Taking stock

An inventory study of quality assurance systems' contributions to poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation

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Taking stock: an inventory study of quality assurance systems' contributions to poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation
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Olga van der Valk and Sietze Vellema

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Summary

This report contains a descriptive comparison of five quality assurance systems operational in niche and mainstream markets: the Fairtrade Labelling Organisations International (FLO), the European regulations on organic production of agricultural products and foodstuffs (2092/91 and 834/2007), the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and Utz Certified. The comparison is based on a set of questions that give an indication of the conditions under which the quality assurance systems, originally designed to monitor, control and correct performance and quality, may work for the broader and intertwined fields of poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation. The results of the stock taking exercise are presented in Annex 1, which forms the main body of this report. In chapter 2 the questions used for describing the quality assurance systems are motivated from the perspective how to create an impact. Subsequently, in chapter 3, the authors review the findings by presenting the merits and by visualising the areas most strongly addressed by the respective quality assurance systems.

The discussion in the epilogue (chapter 4) shifts attention from the actual quality criteria intrinsic to the assurance systems to the indirect effects the implementation of quality assurance systems has on the conditions for development. This discussion emphasises that for understanding how quality assurance systems impact on development it is important to link them to the functioning of and relationships in a specific chain as well as to include the connections a quality assurance systems has with the enabling and regulatory environment. This broadens the view on how to make an impact in the complex fields of poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation by looking at behavioural patterns and institutional settings affected by rolling out quality assurance systems. Perhaps, this is also the terrain where concerted action among individual quality assurance systems and other development actors creates leverage for development.

1. Introduction

In the context of many rural economies, poverty alleviation is entangled with sustainable use and development of bio-divers resources. Bio-divers resources contribute to the resilience to shocks and stresses of livelihoods. This report presents an inventory of how the elements, design and implementation of a specific instrument, namely quality assurance systems arranging access to markets through certification and performance monitoring, contribute to this tandem of poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation. In general terms, a quality assurance is any systematic process of checking to see whether a product or service being developed is meeting specified requirements (SearchSoftwareQuality.com. 2007). The function of quality assurance can be the responsibility of a separate department within a company or it can be delegated to a third party auditor. Quality assurance systems are primarily motivated by the wish to increase customer confidence and a company's credibility, to improve work processes and efficiency, and to enable a company to better compete with others. In this report, the leading question is how quality assurance systems create an impact on larger development goals, namely poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation.

The aim of the report is to inform a discussion among stakeholders on how to make quality assurance systems work for the major development impact areas: poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation. In that sense, the report has a design orientation. An important limitation of the study is that the results do not represent an impact assessment of the quality assurance systems. The study is guided by a set of questions used to examine the formal aspects and designs of the quality assurance systems. How the systems work in practice or under different conditions was beyond the scope and possibilities of the assignment. Hence, the actual outcomes cannot be validated.

The Biodiversity Fund selected five quality assurance systems operational in niche and mainstream markets for the investigation: the Fairtrade Labelling Organisations International (FLO), the European regulations on organic production of agricultural products and foodstuffs (2092/91 and 834/2007), the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and Utz Certified.

The major research result, a descriptive comparison of a selection of niche and mainstream quality assurance systems implemented in nature-based production systems, is presented in annex 1. Reader with a strong interest in quality assurance can use the matrix as a condense source of information that enables cross-system learning and that provides details about the design and organisation of specific quality assurance systems.

Chapter 2 describes the questions used to describe the quality assurance systems. The questions are based on a set of assumptions on what is needed to make quality assurance systems work for the broad and intertwined goals of poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation.

Chapter 3 summarises the finding and present a preliminary review of the merits of each quality assurance system and a synthesis or horizontal comparison of the selected quality assurance systems.

Chapter 4, the epilogue, opens the discussion on how to perceive the way quality assurance systems create a development impact. This discussion emphasises that for understanding how quality assurance systems impact on development it is important to link them to the functioning of and relationships in a specific chain as well as to include the connections a quality assurance systems has with the enabling and regulatory environment.

2. Research questions and method

The inventory was designed to examine the design and modes of operation of a selection of quality assurance systems in order to give an indication of how these systems may work for the tandem of poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation. The materials used were documents, websites and other written information provided by quality assurance systems themselves or published as papers or articles. The draft matrix was presented to the selected quality assurance systems and their comments and suggestions were incorporated in the final report. No actual assessment of the outcomes and impacts of the selected quality assurance systems was made.

