

## United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards Year in Review- 2022

UNFSS Brief introduction: The United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS) is an initiative of 6 UN Agencies: UNCTAD, ITC, UNIDO, FAO, UNECE, and UN Environment. UNCTAD is the secretariat of the initiative.

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## Informed policy Dialogue

### 1. Brussels Dialogue on Sustainable Trade

On Wednesday, 26 October 2022, the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS) held its conference on Sustainable Trade and Development Opportunities in Brussels, Belgium to call on the expertise of the Chair of the European Parliament’s Committee on International Trade, Bernd Lange; Jamaica’s Ambassador-designate to Belgium and Head of Mission to the EU, Symone Betton Nayo; and ISEAL’s Director of Programmes, Kristin Komives; and moderated by Director and Professor of the Global Economics at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Bernard Hoekman, to unravel the many sustainability challenges faced by developing countries posed by international trade.

During the dialogue, the UNFSS launched its 5th Flagship Report entitled “Voluntary Sustainability Standards, Sustainability Agenda and Developing Countries Opportunities and Challenges” which aims to investigate the opportunities and challenges associated with Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) for developing countries. The report covered the governance gaps between developed countries (where these standards are set) and developing countries (where these standards are adopted); as well as the multiplicity of standards and harmonization from the establishment of national sustainability standards by developing countries.

To read the report of the dialogue: <https://unfss.org/2022/11/02/sustainable-trade-in-a-globalized-world-the-time-to-reconcile-development-opportunities-is-now/>

### 2. Academic Advisory Council Meeting

In October 2022, the UNFSS co-organized its second AAC meeting together with the Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies, the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), and the European University Institute (EUI), hosted at the Irish College in Leuven. The meeting was conducted in a hybrid format and some participants joined in-person and some joined virtually.

The meeting brought together an international mix of academic (members of the AAC), practitioners (members from the UNFSS National Platforms) and policy experts from various disciplines and backgrounds to consolidate the knowledge on VSS, and discuss the contributions of VSS to sustainable development, centered around the theme for discussion: “Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis of VSS”, structured around the internal and external dimensions of VSS, with a development related lens. This provided an avenue for cross fertilization of thoughts on the issue at hand.

This year’s AAC meeting discussed the SWOT framework of VSS. On the internal dimension, the AAC meeting explored the strengths and weaknesses of VSS in advancing the sustainability agenda, especially

in developing countries, with a specific focus on VSS institutional design, how they work, how they have evolved over time, and how they try to adopt to new challenges and circumstances.

Further, on the external dimension, the AAC meeting explored the opportunities and threats that VSS face as a private governance tool that interacts with other regulatory initiatives. This is also imperative to be understood as there is an increasing interest in making value chains more sustainable, and from a regulatory perspective, there is an emergence of new regulatory tools, like the EU due diligence legislations, which can have interactions with the VSS systems.

To know more: <https://unfss.org/2022/11/30/navigating-voluntary-sustainability-standards-from-the-lens-of-swot-framework/>

### 3. Steering committee meetings

The UNFSS Steering Committee (SC) is made up of representatives from the five partner agencies that run the forum:

- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- International Trade Centre (ITC)
- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)
- United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)
- UN Environment Programme (UN Environment)
- United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)

The committee holds about four coordination meetings a year and is responsible for: implementing and facilitating the forum's global dialogue on policy; analysis and support activities; working areas; thematic focus; work plan; budget

See Annex 1 for the agendas of 2021 Meetings.

In addition, the SC is also working on developing a strategic framework for UNFSS. In that, the committee members meet once every two weeks to develop a workplan for UNFSS which focuses on the outputs, outcomes, and inputs for the UNFSS.

### 4. Knowledge exchange

- a) **Stepping up Women's economic empowerment through Voluntary Sustainability Standards**, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2022.

To celebrate the International Women's Day, the UNCTAD VSS team will leverage this special day to promote Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) especially in the agricultural sector



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in developing countries. The agricultural sector is a very important sector in developing countries as it contributes directly and indirectly to the majority of the population's livelihood. Addressing WEE requires a combination of interventions aimed directly at increasing women's access and control over economic resources. Thus, VSS team presented its forthcoming study and recommendations to facilitate VSS uptake with gender considerations in this webinar. VSS team aimed to grasp the effects of WEE through knowledge exchange and best practices on the ground, particularly on three key touchpoints:

- VSS to facilitate better women employment conditions and training infrastructures,
- VSS to facilitate women's access to credit for financial and agricultural inputs,
- VSS to facilitate women's decision-making power.

