

Name: Daniel Hawkins

Country: Colombia

Organization: National Trade Union School of Colombia (ENS) www.ens.org.co

Contact details: dirinvestigacion@ens.org.co

Mobile: (0057) 3013963341

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Panel 8

“Selling decent agriculture in indecent working environments: socio-labour certification and coffee production in Colombia”

Abstract

The sustainability discourse has not only become a multi-billion dollar industry it has also moved swiftly and concertedly into agriculture and the realm of workers' rights. International sustainability brands such as Rainforest Alliance, UTZ Kapeh, ISO, Organic, Fair Trade, among others, have all tapped into a burgeoning market whereby product quality is stretched to include what is termed ethical production, based on compliance with environmental and socio-labor standards on certified farms, be they large, medium or small-scale. Such a market-based turn has revolutionized many agricultural commodity chains as hundreds of thousands of producers line up to join the certification-labeling model as a means of accessing reconfigured consumer markets that purportedly care about how the product they consume is produced. However, while this restructuring of the market based on supposed sustainability, speciality, origin, consumption and ethical fetishism has indeed expanded the number of actors involved, it may not have done anything to redistribute profits downwards. Instead, most expert analysis tends to contend that the transformation of numerous agricultural product markets, in line with the growth of sustainability-based certifications, have actually led to a re-concentration of profits, especially between international traders and roasters, packagers, and processors, depending on the product in question. In the meantime international prices have remained extremely volatile and generally low, with small-scale producers not seeing the profit windfall expected even as they are pressured to upscale their production to meet increasingly rigorous environmental and socio-labor standards. At the end of the line, agricultural farm workers are the supposed beneficiaries of rights-based standards that bring historically informal work into a regulatory framework where despite the State's absence, working conditions improve due to third-party monitoring. Nonetheless, such a contention is controversial and often left unexamined, with many academic studies simply accepting that certified farmers, whatever their size, comply with the standards if the registering brand or firm ratifies their certification.

Examining working conditions in the Colombian coffee industry, one of the world's leading coffee suppliers and home to one of the most rapid processes of the expansion of sustainability certification in the coffee-producing world, the tenuous ground upon which socio-labour standards rest becomes more than evident. As part of a SOMO-financed and ENS directed study into working conditions in Colombia's coffee¹ and cut flower industries, the author and his colleague interviewed numerous key actors involved in the country's coffee sector, with a special focus on the certification processes and compliance with the ILO's eight core labour conventions, and surveyed over 140 workers from four of the major coffee-producing regions of the country.

This paper will present the findings of this study with particular focus on how the discourse of sustainability certification systems, regarding the uplifting of producer-worker life conditions via their compliance with set standards as a means of accessing lucrative consumer markets actually disguises an implicit disregard for key and enabling labor rights (such as freedom of association, collective bargaining and social security access), leaving producers and workers in the same precarious position they have always found themselves, while certification brands, coffee roasters, and specialty coffee chains consolidate their market power and their rates of profit.

¹ The project's full title is: *Research on effectiveness of sustainability certification systems 2011-2015* and looks into the production of diverse agricultural products and sustainability systems in four countries (Indonesia, Kenya, Peru and Colombia).