



## **The Limits to Voluntary Private Social Standards in Global Agri-food System Governance**

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*[Paper first received, 5 April 2012; in final form, 9 September 2012]*

**Abstract.** Private agri-food standards, along with certification and labelling schemes, are rapidly becoming the predominant mechanism by which global agricultural production and trade are governed. This article examines voluntary private social standards (VPSS) and certification schemes in agri-food system governance and contends that, while such standards may secure important localized material gains, these are not altogether unproblematic. Furthermore, the potential for voluntary social standards to confront structural injustice in the agri-food system and to contribute to a transformation towards just and sustainable agriculture and food appear rather limited. It is argued that prominent multi-stakeholder standards are increasingly prone to capture by powerful private interests, and that a central role for decisive public regulation in agri-food system sustainability should therefore not be dismissed.

### **Introduction**

The global agri-food system currently faces converging social and ecological crises, which stem directly from the fundamental contradictions of globalizing industrial capitalism (Weis, 2010). The subordination of social and ecological concerns to economic interests has become almost universal, as globalization processes have assisted capital to outpace and escape state-based regulation (Jessop, 2000). The resultant deterioration of interconnected social–ecological systems has accelerated to the point that the earth system as a whole is now threatened (Biermann et al., 2012). In agriculture, a thoroughgoing process of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003), characterized by land concentration and agribusiness consolidation, has had profound impacts on rural communities, as rural people have been simultaneously separated from the land and compelled to seek work in the cities or the ‘rural non-farm economy’. Smallholder farmers that have not been expelled from commercial production altogether are increasingly drawn into global networks of cross-border agri-food chains as suppliers to distant export markets.

Meanwhile, important shifts in the relative power and authority of public sector, corporate and civil society actors have accompanied the globalization of industrial capitalism. Significant in this respect has been the rise of non-state forms of govern-

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ance. The implications of private governance arrangements have been far reaching in the global agri-food system, as public sector regulation and standards have been overlain, and largely overtaken, by a multitude of private standards and codes of conduct. Recently agri-food standards have been reoriented towards product differentiation and the indication of a number of 'credence attributes' (Ponte and Gibbon, 2005), or 'extrinsic qualities' (Mutersbaugh and Lyon, 2009) associated with integrity of the production *process* rather than the material qualities of products themselves. As a result of trend, (social and environmental) sustainability standards and labels have proliferated in the agri-food sector. Advocates believe that private sustainability standards are an effective means to internalize social and environmental externalities of globalizing capitalism, and realize a sustainable agri-food system. Critics, however, hold that such standards are a distraction and a means for powerful corporate actors to maintain the status quo.

This article focuses primarily on voluntary private *social* standards (VPSS), which have arisen alongside private environmental standards or as a component of broader private sustainability standards. The article does not dissect or critique particular standards, but rather examines more general criticisms of various types of VPSS, reflecting occasionally on specific standards for illustrative purposes. My point of departure is the contention that despite localized benefits of VPSS, their value and promise should be judged according to their capacity to address the social inequalities and injustices that characterize the global agri-food system, and therefore contribute to the transformation of the system to one that is just and sustainable. The (in)capacity of VPSS to fundamentally transform relations of production and exchange in the agri-food system should also shed light on the role that private sustainability standards at large might or might not play in contesting and transforming neo-liberal capitalism.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 discusses the rise of private governance as a result of bargaining among corporate, civil society and public sector actors in the wake of contemporary globalization. Section 3 turns to shifting modes of governance in agriculture and food, and attempts to situate voluntary private social standards within broader agri-food system governance, before providing an overview, examples and a tentative categorization of types of VPSS with relevance to agri-food. Section 4 considers the effectiveness of VPSS in terms of, first, their scope to deliver material benefits in accordance with their stated aims and, second, their ideational and symbolic power as tools for the social construction of sustainability. Section 5 discusses limits to the transformative capacity of VPSS, and concludes with some reflections on the prospects of private governance and the need for alternatives.

### **Private Authority in the Wake of Globalization**

The emergence and globalization of neo-liberal capitalism has seen a reconfiguration of interrelationships between state and non-state actors at multiple scales. On one hand, governments and public sector institutions have faced important challenges to their ability to effectively regulate, both within and beyond nation-state boundaries (Held, 2000).<sup>1</sup> Decisive regulation has been politically unsustainable in the face of 'Washington consensus' ideology and, increasingly, practically infeasible given the increasing complexity of globally integrated networks of production-consumption (Urry, 2003). On the other hand, private interests have succeeded in de-

ploying state power and authority (and diverting significant public resources) for the making, steering and policing of markets (Tickell and Peck, 2003). It is in the context of the reluctance and apparent inability of states to address many of the negative 'externalities' of global capitalism that alternative modes of governance have proliferated. Impetus has come from civil society actors and 'new' social movements as advocates for environmental sustainability, human rights and social justice (O'Connor, 1998; Buechler, 2000), but also from firms seeking regulatory certainty and commercial advantage, and from states in pursuit of administrative efficiencies and harmonization (Büthe, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

The reorganization of power and authority among state and non-state actors can be seen therefore as the pursuit of diverse agendas (and attempts to legitimate these agendas) by corporate, civil society and public sector actors alike. In this view, the array of actually existing private governance arrangements arise out of a multitude of struggles, stand-offs and compromises between actors in pursuit of governance regimes that align with their interests and bolster their political legitimacy. Current iterations of this bargaining game can be seen as a necessary response to converging social and ecological crises and the challenges these present for global capitalism generally, and the legitimacy of corporate actors in particular. Innovations in response to these sustainability challenges are becoming more central to contemporary capitalism, as it is reconstructed in the form of a postmodern brand of ethical capitalism (Žižek, 2011).

