

Where is Sustainable Palm Oil Certification headed? Learning from Past Changes to Understand the Future?

Benjamin Cashore, Professor of Environmental Governance & Political Science, School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Yale University.

Abstract

One of the most important questions facing practitioners and scholars assessing the role of market-driven certification programs is to understand the process through which they might become increasingly durable and effective arenas of non-state governance. The purpose of this presentation/paper is to identify a framework through which practitioners might make choices based on future expectations and possibilities. Such an approach is critical when we recognize that the only thing constant over 20 years of efforts to build global certification systems is change. How can strategies and scholars reorient decisions and research that embrace, rather than bypass, changes in programs' standards and processes and norms, all of which affect the incentives and evaluations of firms who are asked to comply? We argue that answering these questions requires much greater attention to two related phenomenon: how market mechanisms might evolve to provide increasing incentive over time; how certification systems interact with traditional governmental efforts at the domestic and international levels. Doing so uncovers unique pathways through which direct and indirect support might occur that has profound, and sometimes counterintuitive, implications for strategic decisions aimed at long-term problem solving. We illustrate these pathways through an historical exploration of key certification efforts including forestry, fisheries, palm oil, and biofuels, and green building