



BRIEFING NOTE

Leveraging Voluntary Sustainability Standards for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Agriculture:

A guide for development organizations contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

Systemic gender inequalities and the disempowerment of women persist in agricultural production across the Global South. Rural households face significant **food security** concerns, and women and girls face unequal access to the calories that are available. Women's agricultural work remains under-valued and under-resourced due to discrimination in access to **land and productive agricultural resources**. Gender inequalities in access to **education** beyond primary school undermines fair access for women and girls to opportunities to improve their agricultural production. **Unpaid domestic labour** burdens constrain women from empowerment opportunities outside the home. Formal regulations and cultural gender norms limit women's participation in **decision making and empowerment** in producer and worker organizations. And finally, **insecure and precarious work conditions** render women a particularly vulnerable labour force in the agricultural sector.

A companion to the 2017 IISD report *Promoting Gender Equality in Foreign Agricultural Investments: Lessons from Voluntary Sustainability Standards* (Sexsmith, 2017), this guidebook summarizes and updates the evidence presented in that report; explains how voluntary sustainable standards (VSSs) can be used as a tool to meet the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as its associated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and targets related to gender equality and women's empowerment in agriculture; and provides recommendations for development organizations working toward that goal.

The 2030 Agenda includes 17 SDGs, which represent the United Nations (UN) member states' action plan to achieve global peace, prosperity and sustainability by 2030. Each of the 17 SDGs is composed of targets (objectives for each goal that each UN member state will strive to meet) and indicators (specific measures for each target that allows comprehensive analysis and comparison of progress across countries



and regions). Gender equality (SDG 5), while a goal in itself, is transversal and necessary to achieving all other goals, most of which include gender-equality-related targets and indicators. The needs and goals of the agriculture sector also figure prominently in this plan, most importantly in SDG 2: Zero Hunger, SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, and SDG 15: Life on Land.

