

# Techno-Political Perspectives on Sustainability Standards: Seeking Autonomy in Global Supply Chains

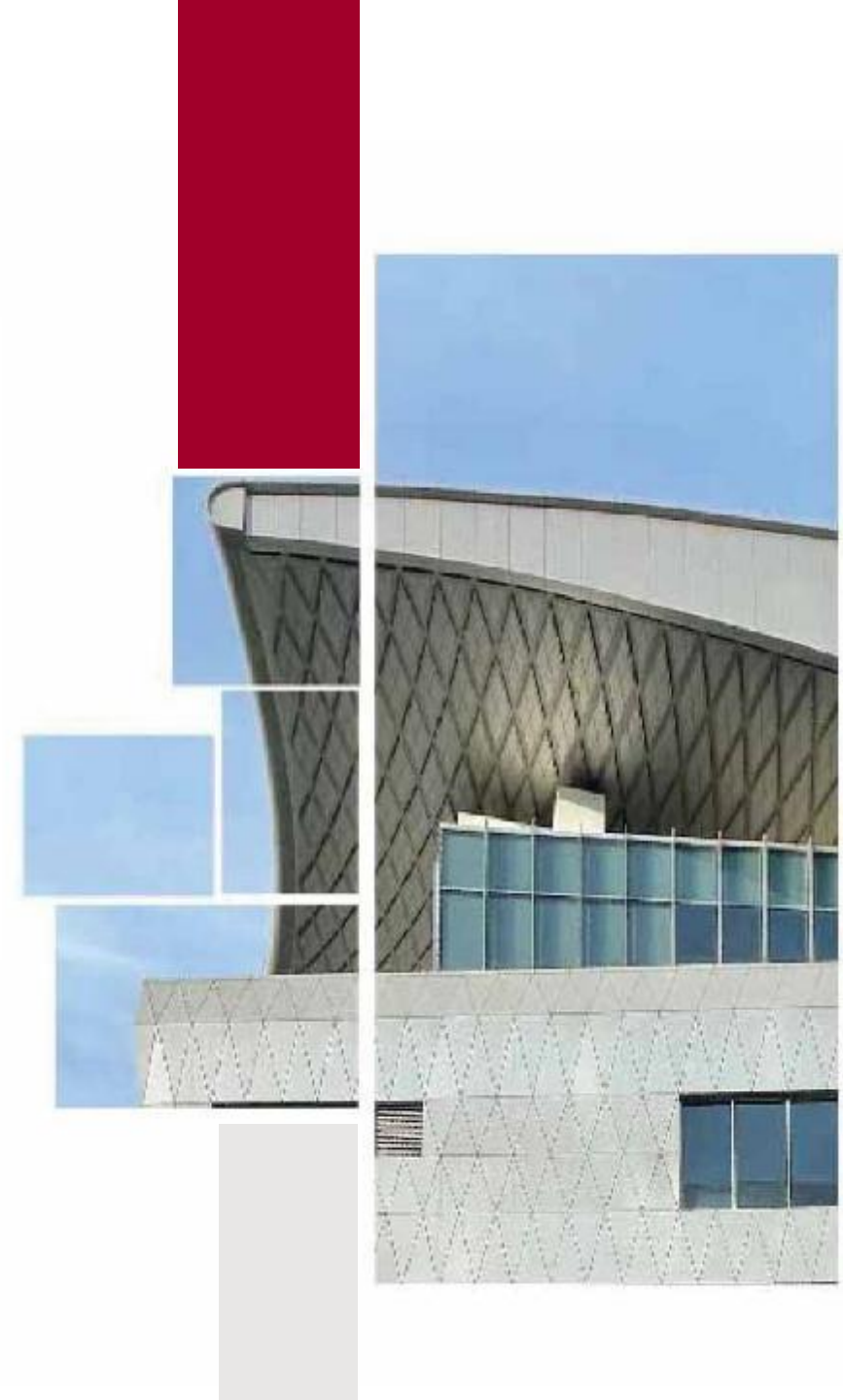
**GS1 Malaysia Summit 2025**

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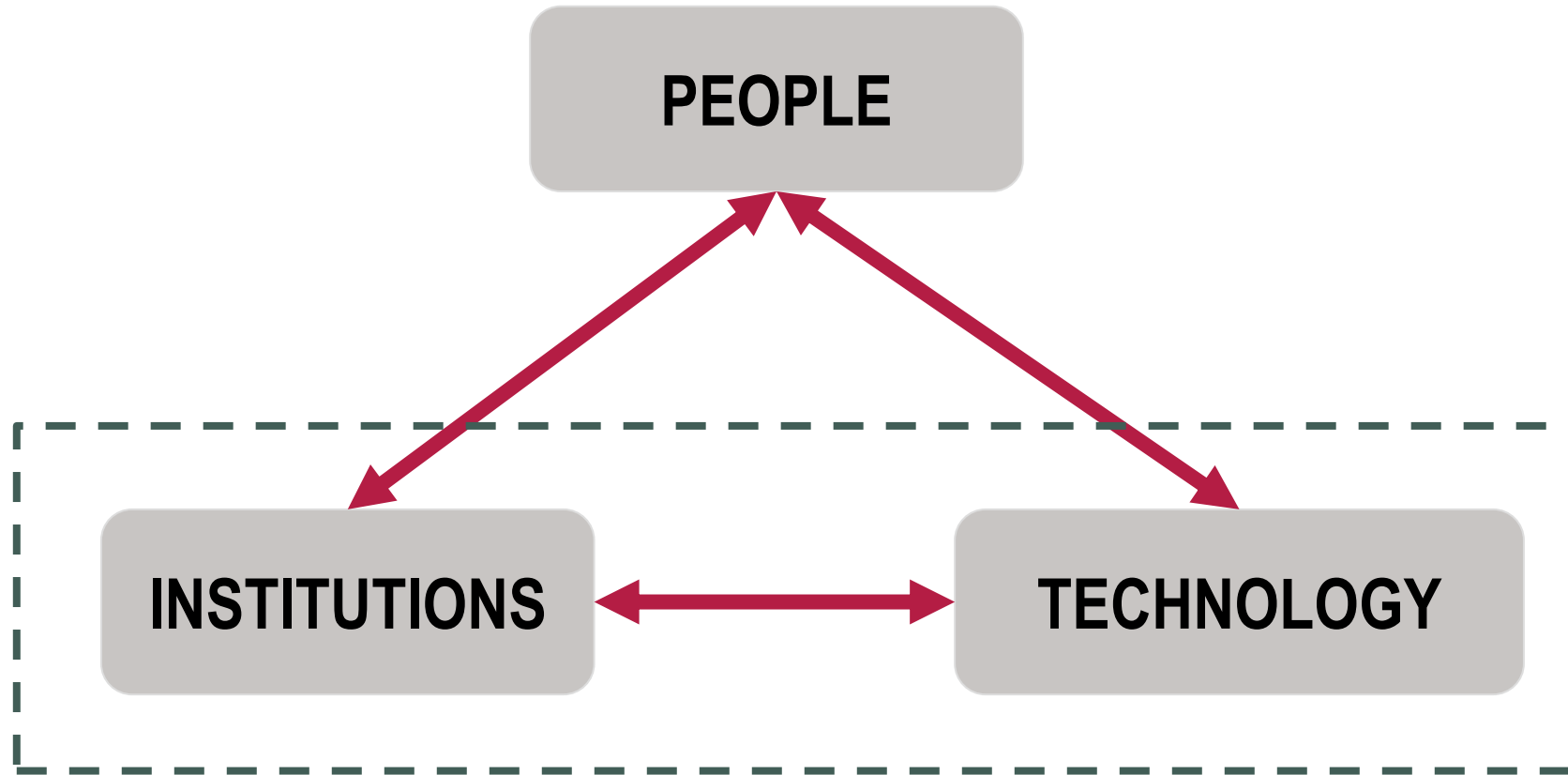
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# Techno-politics



# Voluntary Standards for Agriculture & Forestry

A&B



# Voluntary Sustainability Standards



VOLUNTARY SUSTAINABILITY STANDARDS are a **form of governance**:

“Governance comprises the means used to **influence behavior**, the **production** of resources, and the **distribution** of resources,”  
(Davis et al., 2012, p. 78).

