



# Standardizing sustainable development? The Forest Stewardship Council's plantation policy review process as neoliberal environmental governance

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## ABSTRACT

Trans-nationally-scaled, multi-stakeholder, non-governmental product certification systems are emerging as important elements of neoliberal environmental governance. However, analysts question the extent to which they represent effective alternatives to the damaging impacts of neoliberalized, global production. They call for work examining the environmental politics arising in these new arenas of regulation, where social movements advocating environmental conservation and social justice interact with business interests in debates over how to use neoliberal tools to govern global commodity chains. This article examines The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) process to revise tree plantation certification standards. First, it considers the political process surrounding standard-setting and argues that tensions between rigor, legitimacy, and acceptability restrain the political struggles over standards within voluntary, multi-stakeholder environmental governance organizations. It proffers findings at odds with the expectation that mainstreaming diminishes the rigor of social and environmental standards. Second, it speculates on the implications of this form of neoliberal environmental governance for promoting more sustainable productions of nature. The review process failed to adequately consider the role of plantation certification in strategies for natural forest conservation. Neither did it adequately consider vital questions of the appropriate scale and location of production, the community actors best suited to deliver both forest conservation and poverty alleviation, or the need to encourage reduced consumption. The reliance on a neoliberal framework and values limits the scope of action. These contradictions suggest that FSC certification is an important part of what needs to be a broader movement questioning current practices of environmentally damaging production and complicit, complacent, consumption.

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## 1. Introduction

As commodity networks link producers, manufacturers, distributors, and consumers, they change the world. Nature is literally produced in this process: plants and animals and ecosystems are transformed into landscapes of production, processing, and consumption, with many implications for worker safety, consumer health, environmental transformation, and social justice (Smith and O'Keefe, 1989; Castree, 2001; Watts, 2004). At the same time, the commodity networks producing nature are themselves shaped by trends in economic globalization that permit increasingly powerful trans-national firms to thread together far-flung sites of production, by the ideas and structures of neoliberalism, and sometimes by social movements promoting sustainable development through innovative mechanisms leveraging improvements to the environmental and social conditions of production. The relationships of state, market, and civil society are reconfigured and re-scaled in this cauldron. The resulting transformations of regula-

tory practice comprise one of the most important themes in contemporary human-environment research (Watts, 2002; Liverman, 2004; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004), and scholars increasingly document and analyze the resulting forms of what might be called neoliberal environmental governance (Brand and Gorg, 2003; Lawrence, 2005; Hughes, 2006; Gorg, 2007).

Trans-nationally-scaled, multi-stakeholder product certification systems are emerging as important elements of neoliberal environmental governance. Such systems consist of a body of standards, an independent inspection, and a product label. Analysts question whether they can successfully challenge negative aspects of neoliberal productions of nature, or if their initial challenge is inevitably eroded by increasing exposure to powerful market actors and their demands, and excessively limited by their reliance on neoliberal approaches. To improve understanding of this evolving phenomenon, this article examines the process, debate, and recommendations for standards governing plantation certification at the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), an important and illustrative example of certification systems which is asserting social and environmental goals into the governance of the wood commodity network. Furthermore, it examines the way competing tensions to

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increase acceptability, maintain rigor, and preserve legitimacy restrain and shape the debate over standards. Finally, it identifies the implications of the debate for the FSC's role in promoting sustainable development from within an essentially neoliberal scope of action.

## 2. Certification and neoliberalism

### 2.1. Certification as neoliberal environmental governance

Neoliberalism is simply defined as a political philosophy of free markets and less government. The central elements of neoliberalism include a “near worship” of the self-regulating market, a frequent reliance on the ethical responsibility of consumers and corporations, an antagonism to market regulation by the state, cuts in state regulatory functions, trade agreements that restrict the regulatory options of national governments, and fiscal reforms that decrease the power of the state to directly regulate market actors. Neoliberalism should not be seen as a monolithic construct with homogenous outcomes everywhere, however (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004, p. 276; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Perreault and Martin, 2005; Radcliffe, 2005; Liverman and Vilas, 2006). Instead, researchers are called to examine neoliberalization as an evolving, variegated process, albeit one that frequently empowers a more destructive form of capitalism (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Heynen and Robbins, 2005).

