Private standards that promote supply chain sustainability: discussing their implementation in developing countries

Estándares privados que promueven la sostenibilidad de las cadenas de suministro: analizando su implementación en países en desarrollo

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KEYWORDS
Sustainable supply chain management; Private standards; Cut-Flower industry; Private sector; Africa.

ABSTRACT Private standards are a useful tool for companies to promote sustainability in their supply chains, particularly when competing in the global market. But these standards are usually fostered by consumers' demands and they are rarely adapted to the real needs and challenges of developing countries, where most production takes place nowadays. This paper analyses how a private standard has been developed and implemented in a collaborative way by stakeholders of the cut-flower industry in Ethiopia. This standard has been so successful that it became a national law. It is an inspiring case that shows the advantages of considering suppliers' perspectives when implementing sustainability standards and could be replicated in other contexts.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Cadenas de suministro sostenibles; Estándares privados; Floricultura; Sector privado; África.

RESUMEN Los estándares privados son una herramienta útil para las empresas a la hora de promover la sostenibilidad en sus cadenas de suministro, especialmente cuando operan en mercados globales. Pero estos estándares son normalmente generados para responder a las demandas de los consumidores, y en raras ocasiones se adaptan a las verdaderas necesidades y retos de los países en desarrollo, donde la mayoría de los procesos productivos tienen lugar a día de hoy. Este artículo analiza cómo un estándar privado ha sido desarrollado e implementado de manera colaborativa por distintos grupos de interés de la industria de la flor cortada en Etiopía. Este estándar ha sido tan exitoso que ha pasado a formar parte de la legislación de este país. Es un caso inspirador que muestra las ventajas de tener en cuenta la perspectiva de los proveedores a la hora de implementar estándares de sostenibilidad y podría ser replicado en otros contextos.

MOTS CLÉS

Chaînes d'approvisionnement durables; Normes privées; Floriculture; Secteur privé; L'Afrique.

RÉSUMÉ Les normes privées sont très utiles pour les entreprises dans la promotion de la durabilité dans leurs chaînes d'approvisionnement, en particulier lors de l'utilisation sur les marchés mondiaux. Mais ces normes sont généralement produites pour répondre aux demandes des consommateurs et elles s'adaptent rarement aux besoins réels et les défis des pays en développement, où la plupart des processus de production ont lieu aujourd'hui. Cet article montre comment une norme privée a été développée et mis en œuvre par la collaboration des différents acteurs de l'industrie des fleurs coupées en Ethiopie. Cette norme a été un tel succès qu'elle est devenue une loi à ce pays. Il est un cas inspirant qui montre les avantages de tenir compte du point de vue des fournisseurs dans la mise en œuvre des normes de durabilité et pourrait être répliqué dans d'autres contextes.

Introduction

The global business outlook has been profoundly reshaped during the last two decades. Many companies have expanded their operations and supply chains to developing countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa, boosting economic growth and creating jobs but also introducing new social and environmental risks in vulnerable regions with fragile institutions. In these complex production networks, the

responsibilities of each agent are diluted, whereas multinational corporations and brand-owners are being appointed by society as the entities accountable for the negative impacts their supply chains can produce.

A scandal can seriously harm buying firms' reputation, sales and market share (Olson and Wu, 2010). For example, in the 90's NGOs discovered and publicized the poor labour conditions on Asian factories producing items for Nike and Adidas, this led to a worldwide discredit campaign against these firms (Locke *et al.,* 2007). Another example, in 2009 the toymaker Mattel was obliged to pay 2.3 million dollars in civil penalties when lead paint was found in some of their most popular dolls, they have been manufactured in Asia and Central America (Merminod and Paché, 2011). After such scandals, regaining a company's reputation is not only time-consuming but also expensive.

Buying firms are now urged to monitor and control business operations throughout their entire supply chain, but the complexity and the costs of controlling an extended global network of suppliers are very high (Ciliberti *et al.,* 2009). Private standards may be an interesting mechanism to improve supply chain sustainability in a hands-off way, because companies can simply require suppliers' compliance and rely on third parties for monitoring and certifying compliance with the standard.

