



Territorializing effects of global standards: What is at stake in the case of ‘sustainable’ palm oil?



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ABSTRACT

Global private sustainability standards in agriculture today govern a range of commodities produced in the tropics. Our study analyses the most well-established of these standards, namely the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). We show how, far from being a market device restricted to re-organising global markets in palm oil, RSPO standardisation has wider consequences spatially re-distributing power with territorial effects. Territorialisation occurs through two processes: a strategic and operational process linked to the fabrication and application of procedural rules; a socio-technological process linked to the valorisation of managerial approaches to sustainability. Over time, these twin processes have institutionalised a transnational political space of action with territorial properties. These include: new frontiers of political authority de-bordering national jurisdiction (geographically connecting local scale oil palm estates and plantations with a transversal global supply chain stretching from producing to consuming countries); historical connection; internal coherence and imposition of managerial practices and discourses, including managerial constructions of interdependencies between people, nature and artefacts; prime beneficiaries (large southeast Asian growers, international environmental NGOs and (mainly) European downstream firms); marginalised people (independent smallholders and communities in Malaysia and Indonesia). In this manner, RSPO reinforces its political power and authority over a managerial form of sustainability of palm oil production through territorialising it. Ultimately, this transnational political space of action comes into interaction (and, potentially, conflict) with other political spaces of action and territorial projects as pursued by local people, other NGOs or Malaysian and Indonesian state governments.

1. Introduction

At the turn of the 20th century, international environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and most notably the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), engaged with private actors along supply chains to market as ‘sustainable’ agricultural products produced in the tropics, e.g. palm oil, soy, sugar cane and agro-fuels. These private initiatives took place on a global scale and sought to circumvent international trading constraints imposed on state governments by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (Bartley, 2007). Called ‘Roundtable’ or ‘voluntary’ initiatives, these created private multi-stakeholder membership associations. Their central objective was to establish global voluntary ‘sustainability’ standards, or guidelines, setting environmental, economic and social standards for product production and marketing (Ponte et al. 2011; Ruyschaert, 2013). Producers respecting

these standards could declare their production ‘sustainable’ and the end buyer (e.g., retailer, consumer goods’ manufacturer) could label their processed products ‘sustainable’ with a distinctive global trademark. Unlike organic or fair trade labels, which aimed at market segmentation, Roundtables would work with all willing private actors along the supply chain to transform the entire sector towards sustainability.

In this article, we focus on the most well-established of these standards, namely the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) created in 2004. For its global importance and its longevity, RSPO is a fundamental case to study. It has close to 1700 ordinary members; certifies 2.4 million hectares of production and 13.6 million tonnes of palm oil as sustainable; which represents 19% of global palm oil production (RSPO, 2018a). These important market characteristics notwithstanding, the focus of our article is not on the RSPO’s market-making function *per se* (see, Richardson, 2015), but on its territorialisation effects.

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Accordingly, the RSPO standardisation process is understood to have had important territorial consequences spatially re-distributing and re-ordering power, with global private actors engaging in 'state-like' territorial behaviour influencing resource use rights and values. As has been argued in the literature (Cheyns, 2011; Schouten and Glasbergen, 2011; Schleifer, 2016), despite the RSPO's importance, founding members' initial objectives justifying the RSPO have not been fulfilled. Biodiversity loss and deforestation continue to worsen (Azhar et al., 2017; Colchester, 2016; Edwards and Laurance, 2012; McCarthy, 2012; Pye, 2018; Ruysschaert and Salles, 2014; Gatti et al., 2019). At the same time, social inclusion within the RSPO is an on-going issue (Azhar et al., 2017; Silva-Castañeda, 2015; Cheyns, 2014). Rather than treating these problems as spontaneous outcomes of the sustainability market, we treat them instead as 'features' of the standardisation governing process, and more specifically, as 'territorialisation effects' (Painter, 2010). Indeed, viewing these, and other outcomes, as territorial effects allows us to explain the paradox of the strengthening of the RSPO over time yet with mixed socio-environmental performances.

To grasp the different processes that generate these inequalities, we interpret them from the critical perspective of 'territory', and in particular from a non-essentialist construction of territory which disconnects it from the 'nation-state' (Sassen, 2013). By 'territory' we denote a space of political action with governing authority (Sassen, 2013), not only governing what people do within spatially constructed and practice-orientated boundaries (Gassiat and Zahm, 2013; Sack, 1986), but also defining interdependencies between people, nature and artefacts (Carter et al., 2019). A territorial approach offers a new angle on the RSPO and its internal power politics revealing a political space of private action yet with territorial properties. Further, an analysis of the RSPO through the lens of 'territory' reveals what is at stake for actors. These are not only strategies to control access to natural resources, but also ones to build autonomous political capacity to counter any critique made.

To develop our argument, the article is organised as follows. First, we present our analytical approach and method (Section 2). Second, we describe territorialisation as a strategic and operational process linked to the fabrication and application of procedural rules defining the institutional architecture of the RSPO (Section 3). Third, we examine territorialisation as a socio-technological process, valorising managerial approaches to sustainability (Section 4). Fourth, we analyse these findings, underlining the territorial properties of the RSPO as a space of political action (Section 5). We not only render visible the RSPO's dominant territorial sustainability vision, but also provide understandings of possible alternative visions as held by those actors who contest its territorial project. Finally, we draw conclusion on the significance these findings for global sustainable standards.

2. Territorialising effects, method and material

State projects of neo-liberalisation and globalisation have altered power interdependencies between states and markets, re-shaping state power and increasing the authority of private self-governance of global markets (Carter, 2018; Goven and Pavone, 2015). For a while, these changing state-market relations were thought to have de-territorialisation effects. This idea was sustained by a conception of 'territory' as existing "on a single spatial scale... that of the nation-state" (Jeffery and Wincott, 2010: 167). This "analytical flattening of territory into one historical instantiation, national-state territory" caused misunderstandings both about territory as a concept and its connection with globalisation (Sassen, 2013: 23). It was argued on the contrary that private global governance did not escape territorialisation (Sassen, 2013). One reason was that "capital necessarily territorialises" as the global is "subordinated to production... which is fixed in particular places" (Cox, 2013: 57). The freeing of the concept of 'territory' from the state thus enabled researchers to identify the issue at stake as one of re-territorialisation, not de-territorialisation. These arguments find

resonance in a parallel literature examining trading effects on borders. Here scholars have argued against assumptions locating territorial borders at "the edges of a polity" (Rumford, 2008: 1), insisting on analysis of "behind the border issues" (Hocking and McGuire, 2002). Borders are both "everywhere", i.e. within states, and "elsewhere", i.e. in faraway places connecting non-contiguous territories (Rumford, 2008: 1-2). In a similar vein to analyses of territory, therefore analyses of borders re-framed the question in relation to trade as one of re-bordering, not de-bordering.

