access to markets—particularly in Europe—that demand compliance with such practices. Compliance with the local standard is not mandatory but it is encouraged by the government. However, as a result of this alignment, Colombian producers already certified under GLOBALG.A.P. are exempt from additional government audits, thereby reducing duplication and strengthening export capacity (Colombian Ministry of Agriculture, 2020).

Another example is Vietnam, which is included among the case studies presented in this brief. Vietnam's Forest Law (2017) and the National Forestry Plan (2021–2030) establish the legal and strategic foundation to develop the forestry sector and provide for a national sustainable forest management (SFM) certification scheme. This domestic scheme recognizes international VSSs operating in the country—such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) standard and the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC)—as valid pathways for producers to demonstrate compliance with SFM requirements, thereby facilitating access to international markets that demand certified sustainable timber. Compliance with these standards remains voluntary.

Table 1. VSSs in export measures: Two forms of integration

Direct integration of VSSs in export measures: Mandatory compliance	VSSs influencing export measures: Voluntary compliance
• Governments embed specific VSSs directly into legislation or export rules. • Compliance becomes **mandatory** to export and obtain export licences. • Examples include Jamaica and GLOBALG.A.P. for fresh produce; Kenya and Kenya Flower Council's FOSS	• VSSs inspire national policies, domestic standards, and capacity building programs. • Compliance is **encouraged**, not required, for export. • Examples include Colombia's National Good Agricultural Practices (BPA) harmonized with GLOBALG.A.P. for fruits and vegetables; Vietnam and FSC and PEFC to demonstrate sustainable timber production

Source: Authors.

3.0 Evidence From the Field: Global case studies

This section showcases four case studies from countries that have used or integrated VSSs in export-promotion measures. These VSSs include the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) in Mozambique to increase cotton exports, GLOBALG.A.P. in Namibia for agronomic and horticultural products, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) in Suriname's seabob fishery, and finally, FSC for forestry products in Vietnam.

In 2024–2025, the International Institute for Sustainable Development conducted online interviews (see Appendix A for a list of interviewees) with eight relevant actors in these four countries—including government representatives, producer organizations, and VSSs—to better understand the motivations, nature, and challenges of the integration process of VSSs in export-promotion measures, as well as opportunities to enhance market access for domestic producers.

The interview questions focused on understanding interviewees' perspectives on the motivations and key factors behind the integration and use of VSSs in export measures. The questions also explored the benefits of this integration for value-chain actors, especially producers, as well as the challenges associated with VSS implementation.

The responses were coded and anonymously classified into four categories:

- drivers of VSS adoption in export-promotion measures,
- factors facilitating export-promotion outcomes,
- common barriers to implementation, and
- the perceived benefits of using VSSs in export promotion.

The findings from these interviews, supported by secondary literature, are presented below.

3.1 Mozambique and the Better Cotton Initiative

3.1.1 Main Elements of Integration

Cotton is one of Mozambique's leading agricultural exports and a key source of income for rural households (BCI, 2025b; Chatham House, 2025). Over the past 5 years, total cotton export earnings exceeded USD 150 million, exported mainly to Pakistan and India (UN Comtrade, 2025). BCI is a major sustainability initiative for cotton (BCI,

2023), and Mozambique has collaborated with Better Cotton since 2012. This collaboration was formalized in 2014 through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that was renewed twice and remained in place until 2020 (Cotton Institute, personal communication, 2024). Under the MoU, the government of Mozambique, through the Cotton Institute, deepened its partnership with BCI by integrating its principles and criteria into the national cotton regulation.

This integration resulted in the 2015 Cotton Regulation, which mirrors BCI's criteria (Republica de Mozambique, 2015). The regulation introduces environmental sustainability measures that apply to all cotton production in Mozambique, including soil and water management and pest control. It also addresses social and labour standards through a dedicated article on decent work, which requires operators to adopt occupational health and safety measures, train workers and service providers, ensure compliance with national labour laws, and prohibit hazardous tasks for vulnerable groups such as pregnant women and minors.

While the BCI standard itself is voluntary, incorporating its principles and criteria into the national regulatory framework for cotton meant the requirements became mandatory for cotton farmers operating in Mozambique. Importantly, compliance with the national regulation does not automatically confer BCI certification. Rather, alignment with the BCI principles facilitates compliance with the standard and can ease the pathway toward certification.

This regulatory change can be considered a strategic export-oriented measure. By embedding BCI's requirements into its legal framework, Mozambique positioned itself to meet the rising sustainability demands of global textile markets. In other words, the partnership aimed to improve sustainable cotton production practices at scale, enhance Mozambique's global reputation for high-quality cotton, and boost its exports by accessing international markets with growing demands for sustainability (National Forum of Cotton Producers – FONPA, personal communication, 2024). In this regard, one of the long-term goals was for Mozambique to achieve the status of Better Cotton Equivalent Standard Country through a benchmarking agreement. Similar agreements exist with other countries, such as Australia and Brazil, that have their own robust public sustainable cotton standards, benchmarked against the BCI standard and identified and recognized as equivalent.

3.1.2 Services Provided to Producers

Under this integration, farmers in Mozambique receive training and technical support to meet the BCI standard through Programme Partners that are formally linked to the standard via partnership agreements. Within the BCI system, Programme Partners are locally based organizations formally approved to implement the standard at the field level by delivering farmer training, providing technical support, monitoring compliance, and collecting data to support farmers in adopting and continuously improving sustainable practices.

In Mozambique, Programme Partners include the Sociedade Algodoeira de Namialo (SANAM) and the Sociedade Algodoeira de Niassa – JFS (SAN-JFS). These private national cotton companies are trained on the BCI standard and develop guidance on sustainable production practices, such as on pesticide use and water management, tailored to their national context (BCI, 2025b). They also provide on-the-ground training to farmers, access to

inputs such as seeds and fertilizers, and extension services. This is meant to improve yields and cotton quality (Cotton Ginning Association, personal communication, 2024).

In addition, SANAM and SAN-JFS are designated as concession holders by the Mozambican government under the cotton regulation. As concession holders, they are granted exclusive operational rights in specific areas and are responsible for organizing cotton production in those zones. In other words, Mozambique's cotton sector operates under a structured concession model in which private companies assume public service roles to support smallholder cotton farmers, guided by regulations and contracts with the Cotton Institute (Cotton Ginning Association, personal communication, 2024).

