Agri-Food Certifications in Latin America: Drivers of Accountability or Gateways to Fraud and Corruption?

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Abstract

Agri-food certifications are shaped by Western-driven standards and influenced by consumer demand for quality and sustainability, operating within a complex web of regulations, power structures, and market expectations. However, the requirements often clash with the practical realities and cultural values of the local producer communities responsible for their implementation. While existing literature highlights diverse outcomes in farmers' adoption of standards, a systematic categorisation of these responses remains absent. The article explores the development of sustainability certifications, their driving forces, current characteristics, and operational structures. Building on literature-based evidence from case studies in Latin America, this paper develops a theoretical framework to classify farmers' responses into two key categories within a bifocal model, drawing on insights from surveillance studies and criminology to inform the analysis. When the perceived advantages of compliance outweigh its costs, a culture of surveillance may develop, reinforcing control mechanisms to ensure adherence to certification requirements. However, if standards are seen as burdensome or misaligned with local needs, producers may resist, circumventing requirements or fostering a culture of corruption. The extent of the cultural clash shapes the interplay of these cultures. The article concludes by emphasising the need for further empirical research to test this theory and calls for a reconsideration of priorities that acknowledge local needs and cultural dynamics for certifications, ensuring more effective and trusted outcomes.

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Introduction

In the context of global sustainability debates, green growth and the green economy have emerged as key frameworks for development, aiming to reconcile economic prosperity, social equity, and environmental sustainability. This balance is crucial, as international organisations prioritise green strategies to achieve sustainable development goals (Kang, 2015). They utilise sustainability as a regulatory tool to meet stakeholder demands associated with companies' global expansion and their value chains (Chowdhury et al., 2020). Sustainable supply chain initiatives integrate economic development, social progress, and environmental protection (Govindan et al., 2013). Certifications promoting ethical fair trade and ecological responsibility enhance transparency and best practices in agri-food supply chains, supporting workers' cooperatives and combating labour and land exploitation (Rizzuti, 2022). They respond to public demand, uphold rigorous quality standards, and enhance the appeal of agricultural products to buyers, allowing producers to expand market opportunities (Busch et al., 2005). Several social movements educate consumers on social and environmental food production issues, framing consumption as a political act, "a new way to save the world" (Hatanaka et al., 2005, p. 364). As demand for stronger environmental performance grows, certifications play a key role, although their effectiveness varies. In this context, some private schemes, while costly, can drive significant improvements and offer greater recognition and competitive advantages (Chkanikova & Sroufe, 2021). However, the growing certification trend links disadvantaged Southern farming communities with Northern consumers, exploiting social and economic disparities to strengthen these networks (Raynolds, 2012)[1]. North-South inequalities and colonial legacies continue to influence sustainability certifications (Bacon, 2010). The marketing of indigenous identities and tropical nature, alongside the recognition of small farmers, has become a profitable strategy within green consumerism (Goodman, 2004). This complexity illustrates that standardisation does not ensure uniform improvements, highlighting a critical gap in how regulatory frameworks interact with local realities.

By examining the evolution and structure of voluntary sustainability standards in agricultural production, this paper demonstrates how these institutions frequently reflect the interests of the Global North and explores the implications of their adoption. Drawing on a theoretical framework informed by surveillance studies and criminological theories, this article explores recent literature on case studies of voluntary Fairtrade, Organic, and Rainforest Alliance certifications in Latin America, selected for their increasing influence in the realm of sustainability certifications (Von Hagen & Kasterine, 2011). Farmers exhibit a range of responses to regulatory pressures, from compliance to resistance. The literature identifies a spectrum of "motivational postures" towards certification standards, highlighting the nuanced differences between mere compliance and active resistance (Baur et al., 2024). While alternative outcomes are possible, the proposed framework focuses on the most prevalent patterns identified in the literature, enhancing analytical clarity by systematically categorising local responses to certifications. It introduces a bifocal theoretical approach, grounded in both empirical and analytical models, offering a fresh perspective on how certifications influence production site dynamics. The findings show that the application of standards can either strengthen oversight, fostering a "culture of surveillance"

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[1] For consistency, "Global North" and "North" are used interchangeably, as are "Global South" and "South", throughout the text.

where strict adherence to rules is the norm, as described by Getz & Shreck (2006), or, when perceived as burdensome or misaligned with local realities, lead to resistance and selective compliance. In such cases, standards may strain resources or disrupt traditions, promoting a "culture of corruption" where rule-breaking is common.