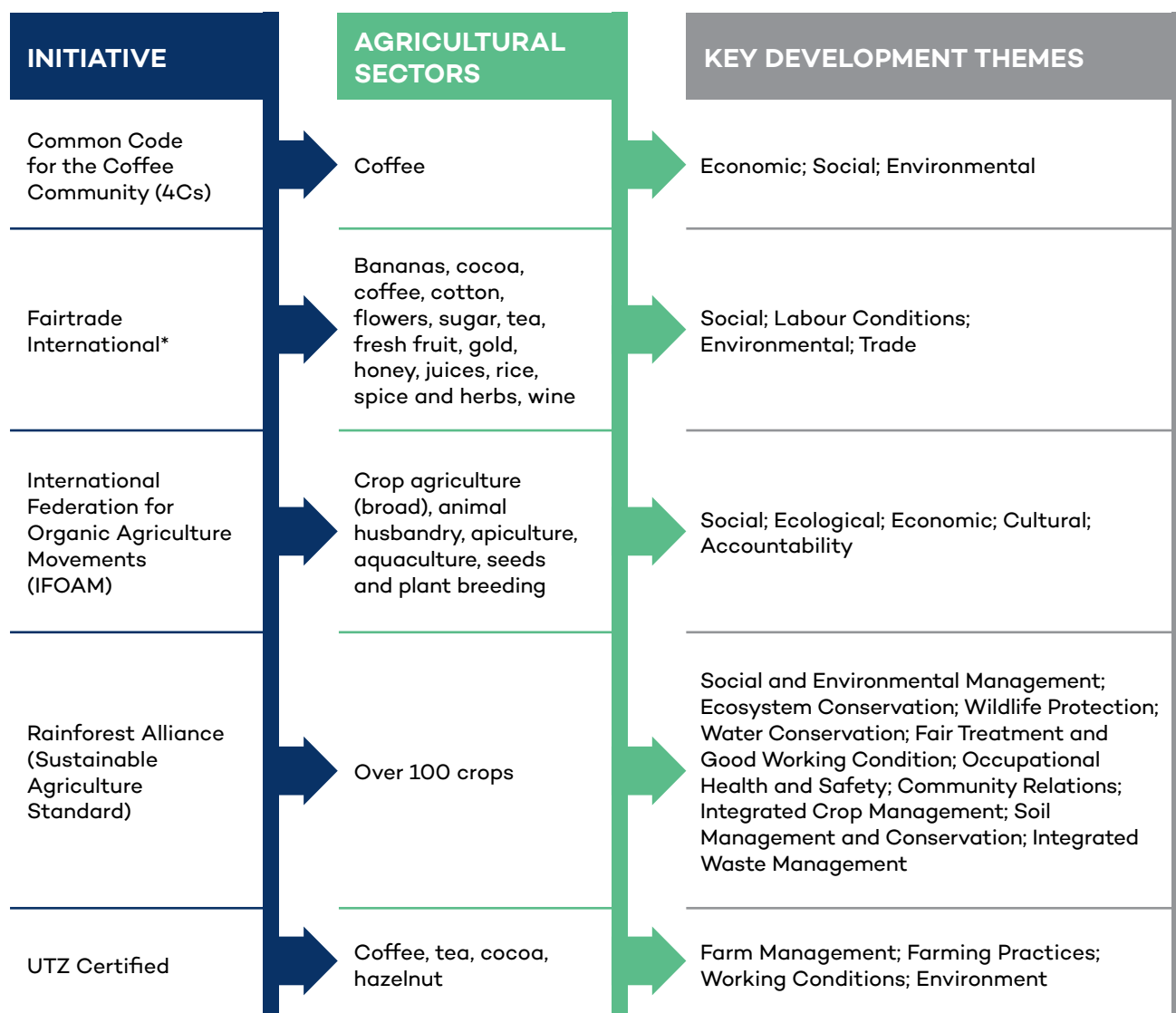
There is significant overlap between the content of the SDGs and VSSs, including with respect to sustainability issues facing the agriculture sector.¹ VSSs in agriculture are private initiatives that aim to promote the economic, environmental and social dimensions of sustainability by requiring that farmers meet certain minimum performance requirements in each of these areas and by providing guidance for improvement. They usually entail a certification process for smallholder farmers or large farms with hired labour by an independent body. To date, there are 148 standards in the agriculture sector.² Seventeen of the leading agricultural VSSs reach an estimated global trade value of USD 31.6 billion (Potts et al., 2014).

The findings in this guidebook are based on an analysis of the content and application of five key VSSs³ in agriculture, which are summarized in Figure 1.

¹ The UN Forum on Sustainability Standards mapped the content of VSSs and the targets associated with the 17 SDGs. They found overlap between VSSs and nine SDGs. Among these, several are related to agriculture, including SDG 12: Responsible Production and Consumption, SDG 15: Life on Land, SDG 13: Climate Action, SDG 2: Zero Hunger. They also found overlap with SDG 5: Gender Equality, on which this guidebook builds. Information retrieved from <https://unfss.org/vss-and-the-sustainable-development-goals/>

² According to Sustainability Map, the International Trade Center's web portal for sustainability standards, codes of conduct and audit protocols. For more, see <https://sustainabilitymap.org/>.

³ Rainforest Alliance and UTZ Certified, which formally merged in January 2018, are treated separately in this report, in accordance with the most recent published versions of their standards. A draft of the new, merged standard, to be called the Rainforest Alliance standard, is expected to be published for public consultation by early 2019.



* In this paper we refer to “Fair Trade” as a broad movement of alternative traders and producers, and to “Fairtrade” as the certification and labelling system institutionalized under Fairtrade International.

Figure 1. Overview of five voluntary standards





Source: Sexsmith, 2017.