Drawing on this body of thought, we examine how private global governance in the form of the RSPO is having "territorialisation effects" (Painter, 2010). We contend that this occurs through institutionalising a "complex mix" of two types of spaces of action (Sassen, 2013: 22-23). First, a "new type... of bordered space... that cut[s] across the traditional inter-state borders" with second, a new type of informal non-national jurisdiction "deep inside the tissue of the national sovereign state" (Sassen, 2013: 22-23). In this process certain forms of territorial interdependence are supported over others, i.e. between territories (at different scales; in different places) or between people, nature and artefacts¹ (Carter, 2018; Carter et al., 2019). Further, the governing of these relationships by non-state jurisdictions either "escape[s] the grip of national-state territoriality" (Sassen, 2013: 28), or comes into interaction (or potentially conflict) with it.

Of course, "territory doesn't just happen, it has to be worked for" (Painter, 2010: 1150) and is "actively formed and shaped through the political process" (Cochrane, 2012: 104). Territories are produced and reproduced in different ways and means (Kärholm, 2007). Territorialisation as political strategy is not only about setting the spatial frontiers of regulatory action, but also the eligibility of actors to govern those spaces, and legitimisation of compromises and contradictions (Carter and Smith, 2008). Hence, territorial properties emerge when a political space of action begins to acquire its own history; its internal coherence and capacity of action; its own governance hierarchy, with dominant and marginalised actors; its own proper social sense and collective identity (Sassen, 2013; Painter, 2010; Carter and Smith, 2008).

In this article, two 'territorialising effects' (Painter, 2010) processes are observed. The first results from actor strategies within the RSPO to define its governing and operating norms, whereby dominant actors impose procedural rules for which they are the main beneficiaries. Here we focus on 'more or less' visible forms of exercising power (Cheyns and Riisgaard, 2014). Mobilising the theory of organisations (Friedberg, 1991), we first study the strategic action of stakeholders within the RSPO. We show how Roundtables have been designed so that each member is expected to defend their specific interests within a coalition of interest groups (Cheyns, 2011). Accordingly, we analyse stakeholder group strategies to establish procedural rules that define the RSPO standard and governance. We discuss the impacts of these procedural rules for each stakeholder category regarding their access to sustainable palm oil resources. This approach to studying territorialisation has already been successfully applied to describe the role of institutions in enabling powerful economic actors to take control of a resource and dispossess local communities from their land in the name of development in Southeast Asia (Vandergeest and Peluso, 1995; Peluso and Lund, 2011).

The second 'territorialising effects' process results from socio-technical governing practices (Painter, 2010). These institutionalised practices not only reinforce the "complex mixed" political space of transnational action that holds actors together, but also limit ideas and future practices which can be mobilised within the standard's various organisational committees. As such, these technologies become political machines, whereby the circulation of sustainability knowledge and measurement is coded for this specific territory (Painter, 2010). To

¹ By artefacts here we might refer to systems of land use or palm oil mills.

study these, we focus on the cognitive and normative processes shaping the meaning of ‘sustainable’ palm oil as the source of territory. We mobilise the pragmatic sociology of regimes of engagement (Thévenot, 2014) to highlight those capacities, knowledge and modalities which are valued within the RSPO for defining ‘sustainability’ and its governance. The engagements’ regimes approach points to three differentiated ways in which people relate to the world around them. In the first engagement regime, ‘engaging in justification for common good’, people argue publically on what they sense as just and unjust in practice. They seek to elaborate a common good through a pluralism of principles of justice (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991),² elaborating compromises between these principles. Problems of inequalities are rendered explicit arguing from a ‘civic’ principle of justice (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991). This regime may be required by local communities and family farmers to criticise production and trading models on which they depend. In the second regime, ‘functional and strategic engagement in a plan’, stakeholders give value to their environment through asserting their interests. This engagement valorises the managerial and technical capacities of participants oriented toward accomplishing an action. In the third regime, ‘familiar engagement’, people operate by maintaining personalised attachments and embedded relations with their environment (Thévenot, 2006, 2014). These regimes tend to be exclusive: actors controlling one engagement regime suppress capacities and values supported by the other regimes, thereby closing down alternative meanings of sustainability (Thévenot, 2014). In addition, promotion of certain behaviour (e.g. networking, quantitative management, benchmarking technique) and tools (e.g. classifications, standards, rules) can produce strong asymmetrical power, for example when they are captured by dominant actors in the ‘plan regime’ (Thévenot, 2014). Promotion of this regime can further impact individual actors within other networks by forcing them to adopt managerial discourses and practices (Thévenot, 2014). As we will demonstrate, these kinds of struggles are visible in the RSPO resulting in competing constructions of territorial interdependencies between people, nature and artefacts.

Our analysis is based on a large variety of empirical material. To assess who are the key historical actors involved in the emergence of the RSPO, we rely on semi-structured interviews with two of the RSPO’s founding members (WWF and Migros) in 2012, as well as literature on economic history and reports produced both by the RSPO members from the RSPO Board of Governors (BG). Analysis of the strategic modalities of constructing the RSPO as a new political space of action is based upon *in situ* observation of annual RSPO roundtables between 2006 and 2014, semi structured interviews with stakeholders across categories, as well as documents produced by the RSPO and key actors between 2002 and 2018. In particular, we analyse General Assembly (GA) resolutions since the first GA in 2004 until 2017 included impacting on GA functioning or on the application of “the RSPO Principles and Criteria”, a binding document regulating sustainable production practices. For each resolution, we assess: (i) which member category tabled the resolution; (ii) the result of the vote; (iii) and its impact for each member category. Analyses of territorialising effects resulting from cognitive and normative processes were also carried out following discussions and decisions in other RSPO arenas (annual meetings, task forces and working groups). Here we focus on observed and analysed actions, knowledge and capacities either valorised or on the contrary dismissed.

² Boltanski and Thévenot (1991) identified different principles of justice, especially the ‘market, domestic, industrial, civic, inspired and opinion-based’ principles.

3. Strategic and operational territorialisation to the benefit of downstream actors

3.1. Evolving relationships between the palm oil industry in Southeast Asia and downstream (mainly European) actors

Palm oil is produced from the fruit of oil palms, and palm oil kernel from its seed. Originating from West Africa, oil palms were introduced into Indonesia in 1848 and Malaysia in 1875 under Dutch and British colonial rule. Although oil palm plantation slowly expanded, especially following independence of these countries at the end of the Second World War, it was only during the 1960s that oil palm plantation really accelerated. Large private firms, especially British-owned companies (such as Guthrie, Golden Hope, Sime Darby and Kuala Lumpur Kepong), small Chinese-Malaysian firms and government-sponsored land settlement schemes (notably the Federal Land Development Authority – FELDA) drove this expansion in alliance with senior governmental officials (Tan, 2008; Cramb and McCarthy, 2016a). This first wave of expansion also coincided with a simultaneous process of buy-out of some foreign-controlled growers, giving rise to a small number of national firms closely linked to governmental administrations and political parties.

From the 1980s, conditions surrounding oil palm expansion changed in southeast Asia as well as globally. First, global agribusiness demand for palm oil increased for food, health care, cleansing agents and fuel.³ Second, burgeoning international ideological support for market liberalism not only increased the role for private banking in palm oil production (Cramb and McCarthy, 2016b), but also the influence of financial markets shaping the organisation of agricultural production (Fairbairn, 2014). Dutch and British banks played a prominent role in this process (e.g., Rabobank, ABN Amro, ING, HSCB, Standard Chartered) (Greenpeace, 2017), providing loans to establish large-scale estates (Willem van Gelder, 2007; Forest Peoples Programme, 2008; Wakker et al., 2000). In terms of scale, Dutch Rabobank and British HSCB were the most exposed investing each about 1 Billion Euros into 15 to 20 large-scale Malaysian or Indonesian growers (Wakker et al., 2000; Forest Peoples Programmes, 2008).