This study examines key cases from English literature, emphasising their theoretical significance and drawing on shared criteria across Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, and Organic certifications. These include a regulatory framework based on voluntary adherence, connections between Southern producers and Northern consumers, and the use of independent audits. These standards operate across North-South supply chains, aligning with the study's goal to examine how certification frameworks interact with local production realities. Each case, set in Latin America over the past twenty years, aligns with the rise of sustainability certifications in the agri-food sector. Focusing on tropical crops allows for a comprehensive analysis of how these systems develop and are implemented. The cases highlight legitimacy challenges in sustainable transitions, demonstrating that certifications improve product sustainability and encourage sector-wide progress. However, they reveal tensions between Global North standard-setters and Global South implementers, as implementation often falls short due to socio-economic and political factors, resulting in a disconnect between claims and participants' experiences, especially regarding financial benefits, working conditions, and gender inclusion (Oya et al., 2017). In this context, the article examines the following question: *What socio-cultural consequences might emerge from enforcing agri-food certifications in areas where traditional production methods vary from those established by standard-setting organisations?*

The article consists of six sections. The first outlines the historical and political context of sustainability certifications, showing their development alongside the rise of free trade. It examines the structural features, especially inspection and auditing. The second section discusses Latin American producers' perceptions and responses to certification values, introducing a bifocal model that categorises responses, such as implementation, adaptation, and resistance, into two outcomes. It highlights a key tension: certifications can serve as oversight tools or unintentionally enable corruption. The third section examines the role of certification in fostering a surveillance culture. The fourth focuses on how these systems can lead to corruption, particularly when rules are applied unevenly. Together, these sections enhance the analysis of the model's real-world effects. The fifth reflects on the broader context, arguing that the tipping point between adapting to these cultures depends on organisational structures, past certification experiences, and local norms, emphasising the distinctiveness of the Latin American setting. Finally, the conclusion synthesises the main findings and reflects their significance for future certification systems in a globalised economy.

Sustainability Certifications' Evolution and Structure

Sustainability certifications, influenced by globalisation and Global North consumer standards, ensure compliance with production protocols, conduct codes, and quality standards across supply chains. As mass consumption diets persist, trade and consumption trends shift towards non-traditional and niche products, especially fresh fruits, vegetables, and organic produce (Busch & Bain, 2004). This change reflects consumers' growing rejection of mass production methods due to concerns about food safety, quality, and environmen-

tal sustainability. Although these certifications encourage enhancement, their prominence frequently reflects traditional market dynamics. (Mutersbaugh et al., 2005). With the shift towards buyer-driven supply chains, multinational corporations often leverage certifications to manage production, trade, and distribution, frequently prioritising profit and reputation over adapting to changing market structures (Childs, 2014). Food retailers utilise private standards, brands, contracts, and certifications to enhance quality-based competition in the agri-food sector, where quality is a key factor. Certifications will not replace the state's role, but they are emerging as important tools for promoting worker rights and protecting the environment in free trade (Gereffi et al., 2001). While intended for universal applicability, sustainability standards often reflect the norms of developed regions, leading to practices that are incompatible with local contexts. The gap between global standards and local acceptance creates challenges, particularly in the South, where producers must comply with standards shaped by Northern consumption patterns. Such standards can impose burdens that ignore local socio-economic realities. This section examines the historical and structural factors that led to the rise of sustainability certifications, revealing how they reflect the development priorities of the Global North and reinforce global value disparities.

The private sector assumed a leading role over public authorities after governments adopted the updated General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1947. International trade and environmental management were seen as separate topics during their development. GATT promoted free trade but opposed environmental protections, neglecting sustainability issues. The underlying assertion of these observations is that trade restrictions enacted for ecological purposes would merely serve as pretexts for protectionist interests rather than authentic endeavours to mitigate environmental harm (Welford, 1995). In 1995, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) replaced GATT to harmonise global standards, making them transparent, consistent, and enforceable. As tariffs and quotas were removed, non-tariff barriers increased, which are harder to regulate. Many are now governed by external bodies and international non-governmental organisations, which increases reliance on voluntary standards, such as certifications (Auld et al., 2015). Certification is often not a legal requirement but indicates that products comply with relevant regulations and possess the necessary qualities to access specific markets (Zeuthen & Ludvigsen, 2021). Continuous improvement in quality management systems enables both new and established organisations to remain competitive in dynamic, demanding markets (Tavares de Aquino & Maciel de Melo, 2016). As voluntary standards and certifications developed, the idea of "quality" grew to include not just technical compliance but also wider aspects of safety, ethics, and sustainability. Quality encompasses criteria like safety, nutrition, labelling, and brand image, which are regulated and promoted. These elements are debated at local, national, and global levels, influenced by specific product attributes. (Goodman & Watts, 1997). Conventions and institutions shape perceptions of quality, and while industrial standards govern the agro-industrial economy, ethical and ecological values are integrated into food sectors by reinterpreting quality criteria (Raynolds, 2012). Achieving quality, including environmental and workplace safety, requires time, resources, and capital. It serves as a "qualifying factor", essential for competitiveness, needing a minimum standard for customer consideration (Slack et al., 2010, p.69). Performance below this threshold risks disqualification from consumers, while exceeding it offers a slight competitive edge.