Analytical Framework for Linking Gender, the SDGs and VSSs

Overlaying the SDGs with the five VSSs described above, this research has identified six cross-cutting gender equality and women’s empowerment themes. The gender equality challenges in agriculture associated with each of these thematic areas; their links to the SDGs, targets and indicators; and how performance in each area is addressed by the certification criteria of the VSSs are outlined in Table 1. In the column “Performance Area,” the green shading indicates a performance area that specifically addresses gender, while the blue shading indicates a performance area that is closely related to the gender concerns identified in the cross-cutting theme even though specific gender language is not included.





Table 1. Global analytical framework for linking gender, the SDGs and the VSSs⁴

Cross-Cutting Theme	Gender Equality Challenges in Agriculture	SDGs ⁵			VSSs							
		Goals	Targets	Indicators	Performance Area	4Cs	Fairtrade International		IFOAM	Rainforest Alliance	UTZ	
							Producer	Labour			Group	Individual
Household Food Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women's responsibility for subsistence agriculture, food procurement and food preparation. Intra-household inequalities in distribution of (nutritious) food. 		2.2	none	Right to a living wage	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Women's Rights to Productive Agricultural Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Systemic discrimination against women's access to land. Access barriers to productive inputs and credit among women. Women's exclusion from information and extension activities. Gender gap in agricultural productivity. 	  	1.4	1.4.2	Respect for customary land rights	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
			2.3	2.3.2	Access to productive resources	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
			5.a	5.a.1	Access to agricultural training	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
				5.a.2	No gender discrimination in agricultural training	✓		✓				



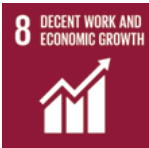
⁴ Any discrepancies in the analysis of the gender content of the VSSs between the present guidebook and the companion report (Sexsmith, 2017) are due either to the release of newer versions of the standards (Fairtrade for Hired Labour and Rainforest Alliance), to the combining or rephrasing of the analytical categories or, in a few cases, to a more flexible interpretation of the criteria.

⁵ For more on the SDGs, see: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>



Cross-Cutting Theme	Gender Equality Challenges in Agriculture	SDGs ⁵			VSSs							
		Goals	Targets	Indicators	Performance Area	4Cs	Fairtrade International		IFOAM	Rainforest Alliance	UTZ	
							Producer	Labour			Group	Individual
Gender Equality in Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender equality in primary education is improving, but secondary and higher education still lag. Persistent, intersectional inequalities between women and men in adult literacy and basic formal education. Reduced agricultural productivity of women due to their lower levels of formal education and access to productive inputs. 		4.1	4.1.1	Eliminate worst forms of child labour	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
			4.2	4.2.1								
			4.3	4.2.2	Educational opportunities for adults	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
4.5	4.3.1											
4.6	4.5.1											
			4.7	4.6.1	Educational opportunities for women			☑	☑			
			4.a	4.7.1								
				4.a.1			☑	☑	☑			
Unpaid Domestic Labour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significantly more time spent by women on care for children, the elderly or sick family members, and on domestic work. Limited mobility of women outside of the home. Engrained gender inequalities in domestic responsibilities from childhood. 		5.2	5.4.1	Access to childcare for workers	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑



Cross-Cutting Theme	Gender Equality Challenges in Agriculture	SDGs ⁵			VSSs							
		Goals	Targets	Indicators	Performance Area	4Cs	Fairtrade International		IFOAM	Rainforest Alliance	UTZ	
							Producer	Labour			Group	Individual
Women's Decision Making and Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutionalized discrimination against women. Patriarchal norms affecting multiple spheres of life. Limited participation of women in agricultural groups. Exclusion of women from leadership roles. 	 	5.1	5.1.1	Gender non-discrimination policy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
			5.5	5.5.1								
Decent Work for Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women's work in subsistence agriculture is under-counted and under-valued. Participation by women in contract farming is limited. Precarious, low-paid and unsafe waged agricultural labour conditions for women workers. 		8.3	8.3.1	Maternity leave	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
			8.5	8.5.1	Breaks and flexibility for nursing mothers		✓		✓		✓	
			8.7	8.5.2			✓		✓		✓	
			8.8	8.7.1	No tolerance for sexual harassment	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
				8.8.1			✓	✓		✓		✓
				8.8.2	Prohibit pregnant and nursing women from participating in hazardous work		✓	✓		✓		✓
					Separation of worksite sanitation or rest facilities for women and men		✓	✓		✓		✓



