Smallholder inclusiveness of voluntary sustainability standards

Our work for the Roundtable on Sustainable Biomaterials (RSB)

Background
The Roundtable on Sustainable Biomaterials (RSB) is an international initiative with the goal to develop sustainability standards for biomaterial production. Its current Standard (version 2.0) is valid for all type of producers of biomaterials. In recognition that smallholders may need specific provisions or they risk to be are excluded from the sustainable biomaterial markets, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL), the founder and former host of RSB, awarded Aidenvironment the assignment to adapt specific parts of the RSB system to small-scale feedstock producers in developing countries.

Barriers to smallholder certification
Smallholders can have various barriers to certification. Smallholders may have difficulties in understanding system requirements or lack the technical capacity to comply them. Hence, there is a need to develop a system which is easy to understand with sufficient guidance and possible capacity building efforts.

The inapplicability of some standard requirements in a smallholder context can create confusion and unnecessary barriers. Hence, there is a need to develop smallholder relevant requirements.

Another constraint are the costs involved in certification (e.g. complying with standards, membership fees and costs for audits) in combination with uncertain or limited direct benefits, such as increased market access and financial premiums. This results in a weak business case for certification. Hence, there is a need to develop a system that is not too expensive and that offers sufficient incentives, either direct or indirect, for example via improved farming skills. One way to reduce costs is to allow group certification, in which groups of smallholders can share certain costs and reach a certain scale of operation.

Proposed RSB Smallholder System
In order to create a smallholder inclusive system, Aidenvironment proposed to reduce the number of documents, online tools and necessary assessments that apply to smallholder certification. The RSB Smallholder System could be built around a smallholder interpretation of the RSB Principles & Criteria and a group certification standard, with specific smallholder guidelines and guidance (e.g. offline GHG Tool and Simplified Social and Environmental Impact Assessment). In addition, specific audit requirements need to be developed for the evaluation on smallholders.

Figure: Proposed changes in RSB system

RSB Principles and Criteria for Smallholder Groups
The smallholder interpretation of the RSB Principles & Criteria has been developed based upon a review of the existing P&C in terms of applicability in a smallholder context. The revised requirements have a clear scope and simple formulation and are accompanied with additional guidance. We have tested versions of the standard in South Africa, Burkina Faso, Indonesia, India, and Brazil.

An important feature in this revised standard is a clear distinction between what is required by the group management and group members. The group management is expected to assure awareness-raising and support activities to group members where
necessary on specific requirements. The group members need to comply with certain requirements at farm or individual plot level. Another feature we introduced is a **stepwise approach** allowing a group to become fully compliant with the Standard within 2 years after the initial audit. This phased approach lowers the entry barrier of certification to smallholders, allowing them to stagger investments over time.

In addition to biomaterial feedstock production, the scope of the group standard has been elaborated to micro and small-scale feedstock processing and biomaterial production facilities that are part of the group. These facilities have separate criteria.

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**Proposed definition of smallholders**

In support of creating more consistency in defining smallholders in a global and multi-feedstock context, the following approach has been developed:

- **Basic requirement**: Smallholders should be responsible for plot management.
- **Priority criterion**: Existing national (or sub-national) definition defined in law, if there is any in prospective country.
- **Secondary criterion**: If there is no legal definition, and smallholders produce timber, Non-Timber Forest Products, soybeans or oil palm, the definitions defined by FSC, RTRS, and RSPO are applicable.
- **Default criterion**: If criteria 2 or 3 are not existent or non-applicable, a combination of criteria would apply regarding technological level, labor input, capacity and scale of operations (based upon IFOAM criteria).

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**RSB Smallholder Group Certification Standard**

The Group Certification Standard describes the requirements with regard to group management. Largely based upon the ISEAL Alliance Common Requirements for the Certification of Producer Groups, it defines the rules for group management, group membership, internal management, internal inspections, continuous improvement, record keeping, chain of custody requirements and communication & claims. It includes a risk based internal inspection system. Separate chain of custody requirements have been included for trade and/or processing of biomaterial feedstock, to make the standard applicable to different types of groups, such as trader networks or factory supply networks.

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**Other recommendations**

To further promote the inclusion of smallholders, the following strategies could be relevant to the RSB and other voluntary certification systems (VSS):

- **To individual VSS**
  - Development of national interpretations & translations.
  - Increase added value by including economic aspects in standards (e.g. good agricultural practices).
  - Reduce assurance costs by introducing risk-based approaches and alternative assurance methods (e.g. area-based/community level approaches, satellite images, and metrics based systems).
  - Develop a smallholder specific certification claim.
  - Facilitate market linkages between smallholders and buyers to promote maximum uptake.

- **Between VSS**
  - Promote mutual recognition and joint audits.
  - Harmonization of assurance and chain of custody systems.

- **Between VSS and other instruments**
  - Develop national platforms to create commitment with national stakeholders to invest in smallholder certification.
  - Create partnerships that build the capacity of smallholders and finance their certification efforts.

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**Interested to know more?**

Look at the EPFL website or contact:

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*Picture: Landscape of diversified small-scale farming*