On the suppliers' side, private standards usually pose a challenge: require product or process upgrading; imply certifying costs; and particularly in developing countries they can become a barrier for market access.

This paper aims to illustrate through a case study how designing private standards in collaboration with suppliers in developing countries can facilitate implementation and better address local sustainability challenges.

The paper will be structured as follows. In Section 2, we summarize the main contributions from literature regarding design and enforcement of private standards. In Section 3, we explain the case study research methodology adapted to this particular research work. Next, in Section 4, the results of the case study itself are related. Section 5 presents a discussion of findings. Finally, concluding remarks can be found in Section 6.

Learnings from literature: design and enforcement of private standards

In order to manage the sustainability of their supply chains, lead firms usually implement private standards by following three steps: 1) set requirements, 2) enforce compliance and 3) exert control over their suppliers.

1) *Set requirements*
Sustainability requirements are usually set by lead companies through private standards. Private standards focus on social, safety and environmental issues and are required by brand producers and retailers when they source their products (Goonatilake *et al.*, 2010). These standards come in various shapes and sizes (Neilson, 2008). They can take the form of codes of conduct (Andersen and Skjoett-Larsen, 2009), certifications (Gandenberger *et al.*, 2011; Laine and Laine, 2009) or product labels (Bacon, 2010; Gómez *et al.*, 2011), among others. They may be comprehensive and contain both environmental and social criteria, or focus on different aspects of sustainability such as workers welfare (Mares, 2010) or pesticide use. They can be general enough to be applicable to any industry (Lozano and Huisingh, 2011), or be developed to suit specifically a certain sector (Hutchins & Sutherland, 2008; Maloni and Brown, 2006). In other cases, companies just use their own-developed code of conduct, this is for example the case of IKEA (Andersen and Skjoett-Larsen, 2009), GAP (Ansett, 2007) or Unilever (Pretty *et al.*, 2008).

Some authors argue that private standards present some problems. First, they will not contribute to a really sustainable business transformation until a greater coherence between social and environmental criteria is achieved (Blowfield, 2000; Pullman *et al.*, 2009). Second, private standards have been adopted by companies mainly due to consumers' demands. Therefore the issues addressed by private standards are mainly the ones that worry sustainability-conscious consumers (usually located in developed countries), which are not necessarily coincidental with the most pressing social and environmental issues at the producing site (Blowfield, 2000). Third, the majority of private standards developed by companies are either audited internally or by an external auditor reporting to the company's management team. In such cases the results are rarely made available beyond the company's boundaries. Nevertheless, a growing trend is being observed to use independently administered standards, which allow a wider range of stakeholders to be involved in the auditing, reporting and consultation process (Gandenberger *et al.*, 2011).

2) *Enforce compliance*
Once the requirements are set, compliance throughout the chain needs to be achieved. Muller *et al.* (2012) identify two strategies to get suppliers to comply with sustainability requirements: prescriptive or collaborative. In the prescriptive enforcement strategy, the requirements are communicated by the lead firm and suppliers have to comply or leave. In the collaborative strategy, suppliers and other supply chain actors have a voice and they can negotiate the requirements, participate on their definition or at least express their opinion about the process. It should be noticed that between complete imposition and full suppliers' participation there is a wide range of intermediate strategies.

As it was discussed in the previous paragraphs, private standards are usually defined by lead firms and include the sustainability issues prioritized by their consumers. This usually generates a certain cognitive dissonance between lead firms' and suppliers' understanding of sustainability, which has been conceptualized as "sustainability

dissonance" in the work of Touboulic *et al.* (2014). The dissonance increases when lead firm and suppliers are located in different countries (Müller *et al*., 2009). Sometimes standards are even perceived as a neo-imperialist agenda by supply chain actors in developing countries (Neilson and Pritchard, 2007).

Different authors highlight the importance of integrating stakeholders in the private standard implementation process through innovative supply chain strategies (Kannabiran, 2009), relational governance and trustful information exchange (Gold, 2011) and direct participation in the definition and prioritization of material issues for sustainable development (Muller *et al*., 2012).