As qualifications place greater emphasis on quality, reliable product assessment becomes essential. With the evolution of global trade, assessment responsibilities have gradually

shifted from public institutions to private companies and NGOs. Free trade agreements have further accelerated this trend by transferring authority to third-party certifiers and inspectors. This shift in responsibility set the stage for new challenges, particularly in developing economies, where the pressures of global competition have had profound social and environmental consequences, often resulting in workers losing their rights and facing poor working conditions (Utting, 2008). NGOs, worried that globalisation and market liberalisation worsen inequality and environmental damage, are adopting fair trade and ethical initiatives (Busch & Bain, 2004). They create private regulatory systems through certification schemes to promote fair trade, merging governmental regulations with private initiatives in a hybrid governance landscape where both sectors influence ethical trade standards. Their model codes provide principles and minimum standards that guide companies' conduct (Urminsky, 2001). Retailers and governments acknowledge that regulations surpass national policies and require transnational applicability to be effective (Flynn et al., 2000). This highlights how international regulations and global trade intersect, as outsourced regulation relies on interconnected networks, prompting public certification efforts to seek support through private schemes.

Certifications involve an independent audit to reduce information asymmetries between potential partners (King et al., 2005). They feature an oversight framework designed to ensure credibility and effectiveness. A crucial element influencing the legitimacy of private regulatory initiatives is the trustworthiness of certification monitoring. Each certification has distinct processes; although the objectives may align, they operate differently, governed by diverse third-party oversight, accreditation, and auditing rules. Recently, third-party certifications have emerged as significant regulatory tools within the agri-food system, thereby enhancing global food security (Hatanaka et al., 2005). The effectiveness of these systems varies across initiatives, affecting both the enforcement of standards and the perceived reliability of certifications in global markets (Raynolds et al., 2007). In non-state-market-driven governance, as in the case of voluntary certifications, compliance is motivated by market incentives and requires an assessment by the audiences these systems aim to regulate, along with other important groups, such as environmental organisations (Cashore, 2002). Compliance mechanisms encompass the certification process, as well as initial and subsequent follow-up audits (Bethge, 2014). Independent testing for compliance with established standards is typically signified by the application of a seal or mark endorsed by a regulatory agency or standards organisation (Wolnizer & Chambers, 1987). Certification programs set accreditation rules for certifiers inspecting and monitoring producers' activities. Compliant entities receive a certificate of conformity, while noncompliance can result in penalties.

The complexity of certification governance arises from the challenges of negotiating standards, establishing auditing procedures, and adapting them to diverse cultural contexts, particularly for small producers in rural areas. Compared to more developed associations, those implementing standards in developing regions face significant cultural constraints, requiring stricter oversight to avoid suboptimal outcomes. Verifying compliance is crucial, as many standards may conflict with local practices. Inspections are often perceived as financially burdensome and rigid, discouraging producer engagement and reinforcing the perception that compliance is a costly obligation rather than a valuable investment. In addition to standard certification costs, suppliers in developing countries often must cover the travel and living expenses of certifiers, further exacerbating barriers to participation (Barrett et al., 2002). The challenge extends beyond assessing producer compliance to evaluating the

reliability of inspectors, particularly when geographical and cultural distances complicate trust and consensus-building on quality standards (Freidberg, 2003). A utility-maximising actor might benefit from adopting performance-based standards without full compliance if undetected (Young, 1999), so rigorous auditing remains essential. Regular independent audits, which assess management systems and encourage voluntary improvements, enhance credibility through impartiality and transparency (Auld & Gulbrandsen, 2010). Many certification programs outsource accreditation to third-party agencies to bolster legitimacy and demonstrate independence.

Building on the importance of independent auditing, transparency emerges as a key principle for inspectors, ensuring that certification processes remain credible and trusted by consumers. Transparency, defined as openness in procedures and results, strengthens accountability by making governance processes and outcomes visible (Koppell, 2005). Procedural transparency, involving openness in decision-making and adjudication, enhances the legitimacy of global governance structures, while outcome transparency relates to disclosing the behaviours of regulated parties. Auditors play a crucial role in maintaining this transparency by evaluating compliance and providing stakeholders with impartial assessments. However, the challenges of limited personnel, the vast scale of production sites, and auditors' often limited understanding of local contexts complicate these efforts (Mutersbaugh, 2002). Despite their influence over certification outcomes and market access, auditors are restricted from advising producers on overcoming barriers to certification, further complicating the process (Mutersbaugh, 2004). The flexible interpretation of standards keeps regulatory power in the hands of external auditors, highlighting the arbitrary and sometimes inequitable nature of certification procedures (Auld et al., 2015). These dynamics risk undermining local autonomy and perpetuating inequalities, as certification entails substantial costs that often exclude smaller producers from global markets (Dolan & Humphrey, 2000). Meanwhile, consumers in wealthier countries, willing to pay a premium for certified goods, expect rigorous inspections and strict adherence to standards, increasing administrative burdens and costs for producers.