Third, and in line with increased foreign direct investment, southeast Asian governments, especially Indonesia’s government, progressively withdrew from supporting agricultural development, a process which accelerated following the southeast Asian financial crisis (Cramb and McCarthy, 2016a). Fourth, the rise in nationalistic discourses of security and sovereignty (Eilenberg, 2014), combined with a decentralization process in these states, and especially in Indonesia, allowed both government and national growers to exercise power over the distribution of land to plantation companies (Cramb and McCarthy, 2016b; Zen et al., 2016). Taking advantage of this unsettled political and economic climate, national growers in the palm oil sector successfully sought governmental backing to access large tracks of available land, claiming them as “free”, over-riding community rights in the process, and minimizing smallholder expansion (Cramb and McCarthy, 2016b).

Following this second wave of expansion, planted areas in Indonesia and Malaysia rapidly increased from 1 million in 1980 to more than 15 Million hectares in 2014 (Cramb and McCarthy, 2016a). In terms of industrial organisation, this expansion facilitated the emergence of large national oil palm growers. By the close of 2018, 29 companies whose headquarters are in Indonesia, Malaysia or Singapore were controlling more than 6.8 million hectares via long-term oil palm plantation leases from the State, with one dominant company, Sime Darby, holding close to 1 Million hectares.⁴ A vast majority established

³ Palm oil today constitutes 38% of the world market of vegetable oils (75,000 tonnes) (USDA, 2017).

⁴ Including Palm Oil New Britain that is now belonging to Sime Darby.

mono-culture plantations or ‘estates’ on several thousands of hectares linked to a mill, using cheap and flexible labour in a ‘plantation complex’ model (Cramb and McCarthy, 2016a; Li, 2016). Firms also developed ‘nucleus-plasma’ models supported by their government with a ring of dependent smallholdings (also called ‘plasma’) on typically two hectares of land around an estate and a mill controlled by a grower (also called ‘nucleus’). Smallholders benefit from technical and financial assistance from the grower, but remain economically unequal and in a position of dependence (Cramb and McCarthy, 2016a). Outside this framework, ‘independent’ smallholders established plantations on their own land, often in the interstices of plantations’ landscapes left by growers at the agricultural frontier (Cramb and Sujang, 2016). Yet, they have difficulty accessing seedlings, fertilisers, cultivation techniques and marketing channels. Today, in Indonesia, large-scale growers represent about 5.5 million hectares, dependent smallholders 2.5 million hectares and independent smallholders 2.5 million hectares (DGEC, 2014).

In addition to horizontal geographical expansion, large-scale growers have gradually sought vertical integration to upstream palm oil value chains to increase economic benefits. With the support of their governments, these growers have progressively diversified activities from production to trade, processing and manufacturing (see Wilmar, 2019). Yet, even though Southeast Asian processors are becoming ever more important as downstream actors, Western processors still remain dominant (e.g., AAK is both a world leader in processing palm oil and first importer in the UK).

In this process, downstream firms, especially retailers and consumer goods manufacturers began to lose control over palm oil production. Many of the previously British-owned growers were now controlled by Malaysian interests, and Dutch growers had been nationalized in Indonesia (Casson, 2000). In addition, Unilever, the world leader in consuming palm oil with 1.5 million of palm oil a year (Unilever, 2019) had sold its own plantations in 2002 (GRAIN, 2015). Without a direct hand in oil production, these downstream actors sought new ways to exert their control (e.g. Unilever had already discussed with the Malaysian Palm Oil Association (MPOA) how to establish a sustainable supply chain for its own operation in 1998: Djama and Verwilghen, 2012).

Planted mainly on previously forested areas where communities held customary rights, the establishment of large-scale oil palm estates has been identified as a main cause of deforestation in the region (Miettinen et al., 2016; Pye, 2018; Vijay et al., 2016). They have also been associated with community conflicts (Colchester, 2016; Dauvergne, 2017; Eisner et al., 2016; Jiwan, 2013; Ruysschaert, 2016; Vijay et al., 2016). Towards the end of the 1990s, environmental NGOs based in the Netherlands, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, began to politicise trans-border relations and mediatise the then near systematic involvement of Dutch banks in the major Asian palm oil producers linked to deforestation (Wakker et al., 2000). Firms that were buying palm oil or its derivatives based in the Netherlands and in the UK became worried about the impact of deforestation on their brands. These factors led to joint initiatives with WWF to create a RSPO (RSPO, 2002; RSPO, 2004a). Among RSPO initiators, we find main downstream actors: Unilever (consumer goods’ manufacturer); AAK (processor); Sainsbury’s (the third largest retailer in the UK); and Rabobank (Bank) (RSPO, 2002). These firms – and especially Unilever - enlisted the support of dominant growers in southeast Asia (e.g. Sime Darby, FELDA, Kuala Lumpur Kepong) and their umbrella associations, The Malaysian Palm Oil Association (MPOA) and *Gabungan Pengusaha Kelapa Sawit Indonesia (GAPKI)* (RSPO, 2002; RSPO, 2004a).

3.2. Procedural rules ensuring downstream firms’ control over decision-making

Following their decision taken in 2003 to create the RSPO, founding members announced their intention to engage with all interested

parties over the definition of ‘sustainable’ palm oil:

“Sustainability must result from consultation and informed consent by all stakeholders, that may include residents in the areas of production, palm oil plantation companies, smallholders, actors along the entire supply chain, consumers, governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations” (RSPO, 2003: 1).

However, by the time the RSPO was established in 2004, downstream firms had already exercised extensive influence over the proposed content of procedural rules, thereby effectively taking control over the governing of the standard. A first step was the setting up of an organising committee to elaborate upon the organisation’s status (RSPO, 2004b). This committee drafted a list of a limited number of eligible member categories: four categories of downstream actors (processors/traders,⁵ consumer goods’ manufacturers, retailers and investors⁶); two categories of NGOs (environmental and social NGOs); and one of growers (which included both large-scale growers and smallholders). No member categories were proposed for residents in producing areas (here, ‘local communities’), consumer associations or national governments.

This initial inequality of access to discussions over membership categories had repercussions for the structure of the Board of Governors (BG) governing the RSPO. Membership of this body was endorsed at the first General Assembly (GA) of the RSPO in 2004, whereby, out of a total of sixteen seats, downstream firms obtained eight, NGOs four and producers four (RSPO, 2004a). Amongst producers, three seats were for large grower companies (Malaysian, Indonesian and the ‘rest of the world’) and one for smallholders. This last seat was initially unoccupied. Since 2006, the Malaysian governmental agency Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) has occupied this seat to represent dependent smallholders.⁷

Procedural rules established the GA as the supreme decision-making body, with one voting right per ordinary member and decisions taken by simple majority. Initially, this rule allowed for an equal distribution of power between large grower companies and downstream firms, each representing around 40% of the vote at the first two GAs, with NGOs representing 20% (RSPO, 2004a; RSPO, 2005). However, from 2006 onwards, downstream firms began to take control of the GA as the numbers of these companies increased much faster than those of producers or NGOs (which remained stable). For instance, between July 2017 and May 2018, downstream firms registered an additional 108 ordinary members, while the number of ordinary members in the other four categories decreased by 4 during this same period (RSPO, 2018b).

