

UNFSS Academic Advisory Council Webinar
Roundtable: Sustainability Standards and Environmental Concerns
Virtual Webinar
10 February 2021

Summary Report
Prepared by the UNCTAD, secretariat of UNFSS

I. Opening Introduction

1. The webinar started by an opening introduction by Ms. Rita Mendez, Senior Coordinator, Impacts and Evidence, ISEAL, explaining the background, aims, and objectives of the webinar. She gave an explanation of the strategic work collaboration between the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS) and Evidensia in terms of the current webinar that aims to stepping up Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) research through UNFSS's Academic Advisory Council (AAC) network. It was also mentioned that this webinar is the first in 2021 Evidensia-UNFSS webinar series that will feature discussions with leading researchers who are part of the UNFSS' AAC on the impacts of voluntary sustainability standards. The current roundtable discusses the potential of sustainability standards to contribute to mitigating the current environmental crisis.
2. Ms. Rita briefly introduced UNFSS and Evidensia as follow: UNFSS is an initiative of five UN agencies, FAO, ITC, UNIDO, UN Environment and UNCTAD is the secretariat of the UNFSS. Its focus consists very broadly of three key areas, 1) Research and Analysis Hub, 2) Support for National Platforms and 3) Informed Policy Dialogue. The AAC is a network of renowned academic expert to foster credibility in the research and analysis mandate. Evidensia supports evidence-based learning to inform sustainability practice and policy. It supports evidence-based learning to inform sustainability practices and policies. This is done through Evidensia platform that provides easy access to credible research. Evidensia aims to build a common knowledge base by making everything available in one place to all users.

II. Setting-the-Scene

3. The webinar was opened by the co-chairs of UNFSS AAC, Mr. Santiago Fernandez de Cordoba, Senior Economist and UNFSS Coordinator, UNCTAD, and Dr. Axel Marx, Deputy Director, Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies, University of Leuven, who set the scene explaining the aims and objectives of the dialogue.
4. The opening remarks delivered by Mr. Fernandez de Cordoba, outlined the context of the webinar and highlighted the need for the current dialogue, given the urgency and severity of the environmental crisis the world is facing today. He signified the need for a rapid transitioning towards sustainable pathways and the necessity of a paradigm shift that deploys remarkable tools and instruments. Mr. Fernandez de Cordoba stated that



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sustainability standards are discussed today as a potential tool in contributing to the mitigation of this environmental crisis and prevention of harm altogether.

5. Dr. Marx highlighted the purpose and the rationale behind the establishment of the ACC and respectively the current roundtable webinar. He mentioned that given the proliferation of VSS in terms of number and use, in addition to the increasing interest and research on VSS, the AAC brings together researchers from different disciplines including natural and social sciences to gain more comprehensive insights on VSS, exchange information and address the potentials and limitations of VSS in addressing the sustainability concerns from the researchers' various scientific point of views. This is done, he added, through organizing events and webinars including the current roundtable webinar.

III. Presentations

6. This session was opened and moderated by Ms. Ruby Lambert, Sustainability Officer, UNCTAD.
7. The first impulse giver, **Dr. Eric Lambin**, Professor, Stanford University & University of Louvain, raised a question of whether VSS are reducing deforestation. He highlighted the multiplicity and diversity of the policies that aim to confront deforestation, from the national to the international level, and the fact that these policies are sequencing. He illustrated that VSS come later in this sequence and are much smaller in number in comparison to public policies, for instance. He signified two essential points in order to enhance the impact of VSS; the need to expand the uptake of VSS and the need to integrate VSS into public policies and company commitment. Lambin as well addressed the differences in the VSS uptake across commodities and how while some commodities are doing well in terms of VSS uptake, others, who contribute to deforestation, are way behind in terms of VSS uptake. He also addressed the VSS selection bias problem and highlighted the risk of the spill over and leakage of VSS. The Three main takeaways from Dr. Lambin's presentation can be summarized as follow: 1. VSS have so far not achieved their goal of reducing deforestation due to limited scope. 2. However, there is a question mark whether their main contribution is to accelerate adoption of credible zero deforestation policies by governments and companies? And 3. If that is the case, more impact can be achieved by amplifying VSS interactions with the broader policy ecosystem.
8. The second impulse giver, **Dr. Graeme Auld**, Professor, Public Affairs Research Excellence Chair, and Director of Carleton University's School of Public Policy and Administration, focused on the need to improve the performance of VSS. The key themes of his presentation were around, first, VSS, taken alone, are unlikely to solve environmental problems, but their performance can be better or worse, and better VSS performance ought to be a goal. Second, science is an input into VSS, but not the only consideration. Third, knowledge of VSS is highly varied and patchy and there are challenge of doing research that recognizes and accounts for differences and specifics, while offering general lessons. And fourth, VSS are not solitary or unitary interventions. That is, there are different views of what they are doing and ought to be doing, and their effects (positive



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and negative) are always a product of interactions. He mentioned that VSS as well, operate through interactions and VSS organizations and standards are conditioned by the nature of markets, supply chains, trade, and technologies, government policies, business strategies, NGO strategies, among others. While he highlighted the necessity of more coordination, he, as well, stressed that this doesn't necessarily lead to better outcomes. This is because, in many different settings, VSS is a political project as much as it is an instrumental project. And the fact each entity, in this interaction, has its own political interest.

9. The third Impulse giver, **Dr. Benjamin Cashore**, Professor, Li Ka Shing Professor in Public Management and Co-Director, Institute of Water Policy, National University of Singapore, raised two main questions: Why do we keep inventing new ways for improving global approaches to sustainability standards and sustainable development? And why although all these policy tools are designed to improve "good governance" and solve critical challenges, still the environmental problems are worsening? Investigating these two big questions lead Dr. Cashore to conclude that there is a disconnect between proliferation of intervention, and the problems that they are trying to solve. The presentation introduced and highlighted the "norm complex" that biases our attention on synergies while treating countervailing effects as implementation or policy design challenges. Dr. Cashore illustrated that this led to "better designed" tools that cause, tragically, fragmentation. How might sustainability standards break from results of previous historical attempts at sustainable development, is a dilemma we need to solve. According to Dr. Cashore, a solution to this dilemma requires that we be much clearer about what specific problems we want to address and to devote explicit attention to what are the ways to conceive of sustainable development problems.

IV. Concluding remarks

10. The webinar was concluded by Ms. Vidya Rangan, Senior Manager, Impacts and Evidence, ISEAL, who thanked the impulse givers and audience and called for more collaboration to make science and practice work closer. She as well raised several questions regarding what this webinar means of the future research. And highlighted the huge need for a cross cutting research and integrated solutions.