The questions used to examine the quality assurance systems were motivated by a discussion between the researchers and the Biodiversity Fond on what conditions make a quality assurance system work for the intended poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation. Five dimensions were defined:

1. The inclusion of poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation within the quality scope of the system;
2. The contribution of the quality assurance system to changing the conditions under which the poor participate in markets or their capacities to deal with uncertainties and instability, particularly in mainstream markets, which may require coalition building at national and international levels as well as connecting quality assurance systems to public social policy and regulation, and the way quality assurance systems take into account the often multidimensional livelihood strategies of the poor;
3. The way the quality assurance systems influences the use of (diverse) natural resources and stimulates coordinated management of natural resources within territorial development and connects this to public policy in the fields of biodiversity conservation;
4. The mode of learning induced by the quality assurance system: it seems relevant to understand how experimentation and (social) learning processes contribute to combining poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation and how improvement and impact are defined and shown through monitoring and control procedures;
5. The effect on the form of governance within the nature-based value chain, which addresses issues of representation and conflict resolution in layered value chains.

Table 1 introduces the research questions and explains the reasons for asking these questions.

Table 1: Research questions used to describe the selected quality assurance systems (QS)

	Label	*Motivation*
	1. Rationale / Scope	
1.1	What is the rationale of the QS?	This question looks for the self defined quality objectives and tries to discover how the QS sees its contribution to development. It discloses the merits of the QS itself.
1.2	How does the QS monitor/perceive the impact on poverty alleviation?	These two questions relate the issue of poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation to the mode of monitoring and measurement found in the QS. And, how does the QS make its contribution to these development goals transparent, which is not necessarily part of the established monitoring procedures.
1.3	How does the QS monitor /perceive the impact on biodiversity conservation?	
1.4	If, and how does the QS target specific social groups?	Poor people have a specific social-economic position, and the question examines whether and how the QS adopts policies or measures targeting the poor as a specific social group.
	2. Poverty & Markets	
2.1	How does the QS address the capacity of producers to handle risks and uncertainties attached to the economic realm (vulnerability to shocks)?	This question goes beyond the quality elements defined by the standard and looks for elements in the quality assurance systems that may have an effect on the capacities of vulnerable groups to handle uncertainties, risks and instability apparent in markets.
2.2	How does the QS address the incorporation of producers into market systems, involving new demands and requirements?	This question acknowledges that market-based development also requires capacity to respond to new demands and requirements from the side of buyers. This question describes how the QS incorporates this interaction between demand and supply.
2.3	How does the QS alter the conditions for marketing the produce?	Although the dynamics and negotiations in the market are to some extent independent from the QS, this question explores whether the QS intends to have an effect on how markets work.
2.4	How does the QS incorporate the multiplicity of sources of income or livelihood strategies?	This is a difficult question, motivated by the observation that poor people often have multiple sources of income and diverse livelihood strategies while QS seem to assume some form of specialisation.
2.5	How does the QS relate to (international and national) public regulation with respect to social conditions upstream in the chain?	This question tries to make visible those elements within the QS that originate in public regulation. This gives an indication for possible alignment with social policy outside the boundaries of the QS.

	Label	*Motivation*
	3. Management of (diverse) natural resources	
3.1	How does the QS see the relationship between farm management and management of natural resources in the surrounding ecosystem?	This question introduces the different scales attached to biodiversity conservation. It assumes that the conservation of biodiversity has to be a combination on on-farm practice and some form of joint effort affecting the surrounding ecosystem.
3.2	What is the view in the QS on the sustainability of the ecosystem in which the production is rooted, in terms of usage of external inputs, recycling and reproduction of resources?	This question originates in the discussion that biodiversity conservation is supported by systems that can reproduce their own resources.
3.3	How does the QS value or encourage collective management of (diverse) natural resources?	This question addresses the more institutional side of biodiversity conservation and examines how the QS perceives collective action as an elements for realising this objective.
3.4	How does the QS relate to (national and international) public regulation addressing biodiversity conservation?	Like in the domain of social policy, this question researches how the QS builds on regulations in the public domain.
	4. (Social) learning	
4.1	What incentives does the QS provide for improvement?	The following questions are motivated by the idea that for achieving the intended development impacts a socially embedded learning process is conditional. Hence, the questions look for the ways in which the QS stimulates individual and joint learning, how corrections are made, and what incentives are available for improving practices.
4.2	How does the QS correct undesired practices or non-compliance of standards by certified units?	
4.3	How does the organisational set up of the QS contribute to joint action and benefit sharing?	
4.4	How does the QS connect to outside institutes for enabling the improvement process?	This question stipulates that the improvement process expected by the QS usually requires inputs from organisations outside the boundaries of the QS or the value chain. This question examines this level of connectivity.
4.5	How does the QS integrate local knowledge?	Upstream actors in a QS are knowledgeable about the specific conditions under which they operate. To what extent does the QS make this knowledge part of the learning and improvement processes.