3) *Exert control*
Eventually, supply chains and the actors involved need to be monitored in order to assess and improve their performance in relation to sustainability. Due to the complexity and costs associated to this task, lead firms tend to make first-tier suppliers responsible of verifying compliance with sustainability requirements upstream in the chain (Merminod and Paché, 2011).

Although a wide variety of mechanisms have been developed to monitor environmental performance, the consideration of social issues in sustainable supply chain management has introduced greater complexity, and Hall and Matos (2010) indicate that current environmental management techniques might not be appropriate to deal with them. That is why new tools and instruments are being developed to, for example, achieve compliance with labour rights (Mares, 2010) and guarantee fair trading conditions (Welford *et al*., 2003). Wognum *et al.* (2011) emphasize how modern information systems are critical in order to ensure transparency and traceability throughout the chain.

Private standards are an important mechanism used by lead firms to govern supply chains. They are enforced by these companies in order to improve sustainability, but it should be acknowledged that their imposition may result in the exclusion of vulnerable suppliers from the supply chain (Perez-Aleman and Sandilands, 2008). These standards might marginalize vulnerable suppliers that are not able to comply with their quality and sustainability requirements due to their limited capabilities and difficult access to resources (Dolan and Humphrey, 2004; Maertens and Swinnen, 2009). The challenge for small and medium suppliers from developing countries is particularly noticeable. Besides, producers usually have to bear the costs of compliance and auditing, in return for none or scarce price premiums (Ras and Vermeulen, 2009).

Methodology

The aim of this paper is to provide some insights into the process of design and implementation of private standards, which usually overlooks suppliers' needs and challenges. Private standards tend to be imposed by buying companies, but in

this article we will analyse the development of a private standard for the Ethiopian floriculture industry by the Ethiopian floriculture industry.

We used the inductive approach principles of case study research (Yin, 1984). This methodology is appropriate for early stages of research on a topic and it is to be used when there is a need to understand a real-life phenomenon in depth but such understanding encompasses important contextual conditions.

Case study research is a methodology oriented towards theory building (conceptualising), grounded on a variety of empirical data sources (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). The unit of analysis in our case is the global floriculture supply chain sourcing from Ethiopia, with a main focus on producers and exporters based in Ethiopia.

Two of the authors travelled to Ethiopia and stayed there for two weeks for data collection purposes. We used a variety of data sources and methods including documentation, interviews and direct observation (see Table 1) to improve reliability. In addition, the participation of various researchers generally reduces bias and provides complementary insights, enhancing the confidence on the findings (Eisenhardt, 1989; Lewis, 1998).

Table 1. Sources of information and data collection methods used in this study

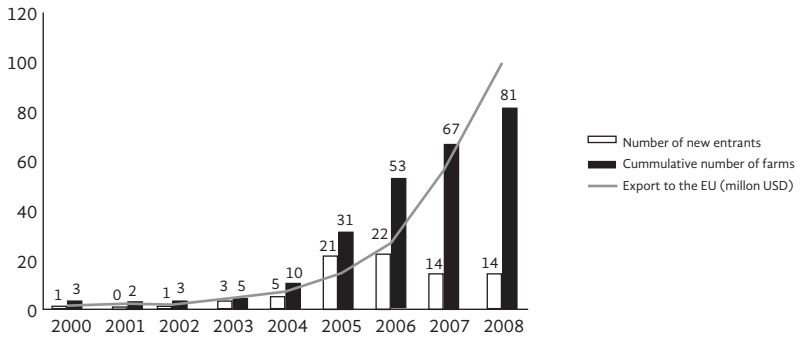
		DATA COLLECTION METHODS		
		Documents	Semi-structured interviews	Direct observation and informal interviews
SOURCES OF INFORMATION	Ethiopian Horticulture Producer Exporters Association (EHPEA)	Code of practice for sustainable flower production etFresh magazine	Manager Coordinator of the training program	Presentation of the organization and staff
	Ethiopian farms			Genesis Farm Ethio-Veg Fru Meki-Batu cooperative union
	Ethiopian Investment Agency (EIA)	Ethiopian Investment Agency Brochure	Agency Representative	
	Agricultural Ministry of Ethiopia		Head of the Department of Agricultural Investment Support	
	Dutch Embassy	PSI brochure	Head of the Private Sector Investment Program (PSI) in Ethiopia	
	Wageningen University	Ethiopian-Netherland Horticulture Partnership. Report on Agenda Setting Mission.		

