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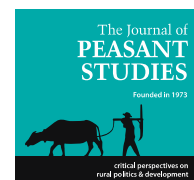
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The Contradictions of Corporate Water Stewardship Certification

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The Contradictions of Corporate Water Stewardship Certification

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Abstract

During the last twenty years the value of export of agricultural products has quadrupled (FAOSTAT, 2015). Agricultural production for export has negatively impacted the environment in many places. Irrigated agriculture led to depletion and contamination of surface and groundwater bodies. In a response to this, global retailers and agribusiness companies have developed water stewardship standards, mostly as part of existing corporate social responsibility schemes (Waldman and Kerr, 2014). Examples are GlobalGAP, Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), the Round Table on Sustainable Biofuels (RTSB) and the Round Table on Responsible Soy (RTRS). Most products that are produced for the US or European market have one or more certificates. Most standards regard more “efficient” water use as the solution, and therefore often require producers to use drip irrigation. Other water stewardship criteria consider groundwater depletion or water accounting (Vos and Boelens, 2014). The standards are mostly set and monitored by private companies from the Global North. These standards are mostly not effectively monitored (Hazelton, 2014). Nevertheless, the criteria deprive smallholders from export possibilities, because they cannot afford the certification, nor the investment in technology like drip irrigation; or because they are using water from an aquifer that is being depleted. At the same time drip irrigation does not save water, but increases water use and concentrates water use rights in the hands of large multinational agribusiness companies. The hegemonic technocratic discourse about “efficiency” reinforces the neoliberal imaginaries that foment and legitimize national policies that allow and encourage accumulation by large scale agriculture. Alternative imaginaries of small scale agriculture for local food sovereignty, income distribution, and local democratic decision making are not reflected in the global water stewardship standards. Thus, three major contradictions are highlighted in the paper: (1) the standards are a reaction to environmental concerns related to large scale agriculture, but legitimize water depletion and contamination, (2) the environmental labelling of products is based on an idea of “consumer influence”, but reinforce the hegemonic power of the major retailers and agribusinesses, and (3) standards claim a more moral and ethical production, but reinforce an universalistic technocratic discourse about “efficiency”.

Introduction

Trade of agricultural commodities and fresh products has increased enormously during the past two decades. Especially the export of soy from South America to China and India has increased, but also for instance fresh fruits and vegetables from the Global South to the Europe and the USA has boomed. Free trade agreements and other neo-liberal politics, together with changing consumption patterns and increased purchasing power of consumers have quadrupled the export of agricultural products worldwide (see Figure 1).