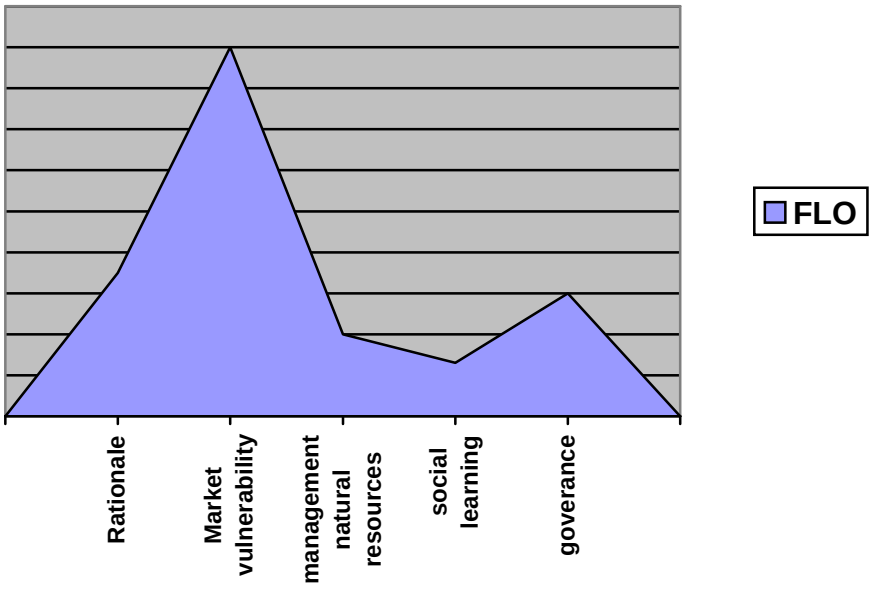
	Label	*Motivation*
	5. Governance	
5.1	How does the QS arrange representation of poor producers or marginal stakeholders in decision making processes?	The basic assumption behind these questions is that achieving the combined development goals, such as poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation, also depends on the organisational culture and institutional arrangements in the QS. These questions explore how the QS arranges matters such as representation and conflict resolution.
5.2	How does the QS resolve and manage conflicts?	
5.3	How does the QS include institutions outside the boundaries of the system in cases of tensions or conflict?	
5.4	How does the QS approach the distance between places of production and places of consumption in the era of globalisation?	This question highlights a specific element of cross-border value chains, namely that actors are institutionally remote. Hence, relationships between actors in the QS or value chain are not nested in a bounded social environment. How does the QS handle this institutional gap?

3. Review

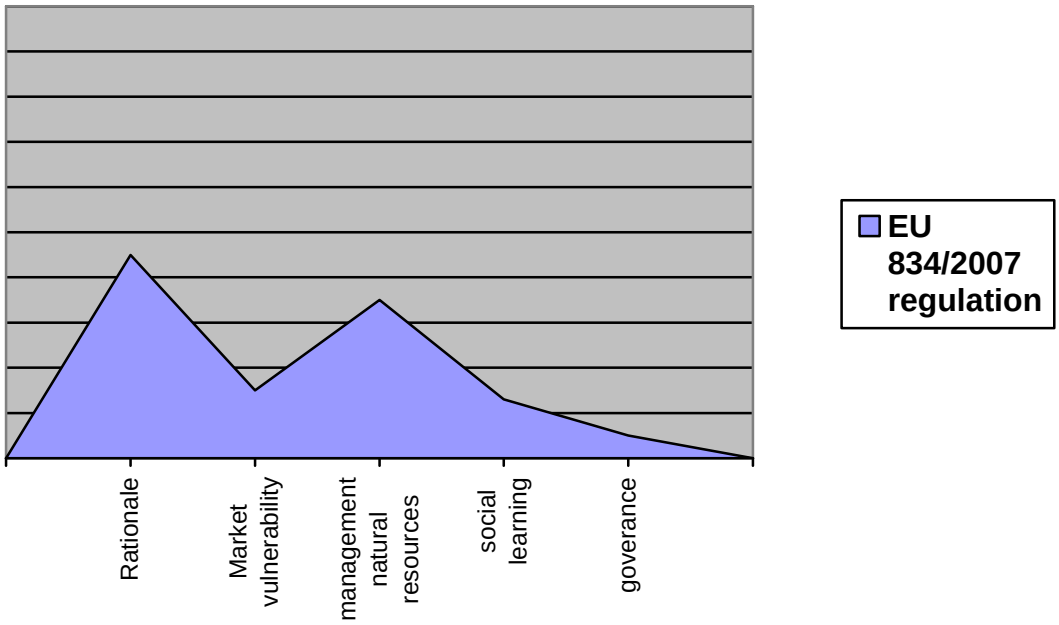
This chapter aims to summarise the rich material presented in annex 1 (Table 2). In addition, the chapter tries to label the distinctive features of each quality assurance system and it visualises the different emphasises put by the quality assurance systems, which helps to discover which quality assurance system pays more attention to what question. Obviously, this is an interpretation of the researchers. Therefore, it is important to note that the research is primarily descriptive, which is reflected in the factual presentation in annex 1. The research was not designed to make a rigorous comparative analysis of the selected quality assurance systems. Yet, a first step towards a synthesis may inform the discussion about merits of and complementarities between quality assurance systems.