For example, SAN-JFS, one of the oldest companies in Mozambique, actively supports local communities by investing in community infrastructure, including schools and solar panels, and creating employment opportunities in ginning and oil pressing (FONPA, personal communication, 2024).

As the lead public agency in the cotton sector, the Cotton Institute collaborated with BCI and cotton companies to develop training materials on production practices and decent work. These materials are used to guide farmer training throughout the entire cotton production cycle. The Cotton Institute also allocated vehicles and staff resources (Cotton Institute, personal communication, 2024).

3.1.3 Results of Integration

With the national regulation closely aligned with BCI criteria, today, 86% of cotton farmers in the country are formally BCI certified, covering 90% of the land used for cotton cultivation in Mozambique (BCI, 2025b). As a result, according to BCI's 2025 annual report, there were 61,472 licensed farmers and 6,950 tonnes of BCI-certified cotton grown in the 2023/24 season (BCI, 2025a).

BCI certification has enhanced farmers' knowledge of best sustainable agricultural practices, improved production quality, and ensured proper record-keeping by cotton companies. Moreover, the presence of BCI in the country has facilitated networking opportunities for Mozambican companies, potentially improving market access (Cotton Institute, personal communication, 2024).

Cotton farmer in Africa. (AM29/iStock)

However, the economic impact of BCI's certification—both in terms of certified exports and cotton prices for certified farmers—remains unclear. Farmers in Mozambique receive a minimum price set annually through a formula linked to cotton export values. It is uncertain whether

certified cotton farmers receive higher prices or premiums. The lack of transparency in pricing and export data, largely controlled by ginning companies responsible for exports, makes it difficult to determine if certification translates into better financial returns for producers (Cotton Institute, personal communication, 2024; FONPA, personal communication, 2024).

3.1.4 Challenges Identified

The MoU between BCI and the Cotton Institute has not been renewed since 2020, primarily due to structural changes at the institute, including a prolonged vacancy in the director's position and broader political transitions. As a result, collaboration has continued informally, mostly through field activities and logistical support. The MoU will probably be reinstated; however, this will depend on renewed government engagement and the strategic direction established by the incoming leadership (Cotton Institute, personal communication, 2024).

Furthermore, Mozambique has yet to achieve the status of Better Cotton Equivalent Standard Country, a designation given to countries with a robust public sustainable cotton standard, benchmarked against the BCI standard and recognized as equivalent. While the cotton regulation incorporated some BCI principles, the lack of funding and institutional changes have prevented Mozambique from advancing to this next stage of recognition (Cotton Institute, personal communication, 2024; FONPA, personal communication, 2024).

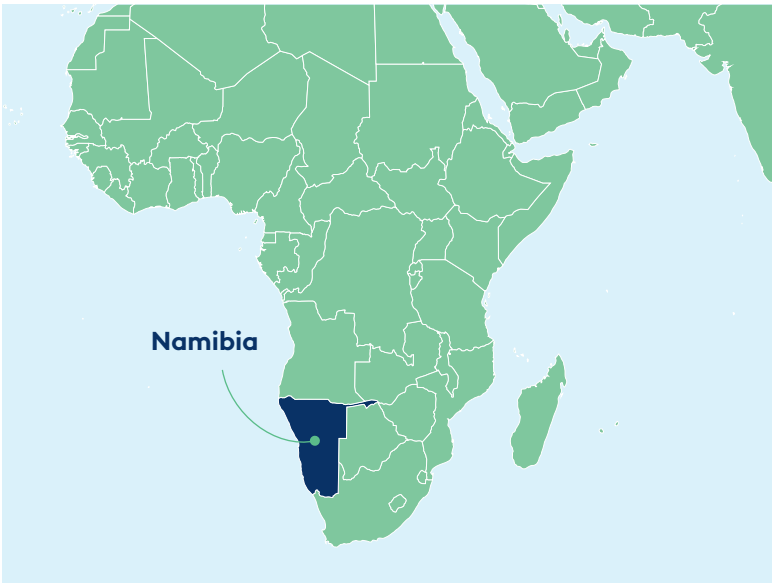
3.1.5 Conclusion

The Mozambique and BCI case exemplifies the first form of VSS integration into export-promotion measures, where a government incorporates the principles and criteria of an international VSS into its national policies and regulatory framework, making compliance mandatory. Mozambique embedded BCI's requirements in the 2015 Cotton Regulation, while working with the VSS to provide training, guidance, and support to farmers.

The primary motivation for this integration was internal, as the Mozambican government sought to improve production practices and strengthen the cotton sector. At the same time, external factors influenced the process, as aligning national regulation with an internationally recognized standard positioned the country to respond to rising global sustainability expectations in the cotton sector. Mozambique demonstrates how internal development priorities and external market incentives can align and reinforce each other within a direct VSS-integration approach.

3.2 Namibia and GLOBALG.A.P.

3.2.1 Main Elements of Integration



The agronomic and horticultural sector is critical to Namibia's economy. In 2022, horticultural products such as fruits, berries, vegetables, and live plants were among the fastest-growing export categories to key markets in Europe, such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Germany, as well as regional markets including South Africa and Angola, reaching about USD 96.9 million that year (Resource Trade Earth, 2025). Given the sector's growing importance in local production and trade, the Namibian Agronomic Board (NAB), established in 1985 and governed by the Agronomic Industry Act 20 of 1992, is tasked with promoting the agronomic industry and facilitating the production, processing, storage, and marketing of controlled agronomic and horticultural products in Namibia (NAB, 2025a). To achieve this, NAB developed Namibia's Food Control System for Agronomic and Horticultural Products, an integrated food safety, quality control, and traceability system for managing imported, exported, and local market agronomic and horticultural products.

NAB's mandate is to strengthen national food safety oversight, ensure that imports entering the country meet internationally recognized standards, and enhance the competitiveness of Namibian exports, particularly to key EU markets. To achieve this, NAB and GLOBALG.A.P., an international farm assurance program setting standards for safe, sustainable, and responsible agricultural practices, signed a 5-year service-level agreement in 2021 (GLOBALG.A.P., personal communication, 2025; NAB, personal communication, 2025). The agreement aims to build the capacity of Namibian producers to adopt and implement GLOBALG.A.P.'s PFA and related standards to ensure that the import, export, and transit of high-value horticultural products, such as dates, citrus, and blueberries, are consistently regulated and comply with global food safety expectations (GLOBALG.A.P., 2021).