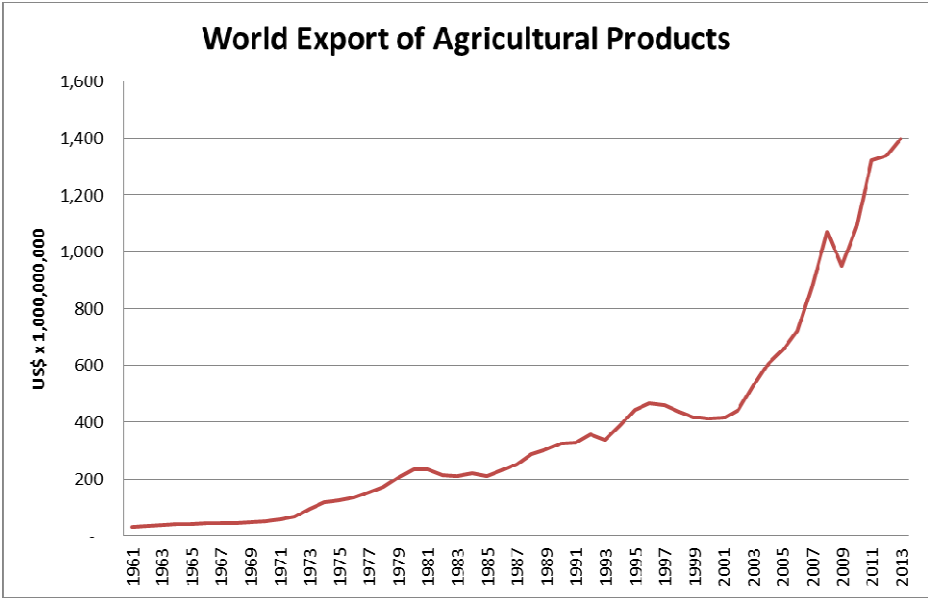


Figure 1: World export of agricultural products. Source: FAO STAT, 2016

The increase of agricultural production and export has led to depletion of natural resources and environmental destruction. However, also social and economic relations have changed. Common property and labour has been incorporated in commodity chains, and agribusiness and retailer companies have gained power.

One of the natural resources affected is water. Rivers and aquifers are being depleted and contaminated. Many rivers do not reach the ocean any more. At the same time environmental movements protested against the disappearance of the rivers and consumers are increasingly aware of the negative impacts the production of the products they purchase.

Multinational agribusiness and retailer companies have responded to the water problems and environmental protests. On the one hand those companies have increased their control over the water resources and implemented conservation measures to ensure sufficient and guaranteed supply for their industry and prevent environmental disasters that might cause reputational damage through media coverage. On the other hand they set up 'corporate social responsibility' measures to show their 'green' image increasing their acceptance with critical consumers and conquer 'niche markets'.

A recent phenomenon are the water stewardship standards. Some agribusiness companies developed their own standards for sustainable farming, including criteria to protect water sources. Major food companies now include 'environmental accounting', including water use efficiency improvements, to their annual reports. Most retailers have included water stewardship criteria in their standards for fresh product. However, also NGOs, development and environmental organizations, and round-table organizations have developed water stewardship criteria (Vos and Boelens, 2014; Waldman and Kerr, 2014).

Doubts have been expressed about the effectiveness of water stewardship certification (Hazelton, 2014). The criteria are too vague or difficult to apply to complex hydrological situations, and the monitoring might be deficient. Certification might also exclude smallholders from the export market because they cannot afford the certification.

In this paper also another aspect is highlighted: the influence of the global business elite on the global discourses norms on 'efficient' and 'sustainable' water use. The neo-Gramscian concept of cultural hegemony, related to three pillars of power: material, institutional and ideological, is used to scrutinize the practices and effects of water stewardship certification. The cultural hegemony of the agribusiness, food and retailer companies is reinforced by the new 'green speech'. The proclaimed 'efficient' and 'green' production might also increase market share.

However, three main contradictions emerge from looking at water stewardship certification through the lens of cultural hegemony: (1) the water stewardship certification is a reaction to environmental concerns, but legitimize (through cultural hegemony) and do not stop capital accumulation by those companies through water depletion and contamination; (2) the water stewardship certification allures to 'consumer choice' and protection of local communities, but the standards are defined and monitored by a small group of powerful men from transnational companies; and (3) the water stewardship certification universalizes notions of 'efficiency', 'sustainability', 'green production', etc., while local realities are complex and locally defined values, problems and solutions for water governance call for specific and negotiated solutions.

1 Analytical Framework

The corporate water stewardship standards, certification and discourses can be regarded as a form of 'cultural hegemony'. The dominant water culture spread by the water stewardship narrative includes the beliefs, accepted knowledge, perceptions, values and norms related to water use. Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) developed the theory of cultural hegemony in the context of the communist struggle in Fascist Italy to understand why the communist revolution did not take place like it did in Russia (Gramsci, 1971). However, the idea that a national or global elite uses a strategy of cultural politics to foster their interests can be applied much wider. Several neo-Gramscian scholars have further developed the notions of cultural hegemony: see, e.g. Cox (1987) and Gill (1993). Levy and Egan (2003) applied the cultural.