Source: Own development.

The case study: a private standard for the Ethiopian cut-flower industry

Ethiopia has become the second African exporter of cut flowers. The floriculture industry has exponentially grown in this country during the last decade, generating important economic activity and creating thousands of jobs. The main catalysts of this success have been the continuous flow of foreign investment and the determined support of the Ethiopian government through fiscal advantages, cheap credits and long-term land leases. However, the floriculture sector has not been free of controversy. Allegations of unsustainable practices and mistrust of local and foreign stakeholders towards the industry jeopardized this sector's growth.

Figure 1. Evolution of business entries and exports to the European Union of the Ethiopian floriculture sector



Source: Gebreeyesus and Iizuka, 2010.

In 2004, the political opposition launched a very critical campaign against the floriculture industry, accusing the government of supporting an unsustainable and harmful business. They denounced the environmental risks associated to intensive flower farming, based on the negative impacts observed in other countries with more experience in the sector, such as Kenya (Bolo, 2008).

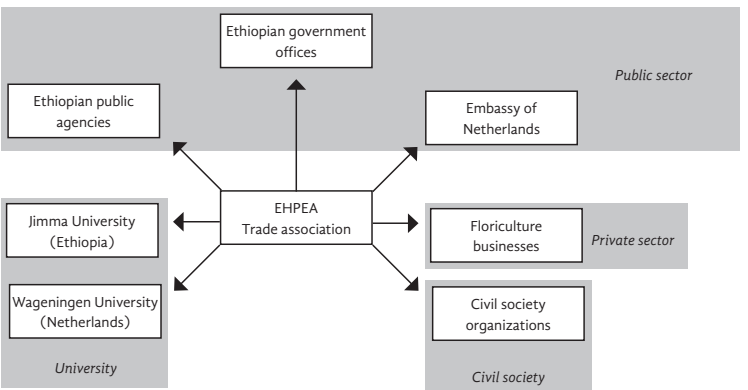
The sector came under close scrutiny. Poor labour conditions and child labour were reported, as well as the use of chemicals that could seriously harm the environment and workers' health (Belwal and Chala, 2008). The floriculture sector was in the spotlight, and the Ethiopian Horticulture Producers and Exporters Association (EHPEA) was aware of the need of taking action to protect the interests of the industry. A private standard had to be developed to address the social and environmental risks linked to flower farming and to improve the public image of the sector.

The main foreign investors of the industry were from The Netherlands. In 2007, 37% of the total production of flowers for export in Ethiopia came from Dutch farms, and

two thirds of the Ethiopian flowers were exported through the Dutch market (Melese and Helmsing, 2010). Therefore, the involvement of Dutch actors into the code of conduct design and implementation process came as no surprise.

The "Ethiopian-Netherlands Horticulture Partnership" was created in 2006. This cross-sector partnership intended to "contribute to a balanced growth of the horticulture sector in Ethiopia" (Helder and De Jager, 2006). As shown in Figure 2, the partnership included organisations from the public sector, the private sector and the third sector. Notable participants were the Dutch Embassy, the Ethiopian Government and EHPEA. From the beginning, the partnership considered very important that the Ethiopian flower growers, through EHPEA, took the lead in the design of the private standard, since they would be the ones implementing it. The presence of civil society organisations in the partnership also ensured that all the relevant sustainability issues were included in the agenda.

Figure 2. Map of participants (by sector) in the 'Ethiopian-Netherlands Horticulture Partnership'



Source: Own development.

