

Private voluntary standards: Placing small-scale growers on a different footing

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Private voluntary standards (PVS) are invariably designed to both assure and appeal to customers (people who buy) and consumers (people who eat) farm produce (these are not necessarily the same people) in industrialised countries. SSGs who grow the produce are obliged to comply with these standards if they trade internationally with customers who demand standards compliance. These private standards are agenda driven; they address the concerns of particular organisations. When the farm is local to the customer/consumer the farmer may at least understand the issues and choose which standards to support. However, when trade is international, particularly when sourcing from developing nations, the issues and concerns of developed country customers/consumers can literally be a world away and are often seen with some confusion at local levels.

This paper aims to offer a new perspective on how to value SSG attributes for final consumers. Notably it is proposing the consumer engages with the SSG using the subject of environmental care; deliberately not using the term 'Farmer' but instead using the term 'Environment Carer' (or 'Environment Steward'). The environment is a subject that Western consumers value, and SSGs are already working alongside rather than against the environment in practice but without recognition. Produce then becomes a medium of exchange, a practical link between SSGs and the consumer, who can now choose to support the environment when selecting food for purchase. Further, this proposal suggests consumers can be more effectively engaged by bringing focus towards protecting and enhancing the environment for the benefit of particular named animals (Imagine if you will, having a World Wildlife Fund (WWF) logo, or Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) logo on produce indicating that the product is associated with specific and credible wildlife environment enhancement).

Inform consumers of the standard requirements

If the consumer of food appreciates and values the standard, and can see a clear connection between the standard and the product (for example the use of the Soil Association symbol to denote produce grown to Soil Association organic standards) local SSGs will have a greater understanding of the links with the market even if such standards are

written with temperate agriculture in mind. The bigger problem is that some of the standards most commonly applied, for example GlobalGAP (formally EurepGAP) may be demanded and valued by UK and European supermarket buyers, but as the logo never appears on the pack, consumers have little idea of the time, trouble and expense SSGs have undertaken to attain and maintain a standard designed for sophisticated Western farms.

If the work and produce of SSGs are not directly valued by the consumer, it is then much easier for exporters and supermarkets to change standards (as they are periodically upgraded) and impose yet further demands without compensation or recognition of practical realities. Over time these standards tend to develop in sophistication and complexity, need further work to upkeep and audit, and grow ever more distant from simple farming systems in developing countries. As we look into the future this trend of direction and SSG alienation looks set to continue.

Re-value small-scale farmers approach in consumer's eyes

It is time to re-think what SSGs are doing and question whether this can be valued - or made to be valued by consumers - and essentially place SSGs on a different footing. This has two requirements to be successful:

- consumers who appreciate what SSGs are doing and are willing to search out and pay for

their products (so there is direct linkage and incentive for SSGs to participate in such standards/schemes),

- a standard that is appropriate and practical for smallholders in developing nations to undertake with a minimum level of outside support and expense.

Perhaps the most obvious example of such a standard that already focuses attention to SSGs is 'Fair Trade' whose agenda is to promise a 'fair' financial return to SSGs who participate in group supply schemes. The benefit of this standard is the 'Fair Trade' mark, which appears on the pack so consumers can make informed choices. While laudable in intention, organising groups, the collation of produce and logistics of international trade all mean SSGs involvement is limited to being a member of a group and growing the produce; rather than full participation in bringing goods to market that consumers, and even Fair Trade themselves, envisage.

One is often struck by how informal and apparently unstructured (to industrialised country eyes) the farms of SSGs are. Crops are hand planted around large trees, crop lines often waver, termite mounds are present, field boundaries are essentially areas of land gone to bush and there is often fallow land not being cropped as part of an overall land rotation system. Chemical sprays and artificial fertilisers are used infrequently and sometimes not at all. While the productivity of such farming is modest, it also means a low environmental impact, and is actually a good form of production for high biodiversity. This would score highly in a LEAF farm environment scheme; however, LEAF is very much a UK farming standard with a plethora of questions not applicable for farms of small size in developing nations. Moreover, LEAF attempts to give credit for overall environment management so there is no specific marketing pull for consumers and farmers will only see benefit if they sell through to a participating supermarket.

It seems the environmentally friendly production of SSGs is a valuable commodity, but which needs to be presented with a focal point that developed country consumers might well value, and value highly. A suitable focal point might be care of the environment to provide a suitable habitat for particular (named) wild animals. On land that is not being farmed, at low cost and with the skill set of SSGs it is quite possible to arrange for food plants to be present (plant cuttings or seed), for rainwater water to collect, for the bush to be allowed to grow as shelter areas, and for mineral salt licks to be established to attract animals. These arrangements could be tailored to suit specific animal species (mammals or birds). This then means SSGs take charge of their non-cropped land to do something valued in the developed countries (looking after the environment in general)

and looking after a particular animal species in particular (the more threatened the better).

In marketing terms it might be possible with the appropriate logo on the final product pack to link an 'Environment Steward' (i.e. a renamed SSG) to a particular animal. In effect, the consumer pays for the environmental work and gets the product for free.

Key lessons

- PVS have been created to address particular concerns and are largely driven by agendas set in the West, which may be appropriate in their country of origin and to farmers local to customers/consumers, but rather inappropriate to SSGs in developing nations.
- As the PVS develop in sophistication and complexity, they become even less attainable and sensible for simple farming systems in tropical and subtropical areas.
- There are enough examples to suggest consumers do place value on goods and services that link to something important to them, and will even pay a premium.
- Most SSGs already farm in a way that has a low environmental impact, and supports wide environment biodiversity. This should be seen as a valuable commodity which needs more focus.
- It is possible to encourage species onto non-cropped land, and even attract particular species, which would give the environmental work the necessary focus.
- A logo that links focused environmental work to the produce would allow the consumer to identify with, value and buy particular products from SSGs.
- SSGs would then have an agenda which is appropriate and practical to local circumstances, yet is valued by consumers in industrialised countries.

Solutions for improvements and sustainability

SSGs themselves as well as the organisations and development agencies that work with them need to think about product 'value'. The subsequent question is: what does the consumer value in the product bought? (And in tangible terms what would consumers be willing to pay for). While traditionally attributes of quality and price attract the attention of the consumer, increasingly intangible attributes are important, sometimes more important in consumer buying behaviour. If it is possible for SSGs to be recognised for doing something of value, which is appropriate and practical at the local level, then they would start to play a rather different game from that set by the current range of PVS.