Conflict of Values

Certification and labelling systems, experiencing the fastest growth in the global food sector, have recently seen a significant increase. Driven by rising demand from the global market North, they created lucrative markets and expanded the volume and variety of certified food exports (Raynolds et al., 2007). They operate within dynamic contexts shaped by evolving consumption patterns, where product demand is driven by collectively constructed social values (Renard, 2005). Their evolution as a tool for transnational governance, coupled with the strict frameworks governing their functioning, highlights the intricate nature of standard-setting as an artificial process that provides minimal opportunities to incorporate the values and needs of the communities they aim to support. The rising significance of sustainability certifications is evident as adherence to these standards, while voluntary and not legally required, is increasingly considered crucial for gaining entry into major Western economies (Dolan & Humphrey, 2000). This outsourced regulatory system primarily responds to consumer demands in the North, where most consumption occurs, yet paradoxically emphasises changes in production practices in the South, creating an appar-

ent contradiction between where the consumption takes place and where the responsibility for adaptation falls (Glasbergen, 2013). The ethical expectations set by the North, although often irrelevant to Southern producers and poorly aligned with local production systems, must still be fulfilled to enter the niche of certified markets (Moberg, 2014). Therefore, these rigid frameworks function as governance tools across diverse cultural contexts, frequently adopting a "one size fits all" approach.

The broad application of sustainability certifications across diverse geographic, socio-cultural, and economic contexts can pose risks, as their content and implementation may not align with the specific social, economic, or cultural realities of local communities. Integrating standards into traditional markets has led to internal conflicts among community members, altering the original values and objectives of sustainability certifications, as they embody a manifestation of economic globalisation (Mutersbaugh et al., 2005). Tensions can arise regarding how standards regulations can be integrated into specific practices, questioning the impact on producer organisations and the roles of producers, union staff, and certifying agents. Producers often find themselves drowned in a web of regulations that are difficult to comply with, where flexibility is no longer tolerated, and where implementation at the point of production creates a mismatch between the expectations raised by the label and the "lived experience" of production (Getz & Shreck, 2006, p.492). Often, the process of translating standards "on paper" into practices "on the ground" remains a black box, leading to various implications (Bartley, 2010, p.3). Standards may become so crucial that their application allows little to no flexibility, as there is concern that easing the rules could jeopardise the certification integrity. The disconnection from local and mainly rural realities raises questions about whether the labels established by standard-setting organisations truly reflect, as is frequently claimed, a commitment to those communities' well-being, values, and needs. Due to the increasing regulatory burden, certifications are often seen as just another mandatory requirement (Barrientos & Smith, 2007).

Producers on certified farms acknowledge the importance of sustainable development promoted by certification schemes. They also recognise that certified production offers social and economic benefits, supported by extensive networks, that are not available to non-certified producers. However, their priorities often lie elsewhere, such as increasing production and securing a decent income. These tend to outweigh abstract commitments to ethical consumption or environmental ideals embedded in the standards. Similarly, the emphasis on collective decision-making, such as distributing premium funds or organising assemblies, is often external to local rural organisational cultures and not ingrained in their typical working practices. It reflects a deeper value clash between those who design and impose the standards and those expected to adapt their practices to meet them. This dynamic can be likened to the "south dancing to only a northern song", where the trend towards alternative and sustainable growth merely represents business as usual (Rice, 2001, p.43). The monitoring systems associated with certifications impose burdensome bureaucratic requirements on producer organisations, thereby disrupting local governance and economic management. Certifications risk becoming "a type of ecological neocolonialism" (Mutersbaugh, 2002, p. 1181), as their rules often reflect a neocolonial civilising mission that, while presented as beneficial, primarily serves imperial interests by enabling retailers to appear socially responsible while deflecting accountability (Freidberg, 2003). They also place financial and bureaucratic burdens that could disrupt inter-organisational connections within agricultural trade organisations (Mutersbaugh, 2004).

Two dominant theoretical approaches in diffusion theories, world polity and coercive theories, assert that modern cultural models originate in Northern countries and spread vertically to the South (Edwards, 2020). Diffusion processes do not always lead to the adoption of new behaviours; they may also involve abandoning recently adopted behaviours or resisting change (Palloni, 2001). Growers, who typically dictate the commercial success of their crops, might fear certification and often do not adhere to it. Their apprehension grows when decisions are entrusted to business-savvy individuals lacking experience, as tensions can arise from misunderstandings about pricing and risk management between financial managers and general members (Rice, 2001). In response, choosing to remain non-certified often reflects an adherence to traditional values rooted in long-standing farming practices and local support networks. For instance, landlords may view alternative farming methods as too risky, and farmers who adopt them face the potential loss of vital neighbourly networks, such as shared equipment or grazing rights (Baur et al., 2024). When producer organisations perceive certification as a means of economic support, they often pursue multiple certifications in their quest to maximise prices for their members, subjecting themselves to overlapping and sometimes conflicting regulations and audits (Moberg, 2014). Managing multiple certifications with inconsistent requirements, which impose significant costs on producers and supply chain actors, prompts doubts about whether these costs yield better food safety, social, or environmental benefits than a single certification or simply compliance with government regulations (Lockie et al., 2015).

These normative tensions highlight the complex challenges that arise from overlapping regulations, inconsistencies, and interpretative ambiguities. Such issues hinder effective implementation and place considerable strain on the social cohesion of the communities responsible for enforcement. The analysed sustainability certifications in Latin America reveal a dual dynamic shaped by these tensions. On the one hand, certification schemes serve as instruments of transnational governance, built upon rigid, standardised frameworks that define full adherence as both a normative expectation and a measurable objective. Certification bodies employ surveillance mechanisms to monitor and enforce these standards, reinforcing their authority and institutional legitimacy. They present adherence as both legally correct and desirable, framing compliance as a shared goal that, when standards are fair and contextually relevant, encourages producers to internalise external values and fosters mutual accountability.

