BLUEPRINT PROJECT FOR SUSTAINABLE LANDSCAPES

Recommendations to Standard Systems on how to Function more Efficiently at the Landscape Level – executive summary

Oliver Bach

Mona McCord

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Three years of Blueprint development: landscape scope recommendations for VSS

Blueprint describes the sustainability status of municipalities with a combination of high-precision visual classification of land cover types, and interviews with a representative sample of local stakeholders to reflect the economic, social, and environmental reality on the ground. It illustrates sustainability challenges and flags opportunities from the perspective of the inhabitants of a territory.

Blueprint was piloted in the Zona Bananera municipality in Colombia. The region is dominated by banana and oil palm plantations that cover more than 70% of the territory's area of which most is certified by a VSS system. At the same time, 83.3% of its inhabitants suffer from poverty[1] in comparison to 69,7% at the department level and 49% at the national level. High incidence of illiteracy and deficient access to basic infrastructure also plague the municipality.

Based on the results of the pilot test, the Blueprint project team recognized a disconnect between the potential of the VSS to generate significant environmental, economic, and social benefits to the community and the less than desirable results at the ground level. The reality in Zona Bananera municipality emphasizes the need for a stronger sustainability approach: a combination of certification and beyond certification methods to describe the socio-environmental reality of an agriculture landscape as a much more transparent picture and reality analysis for actionable steps towards a more sustainable and resilient territory. VSS systems alone have not significantly progressed to demonstrate their capacity to develop new, credible evaluation or monitoring methods suitable for different territorial scales.

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[1] Colombia Muti-Dimensional Poverty Index (2015)

With that, the Blueprint team has five recommendations for combining certification and beyond certification approaches for more impactful results at the landscape level:

Democratize data sharing for community well-being

Currently VSS systems are set up in a way that data is concentrated at the multi-national level, and decisions about which sustainability problems to solve and how to solve them is concentrated with a few organizations. To create a counterbalancing democratizing force, stakeholders on the ground should be consulted to draw an accurate picture of the sustainability challenges within a territory and how to solve them. This entails:

- Talking to local stakeholders in the communities – outside the farm or plantation workplace – to describe the social context in terms of security, income levels, human rights, local governance, and access to basic needs, such as education, health services, clean water, housing with good energy supply and recollection services for domestic residues.

Recognize the farm as an integrated element of the landscape

One way to connect changes at the farm level with landscape impacts is the choice of a trustful land use cover analysis that can reflect changes at the live fence or riparian forest level and distinguishes forests from man-made vegetation canopies of banana or palm monocultures. An analysis of satellite images should always be accompanied by verification of some land use cover types in the field. The Blueprint team recommends the following GIS method:

- Interpretation of the surrounding landscape's land use types with GIS analysis based on a trusted methodology of 1:5000 or 1:10000 visual classification of high-resolution satellite images based on Corine Land Cover – due to its numerous land use types; 61 for Colombia - and combined with field verification (see *GIS land cover type analysis for Zona Bananera.pdf* and *Landuse Cover Report for Zona Bananera and comparison of two scales August 2021.pdf* at the Blueprint dashboard library).

Develop a stakeholder engagement plan that includes social interviewing techniques

To be able to draw a transparent picture of the socio-economic and local governance situation of a territory where monoculture plantation exert influence, the following is recommended:

- Relationships of trust with local stakeholders need to be built, either through a series of meetings or walking them calmly through a structured dialogue. Depending on the stakeholder, different social interviewing techniques may need to be applied to accommodate the perspective of women and Indigenous people.
- Instead of long checklists, a well-structured survey that prioritizes socio-cultural dimensions should be applied. Dedicate the available time to discuss these issues rather than running through a long list of items. The dialogue should last one hour at maximum to reduce the fatigue of the interviewee.

Conduct root cause analyses

SAN also recommends analyzing root causes of the sustainability status in focus groups with community leaders and local stakeholders. A root cause analysis (RCA) is a method of problem solving used for identifying the root causes of faults or problems. A factor is considered a root cause if removal thereof from the problem-fault-sequence prevents the final undesirable outcome from recurring; whereas a causal factor is one that affects an event's outcome but is not a root cause. Though removing a causal factor can benefit an outcome, it does not prevent its recurrence with certainty. A root cause is defined as "the conditions that enable one or more causes".

Develop sustainability standards from the bottom-up

Standard frameworks and principles have traditionally been developed top down and agreed upon by committees that work out of meeting rooms of the North. To develop standards and to design evaluation systems that are backed up by standard users, VSS need to fully apply participatory stakeholder consultations. This means that standard drafts are not written out of a desk and then presented to stakeholders to receive their feedback, but instead involving standard users (operations, workers, local stakeholders) from its very start, respecting their point of views, challenges, and needs. Developing standards together in a collaborative way with its main users has the potential to be the new imperative of collaborative system building for sustainability. Participatory consultations for collaborative standard development would include a mix of cost-effective 1st, 2nd and 3rd party assessment elements to describe the socio-environmental local reality.

Conclusion: encouraging VSS to move outside the box

This implies that the community of VSS and certification systems needs to significantly go beyond their traditional way of thinking and acting.

SAN suggests the following principles that can guide VSS towards a more impactful system change:

1. **Work bottom-up:** participation and leadership by local stakeholders is key for VSS' landscape impacts and they should run it with support from qualified organizations. To truly benefit standard users, standards need to be developed from bottom-up and with truly participatory stakeholder involvement approaches.

2. **Be collaborative:** engage with other value chain stakeholders.

3. **Cost-effectiveness:** design for optimum resource dedication for the benefits of producers and other local stakeholders that influence the targeted territory. Focus on a few key items. Abandon long checklists.

4. **Transparency:** accurately detect the situation on the ground through quality engagement methods, such as participatory monitoring and appreciative inquiry approaches. Include stakeholders of the surrounding landscape for a social background analysis.

5. **Human approach:** Stop operations to express fear to lose a certificate. In a human world of continuous improvement, tolerance, and respect there is nothing to hide. Fallbacks via majeur force, such as extreme climatic events, market price drops or worker shortages are part of the reality.

6. **Transformation:** Transparency is the condition for transformation and is linked to value-drivenness, bottom-up approaches and stakeholder buy-in. The results of root-cause analysis need to form the baseline for sustainability action plans and monitoring progress.

7. **Assessment mix:** Apply a cost-efficient mix of first, second- and third-party assessments. Training local stakeholders on participatory first- and second-party assessments is key to report progress, impacts and fallbacks with a higher frequency.

8. **Effective communication about sustainable sourcing regions:** transparently communicate in an understandable way to market players and consumers that a particular product originates from a region that has embraced sustainable production.