The collaboration seeks to ensure a responsive regulatory framework that guarantees the quality and safety of agronomic and horticultural products produced and traded locally and for export markets. This includes establishing internal government policies to control the movement of food products across borders, permitting only those that meet GLOBALG.A.P. requirements. In practice, this means that compliance with GLOBALG.A.P.'s PFA will become mandatory as a minimum standard for Namibian horticultural products destined for export markets (NAB, 2025b). Draft legislation was proposed in 2022 to make compliance with GLOBALG.A.P.'s PFA a requirement for the domestic sale of crop-based products

(GLOBALG.A.P., 2022); however, no recent updates on the progress or adoption of this proposal are available.

GLOBALG.A.P. also guided NAB through the steps to becoming a verification body capable of overseeing compliance, issuing performance verification, and facilitating trade by aligning Namibia's systems with internationally recognized standards (GLOBALG.A.P. representative, personal communication, 2024). This means that NAB can inspect and certify local farms against the local GLOBALG.A.P. standards for fruits and vegetables, and these results can be entered into the VSS's database (Ya Ngulu, 2023).

3.2.2 Services Provided to Producers

Through the GLOBALG.A.P. and NAB partnership, agronomic and horticultural producers in Namibia benefit from a structured support system designed to build their capacity to meet the PFA, which acts as an entry-level standard for smallholder producers and a pathway to achieve full GLOBALG.A.P. IFA certification[3] (GLOBALG.A.P., 2025). The services provided to farmers include training, quality management system guidance, internal auditor training, and practical mentorship. These sessions are delivered by NAB inspectors and a pool of independent consultants who were formally trained, examined, and registered, ensuring a ready network of competent trainers able to support farmers across the country.

Producers also receive ongoing technical support through NAB's national interpretation guidelines, which translate GLOBALG.A.P. requirements into Namibia-specific rules, including locally permitted pesticides, national social-compliance provisions, and any local legal requirements referenced in the standard. This ensures that farmers receive advice calibrated to local conditions while remaining aligned with internationally recognized practices. To further ease implementation, NAB is developing a food safety management system manual and template manuals to guide farmers through documentation, record-keeping, and system implementation required for PFA compliance. These tools are particularly important for small and medium-sized producers seeking to enter formal retail markets, where compliance with GLOBALG.A.P. PFA and possession of a valid Letter of Conformance are increasingly becoming prerequisites (NAB representative, personal communication, 2024).

In addition, farmers benefit from structured on-farm assessments carried out by NAB inspectors trained on GLOBALG.A.P. standard requirements. These assessments help farmers understand performance gaps and verify the progressive adoption of good agricultural practices. NAB aims to assess at least half of its active registered farmers annually, creating continuous improvement cycles across the sector.

[3] PFA and IFA are both certification standards developed by GLOBALG.A.P. PFA is an entry-level standard designed to help farmers demonstrate compliance with basic Good Agricultural Practices and to serve as a stepping stone toward certification. IFA, by contrast, is the full, internationally recognized certification standard covering comprehensive requirements for food safety, environmental sustainability, worker welfare, and traceability. In this sense, PFA can function as a preparatory pathway toward achieving IFA certification.

3.2.3 Results of Integration

African farmer carries freshly picked tomatoes. (Roger Yebuah/iStock)

Thanks to the partnership, GLOBALG.A.P. has trained over 45 experts in the IFA standard for fruit and vegetables, the PFA standard, and group certification processes, which allow multiple farmers to become certified under a single certificate through a shared internal control system, reducing individual certification costs and administrative burdens while ensuring all members comply with the required standards. (GLOBALG.A.P., 2021).

In 2026, NAB will become the first entity in the world to roll out the full GLOBALG.A.P. PFA training program, marking a major step in institutionalizing continuous capacity building for producers in Namibia. This program will complement NAB's role as a verification and inspection body overseeing the agronomic and horticultural value chains, from production and processing to consumption. With oversight extending across more than 87 horticultural commodities, including apples, watermelons, bananas, and table grapes, NAB ensures that producers receive technical guidance aligned with internationally recognized food safety and quality requirements.

The integration has also resulted in the establishment of a National Technical Working Group, jointly supported by GLOBALG.A.P. and NAB. This expert body develops Namibia's national interpretation guidelines, ensuring that GLOBALG.A.P. requirements—whether related to pesticides, worker welfare, or record-keeping—are clearly adapted to local legislation and production realities. NAB has already convened the first meeting of the working group, strengthening local governance structures and laying the foundation for future alignment not only within Namibia but also with regional trading partners. NAB's objective is to achieve cross-border recognition of Namibian PFA-compliant produce, helping farmers access both domestic retail markets and regional export channels (NAB, personal communication, 2025).

Services provided under this integration are funded through NAB's levy system, where local exporters, importers, and traders contribute a percentage of product value. This allows NAB to cover costs such as trainer fees, training venues, materials, mentorship activities, and producer support services, ensuring that farmers do not pay for certification, farm registration on the GLOBALG.A.P. database, or inspector deployment (NAB, personal communication, 2025). By lowering financial barriers and providing structured, locally adapted technical support, this integration enables producers, particularly small-scale farmers, to comply progressively with GLOBALG.A.P. requirements and access higher-value domestic and export markets.

Looking forward, NAB plans to extend GLOBALG.A.P.-aligned sustainability and good agricultural practices support beyond horticulture into the grain sector, ensuring broader coverage of Namibia's agricultural commodities (NAB, personal communication, 2025).

3.2.4 Challenges Identified

Despite the progress achieved through the collaboration between GLOBALG.A.P. and NAB, structural, financial, and operational challenges continue to limit the pace and depth of implementation. One major constraint is the limited operational capacity within GLOBALG.A.P. to support implementation and the potential expansion of similar initiatives in neighbouring countries. This constraint risks leaving national partners such as NAB with insufficient external support (GLOBALG.A.P., personal communication, 2025; NAB, personal communication, 2025).

NAB faces its own operational hurdles. As both trainer and regulator, it must balance the dual responsibilities of supporting farmers and monitoring their compliance—an overlap that raises concerns about conflicts of interest and limits its capacity to scale services (NAB, personal communication, 2025).

Financial and logistical limitations compound these challenges. Providing nationwide training and assessments is costly, NAB must operate within its levy-funded budget to determine how many farmers it can support each year. Many producers still lack essential infrastructure and struggle with the documentation and record-keeping systems required to meet even basic compliance thresholds. Laboratory services also face challenges, as testing chemicals and materials is expensive due to low testing volumes, making compliance verification more costly (NAB, personal communication, 2025).