Consequently, by 2018, downstream firms represented 84% of ordinary members, mainly due to the processors and traders (34% of members) and consumer goods’ manufacturers (48%) (Fig. 1). Added to this first asymmetry between categories of members (especially between producers and buyers), a second one has emerged over time between countries where firms are located (Fig. 2): 45% (or 749) members (downstream firms, NGOs) are based in Europe. Those members based in three European countries – Germany, UK and the Netherlands – constitute 21% of all RSPO members. With 203 members, organisations based in the Netherlands and the UK weigh more politically than the 197 members based in Indonesia or Malaysia (RSPO, 2018b).

Procedural rules on voting have facilitated control by downstream

⁵ At this point in time, processor/traders were mainly European-based companies: more recently however, Asian processors and trader firms have increased and today constitute 1/5 of this group, which otherwise remains mainly European in terms of numbers.

⁶ Consumer goods’ manufacturers, retailers and investors were then, and remain today, mainly European companies.

⁷ Its membership illustrates the ambivalence of the RSPO regarding governmental involvement, which, although officially forbidden, can be overlooked in practice (Pye, 2016).

**Distribution of the 1678 ordinary members in RSPO's categories
24 May 2018**

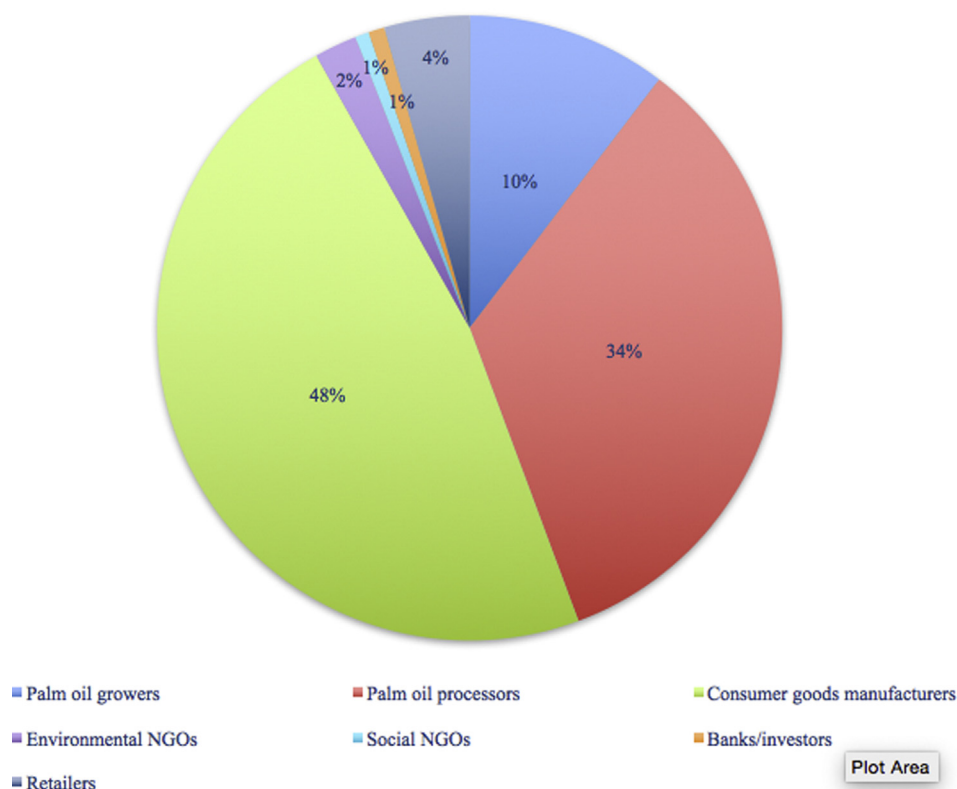


Fig. 1. Distribution of RSPO's Ordinary Members by Category.
Source: RSPO, 2018b.

firms over the GA. In particular, a provision allowing voting by proxy (RSPO, 2004a) was reinforced by a resolution (6d) proposed by Unilever at the 2013 GA to have electronic voting (RSPO, 2013a). The GA always takes place in a Southeast Asian producing country; it is therefore much easier for producers, as distinct from downstream firms, to physically participate in meetings. Proxy and electronic voting facilitated downstream firms maintaining their comparative advantage over producers even if not physically present. Producers have attempted to oppose this control by downstream firms over both the GA and the BG. In 2012, MPOA and Indonesian growers put forward two resolutions. First, in March 2012, the resolution “protecting multi-stakeholder representation at the GA” requested that “any quorum of the GA lower than 50% of the total membership must proportionately represent the whole membership of RSPO by constituency”. It also requested that “in order for a GA to be valid and legitimate it must always have representation from every member category of the RSPO”. Opponents opposed this resolution because this would have allowed any category to have a blocking minority by abstaining to vote on a particular resolution, thus forcing the reaching of consensus among category members to pass each resolution (RSPO, 2012b). The second resolution in November 2012, “proposed amendments to ... the composition of the Executive Board”⁸ to allocate more seats to producers (RSPO, 2012c). But, in both cases, the GA rejected the resolutions, as the majority of members, especially downstream firms, voted against it.

With this political gap widening between downstream firms and other member categories over their respective representational power shaping territorial interdependencies in the name of sustainability (see sections below), Southeast Asian growers, Indonesian environmental

NGOs and Indonesian social NGOs proposed a resolution at the GA in 2017. This called for a “balanced representation in the RSPO General Assembly voting process based on membership category” (RSPO, 2017a). The resolution requested that the “RSPO review its voting format to be based on a proportional approach such that the various membership categories would have equal weighting regardless of total membership numbers” (RSPO 2017a). The banks also co-signed this resolution, in an awkward alliance between social actors and large-scale finance. For banks, this resolution potentially marked a critical gain in political weight in the GA. Banks count for less than 1% of the members: counting by member category would allow banks to increase their political weight by up to 15% of the vote (1/7). To date, however, this resolution has not been implemented and the RSPO BG is still assessing its interpretation and implementation.

3.3. Implementing certification rules securing downstream firms cheap access to oil

Controlling the GA, downstream firms have set certification rules to their own advantage. Initially, producers engaged with RSPO certification believing that they would receive financial compensation (through markets) higher than the economic cost of fulfilling the standard's obligations setting product criteria. Operating within this logic, as early as the GA in 2006, the MPOA put forward a resolution to establish a segregated certified supply chain, separate from non-certified oil, and demanding a premium from buyers of US\$30 per tonne of certified oil (RSPO, 2006). But, the GA rejected this resolution, downstream firms voting against it and arguing that this premium was too high and that segregation would generate logistical costs for them along the whole supply chain. Instead, downstream firms successfully lobbied

⁸ Until 2013, the Board of Governors was called the Executive Board.

