

## Session 3: In search of equitable voluntary sustainability standards: Evidence from the field

UNCTAD presented preliminary findings from field studies on the coconut oil value chain in Vanuatu and the Philippines, conducted in the framework of the project "Fostering Green Exports through Voluntary Sustainability Standards in Developing Countries".

The following key points were highlighted in the presentation and discussion of this session

- VSS present a considerable hurdle for small farmers and producers - whether they are already certified or not. While small farmers in both countries use traditional production methods that may be qualified as organic by "default" or "neglect", obtaining formal certification remains difficult for them due to paperwork, cost and access to information.
- This lack of information can act as a mental barrier: Farmers who do not have certification yet perceive the related barriers as even more severe than those who are already certified.
- There is considerable asymmetry in power and knowledge along the value chain.
- The proliferation of different standards and labels makes it even more challenging for small producers and enterprises to navigate this issue.
- Due to a lack of information and guidance, farmers often follow standards without fully understanding the principles of organic agriculture.
- General challenges are comparable across regions, but details in the local context can be important, especially when searching for the right policy solutions.
- The core benefit of VSS for small farmers does not necessarily lie in higher prices, but in non-economic benefits such as the protection of natural resources. Sometimes, the economic benefits of VSS may not be enough to cover their cost.



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*"We need to check if and how VSS schemes are equitable to small producers."*

**Miho Shirotori, UNCTAD**

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*"Due to a lack of information and guidance, farmers often simply "manage" organic standards rather than fully embracing organic agriculture."*

**Toralf Richter, FiBL**

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*"The core benefit of VSS for small farmers and their communities does not necessarily lie in higher prices, but in non-economic benefits, i.e. sustainability."*

**Gilbert Sindjou**, Sustainability Expert

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*"The asymmetry of power and knowledge in the value chain requires the development of institutional capacity, including cooperatives which allow to aggregate supply and strengthen the power of producers organic certification than coconut farmers."*

**Daniele Giovannutti**, COSA

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**Participants suggested the following policy options to make VSS more equitable**

- The development of institutional capacity, such as clear responsibilities and a coherent approach at the government level, but also the strengthening of cooperatives and multi-stakeholder platforms.
- Providing information and training to farmers to empower them (for example, through peer learning methods).
- Making certification more accessible through targeted subsidies (that help overcome initial hurdles) and increasing the quality of audits and support by certification bodies.



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*" Small companies in the Andean region would benefit from more training and information, as they find it difficult to navigate the multiplicity of standards."*

**Rodrigo Ruperez**, Andean Community Consultant

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*"In the coconut oil value chain, oil producers and brokers tend to be much more informed, interested and optimistic concerning organic certification than coconut farmers."*

**Julia Seiermann**, UNCTAD

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