These issues represent important challenges that NAB must tackle as it expands GLOBALG.A.P. practices and principles across its agricultural and horticultural sector, including potential expansion into other crops, such as grains.

3.2.5 Conclusion

Namibia's approach reflects the first form of VSS integration in export measures, as the government is working with GLOBALG.A.P. to embed its principles and criteria into national policies and, potentially, the regulatory framework. This would make compliance with the standard a legal requirement for producers seeking to export horticultural products from Namibia.

The primary motivation for this integration is internal, driven by the government's goal to enhance the safety and quality of agronomic and horticultural products, both exported from and imported into the country, and to ensure that the population consumes safe, healthy food. External factors have also played a role, however, as Namibia's efforts respond to increasing global sustainability expectations in key export markets, particularly in Europe.

The integration process is still underway and requires continued monitoring to assess its impacts and benefits for farmers, especially when alignment with the standard becomes mandatory for the export, import, and transit of agronomic and horticultural products. Nevertheless, Namibia represents a promising example of VSS integration within export-promotion measures.

3.3 Suriname and the Marine Stewardship Council

3.3.1 Main Elements of Integration

Suriname is the world's third-largest producer of Atlantic seabob shrimp, and the fisheries sector plays a key socio-economic role in the country, contributing to employment and food security (Directorate of Fisheries, 2021; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2014). The country works with the MSC, an international non-profit organization that sets a global standard for sustainable fishing through its voluntary certification and eco-labelling scheme (MSC, 2025a).

The collaboration between Suriname and the MSC originated as a market-driven initiative led by Heiploeg, a Dutch seafood company that ranks among Europe's largest shrimp processors and owns of one of two seabob fisheries in Suriname. Heiploeg sought certification to meet sustainability requirements in European markets, particularly in the Netherlands, where a high percentage of seafood sold must be MSC certified. As part of its corporate social responsibility commitments, Heiploeg commissioned an MSC assessment in 2009, launching a transformative process for the fishery (MSC, personal communication, 2024; MSC, 2025b).

The certification initiative was also a response to the collapse of Suriname's large shrimp fishery, which led to an estimated USD 15 million loss in export revenue between 2000 and 2010. The decline has been associated with overfishing, insufficient stock monitoring, and weak fisheries management systems (Willems, 2016). This downturn underscored the urgent need for stronger management and governance across the fisheries sector, including the seabob industry.

ISEAL and others have highlighted this case as an example of collaboration between the private sector, the government, and a VSS. Notably, the MSC's direct engagement was not with the Surinamese government or producers but with Heiploeg, which acted as the certificate holder and intermediary (MSC, personal communication, 202). While government involvement was initially limited, Heiploeg's relationship with public authorities was essential in advancing the certification process, particularly in supporting investments in gear modifications and science-based management measures (ISEAL Alliance, 2017).

Using MSC requirements as a framework for improvement, Heiploeg recognized the importance of engaging with fishers, scientists, and the government. The integration eventually resulted in the creation of the first national seabob fishery management plan, which was formally included in Suriname's fisheries legislation, a major milestone that provided long-term legal support for sustainable harvesting practices (ISEAL Alliance, 2017; Ministry of

Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Fisheries, 2019). The certification process served as an export-promotion measure in the sense that it enabled Suriname to meet the environmental and traceability requirements of key seafood markets in Europe and North America.

3.3.2 Services Provided to Producers

The MSC does not provide technical assistance or direct funding to producers. Rather, it establishes the criteria for sustainable fishing and oversees compliance through independent third-party audits. The certification process was largely industry-financed in Suriname, with Heiploeg covering the costs of external consultants, scientific assessments, and fishing gear modifications to reduce bycatch (Ministry of Fisheries, personal communication, 2024; MSC, personal communication, 2024).

Suriname's government contributed by coordinating stakeholder engagement, offering staff incentives for participation in the seabob working group, and investing in enforcement and monitoring capacities after certification. For example, it allocated USD 20 million to enforcement vessels and to enhance its monitoring and surveillance systems (ISEAL Alliance, 2017).

While MSC certification involves significant annual costs, especially for small-scale and developing country fisheries, the benefits extend well beyond market incentives. The governance and management reforms required for certification help ensure long-term sustainability for seabob shrimp, offering lasting socio-environmental returns (Sampson et al., 2015).

MSC certification does not appear to have generated a price premium or direct financial gains for producers. However, it has contributed to lower operational costs due to reduced bycatch and faster sorting on board. More importantly, MSC certification has helped secure continued access to key export markets in Europe and the United States, where demand for sustainably sourced seafood has grown considerably in recent years (McConney et al., 2021).

A man sells fish in the Sunday market in Paramaribo, Suriname. (Gert-Jan van Vliet/iStock)

3.3.3 Results of Integration

In 2011, Suriname's seabob fishery became the first tropical shrimp fishery in the world to achieve MSC certification (Marine Stewardship Council, 2017). The process entailed major changes in governance and fishing practices:

- The government commissioned a stock assessment to confirm the sustainability of seabob populations. Over 2 years, fishers assisted scientists and collected 300,000 biological samples.
- As a result of the stock assessment and to meet MSC conditions for sustainable fisheries, Suriname drew up a fisheries management plan, *Seabob Shrimp (Xiphopenaeus kroyeri) Fisheries 2010–2015*, in 2010. It included catch limits and a Harvest Control Rule to prevent overfishing (ISEAL Alliance, 2017).
- The fishery introduced turtle-exclusion devices into its nets and escape panels to reduce the bycatch of other species. During field trials, this strategy not only reduced bycatch by between 12% and 40%, but it also increased operational efficiency, with less sorting required (MSC, 2017).
- A seabob working group was established and became a platform for multistakeholder dialogue, including representatives from the government, private sector, and non-governmental organizations. This working group improved the overall governance and management of the sector on a national scale (MSC, 2017; Ministry of Fisheries, personal communication, 2025).

3.3.4 Challenges Identified

Suriname maintained MSC certification for more than a decade, and the fishery was recertified in 2016. However, MSC certification was temporarily suspended in August 2024 due to a prolonged decline in catch volumes. The root causes of these declines were unclear to the actors interviewed and may involve climate-related factors or stock migration. During the suspension, commercial seabob shrimp fishing activity was limited, with monitoring trips initiated by the seabob working group to support a new stock assessment (MSC, 2025b).

