
New publication: “Certification schemes on ‘sustainability’: 30 years of deceit and violence”

The shelves in supermarkets and stores are full of certified products. The packaging displays different labels indicating products were made with “sustainable” paper or wood, food or cosmetic products made with “sustainable” palm oil, “responsible” soybeans and so on and so forth. Even when it comes to buying an airplane ticket, consumers can pay a little more to *ensure* that their carbon emissions are (supposedly) “neutralized”, so as to guarantee that much touted “sustainability”.

But why is there this need for so many labels and forms of certification? What is actually being certified? And who is benefitting from this? After 30 years of certification schemes with environmental and social bias, what is clear is that the only “sustainability” that they guarantee is that of corporations’ lucrative business and that of certification industry itself.

The first international label for forestry products and their production chain emerged in the early 90s, with the creation of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). Although its origin is connected with civil society pressure on corporations, FSC has been fully incorporated into the production logic of logging companies operating in forests, of giant paper and pulp corporations using tree monoculture plantations, as well as of producers and distributors of consumer goods.

Over time, having shown that it did not constitute any threat – on the contrary: an opportunity – to the accumulation strategy of the corporations involved, other sectors started creating similar mechanisms. In this way, they could wash their image in the face of the environmental and social damage caused by their production chain. Hence, starting in the 2000s, initiatives and so-called roundtables for “sustainable” or “responsible” production of palm oil, soybeans, cocoa, sugarcane, among others, proliferated.

All these initiatives have various aspects in common:

- They are schemes that present themselves as non-profit associations including many apparently diverse actors and interests (companies, NGOs, governments etc.) However, in practice, the business sector participants and their allies, like the big conservationist NGOs, dominate these initiatives and impose their interests in a highly unequal power relation between the members. This is also evident in the focus given to technical and procedural aspects, which often leave real conflicts of affected communities outside the scope of certification.
- They are mechanisms that establish operational guidelines and directives for companies to adhere to on a voluntary bases, leaving no possibility of legal consequences when rules are broken – rules formulated and judged by the companies themselves, it should be noted.
- They are initiatives submitted to the logic of the market and its expansion, that is to say, certification labels have become important both to obtain funding for companies’ expansion projects and to win over consumers, mainly urban consumers and those from the global North.

- They are mechanisms headquartered in countries of the North, and with management boards mainly composed of men and white people. Rural communities of the South that have to face the certified plantations play the role of mere receivers of determinations imposed from outside about the use of the space where they live. And if they want to question the actions of any of the certified companies, they must submit to the protocol created by the certification system itself on how to proceed.

- They are mechanisms used by companies as defence mechanisms whenever they are faced with criticism over the impacts of their activities: “Our products are certified...”, “The project has certification...”, as if this guaranteed that there is no cause for concern.

One way or another, such certification mechanisms have not stopped the destructive expansion of industrial tree plantations, oil palms, soy, etc. Also, they have not been able to resolve the conflicts generated with traditional communities and Indigenous Peoples. Nor do they have the potential to do so, since they are designed to allow the continuity and expansion of corporate accumulation patterns that are intrinsically dependent on a predatory dynamic. In fact, the main common denominator of such certification schemes is that they guarantee a green label to the companies involved, thus contributing to their primary objective, i.e., the maximization of profit.

In other words, these destructive corporations need certification labels to obtain some legitimacy in the eyes of consumers and investors, bearing in mind the vast number of reports, news and studies showing their harmful effects, such as: land grabbing; problematic or inexistent community consultation processes; contamination by agro-chemicals; soil degradation; precarious and humiliating jobs; sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women, among many other impacts related to extensive monoculture plantations. Certifiers have hence become a key element through which companies seek to legitimize their territorial and economic expansion in the global South, deceiving consumers with the “sustainability” discourse. This permits one to affirm without reservation that certification itself has become an underlying cause of deforestation.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that the idea of certification has been taking on new shapes. With the creation of offset mechanisms for carbon emissions and biodiversity loss, new commodities have emerged already linked to certification mechanisms. In this new market, *carbon credits* and *biodiversity credits* – issued by certification schemes – represent a supposed guarantee that greenhouse gas emissions or the destruction of biodiversity are being duly offset elsewhere. Differently from wood, paper, palm oil or soybeans, where the certification is “added” to the product by means of a label, in the carbon and biodiversity markets it is the certification itself that makes it feasible for the (abstract) product to be consumed. In other words, the commodity in itself is supposedly a guarantee – though a virtual guarantee, obtained through dubious methodologies and permeated by openly suspect interests.

This compilation of articles from the WRM Bulletin aims to underscore the damaging role played by companies and organizations involved in certification schemes. WRM considers it important to highlight that after three decades with ever more environmental certification labels on the market, it is urgent to put an end to this greenwashing. Ultimately, instead of combating environmental devastation and the social ills linked to corporations’ and other players’ operations, these labels cover up and sustain their destructive logic.

[Read and download the publication here.](#)