Civil society actors, and social movements more broadly, have been instrumental in reshaping transnational governance. Bernstein and Cashore (2007, p. 359) observe three firm-level responses to civil society critiques. An initial response involves 'fending off', whereby firms underline their compliance with national and international laws, and seek to discredit or marginalize civil society critics. In the event of renewed or increased pressure by civil society groups, potentially involving protests, public awareness-raising campaigns, boycotts and other more or less confrontational approaches, a second response is the introduction of company codes of conduct, corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies, and other attempts by firms to reconstruct themselves as 'good corporate citizens' (Matten et al., 2003). Where these company codes and standards are seen as inadequate, continued pressure may compel firms to respond by adopting multi-stakeholder standards and third-party audited certification schemes (Utting, 2008), which are considered more transparent and legitimate than unilateral initiatives. This ongoing confrontation/collaboration produces non-uniform outcomes, depending on the calculations of firms and NGOs with respect to each other's behaviour in light of numerous contextual factors (Bernstein and Cashore, 2007; Mayer and Gereffi, 2010).

In particular, a wide range of private (and public-private) governance arrangements have emerged out of this bargaining in pursuit of desired regulatory outcomes. Private governance is defined here broadly as governance arrangements overseen by non-state actors – normally either corporate or civil society actors, or both in collaboration. Such arrangements may of course engage public sector actors and institutions to varying degrees, and interact with public regulation, but they are not driven by states – 'the sanctions involved for non-compliance are not enforced by the state, but by the market' (Busch, 2010, p. 67). Private governance arrangements therefore tend to be consumer focused, with impetus for corporate engagement coming primarily from the promise of social legitimacy secured through

'responsible' conduct (Bernstein and Cashore, 2007) – in the eyes of discerning customers and watchful civil society organizations.

Private governance approaches may involve individual actors or multiple collaborating stakeholders. In the case of the former, thousands of domestic and transnational corporations have established company codes of ethical conduct, CSR strategies and/or production and sourcing standards and associated labelling schemes in order to be seen to address a range of issues along their supply chains, including safety, quality, labour rights (and human rights more generally), social justice and environmental sustainability.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, civil society organizations and NGOs have developed codes, standards, and monitoring and certification schemes independently around particular issues or targeting particular sectors. Multi-stakeholder schemes have also proliferated, involving cooperation among firms engaged in specific industries, the mobilization of CSOs around certain social and environmental issues, or the collaboration of corporate and civil society actors in specific sectors or in relation to particular issues. While there are important differences among the various types of initiatives, most arise out of tensions between the values and practices of corporate actors, on the one hand, and civil society groups (and society at large), on the other.

### **Global Agri-food System Governance in Transition**

Friedmann (2005) has identified an emergent 'corporate-environmental food regime', linked directly to the larger restructuring of capitalism in response to 'green' issues, and characterized by 'very specific and unequal compromises among social movements, states, and powerful agrofood corporations' (2005, p. 228). In this awkward environment, new conditions of confrontation are laid down and new contradictions arise, as various civil society projects are appropriated by powerful corporate and state actors, so that the emerging regime 'is already contested by the very movements it draws on' (Friedmann, 2005, p. 257). However, while recent neo-liberal re-regulation and corporate re-branding have been primarily about 'greening', or addressing environmental concerns, the social dimension, I argue, has tended to be discursively and practically subordinated. Therefore, the contradictions of 'ethical capitalism' more broadly – and particularly the social dimensions – are deserving of critical attention. In what follows I frame contemporary agri-food system governance in terms of a broader renegotiation of transnational private governance, and discuss characteristics that may catalyse or block a transformation to socially and ecologically sustainable agriculture and food.

#### *Situating Voluntary Private Social Standards in Agri-food System Governance*

A clear tendency in the globalizing agri-food sector has been the expansion of private authority in parallel with consolidation in agricultural inputs, food processing, and (particularly) food retail. Unprecedented cross-border integration of supply networks has deepened interdependence between distanced regions of production and centres of consumption. Global commodity chain (GCC) analysis has shown how powerful firms can 'drive' chains in their role as lead producers or buyers (Gerffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994). In the agri-food sector, lead buyers such as transnational food processors and supermarkets govern global supply chains with increas-

ing efficiency via private codes and standards (Dolan and Humphrey, 2000; Reardon et al., 2003; Gibbon and Ponte, 2005; Biénabe et al., 2007; Minten et al., 2009).

Standards are defined here broadly (following Ponte et al., 2011) as norms selected as a model by which actors, actions and objects can be judged, compared and evaluated. VPSS more specifically, are standards promulgated by non-state actors, to which a number of parties voluntarily subscribe. They address a range of social issues (albeit often as part of a broader engagement with sustainability, quality and/or safety), including but not limited to labour practices, human rights, worker health and safety, ethical business practices, fair trade and community development. They apply to processes (at various stages of production, exchange and consumption), but also support the certification and labelling of products. VPSS may apply at various scales: from sub-national productive sectors, to global sourcing networks and supply chains, to industrial sub-sectors or entire industries. Before examining examples of VPSS in agri-food system governance, I briefly highlight the extent of diversity within this category of private governance, as this has been identified as often receiving insufficient attention (Henson and Humphrey, 2010).

First, *private* governance is often defined in opposition to *public* government or regulation, and described as arising in response to limitations of the latter. Insofar as 'public' and 'private' equate to 'state' and 'non-state' respectively, the public/private distinction has some conceptual value in identifying different types of governing actors in complex social reality. However, precisely this complexity renders the public/private distinction problematic, as public and private governance are not easily separated empirically. Historically, of course, private authority has been exercised alongside public regulation at multiple scales, and corporate self-regulation has long existed in parallel with government regulation (Rosenau, 2002; Vogel, 2009). Private standards must operate within national and international legal bounds, and their political legitimacy is often secured through compliance with and recognition by public regulation and state authority (Bernstein and Cashore, 2007). On the other hand, governments and multilateral institutions are increasingly looking to private standards as models of 'best practice'. While effective private authority may actually 'enhance state capacity by allowing the state to escape innate constraints and to focus more effectively on other areas of regulation' (Ponte et al., 2011, p. 4), it also serves to weaken the case for regulation (Gereffi et al., 2001; Newell, 2008; Busch, 2010). Interaction and interdependence between public and private standards is therefore very important.