The temporary suspension highlighted the difficulty of maintaining certification over time, especially in the face of environmental uncertainty, a broader challenge for sustainability schemes. Ongoing compliance requires consistent data and institutional capacity, factors that are not always within the control of local actors (Ministry of Fisheries, personal communication, 2025).

During the suspension period, Suriname continued to apply the key management practices developed through the MSC process and remained committed to sustainable fisheries governance (Directorate of Fisheries, 2021). The fishery underwent surveillance audits and submitted a corrective action plan to the MSC—including data collection, stock assessments, and coordination with the government—to regain certification, acknowledging that MSC certification is a "de facto" requisite for access to international markets (MSC, 2025b).

Following these corrective actions and renewed monitoring efforts, the fishery was recertified in July 2025, restoring MSC certification status. This recertification confirms that the fishery continues to meet MSC sustainability requirements and that management measures remain in place to ensure responsible harvesting practices. The certification is currently valid until September 2027.

3.3.5 Conclusion

The Suriname case study illustrates the second form of VSS integration in export promotion measures, whereby the government used the MSC, an international VSS, as a reference to upgrade national practices related to seabob shrimp production, a key export-oriented sector. Rather than developing a separate national sustainability system, Suriname aligned its fisheries governance and management measures with MSC's requirements, using these criteria to guide regulatory reform, scientific assessments, gear improvements, and monitoring practices.

Although compliance with the standard is not a prerequisite for export, the collaboration nonetheless paved the way for a legal framework and led to the creation of the country's first national seabob fishery management plan. These developments allowed Suriname to meet the environmental and traceability requirements of major seafood markets in Europe and North America. Reflecting the motivations behind the collaboration, external market dynamics—especially demand from European buyers for MSC-certified products—were the primary drivers, creating strong commercial incentives for Heiploeg to pursue certification and engage with national authorities.

3.4 Vietnam: Forest Stewardship Council and the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification

3.4.1 Main Elements of Integration

The forestry sector is crucial to Vietnam's local economy. In 2024, Vietnamese forest products were exported to 170 countries and territories, including key markets in the United States, China, South Korea, Japan, and the EU. The export value of timber and forest products reached USD 17.35 billion that year, exceeding Vietnam's target by 14.1% and marking a 20% increase compared to 2023. The trade surplus of forest products amounted to USD 14.6 billion, affirming the country's position as a global leader in timber product manufacturing and export (Nguyet, 2025).

Recognizing the sector's importance, Vietnam has enacted a series of policies and laws to ensure sustainable forest resource management in line with international standards and regulations. For instance, the 2017 Law on Forestry established a consolidated regulatory framework designed to mobilize social resources for forestry development while balancing the interests of the state and forest communities. The law targets sustainable development and environmental protection, focusing on SFM and compliance with wood legality and

sustainability requirements demanded by international markets (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2018).

The law introduced specific provisions on SFM and established SFM certification, which was developed in line with the principles and requirements of international VSSs such as the FSC and the PEFC to facilitate access to international markets (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2018).

SFM certification is a formal recognition proving that a forest is managed well—in other words, that it meets the SFM criteria established under the 2017 Law on Forestry and related policies, including the Forestry Development Strategy 2006–2020 and its updated version for 2021–2030. SFM provides specific requirements applicable to the forest management system of forest owners, especially groups of small forest owners, in accordance with Vietnamese national conditions and international regulations. As VSSs like FSC and PEFC are recognized under SFM certification (Thung, 2025), forest owners holding FSC or PEFC certification are considered compliant with the government's SFM requirements.

In addition, the government created the Vietnam Forest Certification System (VFCS) in 2019 under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development's Decision No. 1288/QD-TTg (2018). The system aims to ensure the implementation of SFM certification and introduces a national chain-of-custody certification for tracking wood products. To support this system, the Department of Forestry signed an agreement in 2021 to collaborate with PEFC to issue forest certificates under the Vietnam PEFC/VFCS national system. The VFCS is aligned with PEFC's criteria and is open to all companies that manufacture, process, trade, or sell forest-based products (Vietnam Forest Certification Office, 2019; Vietnam's Forestry and Forest Protection Department, 2025).

FSC and PEFC engage regularly with Vietnam's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, primarily through the Department of Forestry. Vietnam is a member of PEFC, and both VSSs have contributed to shaping the final text of the current Forest Development Strategy (FSC representative, personal communication, 2024). While the government has not signed a formal agreement with FSC, the standard is nonetheless recognized as an important actor in advancing sustainable forestry. It is integrated into Vietnam's forest legal framework, and FSC-certified areas—alongside PEFC certifications—are included in the country's national certification totals (FSC representative, personal communication, 2024).

3.4.2 Services Provided to Producers

As part of Vietnam's SFM certification implementation, the government set up a consulting team in 2024 to help localities and forest owners build SFM plans and obtain certification under international standards, including FSC and VFCS/PEFC. The Vietnam Forest Certification Office has worked with provincial forest protection departments to offer capacity-building training for cooperatives (Vietnam Forest Certification Office, 2025). The government also developed a team of domestic auditors to meet the requirements of forest certification organizations and reduce certification costs (Thung, 2025).

In addition, FSC and PEFC teams in Vietnam offer guidance to producers on their standards and chain-of-custody certification for processing companies. Both offer capacity-building

training by helping smallholders and certificate holders understand standards requirements and processes, cost management, and ecological–social–economic balance. FSC, for instance, undertakes market-linkage initiatives by connecting domestic producers with international buyers, enabling premium pricing for certified forest products. It also provides guidance on developing ecosystem services and supports efforts to establish verified economic value for sustainably managed forests (FSC, personal communication 2024).

Both standards support smallholder engagement in Vietnam by boosting awareness, understanding, and participation in national SFM certification. This can help forest owners obtain and maintain certification while gaining access to international markets that demand sustainable forest products.

Logging truck in central Vietnam. (RMDobson/iStock)

3.4.3 Results of Integration

As of July 2025, Vietnam had 674,946 ha of forests certified under SFM schemes, including 428,000 ha under FSC certification, of which more than 20,000 ha are natural forests without logging and the rest are planted forests (Thung & So, 2024). VFCS/PEFC certification covers 224,237 ha (Thung, 2025). This means that FSC certification accounts for about 65% of the total certified SFM area in Vietnam, while the VFCS/PEFC scheme covers about 35% (Vietnam Forestry and Forest Protection Department, 2025).