Leveraging VSSs to Achieve Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Summary of findings

As demonstrated in the analytical framework in Table 1, there are significant, important connections between key gender equality and women's empowerment issues in agriculture, the SDGs and VSS performance areas. These connections demonstrate that VSSs have the potential to make significant contributions to gender equality and women's empowerment in agriculture because of their influence on the way certification criteria and procedures for these standards are implemented with agricultural producers and communities. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the relationship between standards and gender equality on two levels: (i) the effectiveness of the standard at integrating gender considerations in its certification criteria and (ii) the outcomes from applying their design through specific activities and interventions by certifying bodies, producers as individuals and groups, and the organizations that work with and assist them.

The following summarizes findings on the ways VSSs: (i) can be leveraged to make positive contributions to gender equality (**green**); (ii) can promote gender equality depending on certain conditions (**yellow**); and (iii) risk exacerbating gender inequalities if not undertaken with sensitivity to local gender dynamics (**red**).

Household Food Security:

Food security is an intersectional issue relating to income and poverty, access to productive resources, gender-based discrimination and health. There is a strong correlation between gender equality and household food security. This relationship relates to women's roles in subsistence agricultural production and food preparation for their families, and to women's and girls' access to nutritious food. Although household food security is not an explicit criterion for VSSs, there is some evidence to support the assertion that VSSs can often contribute indirectly to household food security and to gender equality in access to food in two ways: (i) by enabling food security through sustainable production practices that contribute to a diverse and nutritional diet and (ii) by potentially contributing to higher incomes generated from certification. Both of these benefits are most likely to arise when women have control of an income stream. However, certification is usually also a form of cash cropping, which can undermine women's subsistence agriculture, given cash crops are largely the domain of men. In such cases, when land is prioritized for cash crops over land used by women for subsistence food production, household food security could be undermined.

Sustainable production practices can often contribute to a diverse and nutritional diet.

When certification leads to higher incomes it can contribute to food security, particularly when women have control of an income stream.

Certified cash cropping can undermine women's subsistence agriculture, potentially undermining household food security.

Women's Rights to Productive Agricultural Resources:

Globally, women own an estimated 12.8 per cent of agricultural land (UN Women, 2018). Any existing protections for women's land ownership and inheritance afforded through formal legal systems are often undermined by informal local customs that prohibit or restrict women from owning land and/or earning

Financial supports provided through certification can contribute to women's access to productive inputs and credit when producer cooperatives support these measures.



income from working that land (see Sexsmith, 2017). Women's insecure land tenure imposes constraints on their ability to obtain credit, to gain access to production improvements like irrigation or labour-saving technologies, and to receive information about production improvements delivered through extension agents, non-governmental organizations and certification bodies. Financial supports provided through certification, such as pre-financing or premiums, can contribute to women's access to productive inputs and credit when producer organizations support these measures. However, certification does not directly promote women's rights to land, and it has only indirect impacts on their enjoyment of temporary land rights when men have emigrated and the certification requires a landowner to be present during the audit. Certification has sometimes reinforced gender asymmetries in access to production-related information and training, except where outreach specifically targets women. Finally, standards can promote women's participation in climate-smart agriculture, provided there is equitable opportunity to participate in associated training.

Certification does not directly promote women's rights to land, although indirectly it may contribute to women's enjoyment of temporary land rights when men have emigrated and the certification process requires the presence of a landowner.

Certification can reinforce gender asymmetries in access to production-related information and trainings unless specific outreach with women is undertaken.