The graphs below further illustrate the relative weight an individual quality assurance systems (FLO, EU Organic, FSC, MSC and Utz Certified) puts to the five distinguished domains. A possible next step can be to benchmark each quality assurance system for the five domains and to discover best practices.

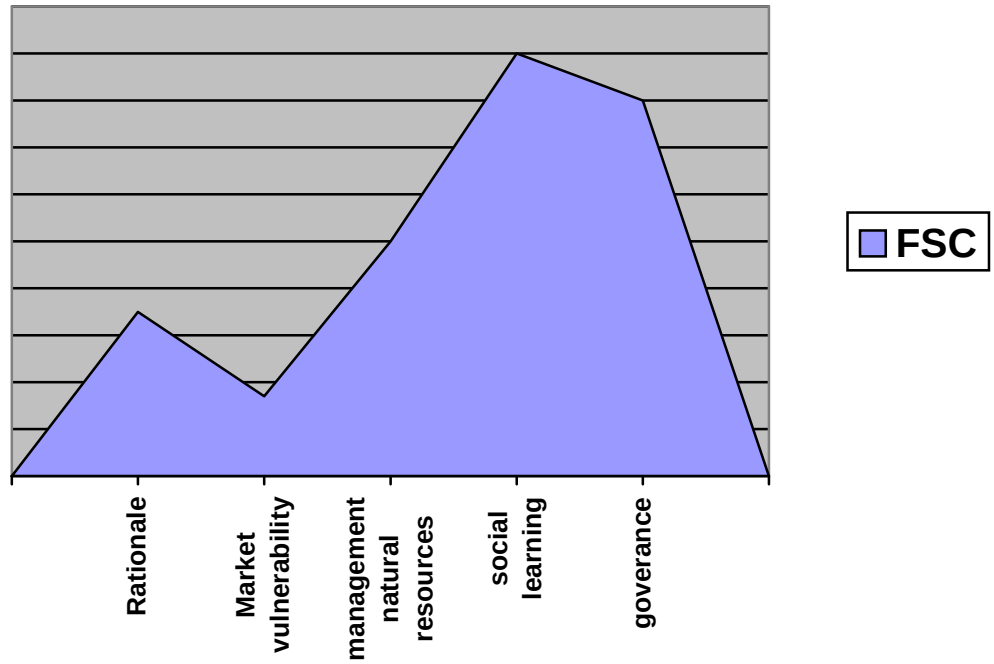
Figure 1: Relative weight the quality assurance systems put to the distinguished domains