#### Speakers:

- Mercedes Araoz Fernandez, Former Vice-President of Peru and Co-Chair of the UNFSS Academic Advisory Council
- Ambassador Chad Blackman, Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Barbados to the United Nations in Geneva, IGC Global board and Gender Champion
- Amrita Bahri, Associate Professor of International Trade Law at ITAM and Co-Chair Professor for WTO Chair Program (Mexico)
- Kezy Mukiri, Executive Director at Ignite Trade Africa
- Suhasini Singh, FairWear India Country Manager

For more information: <https://unfss.org/2022/03/16/empowering-women-is-smart-economics-and-pathway-towards-the-sdgs/>

#### **b) Understanding Smallholder Farmer Access to Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) – Compliant Markets (WEBINAR) (10<sup>th</sup> May 2-3:30 pm CET)**

There are an estimated 500 million smallholder farmer families globally, many of whom make up a large proportion of the world's poor. These farmers work on small plots of land, often earning and producing enough to survive but not enough to rise out of poverty. Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) are instruments to influence how global value chains operate, strengthen farmer's market access and an alignment towards the sustainable development outcomes - economic, social and environment.

This webinar shed light on the factors that influence smallholder farmer participation in VSS-compliant markets, in order to understand how limitations can be addressed and enabling factors harnessed. Through presenting a [study by UNCTAD and IISD](#) that collected data from the field on factors that affect smallholders access to VSS compliant markets in six developing countries and six value chains, the webinar aimed to:

Understand the conditions that enable (or limit) smallholder farmer access to Voluntary Sustainability Standard (VSS)-compliant markets; Identify best practices for creating an enabling environment for sustainable production and trade; Provide inputs on the way

forward to better harness the advantages of VSS by smallholders and producers in developing countries.

To know more: <https://unfss.org/2022/05/12/no-poverty-among-smallholder-farmers-can-access-to-voluntary-sustainability-standards-vss-compliant-markets-help/>

**c) 8th National Conference on Quality (Madinah), 6-8 June**

The 8<sup>th</sup> National Conference on Quality was held in Madinah in June this year. UNFSS presented the work on Voluntary sustainability standards at the conference and the role that standards can play, linked to the theme "Sustainable Quality for an Ambitious Nation".

More information on the conference: <https://www.spa.gov.sa/2360409>

**d) Presentation on "Better Trade for Sustainable Development" at the 50th Anniversary of Universidad del Pacifico (Peru) of their Economy and International Business School, 15<sup>th</sup> September**

UNFSS presented the work on "Better Trade for Sustainable Development".

**e) ISEAL Code consultation webinar, 22 September 2022**

The draft ISEAL Code of Good Practice revises and integrates the ISEAL Impacts, Standard-Setting, and Assurance Codes of Good Practice, and also incorporates essential practices from the ISEAL Sustainability Claims Good Practice Guide.

In its first consultation for the code, UNFSS participated in a panel of experts and provided inputs on the value of including the Credibility Principles as a focus of the revision and integration of the Code?

Recording available at: <https://vimeo.com/752574353/ee1d9bea5c>

**f) Trade and environment week hosted by World Trade Organization, 17<sup>th</sup> October**

WTO hosted the third edition of its flagship Trade and Environment Week, which took place at the WTO's headquarters in Geneva and virtually. UNCTAD/UNFSS contributed as a panelist to the UNECE session on Environmental, social and governance (ESG) traceability of supply chains.

The session showcased the results of the recent blockchain pilots, where companies from the cotton and leather value chains tested the use of blockchain to trace the origin and the social and environmental performance of items. Based on experiences from the fashion industry, speakers will discuss the potential of expanding traceability and transparency approaches to other high-impact sectors, such as agri-food and extractive industries.