Second, the distinction between *voluntary* and *mandatory* standards, is seldom clear cut. On the one hand, only states (and public sector institutions) can formally enforce regulations. Compliance with national food-safety regulations or binding international labour agreements, for example, is mandatory for parties to whom they apply. Firms and NGOs, on the other hand, cannot force adoption of or compliance with private standards, but must rely instead on persuasion (Pattberg, 2005). In practice, however, public standards need not be mandatory (indeed they often come in the form of recommendations or non-binding guidelines),<sup>4</sup> while private standards in some cases and for some actors become *de facto* mandatory. For example, civil society groups, and global social movements mobilized around specific issues (Drache, 2008) can increase significantly the costs to firms of not adopting sustainability standards by threatening brand integrity and corporate image (Sasser et al., 2006). Similarly, powerful corporate actors (particularly lead firms in global commodity chains) can apply standards in such a way that compliance is essentially

a prerequisite for market access and commercial survival for supplying firms and farms (Fox and Vorley, 2006; Swinnen, 2007; Vorley et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2012). Thus while the voluntary/mandatory distinction is not straightforward, it is analytically useful in foregrounding shifting power relations in contemporary governance.

Third, private standards are frequently classified as addressing primarily either environmental or social issues. While there is a tendency among some standards towards increased acknowledgement of the inseparability of environmental and social systems, environmental and social initiatives remain largely separate in organizational and institutional settings. Cases can be made for both separation and integration of environmental and social issues in the formulation of sustainability standards (Blowfield, 1999), and research and analysis may also necessitate separate or integrated treatment. Overall, however, the private governance and standards literatures do not afford equal attention to both dimensions, and environmental concerns tend to dominate over social concerns.<sup>5</sup> This, along with the observed separation of social and environmental issues in practice, and the underdeveloped and underprivileged status of social sustainability standards (along with the social dimension within broader standards) justifies attention to VPSS.

#### *Overview of Voluntary Private Social Standards in Global Agri-food System Governance*

VPSS have arisen over the last two decades within a globalizing agri-food system penetrated increasingly by capital at all stages of production/consumption. Three successive waves of voluntary sustainability standards can be identified (following Djama et al., 2011): 1. a social movement-oriented wave from the late 1970s, with its roots in organics and fair trade, initially supporting alternative models of production and trade and targeting niche markets; 2. a 'business to business' wave in the 1990s, founded on technical food safety and quality standards for mainstream markets; 3. a multi-stakeholder wave since the early 2000s, combining elements of both previous waves, and characterized by managerialist consensus formation, auditing and benchmarking. Standard schemes characterizing this latter wave emerge increasingly as 'authoritative' self-governing institutions, capable of strongly incentivising compliance, and sanctioning non-compliance (Bernstein, 2011).

Figure 1 depicts types of VPSS as outcomes of bargaining among public sector, corporate and civil society actors (following Abbott and Snidal, 2009). Contemporary civil society, corporate and multi-stakeholder standards are discussed below broadly in accordance with the three waves outlined above. Generally, standard types (and specific standards) associated with these historical waves, have co-evolved over time, and what can be observed at present is the product of overlapping waves and jostling between standard types – or what Busch (2011) has called a 'cacophony of governance'.

Figure 1 maps examples of standards schemes in global agri-food system governance. With the exception of region 1 (public), all regions of the Venn diagram may produce VPSS. Regions 2 to 5 represent private standards promulgated by civil society or corporate actors, with or without public sector collaboration. Regions 6 and 7 represent standards that are the product of bargaining between corporate and civil society actors, or among all three types of actor. For the purposes of this article I define the latter two sets as multi-stakeholder standards.<sup>6</sup> Standard schemes are allocated to regions according to classification of the actor(s) with primary responsibility for governance of each scheme. This should be taken as indicative, rather than