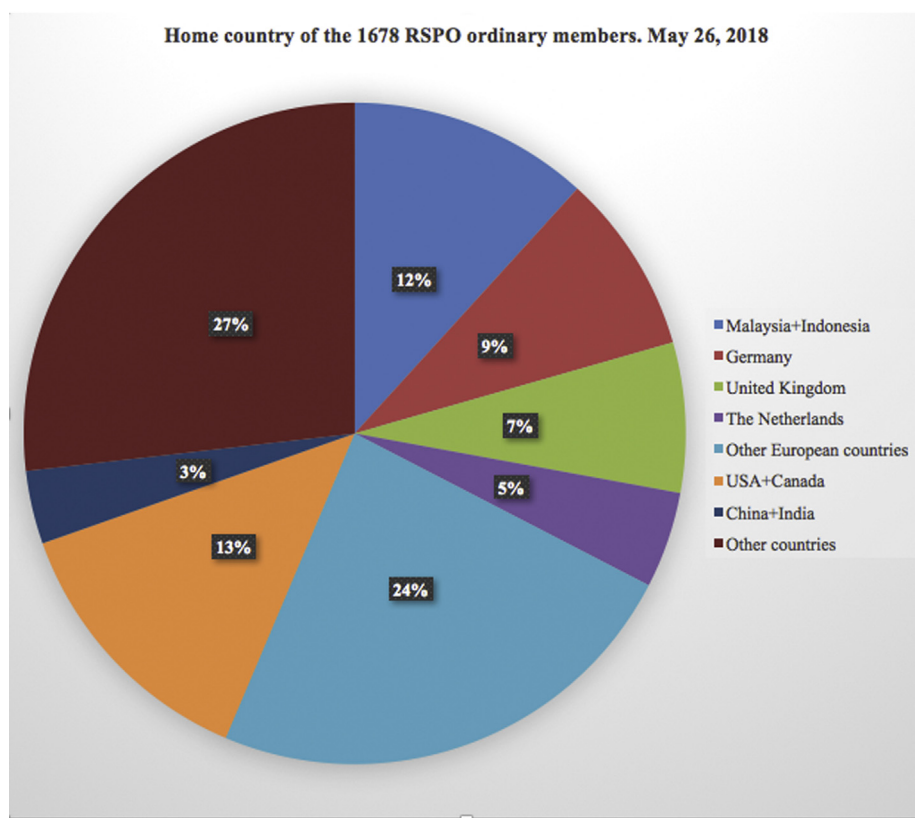


Fig. 2. Distribution of RSPO's Ordinary Members by country of the company's headquarters.
Source: RSPO, 2018b.

the BG with alternatives. In 2008, the BG adopted two other certification methods which worked more to downstream firms' advantage: (i) the 'mass balance' method, whereby certified oil could be mixed with non-certified oil, while remaining physically traceable up to the local retail outlet; (ii) and the 'certificates' (or 'Book & Claim') method developed by the British processor AAK (Richardson, 2015). For the 'Book & Claim' method, a producer can transfer each tonne of certified oil produced into a certificate which is offered for sale on the Greenpalm 'Book & Claim' trading platform. Downstream firms buy palm oil from the conventional global market and cover their purchases by buying these certificates. A certificate costs about 4 dollars per palm oil tonne, which amounts to less than 1% of the price of palm oil sold on the international market (which fluctuates between 500 and 800 dollars per tonne), an insignificant cost compared to that generated by the physical segregation of palm oil (which amounts to between 30 and 70 dollars per tonne). By the end of 2018, certified producers were either forced to sell 55% of their production on the conventional market without compensation or got a marginal compensation with the certificate method (13% of purchases), with the segregated and mass balance methods counting for the remaining 33% (RSPO, 2018d). As such, RSPO certification has significantly contributed to initial strategic objectives of downstream firms to secure long-term supply and to protect their reputation with a label, all at a marginal cost by providing a pecuniary value to sustainability and making a 'sustainable' market (Richardson, 2015).

Obtaining a premium much lower than certification costs, producers have little economic incentive to certify. As a consequence, only the largest world producers have become certified to access European markets, or more broadly speaking Western markets. This amounts to 73 producers certifying 2.7 million hectares in total (RSPO, 2017b). Actually, the situation is even more polarised: the largest palm oil producer in the world, Sime Darby with about one million hectares of oil palm plantations, is also the main certified palm oil producer,

producing 25% of the total volume (RSPO, 2015a).

By contrast, independent smallholders have by and large been excluded. By early 2017, nine years after the launching of the certification system, they contributed to 11,880 ha of certified areas, which represented less than 0.1% of global certified oil palm plantations (RSPO, 2017b). Indeed, fixed certification costs have proved prohibitive for smallholders, with at least 50 dollars per tonne for certified palm oil (Leegwater, 2014) – and this does not include either recurring costs for additional management practices, nor reorganization costs to keep certification on-going.

Finally, the GA has generally adopted resolutions put forward by international environmental NGOs, although they represent only about 2% of total membership (RSPO, 2018b). Environmental NGOs have successfully tabled seven resolutions.⁹ Downstream firms' support for environmental NGO resolutions has been facilitated by their carrying limited financial implications for these companies and because of their positive impact on the reputation of their labelled products (Gallemore et al., 2018). However, these resolutions have had an important economic impact on producers through reducing planting areas and requiring stricter bureaucratic controls. In this context, the largest long-term established producers are being proportionally less impacted than the others due to economies of scale and their capacity to certify plantations established prior to the RSPO cut-off date of 2005 forbidding primary forest clearance.

⁹ Their successful resolutions have been to preserve the Tripa forest (AG, 2008); conserve the Bukit Tigapuluh ecosystem (AG, 2009); enhance transparency on new plantations (AG, 2008); manage peat (AG, 2009); conserve secondary forest (AG, 2010); publish the geo-positioning of the borders of plantation permits (AG, 2013); and improve the Annual Communication of Progress (AG, 2015).

4. Territorialisation of a cognitive and normative nature

4.1. Transforming concerns into technical data and action plans

In the RSPO standard, the definition of sustainability has its origin in a prescriptive document - RSPO Principles and Criteria - composed of high principles, associated criteria and quantifiable indicators. This document was elaborated between 2003 and 2005, and revised in both 2013 (RSPO, 2013b) and 2018. It is a negotiated agreement amongst members based on norms of 'consensus' and 'inclusiveness'. To reach this agreement amongst this heterogeneous group of actors, the RSPO BG decided to separate discussions on various aspects of sustainability into specialized committees to avoid any fundamental debate over the very substance of sustainability (Cheyns, 2011). For example, sensitive environmental challenges to be addressed over the long term led to the setting up of working groups, such as the Greenhouse Gases Working Group or the Biodiversity High Conservation Value Working Group (BHCVWG). Those to be addressed over the short term have led to the creation of task forces, such as the one on compensation for forest loss.