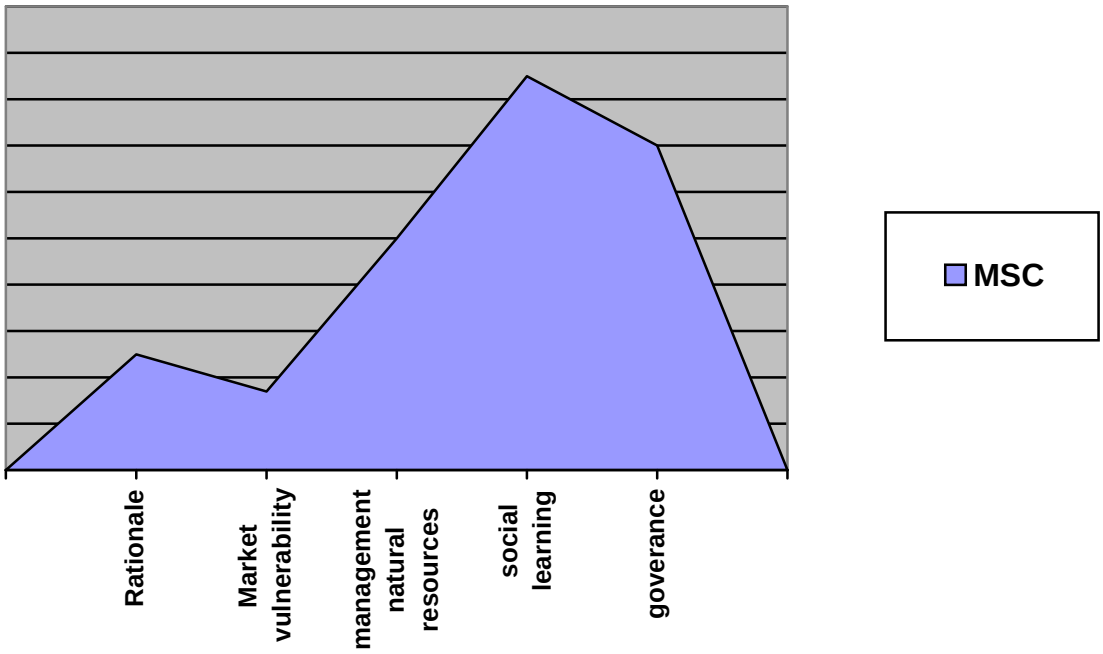
FLO: Empowerment of specific group of marginal stakeholders through strengthening of organizational level and representation structures.



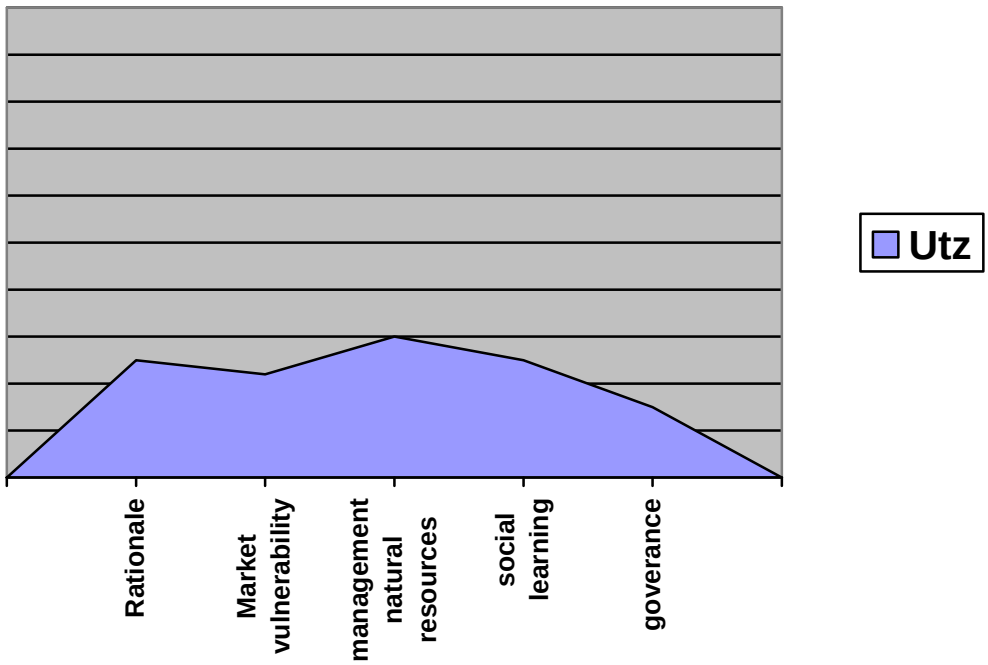
EU Organic: Harmonization of organic principles in farming in internal market of European Union; protection of producer and consumer from malpractices and fraud on claims of organic production methods



FSC: multi stakeholder processes before and during management of certification unit, strong link and revision of local and (inter)national legislation.



MSC: Cross-border certification and strong link with research and information gathering for joint action for fisheries management and its controlled impact on ecosystem.



Utz Certified: participation in system of (large) main-stream market partners downstream in de market chain.