The active strategy of cultural politics to establish a cultural hegemony was conceptualized by Gramsci as a "War of position". In the war of position the 'historical block', which is the coalition of ruling capitalist elites tries to maintain the power through hegemony over the cultural realm and opposition movements try to push their counter hegemonic ideas. Thus, the 'war of position' places the cultural struggle into the struggle for hegemonic economic control, and thus blurs market and non-market strategies.

Neo-Gramscian scholars widen the application and move the 'war of position' away from its historical determinism and ultimate end (the communist revolution). This wider way of applying the Gramscian cultural hegemony way thinking is explained by Levy and Egan (2003:809-810):

"(...) Gramsci's theory of the historical bloc can be applied to contemporary politics by 'building from a micropolitics of autonomous opposition movements, whether derived from production relations or not'. Such movements might include feminism, environmentalism, racial and ethnic groupings, and their motivations can extend beyond economic concerns to include identity and social legitimacy, (...). These contemporary interpretations replace Gramsci's ultimate revolutionary intent with a view of social contestation as an endlessly unfolding 'war of position'."

Levy and Egan (2003: 810) further develop the war of position by defining three dimensions of this strategy: the organizational, economic and ideological pillars of power. They state:

“Actors seek to build coalitions of firms, governmental agencies, NGOs, and intellectuals who can establish policies, norms, and institutions that structure the field in particular ways. Large firms are generally unable to dominate a field purely by virtue of brute economic power or governmental connections; rather, control over a field rests on consent from a broader group of actors. Field stabilization, or hegemony, depends on an alignment of forces capable of reproducing the field. One force is the economic system of production, taxation, and sales, with its associated distribution of costs and benefits to various groups. The second is the organizational capacity, individually and in association, of the companies, government agencies, industry associations, and elements of civil society. The third is the discursive structure of culture, ideology, and symbolism that guides behaviour and lends legitimacy to particular organizations, practices, and distributions of resources.”

The economic power is an important factor of establishing and maintaining cultural hegemony. The power elite controls strategic economic sectors and resource flows. The current production, trade and marketing of agricultural export products is highly concentrated in the hand of a few agro-food companies (Fuchs et al., 2009; McMichael, 2009; Sojamo et al., 2012). Clapp (2014) shows the importance of the worldwide network of control of financial institutions for agriculture. To reduce environmental regulation by government control the companies lobby actively for ‘self-regulation’ of the private sector.

The organizational configurations form another import pillar of power for private companies. Companies forge strategic alliances with government officials, politicians, private foundations and think tanks, and mainstream environmental organizations. The global power elite has a network of institutions and informal rules to develop and maintain a coherent ‘green’ narrative (cf. Domhoff, 1990). The elite occupies strategic positions in the board of directors and management of multinational companies and their network organizations (like the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, WWF, and formation organizations, foundations and think tanks).

The influence of business elites goes beyond the control of the means of production and the flows of money and goods: they succeed in influencing the mere language, values, norms and knowledge government officials and politician use to regulate the private sector. The ideological dimension of power is expressed in the discourses and narratives of the corporate elite. *“Through their presence and participation in various institutions, cultural activities, and many other forms of social interaction, the dominant classes ‘lead’ the society in certain directions”* (Buttigieg, 2005:44). The discourses deployed are not static. They respond strategically to civil society concerns and demands from social movements. Also different factions have different ideas and there is sometimes rivalry between different groups and organizations. Counterhegemonic discourses challenge the mainstream culture.

In the following section the framework of the three pillars of power of the cultural hegemony will be applied to the establishment and use of water stewardship standards by the multinational private corporate sector.

The research method included scrutiny of the water stewardship standards and interviews during the field research period from 2012 to 2014 with key players in the agroexport sector in Peru and Ecuador. Those key players included flower export company managers in Ecuador, management of certifying companies and smallholder farmers that produce for export in the fresh fruit and vegetable sector of Peru.

2 Water Stewardship Certification

The increased agricultural production and export has increased the use of water. In arid and semi-arid regions the use of irrigation water increasingly to drying of rivers and depletion of aquifers.