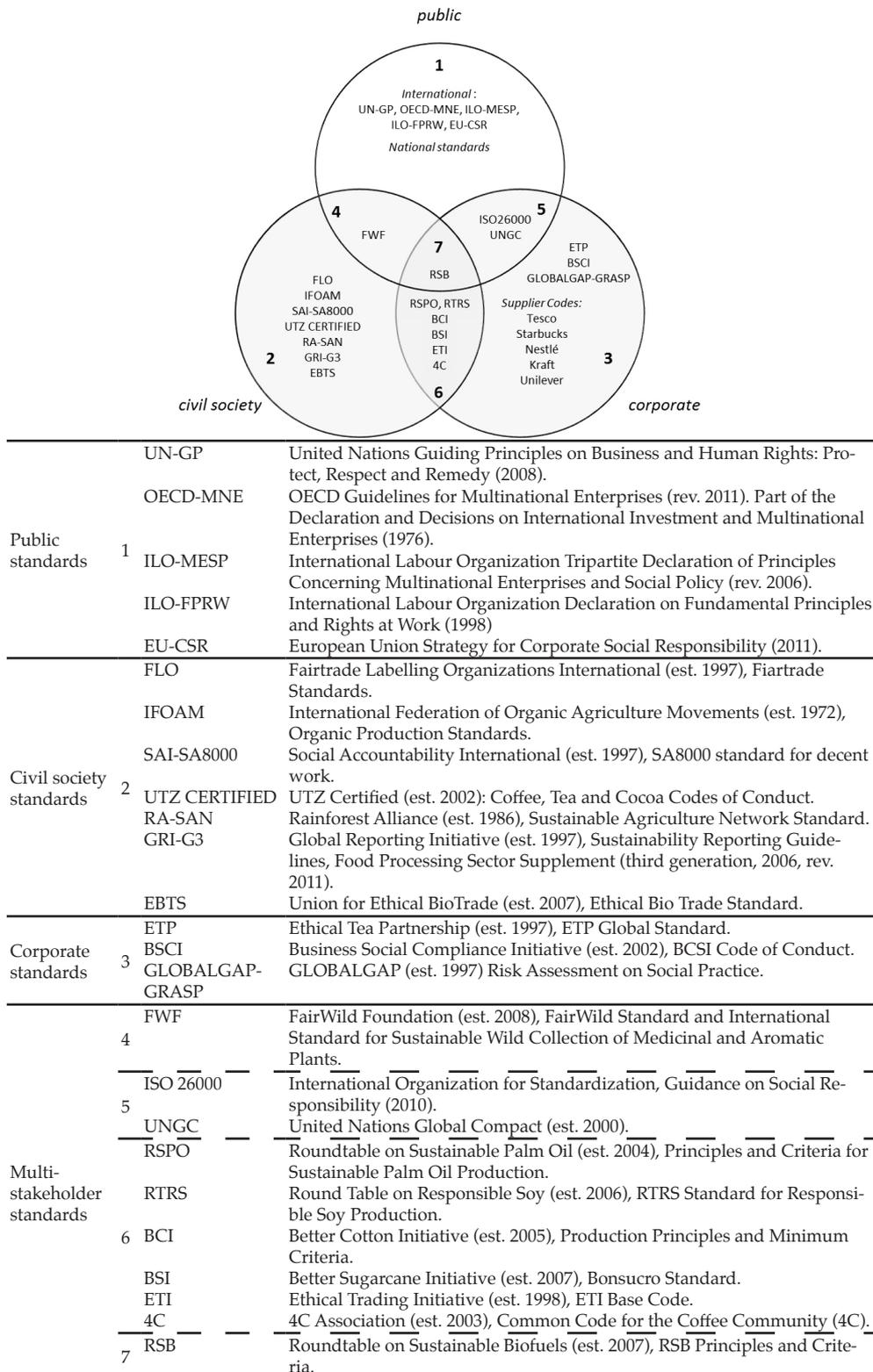


Figure 1. Private social standards in agri-food system governance.

definitive<sup>7</sup> and it should be noted that only selected examples of important agri-food sector VPSS are presented. While an exhaustive stocktake would be impossible, an examination of selected cases allows some cautious assertions about the structure and dynamics of agri-food sector VPSS at large.

#### *Public Standards*

Public sector instruments (region 1, Figure 1), while obviously not private standards, interact in important ways with private governance instruments. In reality, region 1 is very densely populated by public social standards and regulations operating at various scales. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) counts 111 member countries with fully developed national standardization bodies, and some 50 in the process of developing them. State-based standards are influential at a range of scales, but major multilateral agreements and initiatives in particular provide the foundation for many private standards. The basic human rights and labour dimensions of most VPSS can be traced to key multilateral treaties, including the United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), and the International Labour Organization (ILO) Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (1998), which address issues such as slavery, child labour, and the worst forms of exploitation and discrimination. The 2011 Guiding Principles on the UN Framework on Business and Human Rights stress the duty of states to protect citizens from harm inflicted by third parties (including businesses), and the responsibility of corporate actors to respect human rights. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises (rev. 2011) contain non-binding recommendations, endorsed by 42 OECD and non-OECD governments, on responsible business practices for multinational corporations. These largely require compliance with existing national and international laws and standards. The ILO Tripartite Declaration of Principles Concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy (rev. 2006) fulfills a similar function. Public sector initiatives with relevance to agri-food VPSS have also emerged from the European Union (EU) since the mid-1990s, the most recent development being the renewed EU Strategy on Corporate Social Responsibility (2011–2014), which provides a public policy framework in support of private CSR efforts (European Commission, 2011).

#### *Civil Society Standards*

Civil society actors have driven the development of agri-food standards with a strong social component in response to disparities and injustices created by globalizing industrial agriculture (regions 2 and 4, Figure 1). Prominent examples are the global fair trade and organic agriculture movements, which ‘challenge existing production and consumption patterns, and seek to create a more sustainable world food system’ (Raynolds, 2006, p. 51). Fair trade and organics have distinct origins and characteristics, but both arose out of social movements (in the global North) that sought to address directly impacts of modern agriculture. While fair trade is more obviously concerned with social justice and fostering sustainable livelihoods for producers in the developing world, the organics movement is also prominently underpinned by social values.<sup>8</sup> Both (but particularly organics) witnessed a proliferation of certification and labelling schemes in response to growth in international agri-food trade and consolidation in the food retail sector from the late 1980s, but this was succeeded by a strong tendency towards convergence and harmonization. The Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO) and International Federation of Organic

Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) standards include strong provisions on human rights, employment and working conditions. FLO standards, in addition, provide for fair prices, payment conditions and supply contracts with producers across a number of subsectors, including bananas, sugar, cocoa, coffee, flowers, cotton and tea. While FLO is the most widely recognized fair trade initiative, there are other fair trade standards in the market, many of which are associated with specific products or retailers. Competition is even greater among organic standards and labels, where private standards exist alongside public regulation. Other examples of VPSS with origins in civil society initiatives are: the Social Accountability International (SAI) standard 'SA8000' on human rights and labour rights; the Rainforest Alliance 'Sustainable Agriculture Network' ecological and social standards; the 'UTZ Certified Codes of Conduct' for socially and environmentally responsible production of coffee, tea and cocoa; the Union for Ethical BioTrade 'Ethical BioTrade Standard' promoting 'sourcing with respect' of ingredients derived from 'native biodiversity'; the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) 'G3 Sustainability Reporting Guidelines' for the food processing sector; and the 'FairWild Standard' for the sustainable collection of wild plants and crops.

#### *Corporate Standards*

Within private agri-food governance, corporate initiatives (regions 3 and 5, Figure 1) are most prevalent. Thousands of CSR initiatives exist, but they differ significantly in their origins, objectives, content and coverage. Although many initiatives amount to little more than aspirational statements, branding, or corporate philanthropy, the CSR programmes and codes of conduct of many large agribusinesses and food retailers incorporate substantive VPSS. The Tesco 'Nurture' scheme, Starbucks 'C.A.F.E. Practices', and the agricultural and supplier codes of food companies like Nestlé, Kraft and Unilever are prominent examples. Firms also act collectively to promulgate agri-food VPSS. Inter-firm collaboration can occur horizontally within industry associations or sectors, or vertically along supply chains. Examples of the former are the Ethical Tea Partnership (ETP) 'Global Standard', concerned with labour standards and worker health and safety in the supply chains of ETP members; and the Global Aquaculture Alliance 'Best Aquaculture Practice' standards, governing production and processing in a number of aquaculture sub-sectors, and incorporating worker health and safety and 'community relations'.

