International Conference on Voluntary and Mandatory Sustainable Value Chains Governance

Interactions, Impacts, Adoption and Future Pathways

27 – 28 October 2026

Irish College, Janseniusstraat 1, Leuven

Over the past three decades, voluntary and private sustainability instruments have become central to the governance of global supply chains. These include Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) such as Fairtrade, Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), Rainforest Alliance, and the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO); corporate sustainability commitments; supplier codes of conduct; zero-deforestation pledges; and multi-stakeholder initiatives. Collectively, these private governance instruments now shape production practices, trade flows, market access, and sustainability impacts across many sectors.

At the same time, governments, particularly in the European Union and other major markets, are increasingly introducing mandatory sustainability and due diligence regulations, including human rights and environmental due diligence laws, deforestation regulations, and sustainability reporting requirements. These new public regulatory frameworks raise questions about the future role of voluntary and private governance in terms of their complementarity or tension with emerging mandatory rules. These new developments also affect the landscape of sustainability governance initiatives and pose challenges in terms of fragmentation, coordination deficits, and overlap.

Format
This two-day conference presents contributions from different disciplines (economics, political science, law, sociology, geography, management studies, development studies, environmental studies, and related fields) that examine the design, implementation, adoption and effectiveness of voluntary and private sustainability measures, as well as their interaction with mandatory due diligence and sustainability regulation. It will also feature three policy-roundtables offering perspectives from policy-makers and academics on some policy key-issues.

About the conference
This conference coincides with the 6th Academic Advisory Council of the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS). This Academic Advisory Council brings together academics, policy-makers and sustainability governance practitioners to discuss research and recent developments on sustainability governance of global value chains.

Conference venue
The conference will take place in the Irish College in Leuven: https://www.irishcollegeleuven.eu/

Conference Rooms

There are three conference rooms:

Chapel for the plenary sessions
Conference room 1 (CR1) for panels 1, 4, 5, 8 and 9
Conference room 2 (CR2) for panels 2, 3, 6, 7 and 10

Program

MONDAY, 26 OCTOBER 2026

18:30 – 20:00 Registration and Informal Cocktail

Irish College Janseniusstraat 1, 3000 Leuven

TUESDAY, 27 OCTOBER 2026

08:30 – 09:00 Registration

09:00 – 09:30 Opening Conference

Santiago Fernandez de Córdoba, UNCTAD, UNFSS Coordinator
Dominique Burgeon, FAO Geneva, UNFSS Steering Committee Chair
Miet Maertens, KU Leuven
Axel Marx, KU Leuven

09:30 – 11:00 Roundtable 1: Due diligence, New Regulatory Environment and Smart Mix Policies

Room: Chapel

In the last years, we have witnessed an increase in public policy due diligence-based sustainability measures. These create a new environment in which private value chain instruments operate. In this roundtable we would like to discuss the current landscape of sustainability value chain governance instruments, their impact and how to address fragmentation and coordination in sustainability governance.

Chair: Axel Marx, KU Leuven
Heidi Hautala, former Vice President of the European Parliament
Andrea González, Ambassador, Ecuador to the European Union
Amaryllis Verhoeven, European Commission
Daniela Fabel, State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, Switzerland
Tytti Nahi, Fairtrade International
Lauren Shields, OECD
Arianna Rossi, ILO

11:00 – 11:30 Coffee Break

11:30 – 13:00 Panel Sessions 1 & 2

Panel 1: VSS as Institution: Design, Evolution and Governance of Sustainability Standards – Room: CR 1
Chair: Thomas Dietz

1. "Governing Long Value Chains through Labels: Institutional Design, Fragmentation and Coordination in the Sri Lankan Tea Sector"
   Aurore Lunven (Institut Agro Montpellier), Claire Bernard-Mongin (Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement (CIRAD) and Allison Loconto (Gustave Eiffel University)
2. "A New Framework for the Substantive Stringency of Voluntary Sustainability Standards"
   Theresa Vanwingh (KU Leuven)
3. "Using an Assemblage Approach to Understand how Voluntary Sustainability Standards Work in Context: the Case of Certified Indian Tea and Granite"
   Miriam Wenner (Georg-August-University Göttingen and University of Freiburg)
4. "Conflicted Actors, Transatlantic Catalysts: Human Rights Evolution in Voluntary Sustainability Standards"
   Kari Otteburn (KU Leuven)