FSC chain-of-custody certification in Vietnam has grown rapidly, with 1,870 forest units granted this certification in 2024 compared with 836 in 2020 (FSC, 2020). The country has many other FSC-certified raw material lines as well, such as more than 9,000 ha of bamboo and 6,000 ha of rubber (FSC representative, personal communication, 2025; Thung & So, 2024). PEFC had issued 109 chain-of-custody certificates in the country as of 2024 (PEFC, 2024).

FSC and PEFC certification has created new opportunities for Vietnamese producers and forest owners, including potential price premiums, access to trade networks, and connections with international buyers, all supported by a favourable legal framework and the government's commitment to adopting sustainability standards in the sector (Marx, 2017).

3.4.4 Challenges Identified

Vietnam has developed a strong legal framework governing the production and export of forest products, including the recognition of FSC and PEFC in forest management systems. Challenges remain, however. More than half of planted forests in the country are managed by small-scale forest owners, who face the greatest difficulties in adopting or maintaining

sustainable forest certification, as many are unable to cover certification costs, particularly consultancy fees. In addition, production areas are fragmented, making it difficult to organize the development of SFM plans and prepare certification dossiers (Thung, 2025).

Market dependency and international price volatility in the sector are also concerns, as income per hectare of forest remains low and producers may not be able to sustain certification if market demand or price premiums for certified products decline (FSC representative, personal communication, 2024; Trieu et al., 2020).

Regulatory complexity adds another layer of difficulty, as forest owners and smallholders often struggle to navigate government requirements and SFM obligations (FSC representative, personal communication, 2024; Thung, 2025). The total area of certified production forests remains relatively small, accounting for around 17% of the country's total production forest area (Thung, 2025). Furthermore, limited clarity about incentives for forest certification reduces motivation for certified farmers.

It is also unclear why FSC certification is recognized under SFM but was not considered in the VFCS, even though FSC covers the country's largest share of certified forest area and contributes to national forestry plan objectives. PEFC is aligned with and endorses VFCS. This suggests potential misalignment between FSC and VFCS or underlying institutional issues that were not explained during interviews. The absence of formal partnerships between the government and FSC complicates outreach to producers, hinders the coordination of activities and training, and limits support for smallholders seeking access to certification.

This highlights the need for effective cooperation mechanisms and coordinated action among all stakeholders, including the government, VSSs, and buyers, to support producers and strengthen the self-sufficiency of producer groups. Such efforts will be critical to achieving the target of 1 million ha of certified forests by 2030, while expanding access to international markets and ensuring the sustainable development of Vietnam's forestry sector.

3.4.5 Conclusion

The experiences of FSC and PEFC in Vietnam align with the second form of VSS integration in export measures. Vietnam's government recognizes the importance of both standards in developing the forestry sector and for accessing international markets. Accordingly, the government has integrated FSC and PEFC principles and practices into its legal framework, especially within the national forest management certification system, without making compliance with these VSSs mandatory to export forest products.

The motivations for incorporating FSC and PEFC into Vietnam's forest legal framework are primarily domestic. The government has long sought to strengthen forest management and production practices and reduce risks for forest owners while simultaneously responding to growing international market demand for sustainable forest products.

4.0 Cross-Cutting Insights: Barriers, drivers, and policy implications

Across the four case studies (Mozambique, Namibia, Suriname, and Vietnam), VSSs were used in export measures to improve access to export markets demanding sustainability, enhance sectoral reputation, and strengthen strategic export sectors. However, the success of VSS integration depends on whether structural, financial, institutional, and market barriers are addressed and whether enabling conditions are actively strengthened. Cross-cutting insights from the experiences showcased in this report and recommendations or policy implications for policy-makers aiming to effectively integrate or use VSSs into export-promotion measures are explored in this section.

4.1 Drivers of VSS Adoption for Export Promotion

One of the main motivations for promoting or integrating the use of VSSs across the four cases analyzed is improving access to international markets. Interviewees consistently highlighted that VSSs help producers meet the rising sustainability and traceability requirements of key export destinations, particularly in the EU, North America, and Asia. These motivations were not only tied to trade opportunities but also to broader objectives, such as improving product quality, enhancing reputation, and strengthening strategic export-oriented sectors. Some of the main motivations driving the integration of VSSs as part of export-promotion measures include the following.

4.1.1 Meeting International Market Demands and Regulatory Requirements

All case studies underscored producing countries' need to comply with international market demands and sustainability regulations. Interviewees with government officials in Mozambique, Suriname, and Namibia perceived VSSs as effective tools to meet the environmental, social, and governance criteria required by buyers and regulators in export markets. Credible, internationally recognized standards were viewed as essential for meeting the sustainability expectations of importing countries and buyers. In Vietnam and Mozambique, certification was also perceived as a pathway to better prices or price premiums. More broadly, compliance with VSSs was seen as a way to enhance market recognition and secure advantages in sustainability-oriented markets.

4.1.2 Enhancing the Reputation of Industry and the Government

In Suriname, Mozambique, and Vietnam, improving the reputations of both industry and the government on sustainability was a key motivation for adopting or promoting VSSs in export-promotion strategies. Aligning national industries with these standards supported governments' goals of positioning their countries as reliable suppliers of sustainably produced goods in global markets.

4.1.3 Strengthening Strategic Sectors and Export Opportunities

Across the four case studies, using VSSs was perceived as supporting strategic sectors, ranging from cotton and horticultural goods to fisheries and forest products. Integrating sustainability standards into export-promotion measures was associated with improved production practices, product quality, and safety for both local and export markets. It also created more opportunities for producers and smallholder farmers to access key markets and comply with sustainability requirements in those markets. At the same time, adopting sustainability standards in export-promotion measures was driven by the goal of ensuring a level playing field across the sectors analyzed and among producers serving both local and international markets. Interviewees noted that compliance with VSSs helps harmonize domestic practices and align sustainability requirements, thereby enhancing good practices and narrowing gaps in product quality and economic opportunities.

4.2 Factors Facilitating Export-Promotion Outcomes

Our analysis shows that successfully integrating VSSs into export-promotion measures—thereby facilitating export outcomes—depends on several interrelated factors, including government leadership, private sector and VSS-related support, and effective coordination and collaboration. Together, these factors create the institutional, financial, and cooperative basis to support VSSs implementation and promote positive export outcomes.