**g) Public policies in support of Fair Trade: Event organized by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Foreign Commerce of Ecuador and the Fair-Trade Advocacy Office, 21<sup>st</sup> October**

UNFSS participated in this event in Quito and shared best practices on Voluntary Sustainability Standards.

**h) UNIDO Awareness Raising session on VSS, Sustainability agenda and developing countries, 10<sup>th</sup> November**

This webinar presents the work of the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS) internally to UNIDO staff. Building on the findings and analyses of the UNFSS 5th Flagship Report “Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS), Sustainability Agenda, and Developing Countries: Opportunities and Challenges”, the dialogue laid out the multiple roles of VSS to advance the sustainability agenda in developing countries and assess the opportunities and challenges associated with VSS uptake.

**i) ITC ILO Training on Fostering Green Business Growth, 25th November**

Attended by 25 participants representing private businesses and public sector of developing countries and emerging economies from around the world, the webinar organized by the ITC ILO, this course provides both conceptual and practical overview of how service provider and organizations support SMEs to go green. For this session, UNCTAD represented the concept of sustainability standards and its potentials to support businesses to go green.

Course site: <https://www.itcilo.org/courses/fostering-green-business-growth>

**j) WTO World Trade congress on gender, 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> December**

The World Trade Organization conducted its first World Trade Congress on Gender in December. As a part of the congress, UNFSS presented its work on “Facilitating Women’s Economic Empowerment through Trade with Voluntary Sustainability Standards”. For more information on the session participants and the World Trade congress on gender by WTO: [https://www.wto.org/english/tratop\\_e/womenandtrade\\_e/women\\_05122022\\_e/women\\_05122022\\_session\\_e.htm?id=23](https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/womenandtrade_e/women_05122022_e/women_05122022_session_e.htm?id=23)

**k) Webinar: Towards Africa’s Sustainable Development and Industrialization and the role of standardization in the implementation of the UN 2030 SDGs and Africa’s Agenda 2063, 8<sup>th</sup> December**

The webinar was organized by the Africa Regional Standardization Organization (ARSO). Alongside a panel of experts, UNFSS delivered inputs on how circular economy and sustainability standards could help advance the UN Agenda 2030 (SDGs) and the Africa Agenda 2063.

**l) ITC T4SD Technical Working Group and Advisory Group, Ongoing**

The UNFSS provides integral support in the TWG, where efforts are underway to synthesize standard typologies.

## Research and analysis

### 1. UNFSS 5<sup>th</sup> Flagship Report

The UNFSS publishes a flagship report once every two years. This year UNFSS launched the 5<sup>th</sup> Flagship Report on “Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS), Sustainability Agenda, and Developing Countries: Opportunities and Challenges”.

The UNFSS 5<sup>th</sup> Flagship Report discusses the role of VSS in advancing the sustainability agenda in developing countries and assesses the opportunities and challenges associated with VSS uptake in those countries. The report thus examines the opportunities VSS offer for developing countries, and their role in advancing the environmental, social, and economic sustainability agenda in those countries. The report also presents the challenges that developing countries face regarding VSS uptake and use; based on the above, the report distills policy implications that could provide guidance to researchers and policymakers.

Download the report here: [https://unfss.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/UNFSS-5th-Report\\_14Oct2022\\_rev.pdf](https://unfss.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/UNFSS-5th-Report_14Oct2022_rev.pdf)

### 2. Exploring the role of Voluntary Sustainability Standards in Women’s Economic Empowerment in the agriculture sector in developing countries

Women are equally as important economic actors as men, yet they suffer gross inequalities such as gender gaps in income and human capital, despite rapid improvements in global living standards and educational attainment. This report presents evidence and data that proves that many gender-related gaps are identified in the agriculture sector in developing countries which often lead to missed economic opportunities. Market demand tools such as Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) have been identified as having the potential to contribute to achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment, while fulfilling parity in the economy. These positive contributions, as identified in this paper includes possible equality in wages and income, and skills upgrading, and the externalities that expand from having better wages and skills. However, research indicating the socioeconomic impacts of VSS is limited in nature and often offers mixed results. Thus, the challenge of ‘qualifying’ these positive contributions of VSS have yet to be assessed when more independent empirical studies are available. While there are specific examples reported from certain countries, wider research in particular on Women’s Economic Empowerment (WEE) and the role of VSS is very limited if not non-existent. Thus, this report aims to first demonstrate the role VSS plays in fostering WEE; and second illustrate the contribution of VSS to the global agenda of SDG 5: Gender Equality with the available empirical findings on the impact of VSS on gender equality and WEE. The report also presents case studies where this link was investigated.