The local effects of agricultural export are mixed. Agribusiness generates jobs and income, although the wages are usually low, and oftentimes the labour conditions alarming (Bee, 2000; Langan, 2011;

Pearson, 2007). Smallholder agricultural producers in the regions with major agribusiness can often not compete and lack access to credit, export-related knowledge and market networks. When smallholders become trapped in debts they might be forced to sell their land. Thus land and water dispossession and accumulation by agribusiness companies is common (Mehta et al., 2012). Ahlers (2010) provides an example of the North of Mexico.

Water abstractions from rivers has increased in such a way that many major river do not longer reach the ocean in the largest part of the year. This phenomena is called ‘basin closure’ (Molle et al., 2010). Also groundwater is depleted for irrigation. Worldwide the use of groundwater has grown from approx. 100 km³ in 1950 to some 1,000 km³ in the year 2000 (Shah et al., 2007). Countries with rapidly growing groundwater extraction include India, China and Bangladesh (Wada et al., 2010). Another major problem of agricultural production and especially export agriculture is contamination of water by agro-chemicals such as fertilizers, herbicides and insecticides (Devine and Furlong, 2007).

Some individual agribusiness companies have developed standards related to water use. An example from the arid North Coast of Peru is used to illustrate the contradiction between those type of standards and the realities as perceived by local communities. The Danish agribusiness company Ingleby has agroexport plantations in different part of the world: Argentina, Australia, Latvia, Lithuania, New Zealand, Peru, Romania, Uruguay and in the United States. In February 2015, the total amount of farmland under Ingleby’s management was 102,843 hectares. (<http://inglebyfarms.com/our-farms/> accessed 10-1-2016). In Box 1 a text is copied from their Guidelines. The standards clearly indicate an intention for environmental and social water stewardship. However, Burneo (2011) has reported the discontent of the local communities of Motupe in Peru about the 1,180 ha of land bought by Ingleby. Many medium sized farms were bought from the bank when mango producers went bankrupt (because of high temperatures and low mango prices in 2006 and 2008). Moreover Ingleby local communities fear an over exploitation of groundwater by Ingleby for their plantation in Motupe.

Box 1: Ingleby Sustainability memorandum

Clean, plentiful water

Agriculture depends on water. We will use water efficiently and cleanly. To produce ‘more crop per drop’, we will use the best irrigation systems, avoid unnecessary water-use and recycle water where possible.

We will protect the farm waters from fertilisers, chemicals, sediment and animal waste.

Healthy, species-rich ecosystems.

A living farm landscape is crucial to every aspect of agriculture, including soil and water quality, and crop and animal health. As stewards of vast tracts of land, we will protect our regional fauna and flora.

We will encourage native, diverse, threatened, and ecologically important species, as well as protecting their habitats and ecosystems. We will actively promote biodiversity on non-agricultural land.

Beautiful farms

Our farms must be beautiful, clean and tidy. We will always keep our farms’ complete aesthetic appeal firmly in mind.

We will protect natural, historical and architectural features, create cultures of order and tidiness on farms, and encourage gardening and tree planting. We will co-operate with surrounding communities, industries and farmers to protect our soils, water, biodiversity, and the beauty of our local areas.

Source: INGLEBY GUIDELINES, July 2013, page 16 (downloaded from: <http://inglebyfarms.com/publications/> (accessed 10-1-2016, emphasis added)

Many multinational companies engage in water stewardship programs for different reasons. For some major multinational companies, like Nesté, Procter & Gamble, Unilever and IKEA, water stewardship objectives are part of their general corporate social responsibility (CSR) politics. Nestlé (see Box 2),

for example, present general water related objectives that clearly establish links with other organizations World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) and Alliance for Water Stewardship's (AWS).

Box 2: Nestlé's water stewardship program

Our objectives

We aim to promote water policy and management that helps towards sustainable use by industry and others, both globally and locally.

By 2016 – Continue to build the 2030 Water Resources Group Public Private Partnership by adding two more countries per year and further develop and publicise the Global Catalogue on Good Practices.