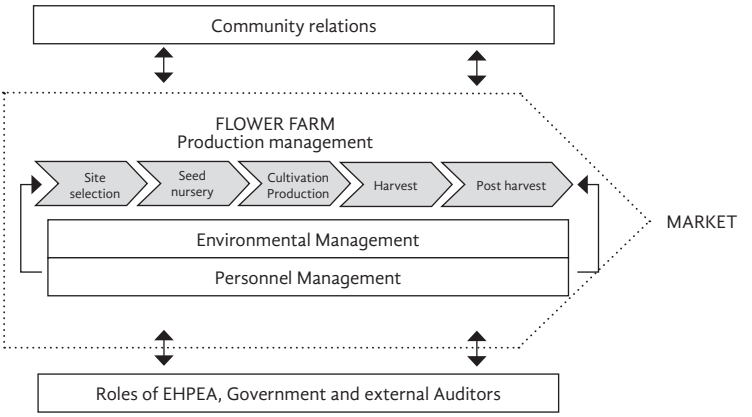
In the course of 2006 and 2007, the private standard was designed. Business, civil society and government were all represented. During the whole process, Dutch experts were advising the team.

The practices of the Ethiopian floriculture sector were characterised, a benchmark study of other private standards was carried out, and the potential linkage with international standards was analysed. Several workshops with farmers were celebrated to review and validate the contents and define the implementation strategy.

The standard was finally launched in 2007. This first version of the standard was quite basic and defined the minimum requirements a flower farm in Ethiopia should accomplish to avoid social or environmental harm: it was called the "Bronze level".

The standard approached different issues that were classified in three categories: management of the farm; good agricultural practices and protection of the environment; and workers' and local communities' wellbeing (see Figure 2). The standard points out the importance of considering the three aforementioned categories throughout the whole production process.

Figure 3. Main components of the private standard



Source: EHPEA Code of Practice.

In 2010, the standard was revised and the Silver and Gold levels were introduced. These new levels were perfected evolutions of the Bronze level. These new levels sought to show the path for improvement to the farms that wished to increase their commitment with sustainability.

The implementation strategy for the private standard was incremental, based on a cyclic process of continuous improvement. EHPEA provided capacity building and support services to its associates during the whole process, through a team composed of an expert – an English expatriate – and six Ethiopian graduates.

The process of implementation, grounded on the classic Deming's circle "Plan, Do, Check, Act" (Deming, 1986), allowed to introduce improvements step by step, facilitating a gradual evolution to the different levels without affecting too much the farm's regular activities. Once the farm was ready, it had to contact the certifying entity approved by EHPEA. Farms must be audited annually to keep the certification.

In 2010, fifty flower farms – accounting for 80% of the total land dedicated to floriculture crops – were certified with the Bronze level, eighty-five farms had participated in workshops related to the standard, and over three thousand farm workers had received training on sustainable practices.

The private standard improved the working conditions in the sector and reduced the environmental risks associated to the farms. The assistance of a specialized training team entailed an important knowledge transfer in managerial, organizational and technical terms. Finally, the implementation strategy has led some farms to adopt a culture of continuous improvement and pursuit of quality.

These positive effects and spillovers were recognized by the Ethiopian government, who decided that the Bronze level of the standard should be mandatory for all flower growers in the country. This mandate took the form of a national law, and the legislation came into effect in 2010.

EHPEA kept working for this standard to be recognized internationally, working for the Silver and Gold levels to be considered equivalent to other international certifications. In 2015, EHPEA Code of Practice for Sustainable Flower Production (Silver Level) was officially recognized as equivalent to the GLOBAL G.A.P. IFA Standard Version 4.0 for Flowers and Ornamentals.

Discussion

This case study allows us to identify relevant factors and best practices that should be considered when creating and/or implementing a private standard for a specific sector in a developing country context.

In 2004, floriculture was a young and promising industry in Ethiopia, and the actors involved were willing to improve the performance of the sector and obtain a better competitive position in the international market. Investors, public administration and local businesses were well-disposed to introduce improvements in processes and products. Therefore, when the crisis arrived (fuelled by allegations of unsustainable practices at the farms), it worked as a trigger, activating a rapid response by the most relevant stakeholders in the industry.