Table 2: Summary and characterization of selected quality assurance systems

	FLO	EU regulation	FSC	MSC	Utz Certified
1. Poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation integral elements of the rationale of the quality assurance system	⇒ Rationale: "Sustainable economic and social development of marginalized producers and workers from a position of vulnerability to security and empowerment of producers and workers as stakeholders in their own organisations." ⇒ Vulnerability not defined in terms of ecological conditions and not related to biodiversity ⇒ Poverty alleviation (social and economic development) defined as "dignified life", fulfilment of "basic needs", minimum income level, monitored by the covering cost price of certified production. ⇒ Access to land as related to poverty and empowerment is not addressed by QS	⇒ Rationale: "Sustainable development of organic production while ensuring the effective functioning of the internal market, guaranteeing fair competition, ensuring consumer confidence and protecting consumer interests." ⇒ Organic production is to respect nature's systems and cycle; sustain and enhance the health of soil, water, plants and animals and the balance between them; and contribute to a high level of biodiversity ⇒ No reference to poverty reduction or labour standards by EU legislation. IFOAM does include social standards	⇒ Rationale: "Promote environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests ⇒ Forest operations are to be managed to be sufficiently profitable, without generating financial profit at the expense of the forest resources, the ecosystem or affected communities. Local people should enjoy long term benefits ⇒ Biological diversity and associated values have to be conserved and integrity of forest maintained ⇒ Targeting specific groups with additional programmes (FSC Social Strategy; SLIMF), to assure participation of marginal stakeholders in forest management ⇒ Inclusion of land and customary rights of marginal stakeholders	⇒ Rationale: "Development and maintenance of effective fisheries management systems through: (1) sustainable harvest of the target stock; (2) acceptable impact of the fishery on the ecosystem, and (3) effectiveness of the fishery management system" ⇒ No statements on impact on poverty ⇒ Fishery management system must observe the legal and customary rights and long term interests of people dependent on fishing for food and livelihood, consistent with ecological sustainability ⇒ Fishing operations should allow for the maintenance of the structure, productivity, function and diversity of the ecosystem, without threatening of biological diversity ⇒ The MSC's Developing World Programme is working on new guidance for certifiers working with small-scale and data-deficient fisheries	⇒ Rationale: "To give assurance of social and environmental quality in (coffee) production for (coffee) buyers; to create transparency in the production chain by means of traceability to provide credibility and accountability required by traders and processors" ⇒ No statements on impact on poverty. Reference to several ILO conventions regarding labour conditions. ⇒ Biodiversity approached in terms of variability among living organisms from all ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part, including diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems. Impact defined particularly regarding deforestation of primary and/or secondary forests." Compensation of deforestation is allowed. ⇒ No targeting of specific social groups. Utz Certified is open to all suppliers and to both individual and group certification.
2. Capacity of up stream actors to enter markets and to handle risks, uncertainties and instability in market environment is affected by quality assurance system	⇒ Protection against strong downward fluctuations in market price. ⇒ Income diversification is not defined in terms of multiple crop systems, but as vertical market integration, that is, development of alternatives for adding value for the same product and thus decrease vulnerability to fluctuations in commodity prices. ⇒ Emphasis on export marketing.	⇒ Regulation does refer to the need for diversification through producing a wide variety of foods and other agricultural products, corresponding to consumers' demand ⇒ No protection against market fluctuations, as it is against WTO conventions. ⇒ Difficult market access for import of organic products by third countries not listed by EU as having equivalent legislation	⇒ Distribution of revenues (environmental and social benefits) to local communities or marginalized groups are not specified in principles. ⇒ No alteration of market conditions ⇒ Forest management should strive to strengthen and diversify the local economy, avoiding dependence on a single forest product ⇒ Forest management Unit is certified with the aim of marketing multiple forest products	⇒ Specific attention by MSC for information gathering by fishery management system; on catch levels; ecosystem; biological diversity and inclusion of research plan ⇒ No alteration of conditions for marketing. ⇒ Data in some multi-species artisan fisheries is often collected at a broader level than species, which makes it difficult to satisfy the requirements of an MSC assessment	⇒ Certified producers get access the Utz Certified track and trace System where they make sales announcements and find market information and information on premiums paid in the system ⇒ Utz Certified coffee buyers will pay premium for quality coffee. Traceability is important and requires that all Utz certified products can be identified and traced ⇒ Utz Certified does not interfere in price negotiations between sellers and buyers

