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## Co-constructing sustainability: Agencing sustainable coffee farmers in Uganda

Winfred Ikiring Onyas, Morven McEachern, Annmarie Ryan

### Synopsis

This article explores the sustainability initiatives undertaken in a non-certified market involving an indigenous Southern firm and smallholder coffee farmers in Uganda. In response to recent calls, we take a performative approach to sustainability and employ an agencing lens to ask the question: how are sustainable coffee farmers constituted in concrete situations, and what role do they play in co-constructing sustainability? The ethnographic study undertaken reveals the proactive and interactive participation of farmers in co-constructing sustainability. Also unveiled, are the continuous and iteratively emergent agencing processes involving firms, farmers, and market devices, which collectively create variably-agenced sustainable farmers who perform diverse versions of sustainability.

failing to account for micro level, context-specific concerns of actors (Warner, 2007; Loconto and Simbua, 2012; Doherty and Huybrechts, 2013). This scrutiny has led to recent calls for a more performative definition of sustainability (Melo and Hollander, 2013; Loconto, 2014), which accounts for a more situated explanation of sustainability and its achievement. Furthermore, while over 60% of world coffee production is sold from non-verified or non-certified sources (Levy, Reinecke and Manning, 2015), a disproportionate level of research has been given to understanding formal fair trade and organic certification within the coffee industry (Lyon and Moberg, 2010; Reinecke, Manning and von Hagen, 2012; Tallontire and Nelson, 2013). This has led to a shortage of evidence concerning the route towards a more sustainable global coffee value chain outside of the certified coffee market (Kolk, 2013).

### Introduction and Background

This paper is concerned with the achievement of sustainable coffee value chains and the role that upstream actors play in this regard. The coffee market is important because it is one of the largest commodity markets (Ponte, 2002) involving over 25 million smallholders, yet many of them struggle to make a living from coffee (Fairtrade, 2017; Mojo, Fischer and Degefa, 2017). At the same time, it also generates a significant amount of waste material both as solids (i.e. coffee pulp) and liquids (i.e. processing effluent), thus negatively impacting on ground/surface water pollution and river eco-systems via leaching and run-off (Kebede et al., 2010). Therefore, the goal of achieving a sustainable coffee sector is important for both planet and producers.

### Issues and Questions Considered

Building on the work of Vorley, del Pozo-Vergnes and Barnett (2012), we focus on the initiatives of a Southern-based entrepreneur with a vision to bring about a distinctive version of a sustainable coffee market. From this perspective, we consider the efforts of an indigenous Ugandan roaster and exporter of coffee, involving farmers in South Western Uganda and reflect upon the active role of smallholder coffee farmers in co-constructing sustainability, which also works for them. Specifically, this emerges in a distinctive version of sustainable farming that balances between environmental, social and economic concerns, but with farmers gaining greater control over their own economic livelihoods. In doing so, we draw from the insights and experiences of farmers to explore how they negotiate with, transform, and ultimately construct a distinctive version of sustainability which responds to societal expectations.

Conventional research on sustainability has come under increased scrutiny for

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We advance similar approaches taken in rural studies (see for example Konefal and Hatanaka, 2011) to reveal the iterative processes unfolding in the co-construction of sustainability; and also, to develop the research on agencements (see Le Velly and Dufeu, 2016 for a more extensive discussion), by illuminating the ongoing efforts to reshape 'sustainability agencements' through agencing processes. In this paper, we conceive the achievement of sustainability agencements as dependent on the realization of an actor-network to perform sustainable farming practices. We follow Cochoy (2014) in conceiving this actor-network as an agencement – a composite consisting of heterogeneous elements including humans, and material and technical devices which flexibly adjust to one another and act collectively (Çalışkan and Callon, 2010: 9). Specifically, our study focuses on the 'agencing' action which affords agency by "'setting-up', arranging, or combining a set of given elements" within the agencement (Cochoy, 2014: 117). Perceived as "strategies for realising sought-after economic agencies" (Callon (2008) as cited by Araujo and Kjellberg 2009: 201), we consider agencing as contributing to create 'agenced sustainable farmers' who then can perform sustainability. Moreover, agencing, through the collective effort of heterogeneous actors, sets processes in motion (Cochoy, 2014; Cochoy, Trompette and Araujo, 2016) which equip farmers to construct sustainability. Hence, this study uses the agencing lens to explain how 'sustainable' coffee farmers are constituted in concrete situations, and what role these farmers play in co-constructing sustainability.