Perhaps the most prominent and prevalent corporate agricultural production standards belong to the GLOBALGAP good agricultural practice standards. GLOBALGAP was initiated by several major European retailers with the aim of harmonising their various food safety, labour and environmental standards.<sup>9</sup> The more recent addition of a dedicated social standard, the 'GLOBALGAP Risk Assessment on Social Practice' (GRASP), allows supplier farms to be audited against a range of control points for on-farm 'social risks' – associated with employee rights, representation, and working conditions. GRASP, however, is a voluntary standard within GLOBALGAP, and compliance (or lack thereof) does not affect GLOBALGAP certification (see Heise and Uhlig, 2010). More specifically focused on social responsibility, but not exclusively targeting agriculture, the Business Social Compliance Initiative (BSCI) Code of Conduct is overseen by free-trade lobby the Foreign Trade Association. BSCI supports over 700 companies, including many food companies, in supply-chain monitoring and auditing against the BSCI Code. The code itself, like

other corporate codes discussed here, essentially integrates pre-existing ILO, UN and OECD conventions.

Several major standards integrate corporate and public sector initiatives, essentially extending public sector support to business self-regulation. In 2010 ISO added 'ISO 26000 Guidance on Social Responsibility' to its portfolio of over 19000 international standards. ISO 26000 is supposed to represent an international consensus on social responsibility and provides guidance for implementation of socially responsible practices within organizations. It is formulated deliberately as a 'soft' guidance document and not a certification standard like other important ISO standards. Also of particular significance in the landscape of high-level public-private initiatives is the 'United Nations Global Compact'. It also draws directly on basic UN and ILO principles and is specifically directed at corporate actors, 8,700 of which are currently signatories. Signatories are encouraged to address human rights and labour issues through the adoption of ten fundamental CSR principles.

#### *Multi-stakeholder Standards*

Multi-stakeholder standards (regions 6 and 7, Figure 1) emerging from interaction and bargaining between corporate and civil society actors and (less frequently) the state, are increasingly prominent in the agri-food sector. Multi-stakeholder VPSS have emerged out of the ongoing drive for legitimation on the part of *both* corporate and civil society schemes. A multi-stakeholder standard itself needs to have (and retain) legitimacy in the eyes of those party to it, or likely to join. But different actors demand different things in return for granting legitimacy, as Bernstein (2011, p. 28) notes: 'many global civil society organizations highly value accountability, participation, transparency and equity, while business actors may value efficiency, the rule of law, and fairness in the marketplace'. Despite their demands, these actors also require political legitimation from consumers, constituents and society at large, as they seek to 'scale-up' standards and embrace (and construct) mainstream markets for ethical products. Multi-stakeholder standards therefore tend towards consensus, balancing the legitimacy requirements of all parties.

Several notable examples of multi-stakeholder VPSS are relevant to agri-food system governance. While there are exceptions, most have emerged around particular agricultural commodities. Typically they incorporate actors from all stages of global agri-food chains, including farmers and rural workers (and their organizations), indigenous peoples, agribusinesses involved in primary production and processing, retailers, customers and consumers, and civil society actors. An increasingly common format for the governance of such standards is the 'round table' (Cheyns, 2011). The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), for example, has certified over 600 oil palm plantations, processors and traders, and consumer goods manufacturers under its 'Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Palm Oil Production'. The Round Table on Responsible Soy (RTRS) maintains the 'RTRS Standard for Responsible Soy Production' and the 'RTRS Chain of Custody Standard', which govern primary production and the global movement of soy and soy products. The Roundtable on Sustainable Biofuels (RSB) certifies 'socially, environmentally and economically sustainable' production of biomass and biofuels. Other similar initiatives include the Better Cotton Initiative, the Better Sugarcane (or Bonsucro) Initiative and associated production standard, and the 4C Association's '4C Code of Conduct' for the coffee sector. Apart from their multi-stakeholder character, these initiatives have in common a commodity focus and a tendency towards multiparty consensus. More explic-

itly concerned with trading relations, and not focused on any single commodity, is the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI). Established with support from the UK Government and the involvement of unions, companies and NGOs, ETI seeks to address poverty and vulnerability among workers and farmers engaged in the production of internationally traded consumer goods. The ETI 'Base Code and Principles of Implementation' is based on ILO labour codes, and has been adopted by over 70 corporate members, and major labour unions and NGOs.

### **The 'Effectiveness' of Voluntary Private Social Standards**

This section focuses on VPSS as outcomes of bargaining between multiple actors in the struggle to attain, retain and consolidate authority, and further their respective goals and interests. Here I follow others who have conceptualized authority as the product of power and legitimacy (Bernstein and Cashore, 2007; Fuchs and Kalfagianni, 2010; Bernstein, 2011). Actors' competition for power and legitimacy (and governing authority), and the role of private standards in this, may be informed by the Gramscian notion of hegemony as a 'congruence of material and ideological forces that enables a coalition of interests to maintain a dominant position in society' (Levy, 1997, p. 129). In this reading, hegemony is secured through 'material control over economic resources as well as ideological control over symbols, imagery and modes of thought' (ibid.). In considering the role and implications of VPSS in the globalizing agri-food system, I focus below on their 'effectiveness' in two senses. On the one hand, we might ask how far various VPSS effectively address the well-documented socially deleterious effects of globalizing capitalist agriculture. On the other hand, we might ask to what extent VPSS effectively obscure and elide power relations and conditions of production and exchange in the global agri-food system. In this framing, the question of effectiveness is clearly a political one. My aim here is not so much to draw concrete conclusions on the effectiveness of VPSS in either sense, but rather to juxtapose these questions, and problematize the role of VPSS in this context. This, it is argued, can highlight blind spots in the arguments of both proponents and critics of VPSS (and private sustainability standards more generally), and further illuminate the contested and political nature of private agri-food system governance.