Certification can promote women's participation in climate-smart agriculture if equitable opportunity to participate in production trainings is provided.

Gender Equality in Education:

While gender differences in enrolment at the primary level have mostly been eradicated, with the exception of some Indigenous groups globally (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2011), inequalities between girls and boys may persist in secondary and higher levels of education due to domestic responsibilities, the quality of education locally available, and gender norms surrounding who advances and who does not. These inequalities tend to be intersectional—meaning factors such as being an older woman, a member of an Indigenous-language-speaking group and poor—create further and compounded disadvantages in women's access to education. VSSs promote children's school attendance by prohibiting child labour, and they promote girls' and boys' education equally.

Standards promote children's attendance at schooling through the prohibition of child labour.

Standards promote girls' and boys' education equally.

Women's Unpaid Domestic Labour:

In most societies, women hold primary responsibility for domestic labour, which includes cooking, cleaning, and caring for children and the elderly. On average, they spend 2.6 times more hours performing this work than men (cited in UN Women, 2018). Rural women face unique barriers in completing their unpaid domestic labour, because they are more likely to live in contexts where incomes are low and access to energy, water and care arrangements are more difficult. As a result, these domestic responsibilities tend to act as a significant obstacle to their participation in any activities away from the home that could enhance their agricultural livelihoods, including production and

Certification can alleviate some of women's domestic labour burden through financial support for labour-saving investments.



work for profit, training, and decision-making bodies such as producer or worker cooperatives (cited in UN Women, 2018). Certification can alleviate some of women's domestic labour burden through financial support for labour-saving investments. However, standards prohibit child labour, sometimes even when it is cultural tradition for children to accompany their parents to the field. This requirement can make it difficult for women with young children to perform agricultural work without any other child care support. In waged labour situations, this problem can be alleviated when the standard ensures adequate childcare is provided on the plantation.

Certification prohibits child labour and can therefore render it more difficult for women with young children to perform agricultural work on their own fields or for a wage, unless the standard also requires that adequate child care is provided.

Women's Decision Making and Empowerment:

Formal and informal systems, practices and behaviours that discriminate against women are deeply embedded in many societies. These formal exclusions are undergirded by prevalent cultural practices that normalize women's subordination to men. Women are under-represented among the leadership of agricultural producer cooperatives and worker groups—and where they are included, do not always have the training and capacity to address gender inequalities in their organizations (FAO, 2011). Certification can promote women's participation in traditionally masculine areas of household decision making and in producer and worker group decision making if gender equality training is provided. However, it can be challenging to shift traditional forms of decision making, particularly where patriarchy is deeply entrenched, which is often the case in agricultural producer and worker groups. In the worst cases, standards may exacerbate male dominance in household decision making, when men retain control of the income stream from the certified product, and/or when no gender equality training is provided to complement the social and economic changes accompanying certification. Additionally, certification might channel development-oriented investments into women's non-commercial activities, inadvertently impeding their economic empowerment.

Certification can promote women's roles in the production process and in community activities, which has often contributed to their participation in the traditionally masculine realm of household decision making.

Where patriarchy is deeply entrenched, certification is likely to have no impact on women's empowerment within the household, or worse, reinforce patriarchal social norms.

Women's gains in intra-household decision making may require complementary gender equality training efforts.

Certification can contribute to gender equality in decision making in producer and worker groups, particularly when gender equality training is provided.

Patriarchal norms render it difficult to promote women's empowerment within producer and worker groups and, in the worst case, may be reinforced if certification promotes male dominance in decision making.

Certification might channel development-oriented investments into women's non-commercial activities, inadvertently impeding their economic empowerment.



Decent Work for Women:

Women represent an estimated 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force, ranging from 20 per cent in Latin America to around 50 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa (FAO, 2011). Rural women spend at least 30 per cent and up to 80 per cent of their time in agricultural work across countries and contexts. Women have diverse and multi-faceted roles in agricultural work, including as subsistence agricultural producers, workers for outgrower schemes and waged agricultural workers (FAO, 2011).