In broad terms, the process of neoliberalization has had a roll-back period which ripped apart traditional forms of state regulation and welfare provision, devolving much responsibility for regulation and welfare provision downwards, and much authority for regulation upwards to international bodies. A subsequent roll-out period of neoliberalization attempts to re-stabilize and re-regulate the system with a patchwork of regulatory institutions and bodies, frequently including public–private cooperation, multi-stakeholder, and/or non-governmental organizations, voluntaristic mechanisms, and reliance on the social responsibilities of rational economic individuals and ethical corporations (Jessop, 2002; Peck and Tickell, 2002; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004). Neoliberalization may also inspire “push-back” (Peck and Tickell, 2002), in which actors and social movements of various kinds resist it, for example, by promoting sustainable development goals.

Non-governmental social and environmental certification projects such as organic, Fair Trade, and the Forest Stewardship Council rely on a set of standards according to which production processes in specific places are evaluated by third party auditors. For Guthman (2007, p. 457), such projects are typical of roll-out neoliberalization because they create multi-stakeholder organizations and audit systems to achieve action at a distance and because they rely on the quintessential neoliberal ideas of consumer responsibility and the preference of markets over more direct instruments of regulation. Does certification also represent a “push-back” against neoliberalism? Numerous scholars invoke Polanyi as they consider the question, especially as they theorize certification systems as instruments of social movements attempting to re-regulate commodity networks in order to protect labor and environmental attributes endangered by neoliberalization (Barham, 2002; Barnett et al., 2005; Mutersbaugh, 2005; Klooster, 2006; Guthman, 2007). A key question then, becomes the degree to which such certification systems comprise an effective “push-back” against the neoliberalization of commodity networks even though they make use of the same neoliberal ideas behind other aspects of roll-out neoliberalization. As Guthman argues, the dearth of viable political challenges to neoliberalism makes the question especially urgent (Guthman, 2007).

### 2.2. Questioning the transformative power of certification

Scholars question the transformative power of certification in two main ways. First, they analyze whether certification systems can maintain their alternative character and rigorous standards as they mainstream, potentially becoming more influential in commodity networks but also more exposed to a transnational political arena including some very powerful actors and pressures. Second, sometimes drawing on the concept of sustainable development, they debate whether an approach using neoliberal ideas can successfully “push-back” against the environmentally and socially destructive aspects of current commodity production networks.

#### 2.2.1. Does mainstreaming reduce the “push-back”?

‘Mainstreaming’ involves substantial increases in the quantity of certified products sold and it includes increased interaction between the social movement instigators of certification, large producers, transnational retailers, and other powerful stakeholders. Pressures from these stakeholders to increase the marketplace acceptability of certification is thought to erode the rigor and legitimacy of certification systems.

Like other forms of roll-out neoliberalization, certification mainstreaming involves the construction of new scales through the strategic interactions of political actors of varying interests and abilities. Following (Smith (1992, 1993), Born and Purcell (2006) point out that scale is fluid, but also fixed. Once constructed, scale is not a blank slate. It involves different sets of actors and comprises its own arena of subsequent political interaction (Brown and Purcell, 2005; Born and Purcell, 2006). Therefore, once re-scaled, new configurations of environmental governance also restructure environmental politics (Lawrence, 2005; Gorg, 2007). Social movements which previously would have made demands on governments to impose regulations on markets, now shift some of their attention to other market actors and to the construction of non-governmental institutions operating at different scales. For example, ethical trading companies, activists, certification systems, and consultants displace the politics of labor regulation to distant sites of production, multi-stakeholder organizations, media outlets, and consumers’ shopping carts (Freidberg, 2003; Hughes, 2006). Similarly, FSC forest certification shifts political contestation over the social and environmental regulation of forestry to a technical arena (Stringer, 2006, p. 702), raising questions of how that re-scaled arena affects those contestations and shapes the contours of neoliberal environmental governance. Re-scaled governance structures may be fraught by tensions and exclusions between the actors that compose them. Because of stakeholder capture, for example, governance structures that ostensibly promote sustainable development may instead promote productivist, neoliberal, strategies (Lawrence, 2005, p. 159). Nevertheless, scale theorists insist that scale does not determine such outcomes. Where environmental governance has been re-scaled by social actors promoting progressive ends such as participation and sustainable development, it is an empirical question whether a particular scale promotes those ends or not (Brown and Purcell, 2005). “The particular social and ecological outcomes of each rescaling never must be assumed but always subjected to critical analysis” (Born and Purcell, 2006, p. 197).

As certification systems linked to alternative social movements enter mainstreamed political arenas, their alternative rigor and social legitimacy might be lost in the face of pressures to increase acceptability among producers and retailers (Mutersbaugh et al., 2005). They might “push-back” less strongly in Guthman’s (2007) Polyanian sense of protecting social and environmental values from unfettered markets. As organic agriculture in the US grew from an alternative social movement to a multi-billion dollar sector of the agricultural economy, for example, large producers and

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