Panel 2: Accountability Mechanisms in Supply Chain Governance - Room: CR 2
Chair: Ariel Hernandez

1. "Markets for Assurance: Explaining Private Auditor Engagement in EU Due Diligence and Risk Regulations"
   Mohamad Belaradi (Carleton University) and Graeme Auld (Carleton University)
2. "Shifting Trends of Third-Party Assurances in EU Supply Chain Legislation
   Stefan Renckens (University of Toronto)
3. "The Emerging Roles of Sustainability Standard Setters in the Implementation of EU Supply Chain Legislation"
   Gabi Sonderegger (University of Bern)
4. "Offsetting Accountability: Litigation and the Future of Human Rights Due Diligence in the Voluntary Carbon Market"
   Roberta Amoriello (BHR to the point)

13:00 – 14:00 Lunch Break

Posters Displayed during the Lunch Break

1. "Labour Conditionality in EU Public Procurement Law: Normative Intensities between Voluntary Standards and Due Diligence"
   Ana Neves (Lisbon University)
2. "Contract Governance as a Pathway to Sustainability Compliance: Voluntary Standards in Maritime Transport"
   Ali Ulvi Sahin (University of Southampton Law School)
3. "Inclusion or Exit? Triangulating Smallholder Perspectives on Voluntary Sustainability Standards in Kenya and Rwanda"
   Francoise Umarishavu (University of Göttingen) and Meike Wollni (University of Göttingen)
4. "Blinkered Compliance: Assessing Identification and Assessment Processes in Human Rights Due Diligence"
   Hans-Günther Herrmann (Chinese University of Hong Kong)
5. "Traceable Deforestation-free Supply Chains: Structure and Participants"
   Charlotte Sedlock (University of Michigan), Kimberly Carlson (New York University), Benjamin Goldstein (University of Michigan) and Joshua Newell (University of Michigan)

14:00 – 15:30 Panel Sessions 3 & 4

Panel 3: Human Rights Due Diligence and Corporate Accountability – Room: CR 2
Chair: Paulo Mortara Batistic

1. "Human Rights Due Diligence: Insights from insider perspectives"
   James Harrison (University of Warwick)
2. "Ensuring Compliance with the EU CSDDD: Understanding the Role of Regulatory Beneficiaries in Prevention and Remediation"
   Paul Verbruggen (Tilburg Law School) and Karlijn van Doorn (Tilburg Law School)
3. "The Actual Effect of Sustainability Due Diligence Regulation on Corporate Behaviour: Towards an Evidence-Based Research Agenda"
   Eva van der Zee (University of Hamburg)
4. "Rethinking VSS Accountability Through a UNGPs-Oriented Reading of HRDD Laws"
   Elena Corcione (University of Pollenzo)

Panel 4: Labor Rights Governance, Forced Labor, Child Rights and Labor Governance
Room: CR 1
Chair: Elizabeth Bennett

1. "Sustainability Labels and Forced Labour: Can We Still Market ILO Compliance?"
   Annelies De Grave (KU Leuven)
2. "Voluntary Sustainability Standards as Evidence? Compliance under Forced Labour Import Restrictions"
   Ilaria Colombo (Bocconi University)
3. "Children's Participation in Private Sustainability Standards: A Child Rights Perspective on Global Value Chain Governance"
   Sven Stumpf (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg)
4. "A Cross Country Analysis of Voluntary Sustainability Standards and Child Labour"
   Vashita Nath (KU Leuven)
5. "Governing Human Rights without Structural Change: Persistent Exploitation in Cocoa Supply Chains in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire"
   Fabrice Niyonkuru (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg)

15:30 – 16:00 Coffee Break

16:00 – 17:30 Roundtable 2: Trade Effects of Sustainability Value Chain Governance Instruments
Room: Chapel

Sustainability value chain governance instruments have important trade effects. This roundtable discusses some of key trade effects of these governance instruments, especially for producers in developing countries, and potential ways to address them.