Certification usually encourages decent working conditions for women waged labourers because it requires compliance with criteria that exceed national laws. Additionally, occupational health and safety conditions that consider the specific needs of women are often improved by certification. However, certification involves extra labour to comply with quality and environmental criteria. This labour is often provided by women in the form of unpaid family labour, thereby increasing women's work burden on smallholder farms without compensation or recognition, unless they are included in production decision making.

Certification encourages decent work conditions for women waged labourers, because they require compliance with certification criteria that exceed national laws.

Occupational safety and health conditions related to women workers; specific needs are often improved by certification.


Certification entails extra labour to comply with crop quality and environmental sustainability criteria. This labour has often been provided by women as unpaid family labour, thus increasing their work burden without compensation or recognition, unless they are included in production decision making.






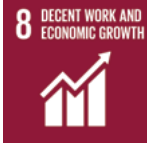
Recommendations to Development Organizations for Leveraging VSSs to Achieve Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment

Flowing from the above findings, Table 2 represents a summary of recommendations to development organizations that aim at leveraging VSS to achieve gender equality and women empowerment in agriculture. These recommendations are further developed within the guidebook. It cross-references each recommendation to the cross-cutting theme and SDG(s) that the recommendations will help achieve. Consistent monitoring of the implementation of these recommendations will be essential to making a lasting contribution to gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Table 2. Recommendations

Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Cross-Cutting Theme	SDGs	Recommendations
Household Food Security		<p>Promote women’s subsistence crops and nutritious crops for inter-cropping, shade and other sustainable production practices.</p> <p>Use gender transformative approaches to encourage women’s financial decision making within the household.</p> <p>Conduct a gender impact assessment of the introduction or reinforcement of cash crop cultivation before promoting certification.</p>
Women’s Rights to Productive Agricultural Resources	  	<p>Promote and advocate for women’s more stable and secure rights to land.</p> <p>Development organizations working in extension (agricultural training) services should use female extension workers in services provided for women.</p> <p>Promote women’s rights to productive agricultural resources in women’s empowerment-focused projects and interventions.</p> <p>Provide support and training on climate change adaptation and climate-smart agriculture for women producers.</p>
Gender Equality in Education		<p>Document and work to promote understanding of local cultural practices around child labour in agriculture.</p> <p>Develop and support initiatives for women’s literacy.</p> <p>Advocate for the importance of girls’ education, from primary through secondary, tertiary and post-secondary schooling.</p>



Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Cross-Cutting Theme	SDGs	Recommendations
Women's Unpaid Domestic Labour		<p>Undertake a gender transformative approach that emphasizes to women and men the importance of cooperating as a family.</p> <p>Develop and implement projects that support women's ability to choose to participate in income-generating agricultural work.</p> <p>Provide child care during any production-related trainings.</p>
Women's Decision Making and Empowerment	 	<p>Impart trainings with child care provided to women so that they can obtain certification.</p> <p>When providing trainings specifically for women, encourage activities focused on the production and commercial aspects of agriculture.</p> <p>Provide training and resources to producer cooperatives, farms and worker organizations that assist them to meet the gender equality and women's empowerment criteria of VSSs.</p> <p>Mandate the participation and representation of women equally to men in any decision making related to development programming.</p> <p>Conduct research with local women to understand what empowerment means to them.</p> <p>Support women-led commercialization projects.</p>
Decent Work for Women		<p>Promote adoption of VSSs on farms with hired labour to improve their employment conditions.</p> <p>Provide training for women and men that promotes women's access to higher-paid jobs with more decision-making responsibilities.</p> <p>Work with women and men to understand the gender division of agricultural labour.</p> <p>Develop and implement regular gender equality training for women and men at all levels of the workforce.</p>



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