#### *Material-Practical Effectiveness*

The material impacts of VPSS, and related initiatives like CSR and ethical sourcing, within the agri-food sector are difficult to ascertain. To begin with, at the core of many VPSS are requirements to comply with existing laws and international agreements. While private standards may improve compliance, their particular contribution (e.g. to combating forced labour) is not easily established – that is, the attribution of positive change to a particular standard is not straightforward. Moreover, different social standards may interact in unexpected ways, and pose important trade-offs. As Scoones (2009) warns, for example, efforts to foster resilient rural livelihoods in one place often create vulnerabilities elsewhere (see also Ellis, 2000). Ultimately, despite burgeoning literatures on agri-food standards and private governance, there is little knowledge of how far VPSS have gone towards addressing global social problems. As in the case of CSR (Prieto-Carrón et al., 2006; Blowfield, 2007), there is

a far greater understanding of (and considerably more research on) the implications of standards for firms and firm strategy than there is of the impacts on communities at which VPSS are ostensibly aimed.

The business case for ethical and socially responsible practices centres on assertions about their coupling with firm financial performance. Within the business and management literatures, arguments for and against CSR, for example, are almost exclusively concerned with how far CSR either detracts from competitiveness and undermines profitability or secures favourable social and political operating conditions in the mid- to long-term (see Carroll and Shabana, 2011, pp. 88–89). The substantive social impacts of private standards and similar initiatives are usually asserted through both the reporting of aggregated statistics on membership and suppliers, and showcasing ‘success stories’ of smallholder farmers integrated into global markets.

Agribusinesses frequently highlight the scope and scale of their operations in asserting positive impacts of their sourcing decisions. For example, Unilever sources and processes product valued at almost US\$30 billion annually, and supplies major retailers like Walmart, Kroger and Tesco. With its ‘Sustainable Living Plan’, it has committed to sourcing all of its agricultural raw materials ‘sustainably’ by 2020 and aims to link some 500 000 smallholders and small-scale distributors into supply chains under its ‘Sustainable Agriculture Code’. Kraft Foods purchased 50 000 tonnes of Rainforest Alliance certified coffee, 24 000 tonnes of Fairtrade sugar, and 19 000 tonnes of Fairtrade cocoa in 2010. Starbucks reports that farms certified under its C.A.F.E. Practices standards employed some 2.9 million workers over the period 2008–2010 (Starbucks Coffee and Conservation International, 2010).

The figures reported by many civil society and multi-stakeholder schemes are similarly impressive at face value. For example, Fairtrade International members label the produce of an estimated 1.2 million producers in 63 developing countries. Global sales of FLO-labelled products rose by 27 percent to reach US\$5.6 billion in 2010 (Fairtrade International, 2011a). Meanwhile IFOAM counts over 750 affiliates in 120 countries, and reports 1.8 million certified producers in 2010, while global sales of certified organics were valued at US\$59 billion. The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil has certified some 30 large-scale producers and 141 processing mills across the Asia-Pacific, Africa and Latin America, and reports 200 000 hectares under production by RSPO-certified smallholders. Social Accountability International (SAI) reports that in 2010 its SA8000 standard covered some 1.6 million workers employed at 2,700 facilities in 62 countries.

The expansion of these standards schemes is evident, yet they account for only a small proportion of global agricultural trade, and their actual material impact is unknown. Statistics on certified farms and farmers, suppliers and workers, under various private schemes provide a rough proxy for the scope and coverage of VPSS, but tell us very little about the integrity of the standards, the extent of monitoring and verification, or concrete benefits to farmers and workers. Similarly, sales of fair trade and organic products reflect the growth of these markets but reveal little about where power is concentrated, value is captured and rents are extracted along fair trade and organic commodity chains. These characteristics must be described empirically, and the expanding body of case-study research suggests that experiences are mixed, and benefits are not automatic or assured.

- Private standards serve as a neo-liberal tool (Busch and Bain, 2004; Blowfield and Dolan, 2008; Djama et al., 2011) by which powerful corporate actors, with

or without civil society collaboration, 'discipline' suppliers in the coordination of global supply chains. Even multi-stakeholder standards, which derive legitimacy from appeals to their inclusive and participatory nature, are often dominated by powerful corporate interests and/or NGOs (García-López and Arizpe, 2010; Cheyns, 2011; Ponte and Riisgaard, 2011). Insofar as standard-setting bodies tend to work within the global trading system and embrace free markets and South-to-North agri-food trade, they are almost certain to be co-opted and reproduce existing injustices. For example, fair trade certification may significantly increase returns to participating producers in developing countries, but this does little to address structural imbalances in global agri-food trade. This is reflected in the fact that of \$5.8 billion in Fairtrade sales in 2010, only 13% reached certified producers and workers (Fairtrade International, 2011b).

- Standards mostly originate in the global North, and embody values and norms of Northern consumers, NGOs and companies. Despite varying degrees of 'stakeholder engagement' and participation, the voices of developing country consumers and producers remain relatively marginalised. This is not to suggest that standards and standard-setting go completely uncontested. As a number of authors have noted, various corporate actors effectively negotiate and challenge prescribed standards (Fold, 2002; Campbell and Le Heron, 2007; Bain, 2010), while workers and farmers in developing countries also exercise agency in disrupting and adapting standards and standard-setting (Selwyn, 2007; Mutersbaugh and Lyon, 2009; Klooster, 2011). However, dominant private agri-food standards are controlled by Northern corporations and NGOs, and input by other actors is highly circumscribed.
- Though ostensibly voluntary, dominant standards may become de facto mandatory (Fox and Vorley, 2006), and pose insurmountable barriers to market access for different actors (Guthman, 2007; Fuchs et al., 2009; Reardon et al., 2009). GLOBALGAP is a prime example, having evolved into a prerequisite for European market access. The often prohibitive compliance costs create new patterns of inclusion and exclusion at different scales. Existing inequalities are exacerbated, as the firms and farms that are able to comply tend to be those that are already successful.
- There is arguably a necessary relationship between certified 'ethical' and 'non-ethical' production/consumption. As Guthman (2004, 2009) notes, it is the 'constructed scarcity' of ethical foods (constructed, that is, through product and process certification against specific standards) that enables extraction of economic rents, but also makes 'ethical foods' dependent upon the exclusion of, and differentiation from other 'non-ethical foods'. In this way, certification against VPSS and other standards of ethical production is an excludable service, and directly implicated in the perpetuation of 'non-ethical' practices. This confines certified ethical products to niche status (despite the 'mainstreaming' of certain ethical commodities) and, ultimately, constrains the expansion of fair trade, organic and ethical certification.
- Imperfect monitoring and enforcement of VPSS can allow various actors to persist with exploitative or unsustainable practices, and may even create unique opportunities for this type of behaviour (Challies and Murray, 2011). Where certified actors are able to get away with this – engaging in 'clean-washing' (Low and Davenport, 2005; Reynolds and Murray, 2007) – the ethicality and 'social sustainability' of entire supply chains can be compromised. This becomes