This crisis was seen as a significant risk that could stall the development of the sector, but soon it turned into an opportunity to improve its performance and competitiveness. Therefore, the design of the private standard was not only driven by a need of mitigating social and environmental hazards, but also by a desire to improve the capacity of local businesses. The private standard was disseminated mainly by a suppliers' development program. This capacity building program was aimed to improve the managerial and technical skills of the Ethiopian producers, so they could implement and monitor sustainable practices but also improve their overall performance. Using the code not only to avoid hazards but also to improve managerial and technical practices fostered local businesses' interest in participating.

When private and public actors involved in the development and implementation of the standard were inquired about their motivation for engaging in this initiative, their first answer was similar: to foster economic development. The Ethiopian government agencies sought to make the sector the spearhead of the new Ethiopian agricultural economy. The Dutch foreign agency had two aims: first, to generate local economic development as part of its development aid agenda; and, second, to improve the business environment for the operation of Dutch firms and investors in the country. EHPEA lived up to its main objective: make the Ethiopian cut flower industry thrive. And Ethiopian farmers just wanted to guarantee the long-term sustainability of their businesses and improve their financial performance. All in all, the motivations of the main stakeholders in the sector were aligned, which made collaboration easier.

The existence of a strong leadership, the business association EHPEA, was key for the launch and success of this initiative. EHPEA was an effective facilitator between local businesses and international buyers, and it had a deep knowledge of the challenges of the sector at a local productive level as well as at a global marketing level. Therefore EHPEA acted as a promoter and an enabler, managing the process, connecting different actors and bridging cultural and business differences.

The design and validation of the private standard was based on multi-stakeholder participation: Ethiopian civil society, businesses and government agencies were all represented. Therefore, this private standard was written for Ethiopia from Ethiopia, counting with the opinion and approval of all the different actors involved in the industry. This facilitated a wide social acceptance of the standard.

Most local businesses did not consider the management of social and environmental sustainability as a priority, therefore they might have offer more resistance to the implementation of this private standard. However, the standard was not externally imposed by buyers, but co-developed with local producers. As aforementioned, the standard contained not only recommendations related to workers and the environment, but also related to management and agricultural techniques. Since the producers participated in the process of development of the standard and it included issues that directly affected their daily work, they were more willing to implement it. Besides, EHPEA explained very clearly how private standards could bring new business opportunities, since it represented a competitive advantage in certain foreign markets.

However, even when the willingness exists, certain abilities are needed to be able to fulfill any private standard requirements. The process of implementation of the standard was based on two main principles: training and continuous improvement. The focus on suppliers' capacity building, together with the incremental nature of the implementation process (following the principles of continuous improvement represented in Deming's PDCA cycle) are relevant aspects to be considered for driving effective change on local business practices.

The active involvement of the government was also an innovative and enriching factor. The Ethiopian government agencies provided institutional support and legitimacy in the interaction with Dutch government representatives. Their participation also allowed the local government to have deeper knowledge of the situation and the needs of the cut-flower sector. After a few years, and based on its success, the private standard evolved from a self-regulating initiative to a government legislation. This case study supports the argument that private standards can be a useful complement to national laws (Arya and Bassi, 2009; Sobczak, 2006).

In summary, the initiative presented in this case study strengthened local producers, reduced environmental and social risks associated with the farming of flowering plants, improved the image of the Ethiopian cut-flower sector, and generated a certain competitive advantage for Ethiopian flowers in the international market.

Conclusion

Private standards are a useful instrument to achieve sustainability and quality in supply chains. They bring rapid change in production practices when market-leading companies enforce them, but they can work as an exclusion mechanism for the most vulnerable suppliers: SMEs in developing countries.

For private standards to be useful in creating and managing inclusive supply chains a balance between global scope and adaptation to local conditions should be achieved, clear and visible incentives for suppliers should exist, and certain support should be provided for vulnerable suppliers to be able to comply with the requirements. Standards allow to codify information and improve the communication of specifications related to product and processes. If the process of development of the private standard is participatory and includes a wide variety of stakeholders, it could be considered a sensemaking process, helping to reduce cognitive dissonance among the different actors involved and facilitating its implementation.

In addition, comparison and learning among different private standards should be encouraged, and they should be designed to interact with other governance systems. They may also be a complement to government regulations.

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