According to rational choice theory, individuals are more likely to comply when the perceived benefits outweigh the potential costs (Coleman, 1990). When certification requirements are considered fair, achievable, and compatible with local realities, producers are more inclined to adopt them meaningfully within their existing practices (Hart, 2005). This exemplifies the optimal situation for certification-setting companies, where formal compliance is matched by meaningful change, and oversight and surveillance are carried out by workers themselves as intended. However, this model becomes problematic when standards are perceived as excessively demanding, due to factors such as cultural misalignment, social distance, or economic infeasibility. When this happens, even if certification still offers attractive benefits, such as better market access, higher prices, or a stronger reputation, the ability to meet its requirements can be limited. This disconnect can give rise to strategic or corrupt forms of compliance, where actors simulate adherence through bribery, falsified documentation, or the concealment of violations. Such practices result in superficial conformity while undermining the broader objectives of sustainability. Griffiths (2012) critiques

the structural inefficiencies of certification systems, highlighting inadequate auditing procedures, unreliable data flows, and the corrupt practices of intermediary actors within supply chains. These systemic weaknesses are often intensified in low-income rural contexts, where producers face persistent financial barriers, infrastructure limitations, and insufficient institutional support. As noted by Strochlic & Sierra (2007), certifications in such contexts are frequently perceived as an externally imposed obligation, disconnected from the everyday realities of local producers.

Building on this analysis, the paper introduces two conceptual frameworks to interpret these dynamics. The first, *culture of surveillance*, refers to the institutionalised systems of oversight designed to secure compliance. In the ideal scenario, adherence to standards becomes internalised, and workers engage in mutual monitoring to ensure collective conformity and prevent individual deviations from the rules. The second, *culture of corruption*, describes how, in contexts of perceived unfairness or inaccessibility, informal practices and rule-bending may become normalised. In line with differential association theory (Sutherland & Cressey, 1960), these behaviours can be transmitted within communities and, over time, cease to be regarded as deviant. Certifications may be formally achieved, yet their intended transformative outcomes are often undermined, exposing a persistent disconnect between regulatory objectives and lived realities. The two conceptual frameworks are explored in greater detail in the sections that follow, which examine their implications for community dynamics, local economies, and the everyday practices of certified producers.

Culture of Surveillance

Standard-setters offer incentives, such as enhanced reputation and market access, to those who adopt and consistently follow their standards (Gulbrandsen, 2010). Thus, certifications act as a means of surveillance, requiring workers to ensure that the desired certified qualities are embedded in commodities and maintained throughout the processing and transport (Mutersbaugh, 2004). Their credibility and authority in local governance are founded on legitimacy and community trust. Building legitimacy is a dynamic process that relies on a combination of efforts to gain consent from both internal and external audiences, establish legality through structured decision-making procedures, and foster political support aligned with shared moral values (Glasbergen, 2013). The legitimacy of organisations promoting voluntary certifications depends on their ability to equitably represent the interests and perspectives of diverse local actors in developing regulatory frameworks. In this respect, organisational and social proximity are essential for adapting environmental certifications to various regions. They facilitate the creation of coordination platforms that minimise conflicts and support the development of regulations for socio-environmental issues, promote inclusive decision-making, ensure diverse participation, and enable a fairer distribution of benefits (Velázquez Durán & Ortega, 2022). The interplay of legitimacy, local engagement, and inclusive regulation highlights the need for mechanisms that embed accountability in daily practices. Certification schemes thus function as regulatory tools and governance systems, shaping social relations through continuous supervision.

In certification schemes, producers are subject to constant monitoring and unannounced inspections (Moberg, 2014). These schemes rely on mutual oversight and self-discipline, where ongoing monitoring fosters a culture of control, positioning certifications primarily

as tools of supervision. In rural production areas where such certifications are prevalent, understanding the social dynamics of the workforce becomes essential for implementing effective practices. Social structures shape how individuals are grouped and distributed, creating spatial arrangements of power and knowledge that influence patterns of interaction and behaviour. Surveillance reinforces these dynamics, serving as a key mechanism for structuring social relations and governing physical spaces (Rouse, 1990). Within this context, social capital, the resources acquired through social networks, has a notable influence on workplace dynamics. Bonding social capital, in particular, refers to the strong ties among members of identifiable groups, such as families or communities, which foster collaboration and mutual support (Mathews, 2021). At the group level, such capital strengthens resilience to external threats, supports development, and cultivates trust through dense interpersonal networks. In these close-knit settings, where individuals are highly visible to one another, trust is reinforced through shared norms, risk is minimised, and effective sanctions can be imposed (Burt, 2001). This dynamic interplay between social capital, surveillance, and social structures fundamentally shapes behavioural norms and governance within certification regimes.