Download the report here: [https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditctab2022d5\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditctab2022d5_en.pdf)

### 3. Reflecting on Sustainability Standards: Trade and the Sustainability Crisis

This paper summarizes the VSS Academic Advisory Council's Roundtables. The roundtables aimed to foster the debate on the possibilities and limitations of sustainability standards as tools to environmental, social and economic sustainability. They were jointly organized by the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS) and EVIDENSIA, in collaboration with the KU Leuven Center for Global Governance.

This paper summarizes the discussions and outcomes of the three roundtable discussions. It brings different perspectives on VSS together which can inform and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of VSS effectiveness through GVCs. Through this paper, the "effectiveness" of VSS is defined along multiple dimensions, all of which are covered and assessed. A first dimension, goal-attainment effectiveness, focuses on the impact of VSS on a range of social, economic and environmental indicators. A second dimension, process effectiveness, analyses the degree to which VSS are adopted by economic operators and the drivers for adoption. A third dimension, constitutive effectiveness, focuses on the degree to which VSS change the overall approach of actors involved in the policy process towards sustainability, i.e., the degree to which their theories of change are used more widely. VSS's role in international trade is also debated and discussed.

To read the full report: <https://unctad.org/webflyer/reflecting-sustainability-standards-trade-and-sustainability-crisis>

4. Africa's trade and sustainable development opportunities through standards: the case of the agri-food sector (upcoming)
5. VSS in International Trade- Report (upcoming)
6. BioTrade and Voluntary Sustainability Standards: Is there a connection? (upcoming)
7. Positioning Voluntary Sustainability Standards as an APEC trade tool toward Sustainable Trade (upcoming)
8. Voluntary Sustainability Standards: A SWOT Analysis (upcoming report of the academic advisory council meeting)

## Capacity Building- Support for National Platforms

### 1. NPICN Meetings (25<sup>th</sup> January 2022, 24<sup>th</sup> May)

UNFSS supports capacity building efforts that are driven by the National Platforms. These National Platforms develop a multi-stakeholder engagement that institutionalizes the adoption of sustainability standards that also reflects the national priorities. The NPICN meets three times a year. They typically provide a neutral forum to exchange information, collect and exchange information on national standards, assess the needs of decision-makers and other stakeholders, link national demands with international expertise and build institutions to strengthen its communications. Currently, there are platforms in Brazil, China, India, and Mexico and Initiatives in Indonesia, Malaysia, South Africa, and Vietnam.

See Annex 2 for the NPICN meeting agendas.

### 2. NPICN Training on VSS Analytical Toolkit (14th July)

UNCTAD developed a VSS analytical toolkit under the project “Fostering Green Exports through Voluntary Sustainability Standards in Asia and the Pacific”. On the demand of the NPICN members and the NPICN chair, UNFSS delivered training on how to use the VSS Analytical Toolkit for conducting research on VSS. The training lasted one hour with a brief Q&A session. The toolkit training allowed the NPICN members to understand how to adopt the toolkit for identification of the challenges and perceptions behind the adoption of a VSS scheme, and to explore policy options to address them.

### 3. Silver jubilee celebrations of QCI 6th October

The objective of the mission is mainly to support the Quality Council of India (QCI)'s journey from an international front and to present the collaboration and progress of QCI's Private Sustainability Standards journey with UNCTAD through the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS) platform, and visions for the future.

Apart from QCI's journey, 2022 also marked a very important year for India as it celebrates 75 years of independence. The event was in fact inaugurated with the presence of India's Minister of Commerce and Industry, Mr. Piyush Goyal who laid out India's goal towards 100 years to become self-reliant and an economy comparable with developed countries. The role for QCI in meeting this goal is emphasizing "quality" in a manner that products made in India is perceived with quality from the international perspective.