more likely as supply chains become more complex, and suppliers are further removed from standard setters. For the same reason that complex manufacturing chains are practically impossible to monitor in their entirety (Talbot, 2009), governance of agri-food chains becomes more problematic as we move from simple commodities to highly processed, multi-ingredient foods. Informal, seasonal, migrant and/or family labour (Barrientos and Dolan, 2006), and specific politico-cultural institutional structures (Pritchard et al., 2010) may also present governance challenges in South-to-North agri-food chains.

- Bargaining can lead to a weakening of standards over time, as pressure mounts to compromise and soften requirements in order to ‘scale up’ or ‘mainstream’ standards and recruit more and bigger firms (Bernstein and Cashore, 2007). This dilemma is reflected in the 2011 separation of Fair Trade USA from Fairtrade International as a result of the former’s stated need to make ‘more business-friendly decisions’, engage larger producers (particularly coffee estates), and boost sales (see WFTO, 2011). Of course multiparty bargaining does not *necessarily* lead to watered-down standards. The outcome of the process depends on the particular case and on the disposition and relative bargaining power of stakeholders.

In summary, evidence on the material impacts of VPSS is inconclusive. What seems clear, however, is that VPSS have as yet had very little impact in addressing major social issues and structural inequalities in the agri-food system. An accumulating body of case-study research reveals localized and uneven benefits, while the wider impacts of such standards schemes are less certain, and contradictory outcomes have created new patterns of exclusion and vulnerability. While this is probably unintended by those who promulgate private agri-food standards, standards can be (and are) imperfectly applied or hijacked and misused. Insofar as there is a gap between the presented or perceived realities, and the actual material realities of global agri-food production–consumption, sustainability standards and certification may be as much part of the problem as part of the solution. It is to the problem of a mismatch between what is implied by VPSS and what is actually achieved that we now turn.

#### *Ideational–Symbolic Effectiveness*

Private standards are pursued by certain actors for private gain. Indeed, the business rationale for voluntary social (and environmental) standards, and the basis on which they are actively promoted, is that sustainability ‘pays’. As discussed above, sustainable and ethical business practices can bring direct savings, create conditions conducive to business and command premium prices for certain products. But in addition to these direct benefits, pursuit of social responsibility, including the adoption of VPSS, serves to foster an image of benevolent corporate citizenship, and to legitimize firms (both individually, and categorically – as ‘the private sector’) as responsible social actors.

However, there is typically a gap between what corporate (and civil society) actors report or suggest the impacts of their activities to be, and what the impacts *actually* are. While this gap might reasonably be expected to be at its widest in the case of unverified firm-level codes, and at its narrowest in the case of audited multi-stakeholder standards, things are not so straightforward. Threat of consumer backlash, NGO scrutiny, and loss of brand value provides some disincentive for highly visible

firms (e.g. branded supermarkets and food companies) to deceive customers or contravene social norms. On the other hand, civil society and multi-stakeholder standards are not unproblematic, and the aims and demands of civil society actors cannot simply be assumed to align with social justice and sustainability (O’Laughlin, 2008). Yet despite mounting evidence of complications and contradictions with private sustainability standards, many hundreds of firms and thousands of their products, trade on the perceived integrity of prominent multi-stakeholder schemes.

The fact that VPSS *can* have positive local effects is vital to their ideational power. The extent to which VPSS can conceivably alleviate social problems such as poverty and injustice determines how useful they are for the discursive construction of responsibility and ethicality. That is, the perceived potential material effectiveness of VPSS is what makes them attractive to corporate actors, but they need not actually *be* effective to serve corporate ends. Much like with the notion of ‘triple bottom line’ accounting (Norman and MacDonald, 2004), the *idea* of social responsibility is more important than its real efficacy or lack thereof. This is the basis for corporate greenwashing, or clean-washing.

Multi-stakeholder standards are also implicated in the neo-liberal depoliticization of global problems and the forestalling of debate and contestation. Central to this is the role of consensus formation in multi-stakeholder standard setting. As VPSS seek to scale up and enrol more actors, a broadening of consensus generally occurs and, as consensus formation entails compromise, standards may be diluted. This is not a necessary outcome of consensus formation, but is likely where bargaining is shaped by underlying power imbalances, and prone to corporate capture. As Bernstein (2011, p. 43) concludes, this need not jeopardize the legitimacy of particular standards or actors: ‘There is no necessary relationship between legitimacy and solving the world’s environmental or social problems’.

The contradictory demands on corporate responsibility are highlighted by Blowfield and Murray (2008, p. 11): ‘on the one hand it must deal with [the fact that] capital, poverty and inequality are intertwined; on the other, it must promote capitalism as a solution to the key social and environmental issues of the age’. This mirrors the fundamental contradiction, described by Žižek (2011), inherent in the notion that (ethical) capitalism is capitalism’s own counter-agent, and evident in the ‘Starbucks logic’, which implies that consumers can counteract the negative impacts of their consumption by consuming products constructed as ‘ethical’. In this sense, while ethical production and consumption legitimates and validates Northern consumers, it disempowers Southern farmers and workers by putting their well-being into the hands of the ‘stewards of virtue’ (Blowfield and Dolan, 2008) among the consuming classes of the global North. The primary vehicle for securing social justice and sustainability becomes ‘ethical’ consumption.