Chair: Bernard Hoekman, EUI
Lucas Zavala, World Bank
Miet Maertens, KU Leuven
Archna Negi, Jawaharlal Nehru University
Cameron Plese, Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)
Virpi Stucki, UNIDO
Aik Hoe Lim, WTO

End of Day 1

WEDNESDAY, 28 OCTOBER 2026

09:00 –10:30	**Panel Sessions 5 & 6**

Panel 5: European Union Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) and Zero Deforestation Policies: Compliance, Enforcement and Adaptation – Room: CR 1
Chair: Evelien de Olde

1. "Environmental Policy Enforcement in Global Supply Chains: An Analysis of Trade Transshipment and Policy Circumvention under the EU Deforestation Regulation"
   Ayodele Idowu (University of Göttingen) and Dela-Dem Fiankor (University of Göttingen)
2. "Equity in Implementing the EUDR: Evidence from the Cocoa and Coffee Sectors"
   Jimena Solar (University of Bern), Karin Ingold (University of Bern), Yovita Ivanova (International Center for Tropical Agriculture) and Christoph Oberlack (University of Bern)
3. **"**Forest-focused Supply Chain Policies Across Commodity-Sectors: Impact as a Product of Coverage and Effectiveness"
   Janne Bemelmans (Joint Research Centre of the European Commission)
4. "From Voluntary Commitments to Mandatory Due Diligence: Corporate Responses to the EU Deforestation Regulation and the Reconfiguration of Sustainable Supply Chain Governance"
   Metodi Sotirov (University of Freiburg)

Panel 6: Sustainability Regulation, Trade and Geopolitics – Room: CR 2
Chair: Yixian Sun

1. "Sustainable Value Chains and EU-India Trade Relations"
   Archna Negi (Jawaharlal Nehru University)
2. "The Politics of Sustainable Trade between Unilateral Regulation and Bilateral Cooperation"
   Charline Depoorter (University of Basel and KU Leuven)
3. "Corporate Sustainability Law in the EU and China. Convergence, Divergence, and the Emergence of the "Beijing Effect"
   Gonzalo Larrea (Utrecht University) and Hao Zhang (The Chinese University of Hong Kong and University of Cambridge)
4. "Can Non-State Governance Help Legitimize Trade-Based Climate Action amid Fracture?"
   Rodrigo Fagundes Cezar (School of International Relations of Fundação Getulio Vargas)

10:30 – 11:00	**Coffee Break**

11:00 – 12:30 Panel Sessions 7 & 8

Panel 7: Forest Governance: Approaches, Interactions and Effectiveness – Room: CR2
Chair: Rupal Verma

1. "Policy Mixes in Deforestation Governance: Interactions between Voluntary Sustainability Standards and Domestic Forest Policies"
   Eva Boonaert (KU Leuven)
2. "The Contribution of Voluntary Corporate Conservation Set-Asides to Area-Based Conservation in Indonesia"
   Kimberly Carlson (New York University)
3. "Is there a Beijing effect? Insights from Mapping of China's Emerging System Governing Forest-Risk Commodities"
   Yixian Sun (University of Bath), Yishu Ren (University of Bath) and Li Li (University of International Business and Economics, Beijing)
4. "The Limits of Voluntary Environmental Certification"
   Kenneth Houngbedji (Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD) and Université Paris Dauphine)

Panel 8: Sustainability Impacts and Outcomes: Measurement and Evidence – Room: CR1
Chair: Rodrigo Rupérez

1. "The Value of Organic Certifications"
   Ignacio Marra de Artinano (Université Libre de Bruxelles and European Center for Advanced Research in Economics and Statistics (ECARES)), Franco Riottini Depetris (University of Michigan), Gabriel Scattolo (Inter-American Development Bank), Christian Volpe Martincus (Inter-American Development Bank) and Lucas Zavala (World Bank)
2. "How Voluntary Sustainability Standards and Agroforestry Practices Shape Economic and Ecological Outcomes in the Indonesian Coffee Sector"
   Muhamad Amin Rifai (KU Leuven), Yudha Kristanto (IPB University), Miet Maertens (KU Leuven) and Nunung Nuryartono (IPB University and National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN))
3. "Do Voluntary Sustainability Standards Improve Agricultural Productivity? Evidence from Tropical Commodity Sectors"
   Patience Phiri (KU Leuven)
4. "Interactions of Voluntary Measures and Mandatory Regulations in Meeting Sustainable Fishing Targets"
   Michael Melnychuk (Marine Stewardship Council)
5. "Sustainability Certification and Plantation Workers' Rights: Evidence from the Indonesian Oil Palm Sector"
   Andini Ekaputri (University of Hawai) and Kimberly Carlson (New York University)