By 2016 – Support the launch of the CEO Water Mandate Guide on Good Practices for Business on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation and pilot test the Guide in our water due diligence in selected markets.

By 2016 – Support the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) to achieve 50 signatories of the WASH Pledge.

By 2016 – Initiate the roll-out process of the Alliance for Water Stewardship's (AWS) International Water Stewardship Standard by implementing it in at least five locations.

By 2016 – Work with the Sustainable Agriculture Initiative Platform (SAI) and the Sustainable Food Lab (SFL) to implement the Water Risk Assessment and Mitigation collaboration initiative in at least one sourcing area of agricultural raw materials.

Source: <http://www.nestle.com/csv/water/policy-stewardship> (accessed, 10-1-2016)

Three reasons are mentioned in the literature for companies to engage in product certification and labelling (cf. Henson and Humphrey, 2010; Hughes, 2001): (1). Supermarkets and retailers want to guarantee a steady and reliable flow of products to sell. Therefore, these companies require quality certification that goes beyond the standard of national government, (2) the companies want to reduce the risk for reputational damage caused by environmental disasters covered in the news media or by environmental organizations. Despite their power and strong public relations strategies a major disaster linked to a product or companies' name can cause a lot of economic damage; and (3) some supermarket chains are eager to win market share in the niche market of environmental products. Although most (water stewardship) certification is not labelled on the consumer product, but only a business-to-business (B2B) standard, companies can present themselves or their products with reference to 'good', 'environmental', 'fair trade' or 'sustainable' production.

Most certification schemes have four characteristics (Mutersbaugh et al., 2005): (1) most of the times the standard is developed and promoted by a private organization established for this purpose, (2) a document detailing the criteria of the standard is published (and regularly updated and modified), (3) a procedure of monitoring and inspection is established, mostly executed by a third-party, private, inspection or audit company, and (4) a label is used for communication to other businesses and sometimes consumers.

Some examples of private standards for food quality that are widely used (B2B) are: GlobalGAP, the British Retail Consortium (BRC), the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI), FOODTRACE and the International Food Standard (IFS) (Henson and Humphrey, 2010). Most of those schemes have specific criteria on environmental issues, including water.

Recent discussion of export crops' large water use and contamination has moved several certification schemes to incorporate control points for water use and/or water pollution. Table 1 gives examples of water related criteria for general B2B certification schemes.

Table 1: Examples of water issues in existing standards

Certification scheme	Control point	Control point related to water	Version
Global GAP (1)	CB 6.2.1	(...) The irrigation system used is efficient. The producer uses the most efficient irrigation system – as is technically available and financially affordable, and complies with any legislation about local restrictions on water usage. (Major Must)	Final Version 4.0_Mar2011
	CB 6.4.1	To protect the environment, is water abstracted from a sustainable source? Sustainable sources are sources that supply enough water under normal (average) conditions. (Minor Must)	
	CB 6.4.2	Has advice on abstraction been sought from water authorities, where necessary? Where necessary, there must be written communication on this subject (e.g. letter, license, etc.).	
MPS-ABC (2) Flowers	2.8.4	Drip irrigation or recirculation (requirement depends on region and type of production system)	Version ratified by the MPS Board on 24 Nov. 2010.
	2.8.6	Records of irrigation usage. Records need to be kept solely of the quantity of water used for irrigation which is supplied by human (mechanical) action (m3).	
The IFOAM organic standard (3)	2.2.6	Operators shall not deplete nor excessively exploit water resources, and shall seek to preserve water quality. They shall where possible recycle rainwater and monitor water extraction.	Version 2010 – Draft version 0.1.
Rainforest Alliance - SAN Sustainable Agriculture Standard (4)	4	4.1 The farm must have a water conservation program that ensures the rational use of water resources. The program activities must make use of the best available technology and resources. It must consider water re-circulation and reuse, maintenance of the water distribution network and the minimizing of water use. (...)	July 2010 v2.doc 22