In these working groups and task forces, sustainability issues have been translated into action-oriented projects: this is to say, each question has been framed operationally and technically. Agreements found in these bodies have had to be practical, realistic and acceptable to all, ultimately resulting in a fragmentation of 'sustainability' into small isolated plans (Thévenot, 2014). For this reason, for example, the two first objectives of the BHCVWG have been to "support the development of ... practical sustainability standards that address biodiversity" and "provide technical input for the elaboration of practical guidelines" (RSPO, 2012a: 2). For the deforestation compensation task force, the two objectives have been "to develop acceptable compensation packages" and "to set up a pilot process to implement guidance and test the compensation process" (RSPO, 2011: 11). Negotiation on 'sustainability' is thereby engaging members to accomplish a plan (Thévenot, 2006). A central feature of this way of working has been the postponing of any immediate objective to set normative thresholds (e.g. on pesticide use) or impose sanctions. Rather, plans are to be continually worked upon and improved. This has led to a multiplication of meetings of working groups and task forces: e.g., the BHCVWG held 25 meetings between 2009 and January 2015, extending over several years their negotiation over the meaning of High Conservation Value Forest (HCVF). This was also the case for the making of decisions by the compensation task force, or the first Greenhouse Gases Working Group, whereby decisions were regularly postponed.

Progress has thus been slow and agreements not very restrictive. Indeed, from 2008 to 2017, no obligation to stop greenhouse gas emissions, and therefore deforestation, has been forthcoming, despite on-going negotiations within working groups. Indeed, the relevant criterion of the 2013 revised standard (criterion 7.8) only stipulated that "new plantation developments are designed to minimize net greenhouse gas emissions" (RSPO, 2013b: 54), with efforts dependent on producers' own evaluation of the effects of their production practices.¹⁰ In this vein, the final document from the committee on compensation referred to a "continuous improvement" (RSPO, 2014: 1) and rejected any idea of either suspending or excluding members on these grounds.

4.2. Valorising a collective identity around management

Defining 'sustainability' in RSPO has thus valorised a certain managerial knowledge and practice (Djama and Verwilghen, 2012), in turn

¹⁰Since 2018, the new standard finally integrates the 'High Carbon Stock' approach which aims to protect secondary forest. Yet, this approach has been criticised by some NGOs for its weak capacity to take into account local ecologies which make sense for local communities (Cheyns et al., 2019).

affecting modalities of power (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). Indeed, RSPO governing has promoted a common managerial nomenclature spanning committees and working groups, and which includes notions such as 'additionally', 'responsibility', 'flexibility', 'exclusiveness', 'pragmatism', 'rationality' and 'scientific robustness'. RSPO leaders' interests converge around this managerial technique, favouring the figure of 'the managers' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999) as the archetype participants (Cheyns, 2011; Djama and Verwilghen, 2012), as well as the ethos of 'corporate social responsibility' within each RSPO member category. Managers, as archetype participants, share administrative skills useful for a planned action, yet often remain detached from the full range of ideas and experiences felt in local territories. They prove themselves to be highly mobile actors, incorporated into a transnational supply chain network, which they co-construct and within which they are able to change their role (Cheyns, 2011). For example, between 2009 and 2015, we observed the circulation and transfer of professionals from environmental NGOs (e.g. World Resource Institute, WWF, Zoological Society of London) and social ones (e.g. Solidaridad) to producers (e.g. R.E.A. Holdings, Sime Darby), to consulting firms that assist producers (e.g. Transition, Deameter), to certification bodies (e.g. Rainforest Alliance), to the RSPO secretariat and to downstream firms (in particular Carrefour, The Netherlands Oils and Fat Industry). This circulation of personnel works in all directions, with members from industries moving to environmental or social NGOs and *vice versa*. This is reinforced through a circulation of capital. International experts, from social or environmental NGOs, work as paid consultants to large-scale growers to help them certify; NGOs access funds from development agencies (in particular in the Netherlands) to participate in RSPO's bodies and facilitate participation of small stakeholders; and downstream firms, such as Unilever or Nestlé, support growers and NGOs to improve their own supply chains (Unilever, 2014; Unilever 2019).

Managers described above have been particularly present in the BG, which is mainly composed of organizations who have engaged in the RSPO from the beginning. This is because, in spite of the fact that the BG is formally open to all members, in practice only 30 members have ever sat on the BG. In this way, a very small number of RSPO members have extended their influence through accumulating functions, taking the role as speakers at RSPO meetings and/or facilitators of working groups. On average, nine out of sixteen BG members have remained the same since the beginning (Table 1). More precisely, the following members of the 2018 BG were already sitting on the first board meeting in 2004: Unilever (president or co-Chair throughout), AAK (treasurer throughout), WWF (vice-president throughout), the consumer goods' manufacturers Mondelēz. This is also true for Oxfam, HSBC bank, Rabobank, MPOA (representing Malaysian growers) and FELDA (smallholders). Other stakeholders have also been very present on the BG, such as the federation of retailers (Retailer Palm Oil Group) or the firm IOI. To this historical connection, one must add interdependence by territory, with nine organizations based either in the UK or the Netherlands: these two countries cover all member categories except, of course, those of producers.

This transnational construction of managers around an administrative capacity has also allowed the RSPO to establish its own political capacity to act. This capacity is apparent at three complementary scales: within its defined space of action, at its border and beyond its jurisdiction. First, in 2015, the BG submitted resolution 6c "to amend the RSPO code of conduct" that imposed upon RSPO members the necessity "to promote and not to denigrate the aims and goals of RSPO" (RSPO, 2015b). Overwhelmingly approved, the resolution seeks to pacify members with risk of exclusion. The BG has also favoured a management approach to the governing of compliance by instructing the Secretariat to establish annual members' performances comparing them according to a matrix of social, environmental and economic indicators. Second, the BG created a complaints' procedure in 2008, including a jurisdictional body composed of RSPO members initially nominated by

Table 1
Annual evolution of composition of the board of governors.