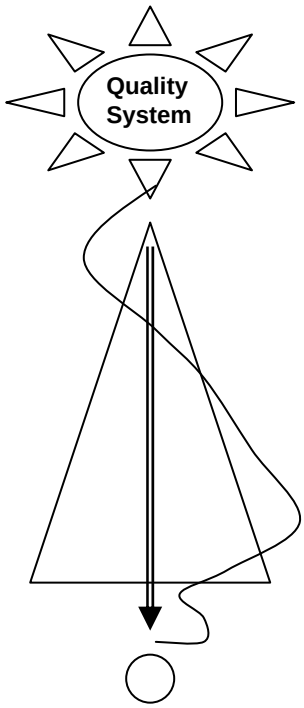
	FLO	EU regulation	FSC	MSC	Utz Certified
3. The individual and joint management of natural resources in ecosystem is supported by the quality assurance system	⇒ Creation of balance between protection of environment and business results. ⇒ Emphasis on joint responsibility in management of farming systems and affected natural resources by certified unit ⇒ Minimal use of synthetic and off-farm fertilizers and inputs ⇒ GMO material prohibited	⇒ Organic farming combines different societal functions of preservation of natural resources and biodiversity on the one hand with satisfying markets and consumers in the other hand. ⇒ Minimal use of synthetic and off-farm fertilizers and inputs that are registered by EU ⇒ GMO material prohibited	⇒ Plantations have to be active in protection, restoration and conservation of natural forests, including dedicated protection zones. ⇒ Plans for selective harvesting and environmental safeguards. ⇒ Promotion and adoption of environmentally friendly non-chemical methods of pest management and strive to avoid the use of chemical pesticides ⇒ GMO material prohibited	⇒ The fishery must have adequate knowledge about the ecosystem relevant to fishing, the impact of fishing, and have management objectives set to address these impact (avoidance / reduction), including regarding threatened and protected species ⇒ Use of fishing gear and practices designed to avoid the capture of non-target species and minimize mortality of this catch where it cannot be avoided	⇒ Demonstration of possible negative impact of farm activities on environment (including pollution and possible waste) and attached record keeping and mapping. ⇒ Reference to excusive use of crop protection products. ⇒ Documented use of energy. ⇒ GMO material allowed provided that producer complies with relevant regulations in the country of production
4. The system gives incentives for improvement, social learning and joint action	⇒ Emphasis on internal improvement rather than on external control. ⇒ Direct business transactions give rise to apprenticeship and empowerment in market position ⇒ Room for definition of development goals by stakeholders themselves ⇒ Standards emphasize need for continuous improvement by certified entities ⇒ Main monitoring instrument is development of plans	⇒ Internal coordination by EU member States ⇒ No incentives for stakeholders. ⇒ Separate EU agricultural policies and programmes for promotion of sustainable agriculture and biodiversity. ⇒ Strong lobbying role by IFOAM for discussion of issues relevant to organic production, certification and trade.	⇒ The forest management unit is required to give opportunities for employment, training, and other services to the communities within, or adjacent to, the forest management area ⇒ Forest management plan is designed with respect for long-term tenure and use rights of third (indigenous) parties and has to be implemented in continuous consultation with people and groups (both men and women) directly affected by management operations.	⇒ MSC label is developed to confirm that the fishery is engaged in taking a series of corrective actions towards sustainability that otherwise would not have been taken ⇒ Management system of fishery has to contain a consultative process that is transparent and involves all interested and affected parties so as to consider all relevant information, including local knowledge.	⇒ Utz Kapeh has a network of technical assistants to train producers on good agricultural practices and organizational skills. Also workers receive training about safe handling of chemicals ⇒ Utz Certified links producers with funding provided by by large coffee companies registered buyers in the Utz Kapeh system (Sara Lee, Efico)
5. Governance, representation and conflict resolution are part of the quality assurance system	⇒ Social and economic development directly related to the principle of democracy: strong emphasis on horizontal integration to achieve development ⇒ Empowerment in terms of long term strategy plans and internal management control systems ⇒ Emphasis on formal control of stakeholders on their organization (compare with process approach of FSC for stakeholder consultation)	⇒ No representation of stakeholders ⇒ No reference to conflict solution among stakeholders	⇒ Strong linkage between FSC principles and legislation: local adaptation of FSC principles require review of national and local forest laws, a listing of multilateral environmental agreements and ILO conventions ratified by country, and a listing of endangered species in the country or region. ⇒ No specific representation of poor producers or marginal stakeholders within the FSC structure.	⇒ In the MSC Stakeholder Council there is a category for representatives from developing country and community interest. ⇒ Regulating fisheries in the space of production alone is complicated because fish is an open access resource. Cross-jurisdictional management of fisheries is an issue.	⇒ Utz Kapeh has a Board of Directors (5). No specific representation of marginal stakeholders. ⇒ Emphasis of importance of traceability