Although social capital enhances trust and shared norms in local networks, facilitating compliance with certification standards, this localised control exists within broader sociological contexts where mechanisms like sanctions and rewards regulate conformity and deviance. Social control can be understood as the process by which social sanctions effectively reinforce conventional behaviour and discourage deviant behaviour (Akers, 2011). This is achieved by rewarding conformity and penalising nonconformity, creating reinforcement patterns that ensure most individuals adhere to societal norms. Through socialisation, conforming behaviour becomes gradually internalised and self-regulated, with individuals responding to periodic reinforcement for conformity and punishment for deviance. Decision-making is embedded in social contexts that shape individuals' preferences and perceptions of rationality. Economic sociologists emphasise the need to view economic actions within broader social and cultural frameworks. This embedding aligns transactions with established norms, making economic activity socially and culturally contingent. Social networks, central to this process, foster stability, trust, and mutual dependence (Taylor & Rioux, 2018). Long-standing community relationships, such as parochial networks that link residents and local institutions, further contribute to social cohesion and the prevention of disorder, including violent crime (Li, 2011). Within certification schemes, these social relations intensify the vigilance of community members and cooperative administrators, reinforcing surveillance and mutual monitoring to ensure strict compliance with certification rules (Getz & Shreck, 2006). While social structures, networks, and norms play a crucial role in maintaining order and guiding behaviour, the tension between local cultural identities and global market demands raises significant concerns regarding the equity and effectiveness of these systems.

How social norms, surveillance, and compliance intersect reveals the way control works beyond formal enforcement, influencing our internal behaviours, identities, and relationships. Although conformity is not absolute and is always open to contestation, establishing standards serves to discipline, reorganise, and transform not only the standardised object but also all individuals and entities that interact with it (Busch, 2000). When standards are internalised, social controls, such as the threat of stigmatisation, can exert a more substantial influence on workers' behaviour than the punitive mechanisms associated with public

regulation or market forces (Michelsen, 2001). Therefore, behavioural adaptation to standards is more probable when individuals perceive adherence to the rules as an appropriate and morally justifiable choice (Gulbrandsen, 2010). Individuals learn to follow standards by observing others and are more likely to adopt specific practices if they see greater benefits than conventional alternatives (Farmer et al., 2014). Indeed, actors act rationally by following established norms when they foresee that the anticipated rewards outweigh the potential costs of noncompliance (Nieuwbeerta et al., 2003). Therefore, each individual closely observes the agronomic and production practices of others, creating a strict oversight system, as the non-compliance of any member can jeopardise the certification status and market value of the entire group (Mutersbaugh, 2002). The underlying idea is that it is better to operate independently than to partner with an unreliable individual (Vos et al., 2019), driven by the fear that the neighbour's lower-quality produce may damage the overall results. Analogous to the panopticon concept described by Foucault (1995), the objective is to establish a state of continuous and conscious visibility in the individual, leading to the internalisation of surveillance mechanisms and reinforcing the self-perpetuating nature of power (Wrobel, 2022). Embracing standards and monitoring aligns personal behaviour with community norms, strengthening order and governance systems.

Culture of Corruption

Cultural dynamics are shaped by the interactions and tensions between diverse social groups, leading to the continuous evolution of norms and values. Tsing (2005) describes this process as "friction", the awkward, unequal, unstable, yet creative engagement across differences that co-produces culture. As societies become more complex, the likelihood of individuals encountering multiple normative groups increases, thereby raising the possibility of conflicting expectations. According to Sellin's "culture conflict" theory (1938), such conflicts emerge when divergent norms from different groups influence an individual's behaviour, even if those groups share certain underlying values. For instance, one group's conduct norms may justify a specific response, while another's may permit the opposite. These normative clashes can give rise to antisocial or criminal subcultures that provide members with identity, status, and a moral framework to legitimise their actions (Einat & Herzog, 2011). Disharmony may emerge within a single culture or from conflicts between distinct cultural or subcultural norms. Resistance to imposed rules often occurs when the moral perspectives of the receiving group diverge from those of the rule-making group (Black, 2014), creating a gap between expected and actual behaviour. This misalignment is formally recognised as corrupt behaviour (Polese, 2023). In colonial contexts, dominant cultural norms and laws were frequently imposed on subordinated groups, criminalising once-legitimate traditional practices (Sutherland & Cressey, 1960). Similarly, when individuals migrate, they may carry behavioural norms that clash with those of the host society, generating cultural tension. Such conflicts shape patterns of delinquency, particularly in areas where social cohesion is weak. Crime, in this sense, arises when communities lack unified opposition to deviant behaviour, creating friction between legal enforcement and competing cultural pressures (Sutherland, 1940).

These instances of normative dissonance highlight how formal rule systems can conflict with local values, particularly when authority is externally imposed or culturally misaligned.

