



Ad-hoc Expert Meeting on UNCTAD Toolkit
Assessing Stakeholders' Preparedness to Voluntary Sustainability Standards
28 March 2019 (10h30-16h30), Room Concordia 5(c), Palais des Nations, Geneva

Concept Note

A. A TOOLKIT TO ASSESS VSS PREPAREDNESS

The sustainable development goals (SDGs) agenda advocates for inclusive green growth. This entails accelerating socio-economic transformation towards a low-carbon, resource-efficient economy in ways that also enable productivity enhancements leading to value creation and capture.

Trends in the global agri-food market present significant opportunities for developing countries to promote sustainable or “green” exports. During the last decade, global demand for “green” products has grown faster than for their “brown” counterparts, with [consumers increasingly willing to pay more for sustainable products](#). Voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) can be an instrument to cater to the growing green demand particularly in agro-forestry product sectors. Becoming certified for a VSS may enable developing-country producers to access niche “green” markets and receive associated price premiums, while simultaneously transforming their production methods to those which would better contribute to the achievement of SDGs.

There are however challenges that limit the potential of VSS to benefit different stakeholders within a global value chain (GVC). For instance, smallholder producers and MSMEs must bear a proportionally high burden as regards administrative complexity and high certification costs, while not receiving enough support in the form of extension services. Diverging priorities and motivations among value chain actors may result in power imbalances within a GVC. Together, these challenges can create market entry obstacles and increasing precarity of livelihoods of smallholder producers. Furthermore, as many VSS are a private-sector initiative, it has been challenging for governments to evaluate on the ground whether the potential benefits of VSS are being realized, which actors stand most to gain, and what actions, if any, can be taken in each case to engender inclusive development.

Against this background, the ongoing UNCTAD Project “[Fostering the development of green exports through Voluntary Sustainability Standards in Asia and the Pacific](#)” has developed the **VSS Assessment Toolkit**. Unlike a conventional top-down model of sustainability governance in value chains, this VSS Assessment Toolkit helps users systematically collect data and assess preparedness of different stakeholders towards adopting a VSS in specific agricultural value chains.

Through the Toolkit, variations in the perceptions of actors within the value chain can be unpacked, shedding light on the understandings and tensions underlying the willingness to adopt certification and sustainable production methods.

For academics and donors, the Toolkit provides an initial contribution to envisage principal perceptions behind the adoption of VSS among smallholder producers and other actors in the value chain.

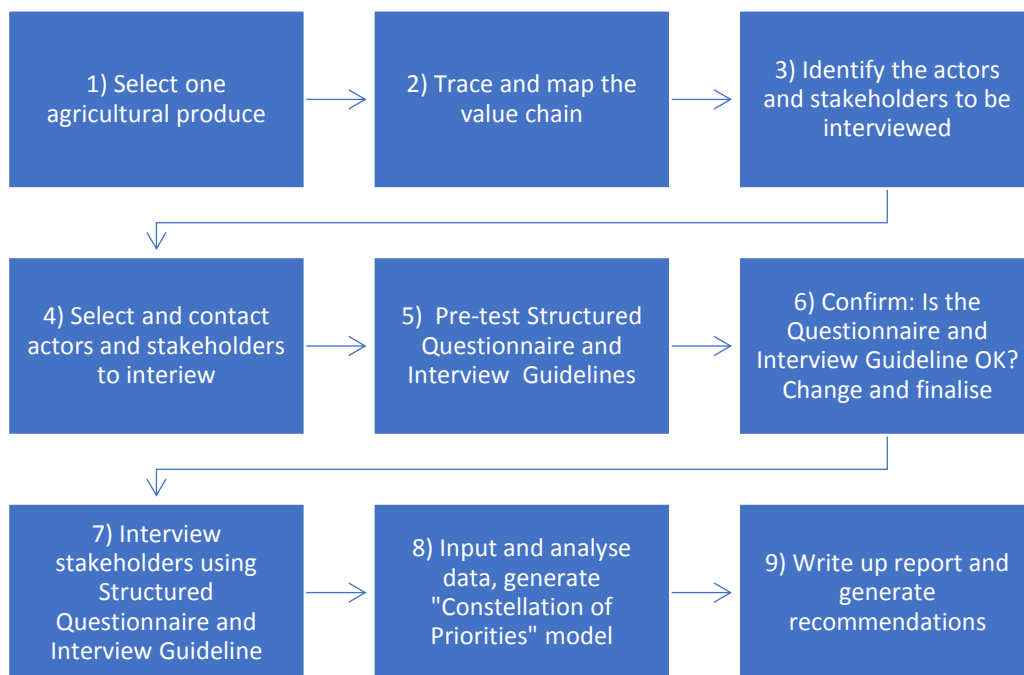
For policymakers, the visualization of motivations will not only identify power and perception asymmetries among value chain actors but also contribute to the detection of areas where policy could play a role in mitigating these differences.