12:30 – 13:30	**Lunch Break**

Posters Displayed during the Lunch Break

1. "Twenty Years of a Voluntary Sustainability Standard: What the Soy Moratorium's Legal Contestation Reveals about VSS–Regulation Interactions"
   Marina Vilas Boas (BHR To The Point)
2. "Auditor Leniency and Participation in Voluntary Forest Certification"
   Johanna Isman (Assurance Services International (ASI))
3. "Understanding Uptake of Voluntary Sustainability Standards: Lessons from Fisheries Seeking MSC Certification"
   Jennifer Rasal (Marine Stewardship Council)
4. "Stalled Sustainability Transitions? Explaining Limited Uptake of Participatory Organic Certification among Vietnamese Vegetable Farmers"
   Lina Tennhardt (Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL)), Robert Home(FiBL), Pham Van Hoi (Vietnam National University of Agriculture), Nguyen Thi Bich Yen (Vietnam National University of Agriculture), Pierre Ferrand (UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO)) and Christian Grovermann (FiBL)
5. "Eco-Labelling and Market Incentives: Evidence on MSC Price Premiums in the French Seafood Sector"
   Andreas Tsakirdis (Marine Stewardship Council)
6. "Voluntary Sustainability Standards. Impacts, Enablers and Barriers for Their Contribution to Shaping Sustainable Food Systems."
   Elvira Maria Laura Uccello (UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO))
7. "Regional Institutions and the Instability of 4C Adoption in Colombia's Coffee Sector"
   Michael Chaves (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne)

13:30 – 15:00	**Panel Sessions 9 & 10**

Panel 9: Consumers, Collective Action and Governance Complexity – Room: CR 1
Chair: Rodrigo Fagundes Cezar

1. "Conceptualizing Consumer Trust in Voluntary Sustainability Standards"
   Emma Sofia Lunghi (University of Milano-Bicocca and Best4Food Research Centre)
2. "Cooperative Values and Principles Fostering Voluntary Sustainability Standards and Enabling Regulatory Pathways"
   Jeroen Douglas (International Cooperative Alliance (ICA)) and Santosh Kumar Padmanabhan (ICA))
3. "Business Associations as Accountability Checkpoints in Sustainability Governance: Strengthening Public–Private Regulation in Global Value Chains"
   I-Ching Chen (National Tsing Hua University)
4. "Serious Games to Explore Governance Complexity"
   Evelien de Olde (Wageningen University & Research)

Panel 10: Power, legitimacy and contestation in sustainability governance Room: CR2
Chair: James Harrison

1. "A Neo-Gramscian Analysis of the Unravelling of the Corporate Social Due Diligence Directive and its Implications for the Governance of Global Value Chains"
   Louise Curran (Toulouse Business School Education), Matthew Alford (Manchester Business School) and Khalid Nadvi (University of Manchester)
2. "When Public Authorities Constrain Private Sustainability Regulation"
   Lívia Meneses (University of São Paulo)
3. "Virtual Diligence: A Social Critique of European Regulatory Exceptionalism"
   Hisashi Harata (University of Tokyo) and Sungjoon Cho (Chicago-Kent College of Law)
4. "Smallholders at the Margins? RSPO, MSPO and the Politics of EUDR Compliance in Malaysian palm oil"
   Natalie Langford (University of Sheffield)

15:00 – 15:30	**Coffee Break**
15:30 – 17:00	**Roundtable 3: Reflection on future developments and challenges** **Room: Chapel** The last roundtable is forward looking. In a geo-political context which is not favorable to sustainability governance, it will explore the key challenges and possibly opportunities for the future. The roundtable will discuss some key insights policy-makers should take into account moving forward from the perspective of making sustainability governance effective. Chair: Santiago Fernandez de Cordoba, UNCTAD Xiuchun Zhang, China Association for Standardization (CAS) Karin Kreider, ISEAL Graeme Auld, Carleton University Claudia Kersten, GOTS Manish Pande, Indian Institute of Forest Management Charline Depoorter, University of Basel Joseph Wozniak, International Trade Centre
17:00	**Closing of the conference** **Room: Chapel** **Concluding remarks** Axel Marx, KU Leuven Santiago Fernandez de Córdoba, UNCTAD, UNFSS Coordinator
	End of the conference

Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies

VSS Academic Advisory Council

UNFSS United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards a joint initiative of FAO, ITC, UNCTAD, UN Environment and UNIDO



UN trade & development UNCTAD

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

International Trade Centre

UNECE

UNIDO United Nations Industrial Development Organization

UN environment programme

VSS4FOOD FIBER

fwo