“To govern, in this sense, is to **structure the possible field of action of others**” (Foucault, 1983, p. 221).

VOLUNTARY SUSTAINABILITY STANDARDS fill a  
“**governance void**” (Rasche, 2012, p. 679) **(un)intentionally** created by a  
lack of international/multilateral collaboration.

# Governmentality



“**Governmentality**” is the phenomenon of “techniques and tactics of domination”(Foucault, 1980, p. 102) being **extended to other social settings** (Foucault, 1983;Hunt & Wickham, 1994)

“Whereas in earlier power/knowledge regimes were associated with the exercise of power by specific actors in specific types of institution (e.g. the courts, prison, the military,schools), under neoliberalism they have (also) **permeated other aspects of everyday life.**” Schweber (2017, p. 295)

# Expanding Supply Chain Governmentality

Basic health and safety standards

→ **sustainability, human rights, ESG standards**

Tax and labor standard audits

→ **international certifications and supplier audits**

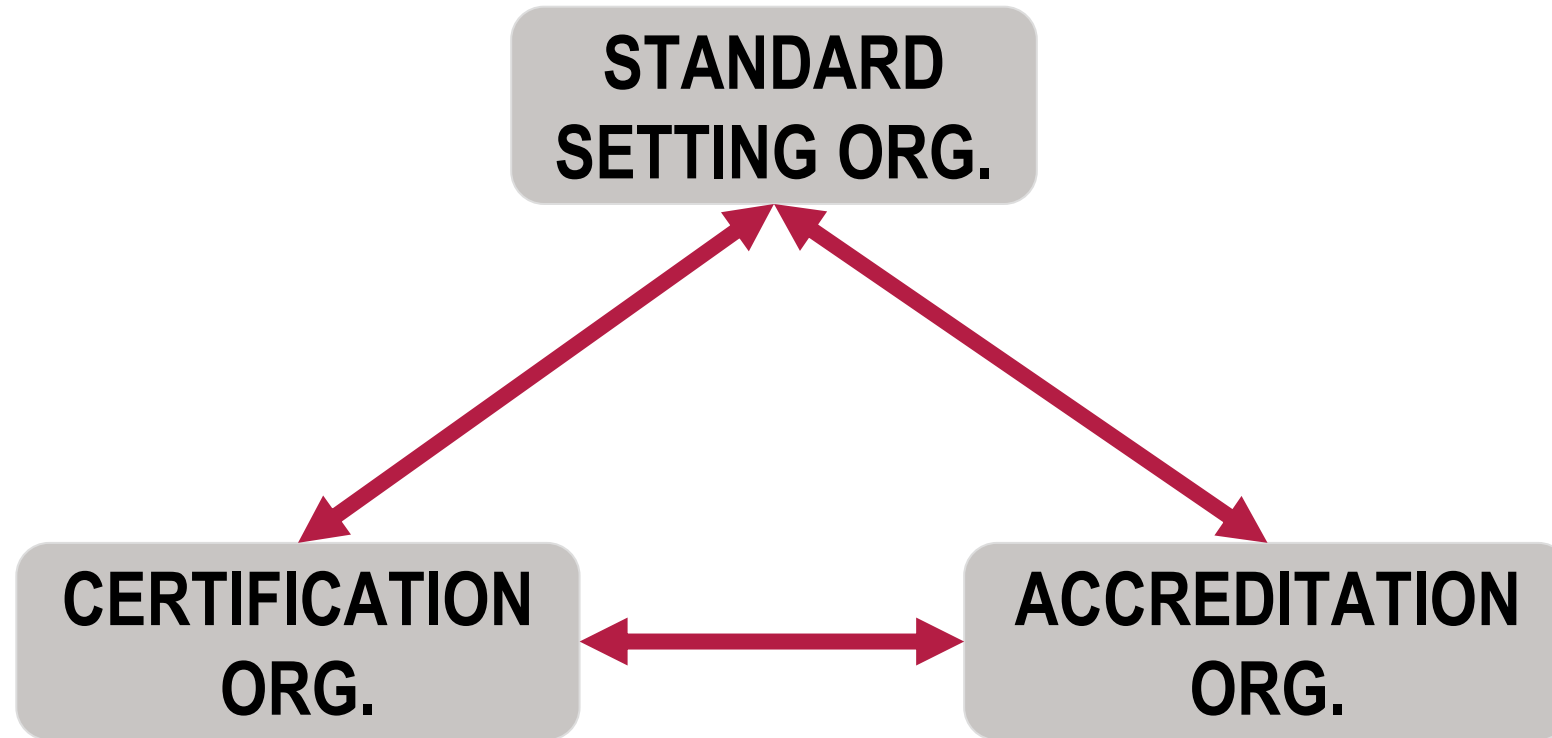
Shipping manifests, customs records

→ **globally traceable supply chains (EUDR)**

Government policy lending

→ **sustainable finance taxonomies**

# Tripartite Standards Regime (TSR)



# Impact of Tripartite Standard Regimes



TSRs tend to create **closed standards** (Christensen et al., 2017)

Emergence of epistemic communities or ‘**social worlds**’ with shared beliefs and values, which include some but **exclude others** (Bowker & Star, 2000; Schweber, 2017).

“**often taken for granted** calculations contained in standards and techniques serve to filter, rank, distinguish and **reward particular arrangements** over others, with potentially significant implications for the effect of the techniques in which they are embedded.”(Schweber, 2017, p. 295)