Category	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Producers - Malaysia	MPOA	MPOA	MPOA	MPOA	MPOA	MPOA	MPOA	MPOA
Producers - Indonesia	GAPKI	GAPKI	GAPKI	GAPKI	GAPKI	GAPKI	GAPKI	Goodhope
Producers - Smallholder			FELDA	FELDA	FELDA	FELDA	FELDA	FELDA
Producers - Res of the world	Fedepalma	Fedepalma	NBPOL	NBPOL	Agropalma	Agropalma	Siat	Siat
Traders	Musim Mas	Musim Mas	IOI	IOI	IOI	IOI	IOI	IOI
	AAK	AAK	AAK	AAK	AAK	AAK	AAK	AAK
Manufacturers	Unilever	Unilever	Unilever	Unilever	Unilever	Unilever	Unilever	Unilever
	Mondelez	Mondelez	Mondelez	Mondelez	Mondelez	Mondelez	Mondelez	Mondelez
Retailers	Migros	Migros	Migros	Migros	Retailers POG	Retailers POG	Retailers POG	Retailers POG
	Bodyshop	Bodyshop	Bodyshop	Bodyshop	Bodyshop	Carrefour	Carrefour	Carrefour
Banks			HSBC	HSBC	HSBC	HSBC	HSBC	HSBC
			Rabobank	Rabobank	Rabobank	Rabobank	Rabobank	Rabobank
Environmental NGOs	WWF Inter	WWF Inter	WWF Inter	WWF Inter	WWF Inter	WWF Inter	WWF Inter	WWF Inter
	WWF Indo	WWF Indo	WWF Indo	WWF Indo	WWF Indo	CI	CI	CI
Social NGOs	Oxfam	Oxfam	Oxfam	Oxfam	Oxfam	Oxfam	Oxfam	Oxfam
	Sawit Watch	Sawit Watch	Sawit Watch	Sawit Watch	Sawit Watch	Sawit Watch	Sawit Watch	Sawit Watch
Category	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	
Producers - Malaysia	MPOA	MPOA	MPOA	UP	UP	MPOA	MPOA	
Producers - Indonesia	Goodhope	Goodhope	Goodhope	Goodhope	Musim Mas	Musim Mas	Golden Agri	
Producers - Smallholder	FELDA	FELDA	FELDA	FELDA	FELDA	FELDA	FELDA	
Producers - Rest of the world	NBPOL	NBPOL	Agropalma	Agropalma	Agropalma	Agropalma	Agrocaribe	
Traders	IOI	IOI	IOI	IOI	IOI	IOI	IOI	
	AAK	AAK	AAK	AAK	AAK	AAK	AAK	
Manufacturers	Unilever	Unilever	Unilever	Unilever	Unilever	Unilever	Unilever	
	Mondelez	Mondelez	Mondelez	Mondelez	Mondelez	Mondelez	Mondelez	
Retailers	Retailers POG	Retailers POG	Retailers POG	Retailers POG	Retailers POG	Retailers POG	Retailers POG	
	Carrefour	Mark&Spen	Mark&Spen	Mark&Spen.	Mark&Spen.	Mark&Spen.	Mark&Spen.	
Banks	HSBC	HSBC	HSBC	HSBC	HSBC	HSBC	HSBC	
	Rabobank	Rabobank	Rabobank	Rabobank	Rabobank	Rabobank	Rabobank	
Environmental NGOs	WWF Inter	WWF Inter	WWF Inter	WWF Inter	WWF Inter	WWF Inter	WWF Inter	
	CI	CI	CI	WRI	WRI	WRI	WRI	
Social NGOs	Oxfam	Oxfam	Oxfam	Oxfam	Oxfam	Oxfam	Oxfam	
	Both Ends	Both Ends	Both Ends	Both Ends	Both Ends	Both Ends	Both Ends	

Abbreviation: CI: Conservation International; WWF Inter: WWF International; WWF Indo: WWF Indonesia; UP: United Plantations.

the BG. This body heard complaints on the application of the standard and today has the final say (up until 2013, the BG had the final decision). Most of the complaints were about the interpretation of land rights, that is to say the implementation of the frontier between members of the RSPO territory and local communities. In practice, these negotiations can last several years before any agreement is reached. Furthermore, complaints from local communities are often taken up and implemented as “action plans” by firms, oriented toward partnerships for production, or monetary compensation, avoiding fundamental questions of land restoration and restitution for local communities (Silva-Castañeda, 2015; Colchester, 2016). Finding that most of the cases were not resolved to the satisfaction of complainants, in 2013 Indonesian social and environmental NGOs put forward the resolution “Guaranteeing fairness, transparency and impartiality in the RSPO complaints’ system”. Endorsed by the GA, it requested a strict separation of power between the complaints’ panel and the BG. After negotiating two years among its members, in June 2017, the BG endorsed the panel’s terms of references (RSPO, 2017c). Accordingly, RSPO members can propose their name on a list handled by the RSPO Secretariat, which then will propose the names to the Complaints’ panel, a body of 12 members, assigning cases to avoid conflicts of interest. It remains to be seen how this arrangement will work in practice. Indeed, 9 out of the 12 panel members were still from the North in 2018 (RSPO, 2018c) with the exception of two growers (Bumitama, SEPA) and one social NGO from the Philippines (Verite).

Third, to extend the frontiers of its political action, the BG established in 2016 an explicit political strategy known as DAVE (Declare Acknowledge, Vision, Evaluate) to respond to critics. Within this, the RSPO extended its territorial reach through the establishment of its own European office in Brussels to lobby EU organizations.

4.3. Dismissing marginalised actors and their discourses within the RSPO

The taking into account of vulnerable local voices and actors (smallholders, especially independent ones, local and indigenous communities, workers in plantations) within the RSPO remains a central issue. In response, some Dutch social NGOs (i.e. Both Ends, Oxfam Novib) and UK-based ones (e.g. Forest Peoples Programme) have sought to facilitate the inclusion of smallholders and communities as RSPO participants either directly, or via an Indonesian social NGO, Sawit Watch. However, direct participation of smallholders and communities in public debates is not easily accommodated within RSPO forms of coding. Their voices can be discredited when they evoke rival ‘territorial interdependencies’ (Carter et al., 2019) between people, nature and artefacts than those institutionalised within the managerial approaches of the RSPO. These interdependencies come in the form of personal attachments to the places where they live, or personalised relationships with their land and their close natural environment. Their narratives about palm oil conflicts often emerge from monographic narratives based on emotional, contextualised and personal experiences. Their land use customary rights, which are in theory recognised by the RSPO standard, often relate to personal and ancient marks of nature (e.g. rivers, trees) that make sense for dwellers sharing a same connection to the environment (Cheyns, 2014; Silva-Castañeda, 2012). These forms of evidence have often found themselves at odds with the dominant managerial discourses about natural resources that promote other understandings of territorial interdependencies between people, nature and artefacts in these geographical locations (e.g., forests allocated to oil palm estates for oil palm development; legal land use permits; non-natural straight-lined borders; statistics to show nature-society connections).

Marginalized/vulnerable voices’ participation has rested on a desire

to inject issues of justice and injustice into definitions of ‘sustainability’. In this engagement, Indonesian communities have focused on discussions upstream of production and especially over the validity of granting large-scale concessions on forests or cultivated lands, which they consider to have been sustainably managed for thousands of years. Indonesian smallholders and workers’ trade unions have mooted more equitable and redistributive development models (Cheyns, 2014). Instead of trying to influence a specific part of the RSPO standard within technical committees or management practices, these actors have instead advanced their social demands in public debates during the annual RSPO meetings and within the limited scope of their allocated time. They have also organised press conferences and demonstrations, such as the one in 2013 on the limited ability of the RSPO to strengthen workers’ social rights within the RSPO standard (Parker, 2013).

Even if local communities and farmers record minor successes with support from social NGOs, the plan regime within the RSPO has largely prevented them from addressing fundamental questions of social justice regarding land access and production models (Cheyns, 2014). This was particularly obvious when Indonesian smallholders, through their trade union, criticised their own dependency on large-scale planting firms operating in a situation of monopsony and their public speeches were discredited (Cheyns, 2014; Köhne, 2014). Smallholders are frequently substituted by other categories of stakeholders. This was the case for example at a RSPO European roundtable in June 2016. Invited Indonesian independent smallholders exposed their situation during a panel discussion, asking RSPO members to speak genuinely (“from the heart”) to ensure that smallholders received a fairer revenue for their families. Dismissed by the BG of the RSPO as not being conducive towards the RSPO they were not invited to participate at a similar panel at the following European roundtable in 2017. Instead, agribusiness firms and international NGOs replaced smallholders at this panel whose topic was on how to include smallholders. Generally, smallholders who have experienced RSPO participation regret that the RSPO does not recognize the legitimacy of people talking about their ‘real life’, instead prioritising technical narratives (Cheyns, 2014). Coding practices within RSPO have thus resulted in the exclusion of alternative understandings of sustainability, especially those based either on ‘civic’ solidarity (i.e. the re-distribution of value and land), or on local ecologies and place-based attachments of local dwellers affected by palm oil expansion (Cheyns et al., 2019).