Sources Vos and Boelens (2014) (all accessed 25 April 2012):

- (1) http://www.globalgap.org/cms/upload/The_Standard/IFA/Version_4_2011/Final_V4/Documents_clean/110420_gg_ifa_cpcc_cb_eng_final_v4.pdf
- (2) <http://www.mps.com/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=dSIKZ3Fssqk%3d&tabid=168&language=nl-NL>
- (3) Downloaded from http://www.ifoam.org/about_ifoam/standards/norms.html
- (4) <http://sanstandards.org/userfiles/file/SAN%20Sustainable%20Agriculture%20Standard%20July%202010.pdf>

Other standards are directed towards consumers. Those standards put labels on consumer products to win consumer share in the niche market for ‘conscious’ consumers. Examples are: the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), Aquaculture Certification Council (ACC) for ‘sustainable’ fishery; the Fair Trade (FLO) labels; ecological (or organic) production (for example IFOAM, USDA Organic, EU Eco-regulation, and the Soil Association), the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) for forestry, and specific ‘carbon-neutral’ certification (such as the Rainforest Alliance). Other ethical certification schemes certify labour conditions (Ethical Trading Initiative), biodiversity and animal welfare.

Also specific standards have been developed for specific commodities. In these ‘round table initiatives’ standards are formulated by private organizations that bring together major market players. Also some environmental organizations and universities have joint these round tables. Four major schemes are: the Round Table on Sustainable Biofuels (RTSB), Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), the Better Sugarcane Initiative (BSI), and the Round Table on Responsible Soy (RTRS). Table 2 shows the water related control points of these initiatives.

Groundwater overdraft is addressed by RTSB, BCI, the RTRS. The BSI does not address groundwater depletion and sets relatively permissive standards for water contamination. These differences might be

related to the membership of the board of BSI, which are mainly major companies from the sugar commodity chain. Whereas the BCI, RTRS and RTSB boards include representatives of NGOs and research institutes.

Table 2: Water issues in the draft standards of sector round tables

Round table	Draft requirement related to water
Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) Version 2.0 Dec. 2009	2.2 management practices are adopted to ensure that water extraction does not cause adverse effects on groundwater or water bodies
Better Sugarcane Initiative (BSI), Bonsucro Production Standard Version 3.0, March 2011	4.1 - Oxygen demand by calculation of quantity and analysis of runoff. - To protect any existing riparian areas, wetlands or other significantly affected natural habitats in a satisfactory state, to provide habitat corridors and to conserve any rare, threatened or endangered species. - To minimise air, soil and water contamination, use less than 5 kg active ingredient of herbicides and pesticides per hectare per year.
Round Table on Responsible Soy (RTRS) Production Version 1.0 10 June 2010	5.1 The quality and supply of surface and ground water is maintained or improved. 5.1.4 Where irrigation is used, there is a documented procedure in place for applying best practices and acting according to legislation and best practice guidance (where this exists), and for measurement of water utilization. 5.2 Natural vegetation areas around springs and along natural watercourses are maintained or re-established.
Roundtable on Sustainable Biofuels (RSB) Version 2.0 20 Jan. 2011	Principle 9. Biofuel operations shall maintain or enhance the quality and quantity of surface and ground water resources, and respect prior formal or customary water rights. Criterion 9a. Biofuel operations shall respect the existing water rights of local and indigenous communities. Criterion 9b. Biofuel operations shall include a water management plan which aims to use water efficiently and to maintain or enhance the quality of the water resources. Criterion 9c. Biofuel operations shall not contribute to the depletion of surface or groundwater resources beyond replenishment capacities. Criterion 9d. Biofuel operations shall contribute to the enhancement or maintaining of the quality of the surface and groundwater resources.