4.2.1 Government Leadership

In most of the cases analyzed, governments took the initiative to organize, coordinate, and engage with standard-setting organizations. In Namibia and Mozambique, governments coordinated stakeholder efforts by mobilizing government agencies and facilitating financial resource allocation and investment. They allocated budgets to activities and collaboration with VSSs, invested in technology, and provided finance and human resources to support certification. Adequate resource allocation proved essential for successful implementation. As illustrated in Mozambique, resources extended beyond financial budgets to include logistical and human inputs, such as staff time and vehicles.

Both governments created mechanisms to simplify certification processes. Namibia created a national verification body, highlighting the importance of public support for certification while reducing costs for farmers. In Mozambique, including VSS criteria in the national cotton regulation simplified collaboration with the standard. In both countries, integrating sustainability practices into national regulations helped mainstream sustainability principles, raise awareness, and align domestic practices with international expectations.

4.2.2 Private Sector and VSS Support

In some cases, industry actors and VSS organizations played an enabling role by contributing to implementation, resource mobilization, and sectoral organization. In Suriname, the private company Heiploeg catalyzed collaboration by mobilizing funds for the certification process, including research and stock assessments, and actively engaging with government institutions and other partners to help producers access MSC certification.

In Vietnam, the widespread presence of FSC and PEFC, together with the importance of the forestry sector to the local economy, facilitated the adoption, coordination, and scaling of VSSs within the forest legal framework. Similarly, strong and organized sectors—such as cotton in Mozambique and horticulture in Namibia—supported certification efforts, disseminated information, and promoted good practices. Their established networks and processes enabled outreach to producers and other value-chain actors to gather feedback and make the integration of VSSs in export-promotion measures more inclusive.

4.2.3 Effective Coordination and Collaboration

The success of VSS integration in export measures in the case studies depended on effective coordination and sustained collaboration among governments, standard bodies, industry actors, and supporting organizations. Key enablers included the following:

- **Communication and coordination mechanisms:** Regular dialogue among stakeholders, including working groups composed by government, industry members, and producers in Namibia and Suriname, helped maintain strong, consistent relationships between governments and VSS organizations, ensuring effective implementation.
- **Planned and shared responsibilities:** Formal agreements, such as MoUs in Mozambique and Namibia, clarified roles and guided structured collaboration between governments and VSSs. Both governments and VSS bodies participated in planning and adapting interventions.
- **Partnerships with interested organizations and private sector actors:** In Suriname, regional organizations such as the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism provided technical and financial support. In Namibia, close cooperation between the government and private sector actors was seen as vital for effective and successful implementation.

Insights for Policy-Makers

Strong legal and regulatory foundations, along with clear mechanisms and intervention strategies, are vital for ensuring success.

The case studies highlight the importance of government-led regulations and guidelines that define procedures for compliance with sustainability requirements for producers, exporters, and certification service providers. Clear regulatory backing—including financing mechanisms such as levies or cost-sharing schemes, as in the case of Namibia's levy to support certification and training—is an example of a good mechanism to secure the project's financial stability that can minimize the risk of disruption due to government changes, shifting priorities, or budget restrictions.

Formal agreements and concrete measures, such as MoUs, can guide collaboration among governments, standard-setting bodies, and private sector actors when integrating VSSs in export-promotion measures. Clearly defining roles, steps, and responsibilities enhances coordination and ensures continuity of the activities, even amid administrative or political change. Formal frameworks and collaboration models tailored to national contexts help to create accountability and make it easier to align national export strategies with VSS requirements. Another clear mechanism to support VSS compliance is government investment, as in the case studies of Mozambique and Namibia, in establishing national verification bodies. In these cases, such a mechanism helped reduce costs for farmers while easing audit processes and alignment with international standards.

4.3 Common Barriers to Implementation

The interview analysis shows that while VSSs are used in export-promotion measures to enhance market access, environmental protection, and ethical trade, their use in developing countries remains limited by interrelated operational, economic, institutional, and market challenges, including the following:

- **Capacity limitations from VSSs:** While standard-setting bodies are engaged—sometimes even leading collaboration—many lack the resources needed to support the process and scale certification nationally. Producers and implementing agencies interviewed also reported an absence of support, training, and follow-up from these bodies after certification. This has contributed to label suspension in some cases and difficulties maintaining compliance as standards evolve. Interviewees also said that many producer groups and cooperatives have limited organizational capacity and inadequate management skills and technical expertise to access and maintain certification.
- **Certification costs:** The cost of certification is one of the biggest barriers to sustained participation in VSS programs across the four cases analyzed. Producers, particularly smallholders, struggle with high auditing expenses and limited budget predictability, making long-term compliance with a VSS difficult. Capacity constraints, including limited access to finance, extension services, and equipment, further hinder the ability to achieve or maintain certification, especially in the absence of government support.

- **Political factors and limited government capacity:** Political crises and changes in government or the appointment of officials in agencies leading the integration of VSSs in export-promotion measures can undermine continuity in policy support for VSS adoption. In some cases, weak or inconsistent relationships between governments and representatives from standard-setting bodies limit coordination, create regulatory uncertainty, and erode the continuity of collaboration. In some cases, such as in Namibia, the government's lack of infrastructure—including quality-control laboratories and traceability systems—can hamper the effective integration of VSSs into export-promotion mechanisms.
- **Changing market conditions:** Smallholders and exporters may depend on just a few major buyers who control market access and pricing. When buyer preferences shift or purchasing volumes decline, certified producers are left without stable outlets for their goods. Changing market conditions and buyer decisions can greatly affect production planning and income predictability. Furthermore, there is little demand for VSS-compliant products in producing countries, with low consumer awareness and willingness to pay for certified goods. In some cases, low global demand for certified products does not justify the investments and financial and technical efforts that producers put into obtaining and maintaining certification.
- **Limited access to market information:** Limited access to data on prices, market trends, and marketing opportunities for VSS-compliant products makes it difficult for exporters to make informed decisions about certification investments, according to several interviewees. The absence of coordinated information-sharing mechanisms among governments, VSSs, and producers often reduces transparency and strategic planning capacity. These challenges signal that a supportive ecosystem is essential for VSS integration to contribute proactively to export-promotion measures. This ecosystem must combine technical assistance, consistent public–private collaboration, and targeted financial support to offset the high costs of compliance and reduce vulnerability to market fluctuations.

Insights for Policy-Makers

Investment in training, extension services, and market information reduces implementation barriers and helps producers and exporters access sustainable markets.

