VSS Assessment Toolkit

A.1   Interview Guidelines

The following sections provide interview guidelines for Step 2 of the VSS Assessment Toolkit: roles and connections of actors in the value chain, and the challenges and opportunities they face and perceive with respect to the adoption and use of VSS.

In order to minimize bias, when using the guidelines in Table A. 1 and Table A. 2, interviewers should keep in mind to start by asking broad questions (first and second column) and move to more specific questions (third column) only if the interviewee is not sufficiently responsive to broad questions.

In planning for the interviews, etiquette suggests contacting respondents well in advance of the interview to set up an appointment, and whenever possible email them a brief of the case for context. Additionally, on the day of the interview, the interviewer should go over the goals and context of the study and the interview in a clear, concise manner, giving interviewees an opportunity to ask questions. All respondents should be given the option to remain anonymous, should they wish to do so. Respondents should also be given an option to refuse participating in the interview before, or even during, the interview. These principles should also be followed when organizing FGDs.

A.1.1   Questions on value chain roles and connections

Table A. 1: Questions on the organization of the chain

Key topics of interest	Question theme	Probe questions
Value chain actor, role and function	Role and function	• Kindly describe your role (in the value chain)
• Institutional capacity and coordination across actors • Information asymmetry and transparency in the value chain	Organization and coordination in your value chain.	• How do you get information for your production and market (e.g. production methods, market info)? • What were the main challenges in collaborating with buyers (and vice versa)? • With whom do you discuss your issues or problems? Are these people easily accessible to you? Could you approach extension workers or government agencies easily for help? Kindly give an example. • Do you know where your produce goes to? Or what happens to your harvest? Have you seen its final form (in retail)?

Risk bearing	Please describe who bears the risk in your value chain.	• If the produce gets rejected or does not get sold, what will happen (to the produce/ to prices)? • Who are the losers and winners when produce fail to meet standards?
• Power[1] • Social capital in the relationship	Can you explain what your relationship with other actors in the value chain looks like?	• Do you trust other actors? Why or why not? • Is your relationship with other actors in the value chain stable? What sort of disputes have arisen during your relationship, if any? • Are the prices you receive for your produce fair? Are they stable?

[1] Power refers to power over information about the certification process, power to dictate production methods or quality and quantity of harvests; or power to set prices.

A.1.2 Questions for challenges and opportunities of VSS adoption and use

Table A. 2: Questions on perceptions and outcomes of VSS adoption and use

Key topics of interest	Question theme	Probe questions
Barriers to VSS (e.g.: cost, too strict, etc.)	Do you think it is easy or difficult to obtain certification?	• Are there many or few local producers who are certified in your area? Why is this so? • Do you think it is expensive to get certification? Are the certification requirements too strict?
Challenges and who bears the cost of obtaining certification	What do you think are the main challenges of **obtaining** certification?	• Please identify up to three challenges (cost, time, lack of capabilities, lack of government support). Kindly motivate your answers. • Do you know of farmers who received certification before but are not certified now? If yes, what happened? • Who pays for what in maintaining certification? Do farmers pay 100% for the whole process? Kindly explain the process.

Challenges and who bears the cost of <u>maintaining</u> certification	What do you think are the main challenges of **maintaining** certification?	• Please identify up to three challenges (cost, time, lack of capabilities, lack of government support). Kindly motivate your answers. • Do you know of farmers who received certification before but are not certified now? If yes, what happened? • Who pays for what in maintaining certification? Do farmers pay 100% for the whole process? Kindly explain the process.
Interoperability of standards	Do you think getting one type of certification makes it easier to get another type of certification? Why or why not?	• Do you know of other local producers who have multiple certifications? • For producers, are you interested in getting multiple certifications?
Improvement of the current certification process	Do you have ideas on how to improve the current certification process or how to design a process that could better serve specific actors in the value chain?	• Kindly give suggestions
• Link to SDGs (in particular, poverty alleviation, food security, decent employment, gender equality, environmental conservation, global partnership) • Credibility of VSS • VSS and public policy	How do you think certification affects you and your community? Does certification impact the community or country? How? In which way?	• Are the effects of certification positive? To whom? Why? What are the main benefits? • Are there disadvantages of being certified too? Have there been farmers who did not benefit from certification? What are the main disadvantages? • Going back to benefits, what types of benefits from certification schemes would most likely be important to producers? To other actors in the value chain? • Along the value chain, who do you think benefits most from certification schemes or standards? Why? Please explain your answer.

		• How does certification impact the community? Elaborate on social, economic and environmental aspects.
• Community level impact • Links between certified and non-certified farmers	Do your peers who have certification support your joining such schemes?	• Are those with certification more respected than those who do not have it? • Do you get any support to join certification schemes through peers?
Reasons for stopping to participate in a VSS scheme (for farmers who no longer participate in a VSS)	Why did you stop participating in a certification scheme?	• What were the main reasons? • Did you feel the costs outweighed the benefits?
Multi-stakeholder platform establishment, composition and focus	Creation of a national multi-stakeholder platform for voluntary sustainability standards	• Who do you think should be represented in the platform and why? • What should be the first issues that this platform could tackle? How could farmers / other actors in the value chain benefit from this platform? • How do you think this platform should operate? (e.g. where to meet and how often, how often will the representatives be re-elected?)
Gender Equality and women empowerment and VSS	Role of women	• Do you think certification will help increase work opportunities for women? • Do you think certification will allow more women to find meaningful work in agriculture?

A.1.3 The Constellation of Priorities (CoP) model

In order to build the CoP model, actors are first asked to list various economic, social and environmental aspects that matter to them (*priority indicators*). The interviewer should not provide any leading information to respondents, but rather encourage them to state their preferences. If respondents are unable to list their priorities in these areas spontaneously, the following non-exhaustive list can be a useful guide to help them kick start the process:

- Economic: productivity, quality, safeguarding supply, traceability, reputation, income, livelihood diversification, asset accumulation.
- Social: capacity building, farmer organization, food security, freedom of association.
- Environmental: protecting soil, water, forests; biodiversity conservation; organic; carbon sequestration; disaster reduction.

Once respondents have provided a list of priority indicators in each dimension, they are then asked to classify each of them as: important (critical and essential to the livelihood), important but not essential, indifferent/ not very important.

The resulting CoP classification indicates the pre-conceived notions different actors in the value chain have about the adoption of standards and their possible benefits. At this stage it is possible to compare across different actors what they consider are the most important priorities when using a VSS. When the priorities across different actors diverge then there are "spaces of contestation", while when they converge the system is aligned. Step 4 (Analysis) of the VSS Assessment Toolkit suggests how this information can be visualized and interpreted.