Sources (Vos and Boelens (2014) all accessed 25 April 2012):

- (1) http://www.bettercotton.org/files/BCSInfoPack/2A_Production_Principles_and_Criteria_2.0_final_eng_ext.pdf
- (2) http://www.bonsucro.com/standard/bio_diversity_eco_systems.html
- (3) downloaded from: <http://www.responsiblesoy.org/>
- (4) <http://rsb.epfl.ch/files/content/sites/rsb2/files/Biofuels/Version%202/Indicators/11-03-08%20RSB%20Indicators%202-0.pdf>

3 Three Contradictions on Water Stewardship Certification

In this section the neo-Gramscian analytical framework of the cultural hegemony is used to look at the water certification schemes. Three major contradictions are highlighted: (1) the ‘greenwashing’ instead of real environmental changes, (2) the reinforcement of the cultural hegemonic power of the agribusiness multinational instead of consumer empowerment, and (3) the reinforcement of technocratic and instrumental environmental discourses instead of more local dialogue and definition of problems and solutions.

First Contradiction: ‘Greenwashing’

The water standards and criteria are developed as a reaction to the concerns about depletion and contamination. Not much systematic research has been done on the effectiveness of the water certification. However, documented cases in Peru (Progressio., 2010; Van der Ploeg, 2008), Ecuador (Breilh, 2007; Gaybor 2011), Paraguay (Palau et al., 2007), India and Pakistan (Chapagain et al., 2005) and East Africa (Becht, et al., 2005) indicate that certified production does affect water resources

negatively. Moreover, the certification seems to legitimize the water depletion and even grabbing. Thus, the economic power of the agribusiness is increased by the cultural hegemony.

Second Contradiction: Reinforcement of Institutional Power

The standards developed by private companies and round tables allure to the idea that ‘informed’ and ‘conscious’ consumers can have a positive influence on the environmental effects of the products they buy, and also the products they chose not to buy. However, the retailers and round tables formulate water standards without much real influence of consumers (Sojamo et al., 2012; Bacon, 2010; Amekawa, 2009; Campbell, 2005). Retailers have institutional power and therefore are able to impose their standards upon producers. The leading multinational supermarket companies: Wal-Mart, Carrefour, Ahold, Metro and Tesco (Fuchs et al., 2009), can define and enforce standards, because they control the supply chain from producer to end-consumer. All producers that supply supermarkets in Europe and the USA are obliged to subscribe to one or more certification schemes (Fulponi, 2007).

An example is the widely used GlobalGAP standard (example taken from Vos and Boelens 2014). The board of GlobalGAP that decides on standards is composed of eight members: four elected representatives of retailers, and four elected representatives of suppliers. Currently, all members are from either Europe or the US. The standards of GlobalGAP are discussed in various Sector Committees; GlobalGAP reports that one representative of smallholders participates in the Sector Committees. According to its webpage, GlobalGAP wants to incorporate the needs of smallholders into the application and further development of the standard. This was the rationale for establishing the Africa Observer project, with substantial international funding from the UK Department for International Development and GTZ. Since 2009, however, only one ‘smallholder ambassador’ has represented the views of smallholders in all GlobalGAP Sector Committee meetings. This seems a meagre representation of the vast and diverse group of smallholders, compared to the many representatives of large agribusiness and food industry companies. Moreover, this smallholder ‘representative’ is Chief Executive of an association of exporters from Kenya that, according to its own website, ‘represents small, medium and large exporters equally’, and thus can hardly be taken to be a representative of small farmers only. Transnational power groups deploy concepts such as ‘local’ and ‘small’ in strategic ways. As a consequence, it is common to see that standards imposed are discriminatory for smallholders.

Third Contradiction: Universal Technocratic Discourses (based on Vos and Boelens, 2014)

The criteria of environmental standards are developed by companies and organizations that come mainly from Europe and the US. As a consequence, it is not water users embedded in local water cultures and community livelihoods, with long-standing practical experience, who determine standards, but certification experts and water specialists from water modernization schools who decree what is (universally) right, imposing particular norms and values and ways of looking at farming and resource use.