### **Discussion and Conclusions: Limits to Voluntary Private Social Standards**

Insofar as they tend to be captured and put to work in the service of capital – in constructing corporate actors as ethical and responsible, in obscuring the realities of production and exchange in global agri-food, and thereby creating an illusion of progress (and progressiveness) while perpetuating the status quo – VPSS work against their stated goals. The case of global agri-food system governance provides some insight into this tendency, and into the limited transformative capacity of VPSS. Compared to other productive sectors, the agri-food sector provides examples of global

commodity chains that can be relatively well delineated and grasped (Talbot, 2009). It is not that these chains do not entail complex productive relations or institutional settings, for example, but rather that the actors and sites of production and exchange can be relatively clearly identified. The implementation, monitoring and verification of VPSS in agri-food tends to be most successful in cases of simple unprocessed or semi-processed products like fresh produce, coffee, cacao, cotton, sugar, etc. It is no coincidence that the most important fair trade products are sourced from such commodity chains, which also happen to involve mostly former colonial crops historically produced under highly exploitative conditions. Producers of these crops are of course deserving of respect and fair treatment, but such commodities are also ideal candidates for fair trade and ethical sourcing because their production under fair, socially sustainable conditions makes for a particularly compelling and saleable story. Basic agri-food chains are therefore particularly appealing to firms and standard setters looking to showcase their ethical sourcing and certification activities. In consuming the whole 'backstory' along with the final product, consumers are able to 'know' and 'virtually engage' (Lyon, 2006) with the producer and/or farmer beneficiaries of their consumption choice (although this acquaintance is almost always a one-way street).

The value of high-visibility fair trade or ethically sourced products is significant for large agri-food businesses. Companies such as Kraft Foods, Unilever and Nestlé boast dozens of brands and thousands of products, and engage hundreds of thousands of suppliers. While some of these firms have made apparently bold commitments to social and environmental sustainability, they can only hope to implement sustainable sourcing meaningfully in a few product lines. So when a company like Kraft Foods commits to sourcing all of its coffee from fair trade certified sources the implications are significant. Simply by virtue of the volumes sourced, many growers and rural communities should benefit directly and indirectly. But this should be seen in the context of the social impacts of the less-visible majority of a company's sourcing practices, and attention should be paid to just how far it lives up to its image of social responsibility.

The capture of VPSS by corporate interests proceeds unspectacularly through the on-going process of implicit and explicit bargaining among public, corporate and civil society actors. The reluctance of states to regulate capital, and their active intervention to facilitate markets and private authority, has bolstered the bargaining power of corporate actors in the negotiation of arrangements for governance beyond the state (Swyngedouw, 2005). Despite the momentum behind various social movements, and the not insignificant power of NGOs, multi-stakeholder standards tend to converge on consensus, which serves to depoliticize issues such as global poverty and inequality, restrict the bounds of legitimate action and discussion (Hajer, 1995), and preserve the 'ecological dominance' of capital over state and civil society (Jessop, 2000).

To address social and ecological crises in agriculture and food a fundamental transformation is required, away from the current industrial capitalist agri-food system and towards truly just and sustainable agri-food systems. This article has proposed that the value of agri-food VPSS should be assessed against their capacity to contribute to such a transformation. I have argued that while individual standards schemes have been shown to have positive local effects, VPSS at large do not appear to have the transformative capacity to support a fundamental shift due to their susceptibility to capture by corporate interests. Even where individual standards

retain integrity and resist co-option, the field as a whole faces a crisis of legitimacy, as high-profile 'success stories' and examples of 'corporate social responsibility' obscure the persistence and predominance of unethical and unsustainable corporate practice (Fox and Vorley, 2006).

The dilution of standards and the depoliticization of social and environmental problems as a result of bargaining and consensus-formation within multi-stakeholder initiatives means that now many of the high-profile 'roundtable' standards entail little more than obligations to comply with existing national laws and international agreements. That standards and certification are required to motivate corporate actors to comply with even basic human rights and environmental laws would seem to suggest that these actors cannot be relied upon to self-regulate in the interests of the common good. The trend towards corporate co-option of private sustainability standards highlights the realm of sustainability governance as one which should not be left to the market, but rather calls for regulation by strong democratic states.

Positive alternatives to agribusiness and global agri-food trade (and to globalizing capitalism more broadly) emerged from social movements like organic agriculture and fair trade. The rationalization, standardization, verification and auditing of these projects only became necessary as they themselves were lured into 'mainstream' markets and global trade. I suggest that insofar as a transformation away from unsustainable capitalist agriculture is necessary, and as sustainable alternatives will need to embrace social and ecological diversity, the value and utility of global private standards can and should be questioned.

## Notes

1. The point here is that the role of the state has been transformed rather than simply diminished. States remain powerful not least in their enforcement of neo-liberal policies.
2. Technical experts across various sectors and epistemic communities in the standard-setting profession (Murphy and Yates, 2011) have also driven demand for private governance (Busch, 2010; Büthe, 2010).
3. There are no reliable data on the number of companies that have adopted various types of voluntary standards, but the phenomenon is very widespread. There is also great diversity among such schemes, which range from outright 'greenwash' to relatively progressive codes of conduct.
4. The capacity of states to govern directly (through coercion and enforcement) is diminished at the transnational scale, where they, like civil society organizations, must rely more on persuasion, leadership and legitimation (Abbott and Snidal, 2009).
5. This even despite the significant body of scholarship on fair trade and CSR. The latter in particular appears to focus increasingly on environmental dimensions, as CSR is subtly reframed as 'corporate responsibility' or 'corporate citizenship'.
6. I adopt the broad definition of 'multi-stakeholder initiatives', provided by Fransen (2012, p. 116), as 'a universe of initiatives in which the expertise, skills and finance of non-profit and for-profit organizations are pooled'. I do not argue, however, that these necessarily have 'governance structures allowing for an equal possibility of input among the different partners in steering the initiative' (ibid.).
7. Figure 1 is based on Abbott and Snidal's (2009) 'governance triangle' framework. The approach taken here is somewhat simpler, in not differentiating between standards *within* regions of the diagram.
8. The foundational principles of organic agriculture as defined by IFOAM are health, ecology, fairness and care. Fairness, for example, is characterized by 'equity, respect, justice and stewardship of the shared world', and requires 'systems of production, distribution and trade that are open and equitable and account for real environmental and social costs' (IFOAM, 2005).
9. On the development of GLOBALGAP, see Campbell, 2005; Campbell and Le Heron, 2007; Bain, 2010.

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