

## Session 1: Merging market interests with development interests: Approaches with voluntary sustainability standards

### How can we turn VSS into a tool to improve the livelihoods of small producers?

The world-wide demand for sustainable products is growing, and voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) are becoming a pre-requisite for producers to participate in global value chains. VSS could thus represent a tool for progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Indeed, farmers in developing countries hope that VSS will help them obtain higher prices and access export markets. However, the process of obtaining certification is challenging, and the related costs are largely borne by producers, while benefits are concentrated with brand owners and retailers. In this way, standards often act as trade barriers.



*"The biggest challenge is that small producers currently do not receive enough benefits from voluntary standards."*

**Isabelle Durant**  
Deputy Secretary General, UNCTAD

### The discussion in this session highlighted three key points

#### 1. There is a lack of a clear, authoritative definition of "sustainability"

- It is important to distinguish between different standards, as not all of them share the same goals. This also implies that the definition of "sustainability" is not always the same. Could a UN definition or guidelines of good practice become a benchmark for "sustainability"? Some guidelines already exist; and the "Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing", which comprises the obligation of fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources, is an example of successful UN mechanism.

*"Whether small producers gain from VSS depends on who sets the standard, who controls it, who pays for it, and who oversees if VSS are truly sustainable."*

**Sergi Corbalán**  
Fair Trade Advocacy  
Office



*"For small producers to gain from VSS, we need to foster cooperatives, inclusive and participatory processes and partnership with buyers built on trust."*

**Lorena Jaramillo**  
UNCTAD

## 2. A comprehensive approach is needed

- The issue of VSS is complex. It requires not only thorough analysis, but also a comprehensive policy approach. Policy instruments that can be used include measures as different as competition policy, banning the worst unsustainable practices, and making use of new technologies. The complexity surrounding VSS is also reflected in a lack of information among small stakeholders, in particular farmers. Promoting inclusive and participatory processes and increasing transparency and the flow of information are key to achieve a more equitable sharing of the benefits of VSS.

*"The complexity of VSS requires dialogue among all stakeholders, including international cooperation and a comprehensive approach, which is where the UN can be helpful."*

**Rashid Kaukab**  
CUTS International Geneva



## 3. Multi-stakeholder collaboration is key

- Collaboration between different stakeholders can help overcome barriers. Farmer cooperatives can increase the economies of scale and share costs for certification. Multi-stakeholder platforms can bring different actors together at the national level to help governments design VSS policies that are adequate for all stakeholders. At the international level, the UN has an important role in bringing different stakeholders together, mitigating power imbalances, building trust and providing a platform to exchange on good practices and challenges.



*"We need to rebalance the relation between consumers and suppliers such that more value added is retained at the farm level"*

**Stephen Fevrier**  
Permanent Delegation of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States in Geneva



*"It is important to work with all stakeholders in order to learn from each other and exchange on practices and challenges related to sustainability standards."*



**Nina Eggert**  
Swiss Trading and Shipping Association