The setting of standards for ‘good’, ‘efficient’ and ‘sustainable’ agricultural and water management practices is implicitly left to experts from Europe or the US, who follow international or Western norms rather than, for example, the heterogeneous norms that are established by peasant and indigenous knowledge systems.

Private standards are generally developed and monitored with little involvement from national or local stakeholders from the global South (Amekawa, 2009; Bacon, 2010; Campbell, 2005). Certification and audit companies are also almost exclusively from the North (Fuchs et al., 2009; Ouma, 2010). Even when roundtables are set up to involve different stakeholders in specific sectors (sugarcane, biofuels, cotton, soy beans), large transnational companies, international NGOs and supranational policy networks dominate the negotiation table; it is far more difficult for organizations that represent small farmers to participate and stake claims.

All environmental standards applied and developed at this moment (see Tables 1 and 2) tend to express the presumably ‘natural’, self-evident and unquestionable rationality of ‘modern’ water control. Modern water control is commonly presented as the technical manipulation of water flows and human behaviour with the most accurate infrastructural and managerial tools and according to scientifically established, measurable and universal criteria, to maximize agricultural outputs with minimal use of water and funds. Water control modernization sets standards for what is achievable; current performance levels must be measured against these norms to evaluate their degree of ‘modernness’; mainstream ‘efficiency’ and ‘productivity’ standards are a clear example of this (Boelens and Vos, 2012).

The certifiers’ preference for drip irrigation over the surface irrigation practised by most smallholders in the world is a typical example. Drip technology is widely regarded as more efficient and therefore several sustainability standards promote drip irrigation as ‘best practice’. Introduction of drip technology, however, also has social consequences. With drip irrigation, less water percolates to deeper parts of the soil; while commonly considered a loss, this more deeply infiltrated water is often utilized by other users downstream in the watershed (Lankford, 2006 Perry, 2007). Thus, more efficient water use at farm level through the introduction of drip irrigation might lead to a concentration of water and land by large farmers, to the detriment of smallholders (Hepworth et al., 2010). Moreover, smallholders (in and outside certification schemes) are trained to see themselves as inefficient, anti-modern surface water users and feel pressured to introduce drip technology, even if their economic situation prevents them from meeting the standards. When smallholders do convert to drip irrigation, this can negatively affect smallholders’ irrigation schemes because conversion to drip by individual plot owners can disturb long-established, effective methods of water distribution (Boelens and Vos, 2012).

Effects of the use of groundwater for irrigation on the aquifer are hard to assess. The geomorphology of aquifers is often complex. Different fractionated layers of groundwater might exist that might, or might not, interact. Therefore, the effects of the use of groundwater by one or more users is very hard to determine. If many users use groundwater, the share of depletion by one particular user is hard to determine. Also groundwater models are hardly reliable (Voss, 2011). This means that standards that prohibit a producer to affect the aquifer negatively cannot be monitored.

Some Conclusions: The Cultural Hegemony of Agribusiness

The neo-Gramscian framework reflects the material, organizational and discursive dimension of cultural hegemony. These three ‘pillars of power’ constitute the means that help agro-food businesses to retain and reinforce their powerful position in the world. Three major contradictions are highlighted in the paper:

- (1) The standards are a reaction to environmental concerns related to large scale agriculture, however they tend to legitimize water depletion and contamination. The ‘greenwashing’ of the image of the companies reinforces their cultural hegemony.
- (2) The environmental labelling of products is based on an idea of ‘consumer influence’, but in practice reinforces the institutional power of the major retailers and agribusinesses
- (3) Standards claim a more sustainable and ethical production, but mostly reinforce an universalistic technocratic hegemonic discourse about ‘efficiency’. In practice the universal ‘efficiency’ claims pose a lot of problems: (a) Water savings are not real water savings but rather concentrate the water on the land of the landowner with more capital for investment in irrigation technology; (b) The local context of production shows much variation [may be there is too much water!]; and (c) Groundwater is very difficult to monitor and depletion is difficult to attribute to one user.

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