Such tensions are not limited to legal or penal systems but extend to regulatory instruments like certifications, which similarly attempt to establish unified and elevated standards. However, in doing so, they risk over-regulating behaviour by turning previously informal guidelines into enforceable norms, which may open avenues for manipulation or corruption. In highly structured regulatory environments, actors may attempt to circumvent or exploit these standards to gain competitive advantages or reduce compliance burdens. Much like codified legal systems, certifications operate by explicitly codifying expected behaviours. In contrast, societies that rely on informal social controls, such as shared norms, values, and community expectations, often reduce their dependence on legal institutions, as individuals are socially and internally motivated to conform (Groff, 2015). Conversely, in contexts with higher crime rates, societies tend to rely more heavily on legal structures, where behaviour is regulated through clearly articulated definitions of criminality and corresponding sanctions (Clifford, 1977). The codification of criminal behaviour reflects evolving cultural norms and a collective understanding of unacceptable conduct and its consequences. As societies evolve, legal systems often institutionalise practices that were previously governed informally. In certification schemes, this formalisation can unintentionally override community-based norms by imposing externally defined standards.

This tendency to formalise and externalise standards without adequate local engagement reflects broader issues of governance and legitimacy. It highlights the limitations of top-down regulatory approaches, particularly when rule-making processes exclude those most directly affected by them. This aligns with the concept of "closed spaces", where decision-making processes are controlled by policymakers, bureaucrats, or experts, with little to no engagement from stakeholders (Vos et al., 2019, p. 265). Local actors will assess and either accept or reject the rules of certification schemes according to their specific interests and needs (Velázquez Durán & Ortega, 2022). Agribusiness's profit-driven logic often clashes with community values of collective responsibility and environmental stewardship (Korovkin, 2003), eroding solidarity and group cohesion (Mutersbaugh et al., 2005). For example, modern agricultural practices often contrast sharply with the ancestral methods of indigenous peoples, such as rotating fallow lands (Salazar et al., 2023). As certification schemes follow modern guidelines, indigenous farmers face challenges in adhering to them. Similarly, the decline of community organisation arises from conflicts with the core values of solidarity and cooperation in indigenous cultures. Thus, certifications may lead to greater marginalisation unless they are supported by appropriate rural policies, legislation, and a coordinated transfer of knowledge (Mancini, 2013). They promote an environment focused on certification benchmarks rather than the values they represent. When imposed top-down, certification standards may be seen as external mandates rather than tools for fostering shared values, prompting producers to rationalise non-compliance or corrupt practices.

Getz & Shreck (2006) highlight that certification rules often push traditional practices underground. For example, Organic certification prohibited sourcing from uncertified neighbours, directly clashing with community traditions of barter and exchange. Instead of eliminating these practices, the rules forced them to occur illicitly, in secret. Many community members devised creative workarounds, fully aware that these actions violated certification rules. Examples include corruption and theft by cooperative managers (Lyon, 2003), instances of corruption in the use of premium funds, and mismanagement of resources (Booth & Whetstone, 2007), to enumerate a few, coupled with insufficient tracking and control by auditing companies (Bethge, 2014; Trauger, 2014). Legal consequences are more

direct for Organic certification due to its legal basis, whereas private schemes like Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance usually rely on administrative actions. In cases of clear intent to defraud, criminal proceedings may follow, though public views on the seriousness of such offences remain ambiguous. Individuals from different cultural or social backgrounds may evaluate the gravity of misconduct differently, shaped by personal and contextual factors. Many actors rationalise or neutralise their actions, framing them as necessary or justified within their moral or social framework. Rationalisation often occurs after the act to reduce moral conflict, while neutralisation happens beforehand to pre-empt guilt (Severson et al., 2019). These strategies help reduce feelings of guilt or cognitive dissonance, allowing individuals to engage with certification systems in ways that may contradict their intended purpose. While rising costs can tempt actors to bypass regulations, they must weigh this against the risks posed by strict external monitoring and compliance checks (Moberg, 2014). Resistance to certification frequently stems from its perceived failure to resonate with local values or inspire meaningful change. When viewed as intrusive or misaligned, standards can provoke cultural friction, foster non-compliance, and even normalise corrupt practices.

Discussion and Limitations

This paper, based on case studies of the socio-cultural impacts of Fairtrade, Organic, and Rainforest Alliance certifications in Latin America, faces limitations due to its focus on a niche segment, which restricts the broader applicability of its findings across other sectors and regions. It adopts a broad "sustainability certifications" framework, which risks over-simplifying the distinct aims, criteria, and impacts of each scheme. The limited number of case studies, primarily focused on Fairtrade and Organic certifications, further constrains the generalisability of findings and introduces potential bias. This underscores the need for a more comprehensive and nuanced theoretical framework, to which this study seeks to contribute. Ultimately, the bifocal model serves as a simplification that may overlook the nuanced possibilities between the two suggested models. Further comprehensive and up-to-date empirical research is required to examine the development of agri-food standards, governance, resistance, evolution, and connections to the moral and political economies across regions, nations, and global systems (Busch, 2000). It should include additional case studies to examine various certifications and their variations, broadening the selection to enhance understanding of their impact on sustainable development.