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#### 4. NPICN Participation at the UNFSS AAC meeting

The representatives of India, China, Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia presented their research and exchanged ideas and best-practices with the academic community on VSS related work at the UNFSS academic advisory council meeting this year. This allowed for the policymakers to collaborate with the academic community working on VSS.



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## Annex 1: Steering Committee meeting agendas

### Steering Committee

#### Meeting Agenda

Thursday, June 9th, 2022, 3-4.30pm (CET)

1. Opening by Steering Committee Chair, UNEP
2. Presentation of the initial findings and updates of the 5th Flagship Report on “Voluntary Sustainability Standards, Sustainability Standards and Developing Countries: Opportunities and Challenges” by the co-chairs of the Academic Advisory Council, Santiago Fernandez de Cordoba and Dr. Axel Marx.
3. Discussions on Flagship Launch – 26 October 2022 in Brussels UN Building
4. Discussion on the Standard Operating Guideline
  - Standard operating guideline
  - Statement of support
  - Strategic Framework
5. Academic Advisory Council
  - New members
  - AAC Fall meeting update
6. Agencies Tour de table
  - FAO
  - ITC
  - UNECE
  - UNIDO
  - UNCTAD
  - UNEP

#### Attachments:

1. Advanced 5th Flagship draft
2. Standard Operating Guidance draft
3. Statement of Support draft

## Annex 2: NPICN meeting agendas

DATE: 24th May NPICN Agenda (14:00 – 15:30pm CET)

<b>Time</b>	<b>Agenda Items</b>	<b>Speaker/Facilitator</b>
14:00 – 14:05	Opening   Agenda   Introductions	Ms. Vivian Xia China Association for Standardization
14:05 – 14:10	UNFSS Updates	Mr. Santiago Fernandez de Cordoba, Senior Economist UNCTAD and UNFSS Coordinator
14:10 – 14:35	Proposal and discussion of common research agenda for NPICN members	Ms. Vivian Xia China Association for Standardization
14:35-14:50	Presentation on a scheme for personnel certification of Traditional Healers based on ISO 17024	Dr. Manish Pande Director & Head, Project Analysis & Documentation (PAD) Division, Quality Council of India
14:50-14:55	Buffer time to allow ISEAL to enter the meeting room on Zoom	
14:55 – 15:25	ISEAL Credibility Principles Presentation followed by Q&A and discussion	Ms. Caitlin Peeling, Senior Manager, Membership and Services, ISEAL
15:25 – 15:30	Next Meeting & Closing	Ms. Siti Rubiah Lambert, Associate Sustainable Development Officer, UNCTAD.

DATE: 25<sup>th</sup> January NPICN Agenda (14:00 – 15:30pm CET)

<b>Time</b>	<b>Agenda Items</b>	<b>Speaker/Facilitator</b>
14:00 – 14:10	Opening   Agenda   Introductions	Dr. Manish Pande, Director & Head, Project Analysis & Documentation (PAD) Division, Quality Council of India.



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14:10 – 14:15	UNFSS Summary of 2021 Achievements	Mr. Santiago Fernandez de Cordoba, Senior Economist UNCTAD and UNFSS Coordinator
14:15 – 14:40	UNCTAD- Understanding Smallholder Farmer Access to VSS-Compliant Markets	Ms. Niematallah Elamin, Associate Economic Affairs Officer, UNCTAD.
14:40 – 15:00	Presentation on Benchmarking: Initiative for harmonisation of standardisation across economies'	Sh. Sanjay Dave (Former Chairperson, Codex Alimentarius Commission and Former Adviser, FSSAI, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India)
15:00 – 15:15	Tour de Table- Voluntary updates from the NPIC.	Dr. Manish Pande, Director & Head, Project Analysis & Documentation (PAD) Division, Quality Council of India.
15:15 – 15:25	Handing over the Chair to China (Vivian Xia, China Association for Standardisation)	Dr. Manish Pande, Director & Head, Project Analysis & Documentation (PAD) Division, Quality Council of India.
15:25 – 15:30	Next Meeting & Closing	Ms. Siti Rubiah Lambert, Associate Sustainable Development Officer, UNCTAD.

Note taker: Ms. Rupal Verma