The Toolkit consists of the following:

- i. **Roadmap** to guide users and researchers on how to operationalize the VSS Assessment Toolkit;
- ii. **Structured Questionnaire**, a series of simple closed-ended questions that is divided into three sections, namely, (I) Preliminary questions (II) Perceptions (further categorized for farmers/producers and for traders/processors/wholesalers) and (III) Personal information;
- iii. **Interview Guidelines** which provide open-ended questions to probe deeper into the stakeholders' statements in the Structured Questionnaire; and
- iv. **Guide to Data Analysis** which explains how to analyse the data gathered from the survey and interviews.

The figure below lists the nine steps recommended to use the VSS Assessment Toolkit.



Between March and December 2018, the Assessment Toolkit was deployed in three country studies that assessed the preparedness of various stakeholders towards organic certification of coconut oil (in the Philippines and Vanuatu) and coffee (in Lao PDR). The three pilot cases helped UNCTAD identify the areas of the Assessment Toolkit that require improvement before it is made available on line.

B. OBJECTIVES OF THE MEETING

Against the above background, the objective of the meeting is to present the Toolkit to leading experts and receive their feedback for improving viability and usefulness of the Toolkit to possible users.



C. ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

Major issues for discussion are the content and methodology, the usefulness, applicability, and modes of dissemination. The following are potential questions that can be discussed during the ad-hoc expert meeting.

C.1 Content and Methodology

- Do the survey questions adequately cover the factors that would determine different stakeholders' preparedness to VSS?
- What did the country study authors find useful or redundant in the Toolkit? Did the questionnaires flow fluidly? Are the questions too deterministic or suggestive? Were questions supportive to data gathering? Is the questionnaire length manageable?
- Should we further nuance different types of VSS as the implications will vary depending on the ultimate route through which certification is received i.e. first, second- or third-party auditing?
- Are the key SDGs covered? What other metrics would it be useful to add or modify? Are the connections with the SDGs relevant to the interviewees? Are there better ways to distil stakeholders' interest/indifference towards their participation in meeting the SDGs?
- Is using perceptions as an instrument valid, considering many motivational aspects of priorities (such as cognitive rationality) have not been studied?

C.2 Usefulness of the assessment toolkit

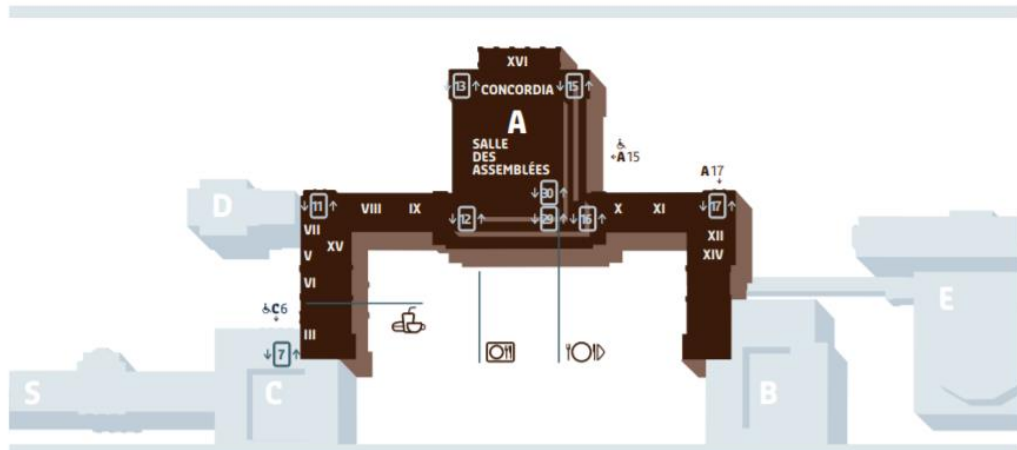
- Are there similar efforts, or initiatives that overlap with this toolkit? If so, can this toolkit complement other existing evaluation tools?
- How best can such an assessment toolkit contribute to countries' monitoring of the SDGs, e.g. as an input to Voluntary National Review of the SDGs?

C.3 Adaptability and applicability

- What parts should be compulsory, i.e. common across all the users, and what parts can be tailored to each case?
- Can this toolkit be made applicable to sectors other than agricultural commodities, e.g. garments, leather, electronics and service?

C.4 Modes of dissemination and data usage

- What are technical/legal/other challenges to making the Toolkit available on-line?
- Shall we aim at creating a community of users and providing them with a space to share findings and experiences?



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	SALLE ROOM XIV	A17	A17
2^E ÉTAGE 2 ND FLOOR	SALLE ROOM CONCORDIA 1	A15	A13 A15
	SALLE ROOM CONCORDIA 2	A15	A13 A15
	SALLE ROOM CONCORDIA 3	A15	A13 A15
	SALLE ROOM CONCORDIA 4	A15	A13 A15
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