4. Epilogue

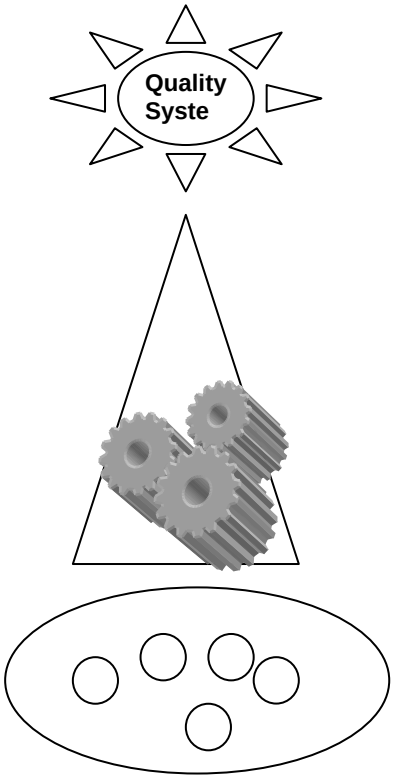
We started this inventory study from the question ‘how do quality assurance systems create an impact for poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation’. The research questions we used to examine the characteristics of the quality assurance systems entail a shift from the narrowly and sometimes mainly technically defined quality requirements and the related plan-do-check-act mode of operation, to an interest in the configuration that sets the conditions for improvement and change.

Poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation are multi-scale and multi-site problems that may be beyond the direct influence of the quality assurance system. This report is an endeavour to make the contributions of quality assurance systems to these composite problem areas more visible. It does so by embedding the functioning of quality assurance systems in change processes within nature-based value chains and by connecting this to development endeavours in the wider environment. With this step, we linked quality assurance systems to their physical and institutional environment. We also included the social process and institutional arrangements within a chain, because changes in the chain organisation as a result of quality assurance schemes may also result in development outcomes.

This observation led us to the first steps towards developing an impact-oriented perspective on quality assurance systems. The text and illustration below sketch the contours of such a perspective. We hope that this stimulates discussion among the quality assurance systems and development-oriented organisations.

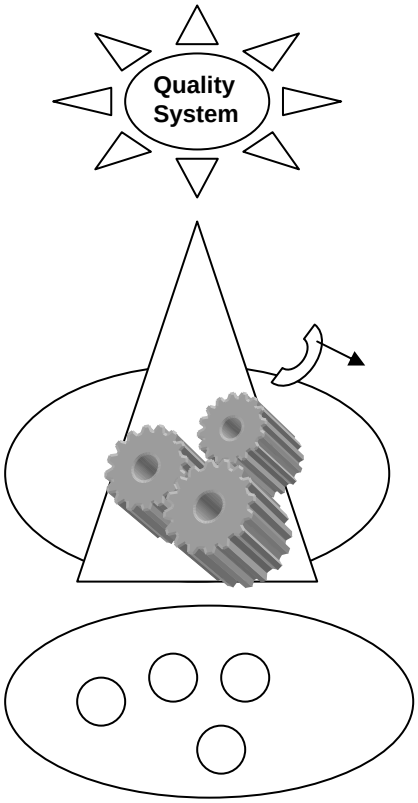


1. A shift from direct to indirect effects
When looking at quality assurance systems from an impact perspective, the most obvious angle is to look for direct effects produced by the system itself. This report indicates that poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation are too broad to be included in the plan-do-act modality elementary to quality assurance systems. Therefore, it seems valuable to emphasise indirect effects resulting from the implementation of quality assurance systems, in particular changes in behaviour such as more concerted action, shared investments and social learning. In this sense, the ways quality assurance schemes produce an impact also depend on its relationships with environmental factors.



2. Quality assurance systems act in configuration with the chain and its impact also depends on concerted action in the development domain.

The questions raised in this report, may also imply that improvement processes in nature-based value chains strongly rely on both coordinated action within the chain configuration and concerted action in the domain for development intervention. Impact is created by a combination of functions and mechanisms, which make the system work for solving composite problems such as poverty and biodiversity degradation. Hence, the bias of quality assurance systems to performance of individual units may contrast with the need to assemble different actors in an endeavour to address composite problems. This explains the interest in actions and interventions at scales exceeding the individual production unit, which is usually the focus of monitoring and correction in quality assurance systems. The shift is to levels of connectivity and nature of the social relationships between actors in achieving development goals.



3. Leveraging development by connecting actors

The investigation in this report suggests that quality assurance systems produce development outcomes in combination with other measures. Strategies targeting poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation usually exceed the boundaries of individual units and therefore require both the involvement of multiple actors in managing a common good and interventions at different scales, which is not easily covered by existing quality assurance systems.

This implies that the complementarities between voluntary forms of regulation and other forms of regulation and coordination are an important condition for leveraging development-oriented interventions. It seems wise to trace the alignments of quality assurance systems with other actors to find levers for development and to have impact at different scales. Likewise, the expectations of how quality assurance systems can make a difference can become more realistic, and move away from the idea that a single quality assurance system can achieve complex and ambitious development goals through a unidirectional and linear process of plan, do, check and act.

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