

RESOLVE

Multi-Sector Expert Panel Releases New Findings on Sustainability Certification

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Today a 12-member Steering Committee composed of international business and civil society leaders and academic experts released its final report, [*Toward Sustainability: The Roles and Limitations of Certification*](#). This consensus report describes what is known and what is most important to learn about the performance and potential of voluntary standards and certification.

The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and Mars, Incorporated, initiated and funded the consensus-based process that led to this report.

Michael Fernandez, Director of Public Policy and Global Partnerships at Mars, Incorporated, said, “Mars is committed to having sustainable sources of our raw materials and creating mutual benefits for the communities that supply these ingredients. This assessment will help us better understand how certification can help us achieve these objectives, as well as where there are gaps that still need to be addressed within certification systems, or through other complementary programs.”

Committee members expect the report to be of particular value to businesses, governments, and NGOs that are considering the use of certification to assist in sustainability goals. “The *Toward Sustainability* report gives us the best insight we’ve ever had into the actual, perceived, and potential impact of environmental and social labeling schemes,” said Jan Kees Vis, Global Director of Sustainable Sourcing Development at Unilever. “This is a great help to businesses who want to ensure they contribute to social progress and environmental improvement through their supply chains.”

Report Findings

Through a consensus-based process that came to be called the State-of-Knowledge Assessment of Standards and Certification, the Steering Committee found substantial evidence of improvements in social, environmental, and economic practices resulting from certification at the site level, as well as some instances of unintended effects, positive and negative. However, they also found that the evidence of broader or longer-term impacts is more limited. In many cases, the Committee discovered, research has difficulty attributing outcomes directly to certification. Consequently, Committee members believe that additional coordinated research on the impacts of certification, as well as greater collaborative effort to systematically collect data, is a top priority.

The Steering Committee also found that the indirect impacts of certification are substantial and probably greater than the direct impacts. Voluntary standards and certification may be most effective, they believe, as part of a suite of integrated public and private sustainability tools. Standards and certification are useful complements to regulatory policies and other private voluntary sustainability initiatives, filling gaps and to introducing incentives for supply chain innovation. This speaks to the need for designing voluntary standards to work better in concert with other approaches.

Rainforest Alliance President Tensie Whelan said, “The Rainforest Alliance and other third-party, multi-stakeholder certification systems are eager to work together with governments and funders to invest in impact assessment. This report demonstrates that we have begun to learn how to assess impact, but that the support of academics, funders, and others will be critical in order to help us move forward with designing and implementing comprehensive yet cost-effective impact assessment methodologies.”

The Assessment Process

The Steering Committee was composed of 12 experts from businesses, universities, and nongovernmental organizations: Mike Barry (Marks & Spencer), Ben Cashore (Yale University), Jason Clay (World Wildlife Fund), Michael Fernandez (Mars, Incorporated), Louis Lebel (Chiang Mai University), Tom Lyon (University of Michigan), Patrick Mallet (ISEAL Alliance), Kira Matus (London School of Economics), Peter Melchett (Soil Association), Michael Vandenberg (Vanderbilt University), Jan Kees Vis (Unilever), and Tensie Whelan (Rainforest Alliance). Member biographies are available at www.resolve.org/towardsustainability.

The process was chaired by Patrick Mallet of the ISEAL Alliance and facilitated by RESOLVE, a nonprofit collaboration and mediation organization that served as the Secretariat.

The Steering Committee commissioned four in-depth academic reviews of the peer-reviewed and gray literature focused on the certification of forestry products, wild-caught and aquaculture seafood, and agricultural farming systems. Additional commissioned reviews examined business drivers for engaging with certification, a typology of private governance tools, methodological approaches for improving research on the impacts of certification, and other research contributing to analysis. Based on the preliminary, combined review findings and subsequent outreach meetings, the Steering Committee drafted and refined the main chapters of the report in 2011. These chapters were then subject to peer review late last year and have been finalized, along with report recommendations and an executive summary.

Contents of the Report

The *Toward Sustainability* report explores:

- The current state of knowledge regarding the environmental, social, and economic **impacts** of voluntary certification;

- How the **design** of certification systems has evolved, and design elements common to successful systems;
- How businesses, governments, NGOs, foundations, and consumers **make decisions** about using or supporting certification;
- **Interacting approaches** such as government regulation – and how they affect certification outcomes;
- **Trends** that could significantly impact standards and certification systems in the future; and
- **Recommendations** for improving the performance of certification systems, and outlining priority areas for future research.

“This report marks a significant achievement,” said Mallet. “For the first time, the body of evidence for what we know about voluntary standards and certification has been pulled together and synthesized in one place. Voluntary standards are becoming increasingly prevalent, and this report provides directions for how we can make them more effective.”

For More Information

The 115-page report, plus an executive summary and appendices, and additional information about the Assessment, can be found at www.resolv.org/towardsustainability. For more information, please contact RESOLVE (the Secretariat) at 202.944.2300 or info@resolv.org.