## Methodology

This study adopts a market studies approach, which considers action as enacted through a network of attachments, without which actors would cease to exist (Latour, 2005). Drawing from Callon (1986) and Latour (2005), we trace the practices of the actors, to learn from them how they define their identities, actions, and the range of choices open to them; and how they define and associate different elements to construct and explain their world. Conducted in July and August 2010, the field research investigated the everyday coffee production and exchange practices of participants. We specifically examined the sustainability initiatives introduced by the firm including the formation of Producer Organizations (POs) and Saving and Credit Cooperatives (SACCOs) which collectively sought to achieve 'community empowerment' and 'sustainable projects' targeting farmers. We examine how these initiatives contribute to construct and to create durable interactions/connections between farmers and an indigenous coffee exporting firm.

## Outcomes and Findings

This study showcases the greater level of cooperation and integration between sustainability partners (Jaffee, 2007; Warner, 2007; Vurro et al., 2009; Le Velly and Dufeu,

2016) – the firm and the farmers in this case. However, it also illuminates the role of market devices in mediating the relationship between partners and equipping the targeted actors (farmers) to participate in co-constructing sustainability. Contrasting Wilson's (2010) findings on Fair Trade as unprofitable to Nicaraguan farmers, this study demonstrates that, with a degree of autonomy, farmers can creatively shape a form of sustainability which is beneficial (and sometimes profitable) to them. The farmers can take control over their saving practices within the frameworks of initiatives provided by sustainability firms. Moreover, agenced farmers can "patch things together" (Wilson, 2010: 85) when faced with scarce resources (cash), price uncertainties, and information asymmetries. Although co-operation has been foregrounded as central in achieving sustainability (see Mojo, Fischer and Degefa, 2017), the emphasis has been on human actors and organizations, thus, ignoring the role of intermediary devices. Hence, we portray smallholder farmers as reflexive actors, learning and relearning from their experiences (in using the market devices, for example) in order to make things work. As Boersma (2009: 52) remarks, this more reflexive understanding of so-called 'poor and marginalized' actors is crucial in developing a "fairer and more humane" (sustainability) market.

In the absence of the global market's over-reliance on mainstream actors which largely operate top-down Third-Party Certification approaches to sustainability goal-setting (e.g. as critiqued by Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002; Reynolds et al., 2007; Reinecke et al., 2012; Levy et al., 2015), the firm (and its actor-network) employs localized farmer-agencing efforts to address the aforementioned limitations of international certification schemes. Although the farmers involved are in pursuit of more environmentally sustainable practices akin to organic certification. It is the localized approach, combining top-down and local initiatives, that helps to realize a more dynamic and co-constructed version of sustainability. This will potentially boost greater smallholder, farmer-involvement in negotiating and/or setting sustainability goals. Thus, leading to a fairer and more sustainable global coffee value chain.

Contributing to the emerging research on agencing, this article illuminates the processes of transforming the agency of actors as interactively and iteratively emergent. Thus, there is no distinction between the 'agencor' and the 'agenced', as all actors involved are continuously transformed through the agencing process (which in our case is the action involved in equipping farmers to save and to calculate). The 'unagenced' actors stand out, as they simply observe, or are in the process of trialling sustainability mechanisms. Future research could look into the entire timeline in tracing the agencing process (Hagberg, 2016), as in this study we have only provided a snapshot of the process.

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Title: Local conditions and economic growth from South-South FDI

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