Although the article references an extensive body of literature, some relevant works discussing surveillance dynamics in plantations have been omitted, as they focus on specific geographic areas in Asia and do not clarify the certification status of the production sites. A relevant example is Li's (2018) concept of the "mafia system" in Indonesia's oil palm plantations, which explores how networks of corruption, coercion, and violence, involving state actors, corporations, and local elites, facilitate plantation expansion at the expense of local communities. The system operates through both overt violence and more subtle forms of infrastructural manipulation, with surveillance by corrupt supervisors and security personnel enabling exploitative practices. The concepts of corruption and surveillance align with the themes of this research but fall outside the scope of certified production in Latin America, which is the article's primary focus. Finally, some studies suggest that internal monitoring can create tensions when producers are expected to oversee their peers (Oya et

al., 2017). However, this issue falls outside the scope of the present study. In the referenced cases, internal inspectors are specifically hired for this role, positioning them differently within the organisational hierarchy and framing their oversight as a formal job function, rather than peer-based surveillance. In contrast, this paper examines surveillance dynamics among peers, individuals on the same level, where monitoring is informal and can influence social relations within the group.

Conclusions

Voluntary sustainability certifications constitute a complex and often contradictory system of standard-setting, auditing, and conformity assessment that functions alongside traditional regulatory frameworks. Promoting a moral economy of alternative development, these systems operate both within and against global market structures, seeking to balance ethical imperatives with economic incentives (Goodman, 2004). However, their practical implementation in the Global South exposes deep-rooted tensions. Empirical studies indicate that the introduction of externally constructed standards often conflicts with local cultural values, social norms, and governance practices, resulting in varying degrees of compliance, resistance, or adaptation. For individuals and organisations, the decision to engage with these certifications involves carefully weighing the perceived benefits, such as improved market access, financial returns, and reputational legitimacy, against the potential erosion of traditional ways of life and community structures. These tensions are further complicated by the subjective and context-specific nature of how cultural differences are experienced and interpreted. As Brunton-Smith et al. (2018) note, evaluating values, attitudes, and behaviours across diverse settings presents methodological challenges, making it difficult to generalise behavioural responses. Consequently, determining the exact point at which actors shift from genuine compliance to strategic adaptation or resistance remains elusive, underscoring the complexity of transnational governance in culturally diverse contexts.

The proliferation of sustainability certifications has given rise to two distinct yet interconnected cultural dynamics: a *culture of surveillance* and a *culture of corruption*. As certifications become increasingly indispensable for access to lucrative Northern markets, they operate as external mechanisms of governance and control. When standards are perceived as legitimate and culturally resonant, a culture of surveillance can develop, fostering compliance through accountability and authentic engagement. However, enforcement often relies on bureaucratic audit processes that fail to account for local socio-economic and institutional complexities adequately. Under these conditions, a parallel culture of corruption can emerge, particularly where certification requirements are overly burdensome and resources, infrastructure, or cultural alignment are lacking. Producers may respond by simulating compliance through the use of falsified documentation, bribery, or superficial practices. Over time, such behaviours risk becoming institutionalised and socially normalised as pragmatic adaptations to an inflexible and inequitable system. The coexistence of these two cultures reveals a core tension in global sustainability governance: namely, the imposition of universal standards upon heterogeneous local contexts, and the unintended consequences that arise when such standards are implemented without adequate sensitivity to local realities.

Whilst these cultures are conceptually distinct and often framed as mutually exclusive, they are not invariably separated in practice. A transitional space frequently emerges in

which elements of both interact, particularly as actors begin to accumulate institutional support, resources, and familiarity with certification processes. In such contexts, practices that originate as strategic circumvention, often motivated by systemic constraints or scepticism towards regulatory legitimacy, may gradually evolve into more substantive engagement. This progression is seldom linear or clearly demarcated; rather, it tends to unfold along a continuum marked by partial compliance, selective adherence, and the persistence of informal practices. The shift from one cultural mode to another is contingent not only on improvements in capacity and infrastructure, but also on the extent to which regulatory norms are internalised and actors perceive value in sustained compliance. Until this point of normative alignment is reached, a blurred zone persists in which behaviours reflect both adaptation and resistance. Recognising this fluid dynamic is key to a more nuanced understanding of regulatory change and its socio-political context.

In light of this complexity, a more inclusive and participatory approach to standard-setting becomes essential in bridging the gap between external expectations and local practices. Meaningful engagement with local communities and marginalised stakeholders can help foster the conditions necessary for normative internalisation and sustained compliance. Targeted outreach initiatives may also enhance understanding of the principles underpinning certification standards and improve their perceived legitimacy. Moreover, resistance or superficial adherence risks can be mitigated by developing standards that uphold ethical commitments, protect rights, and deliver tangible benefits that outweigh compliance costs, ensuring equitable outcomes for everyone (Busch, 2011). Further empirical research should investigate the power dynamics between standard-setting bodies and local actors, focusing on how these relationships shape the acceptance, negotiation, or rejection of imposed standards. Additionally, nuanced analysis can reveal the factors that influence individual moral frameworks, especially those that diverge from official state norms and legal definitions (Polese, 2023). Addressing these complexities will enable more collaborative and effective standards implementation, fostering legitimacy and making a more meaningful contribution to sustainability objectives.

Declarations

Ethics Ethics approval was not required for this study.

Competing interests The author certifies that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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