Government and VSS investment in training, extension services, market information and support for smallholders ensures that producers can obtain, maintain, and renew certification and access sustainability markets. Without continuous support, smallholders risk losing certification and access to premium markets. Access to market information was highlighted in the research as a major challenge for producers. Government efforts to provide up-to-date data on prices, market trends, and marketing opportunities for VSS-compliant products are therefore critical for enabling producers and exporters to make informed decisions about certification investments. Transparent price monitoring can further inform the design of more equitable policies.

4.4 The Perceived Benefits of Using VSSs in Export Measures

Interviewees see many benefits for governments, farmers, and VSSs when standards are used or integrated into export-promotion measures. Benefits increase when the government and other supporting stakeholders (such as private sector actors) support integration. This can enhance market access, improve livelihoods, and strengthen national export capacity. These benefits include the following:

- **Cost reduction and simplified certification procedures:** Government involvement as a verification body, such as in Namibia's case, can greatly reduce certification costs and simplify certification procedures, benefiting both farmers and VSSs. When regulations clearly define the services provided and are implemented in line with national guidelines, they broaden the reach of sustainability practices while ensuring transparency and a level playing field. Support tailored to farmers' needs increases effectiveness and inclusivity in reaching diverse producer groups.
- **Economic benefits for producers and links with buyers:** Financial incentives from governments, such as paying certification costs, encourage broader participation in VSSs and lower access barriers for smallholders. Interviewees identified potential price premiums as one of the top advantages of certification for farmers, as they directly benefit producers. They also see compliance with VSSs as facilitating links with potential buyers in key export markets and enhancing access to new and higher-value markets, rewarding sustainable production practices.
- **Inclusiveness and collective learning:** Collaboration fostered through VSS adoption in export-promotion measures can strengthen inclusiveness across actors. As seen in the cases analyzed, such collaboration often brings together private sector actors, industry and VSS representatives, and government officials in formal mechanisms, such as working groups. These platforms enable dialogue, promote the exchange of best practices, and create channels for collective learning.
- **Reduced administrative burden:** Using VSSs to support export promotion can streamline export-related processes, such as monitoring and management, through harmonized plans and standards. Integration can ease administrative fatigue for farmers, governments, and VSSs by reducing the number of audits and inspections and enabling platforms for mutual recognition and coordination. Developing local guidelines for VSS implementation in partnership with standard-setting bodies ensures context-appropriate practices and improves certification accessibility for all producers (as seen in Namibia).
- **Better productivity and sustainability practices:** Adopting more sustainable practices supported by sustainability standards has helped farmers improve yields and production quality, while also strengthening sustainability outcomes related to better input use, improved working conditions, and environmental conservation, according to interviewees. The process of certification and collaboration with other supporting actors has also encouraged continuous learning and raised awareness among producers and government officials about broader sustainability concerns across value chains.

Insights for Policy-Makers

Effective integration of VSSs requires inclusive and holistic stakeholder engagement.

The integration of VSSs into export-promotion measures is most effective when accompanied by mechanisms that ensure ownership and the active participation of all relevant actors—including government agencies, producers, farmer groups, private sector actors, and VSS organizations—from the outset, such as by establishing technical working groups. Ongoing exchanges and progress reporting help interventions reflect diverse needs, build trust, and support more inclusive decision making.

Participation by value-chain actors is also facilitated where the private sector is well organized. In sectors such as cotton in Mozambique and horticulture in Namibia, strong private sector organizations have actively supported certification efforts and helped convene producers and other stakeholders. Established private sector structures have enabled outreach to producers and other value-chain actors to gather feedback and make the integration of VSSs into export-promotion measures more inclusive.

5.0 Concluding Remarks

Across the report, lessons emerged about the factors, motivations, opportunities, and challenges of integrating VSSs into export-promotion measures. While VSSs integration and use in export-promotion measures can support market access, strengthen sectoral coordination, and streamline processes, the expected benefits are not automatic. The cases analyzed show that the effective implementation relies on adequate institutional support, robust partnerships, and targeted investments. Simply having a strategy is insufficient; governments, standard-setting bodies, and sectoral associations must proactively engage to ensure tangible outcomes.

Despite varying motivations and challenges in integrating VSSs into export-promotion measures, key success factors identified in the case studies include strong legal and regulatory foundations, clear guidelines, and financial structures that support access to and maintenance of certification. Equally important is inclusive stakeholder engagement: VSS implementation and the resulting export-promotion outcomes are most effective when accompanied by mechanisms that ensure ownership, active participation, and decision making that reflect diverse needs, build trust, and promote inclusivity.

Leveraging VSSs in export measures can support market diversification, boost domestic consumption, and strengthen intraregional trade. Market overdependence on a few large buyers positioned mainly in the Global North or exporting firms must be reduced. This requires prioritizing access to new regional and international markets, supporting the value addition of products versus focusing on cash crops (such as tea or coffee), and addressing bottlenecks that limit competition. Emerging economies, including those in East Africa and Southeast Asia (i.e., India), are increasingly driving sustainable consumption and demand for VSS-compliant products (Ninnin, 2023; ProFound Advisers in Development, Organics & Development & Markus Arbenz, 2020). Diversification also strengthens smallholders' bargaining power and should be complemented by efforts to stimulate domestic demand for VSS-compliant products.

Promoting peer learning and collaboration is also key. Countries that have already integrated or used VSSs as export-promotion enablers—and those interested in doing so—would benefit from peer learning, including exchanges of experiences, technical advice, and lessons learned. As an example, Vietnam's experience illustrates that close government–VSS collaboration can help countries and producers prepare for and comply with sustainability regulations in importing countries, such as the EU Deforestation Regulation. Going forward, it would help to create and maintain a database on the countries that have integrated VSSs into export-promotion measures and monitor impact. The four cases included in this brief highlight the value of inter-country collaboration and learning networks.

Overall, this analysis shows that, regardless of the mix of motivations and factors driving VSS adoption in export measures, careful, planned integration into national regulatory systems can meaningfully support export promotion, facilitate access to markets, and advance sustainable production outcomes and practices that benefit producers and value chains across key economic sectors.

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Appendix A. List of Interview Participants

- Francisco Ferreira dos Santos, Mozambique Ginning Association (November 2024)
- Jennifer Mbuvi, GLOBALG.A.P., Namibia (January 2025)
- Lorna T. Shikongo-Kuvare (January 2025)
- Marin Hawk, MSC, Suriname (October 2024)
- Que Anh, FSC, Vietnam (Novermber 2024)
- Vicente Sando, FONPA, Mozambique (October 2024)
- Zojindra Arjune, Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Fisheries, Suriname (November 2024)

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