# Example of Sustainable Palm Oil

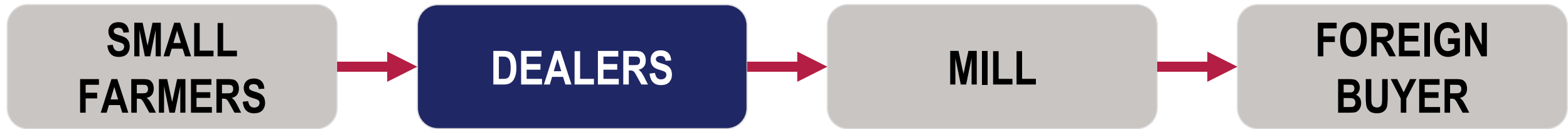


RSPO standard shaped by **large corporate interests** (producers and buyers) supported by NGOs and academics – standards are challenging for **small farmers** (Hidayat et al., 2015; Ogahara et al., 2022).

Malaysian small farmers and the EUDR:

“As **dealers are not certified** and as they are not required to pass relevant information on the area of FFB production to the mill, tracing palm oil back to the plot of land on where FFBs were cultivated is not possible. Additionally, the **smallholders and mills that dealers transact with can change frequently, further complicating the situation.**” (MSPO and EFI, 2024, p. 21)

# Agricultural Commodity Supply Chain



# Small Farmer Dilemma

Do cause deforestation (biodiversity loss; GHG emissions)  
→ lands sometimes acquired by large firms later on

Lower yields, marginal producers, low value capture

Sometimes high dependence on large suppliers or dealers:  
are they really independent?

Less monitoring and enforcement

Maybe exclusion from (some) international markets is OK?

# Seeking Autonomy



**Pro-Active Domestic/Regional Standard Development:** appears to occur in sustainable finance (ASEAN Capital Markets Forum), palm oil (MSPO)  
→ *national contestation of global standards*

**Co-regulation:** regulator sets goals, engages regulated parties on how to design systems/processes to achieve them (Rouvière & Caswell, 2012)  
→ *many regulatory breaches are unintentional*

**Blockchain/IoT:** potential of open, transparent and decentralized reporting, traceability and verification  
→ *can we have decentralized certification and standards?*

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# Thank you!

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