



Reflecting on Sustainability Standards: Trade and the Sustainability Crisis



UNITED NATIONS



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^a The United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS) is a joint United Nations platform working on advancing the understanding of Voluntary Sustainability Standards and their role to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. UNFSS members are FAO, ITC, UNCTAD, UNIDO and UNEP. UNCTAD is the Secretariat. For further information go to www.unfss.org.

Abstract

This paper summarizes the Voluntary Sustainability Standards' (VSS) Academic Advisory Council 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 role on international trade is also debated and discussed.

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