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1. Discussion

Our examination of RSPO standardisation reveals the institutionalisation of a private space of political action with territorial properties, spatially re-distributing and re-ordering power. We observed the institutionalisation of new frontiers of political authority stabilising a ‘complex territorial mix’ of power, cross-cutting some state jurisdictions whilst working deep within others. Geographically this space of action connects local scale oil palm estates and plantations with a transversal global supply chain stretching from producing to consuming countries. In producing countries, it creates frontiers, which are geographically marked by established large-scale oil palm estates and associated mills belonging to large oil palm growers, most of them controlling over 100.000 hectares each (ZSL, 2018). The frontier is also transversal to this territorial insertion, bringing into relationship non-contiguous territories via global supply chains and the establishment of a specific ‘sustainable’ palm oil market for Western downstream firms competing with other countries (Schleifer, 2016).

RSPO as a space of political action did not appear from nowhere around the problem of sustainable palm oil. Rather, we can see that its creation is one moment in a continual process of reterritorialization of producer and downstream actor relationships. As such, it has an historical connection with large-scale southeast Asian growers, some of

them existing since pre-colonial times, allied with prominent downstream firms often linked to former colonial powers (The Netherlands, UK). In this way, it builds on already existing territorialisation processes and producer states’ regulatory power opening land up for large-scale palm oil development (Cramb and McCarthy, 2016a,b; Brad et al., 2015). More critically still, RSPO standardisation provides additional legitimisation to these territorial interdependencies through its democratic and sustainability narratives (Schouten and Glasbergen, 2011).

RSPO standardisation has acquired its own internal coherence and social sense. This results from the imposition of a sustainability norm driven by managerial practices and discourses, including managerial constructions of interdependencies between people, nature and artefacts. This coherence is further reinforced by codes of conduct and a constant circulation of managers, information, knowledge and capital. Few members have held key positions within the RSPO, and especially in the BG. This provides the BG consistency interpreting the standard and especially when working in conjunction with jurisdictional bodies, e.g., the complaints’ panel. The meaning of ‘sustainability’ as agreed by the RSPO legitimises certain types of knowledge and governing practice, excluding others. Social and ecological concerns have been transformed into technical data and action plans supporting a commodification of nature (Richardson, 2015). Whereas certified palm oil production takes place in land, which is theoretically open to all kinds of people, in practice it is restricted to certain users whereby some interdependencies between people, nature and artefacts are supported over others within an agribusiness production model (Brad et al. 2015). Support has been for *inter alia*, secondary forests allocated to plantation companies for oil palm development and use of peatlands (until 2018); non-natural straight-lined borders; statistics to show nature-society connections; and plan-oriented actions. This way of working has reinforced the position of dominant downstream actors, consolidating RSPO political capacity to respond to its critics and marginalizing fundamental concerns expressed by other members over the dominant RSPO meaning of sustainability.

RSPO standardisation establishes prime beneficiaries, which are downstream firms, large-scale Southeast Asian growers and some international environmental NGOs. These actors have reinforced their already dominant positions along the supply chain (Oosterveer, 2015). Marginalised actors are independent smallholders and affected communities. Although actors often create rules on the assumption that they benefit all members, in their application, they benefit mainly dominant ones. Therefore, there is continuous creation of new rules to address non-inclusiveness problems, even though paradoxically, as we have argued, RSPO territorialisation maintains power inequalities. As well as making transparent dominant territorial sustainability visions, we also identified alternative visions of territorial interdependencies between people, nature and artefacts as held by marginalised actors. These support equitable development models; emotional and personal connections with land as customary rights; ancient natural symbols (trees, rivers) in human-nature connectivity.

Ultimately, this transnational political space of action comes into interaction (and, potentially, conflict) with other political spaces of action and territorial projects as pursued by local people, other NGOs or Malaysian and Indonesian state governments. Although beyond the scope of this article, other published work indicates that this is already happening. Actually, rival standards have been initiated by Indonesian and Malaysian Sates (Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil Standard – ISPO and Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil Standard – MSPO). According to Pacheco et al. (2018) these are governmental attempts to regain control over their ‘own’ territorial development, by re-claiming authority (Hidayat et al, 2018) and legitimacy, disparaging RSPO as a Westerner-led initiative (Hospes, 2014).

At the same time, things have changed since the RSPO’s establishment in 2004. Climate change linked to deforestation has emerged as a world wide concern; new technologies (Internet, satellite images and web portals such as “Global Forest Watch”) have allowed NGOs to

access deforestation issues in relatively cheap and accurate ways, and the number of independent smallholders has rapidly grown in Indonesia and Malaysia, seeking their economic share from the palm oil boom (Cramb and McCarthy, 2016b; Lee et al., 2014). Building on this changing environment, proactive social and environmental actors (including indigenous peoples, NGOs, grassroots movements) have built their own alliances along the palm oil chain (Pye, 2018). Today, they are successfully questioning the use of palm oil for agro-fuel to mitigate climate change and, in producing countries, they have registered landmark court cases against growers (Ruysschaert and Hufty, 2018). They have also started to use the RSPO as an “accountability” arena (Pye, 2016) where they expose what they view as ‘bad practice’ by RSPO members (Pye, 2016; Ruysschaert and Salles, 2016). Under this growing pressure, in 2018 RSPO members developed a new standard specific for independent smallholders. This new standard claims to value the inherent social relationships that these smallholders maintain with their relatives and their forest, a dramatic move from the historical standard. It remains to be seen how the implementation of this new standard will interact with the historical one (compete/complement) and affect the spatial redistribution of power based on commodified territorial interdependencies.

5.2. Conclusions

In this article we mobilise ‘territory’ as a “window on politics and governance” (Uitermark, 2015) and a theoretical lens to analyse the working of private global government. Territorialisation is grasped as a form of power and exercise of authority governing relationships between “people and things” (Valdivia, 2008) and more specifically, between people, nature and artefacts (Carter et al., 2019). We show how RSPO territorialisation is discreet and counter-intuitive, both deviating from cardinal-based RSPO principles of inclusive participation yet supporting them through a managerial discourse of sustainability. Studying territorialisation effects of agricultural standards enables to understand that these devices are not neutral, but create contentious development issues, especially in the tropics where they are widely used. In particular, this private political space of action intervening in geographical territories within nation states can destabilise local politics (Carter, 2014) as well as local models of territorial development (Schouten et al., 2012; Oosterveer, 2015).

Studying RSPO from a territorialisation perspective can offer us insights into how the RSPO continues to grow (at least in term of areas or volumes certified as ‘sustainable’) despite its critiques. This connects to the ability of well-established dominant actors along the supply chain (especially growers, downstream firms and environmental NGOs) to strike deals that maintain their political positions though the imposition of rules and socio-technological devices, legitimizing their approach by a democratic narrative. This is supported by a wider liberal ideological context that claims to have shifted control over deforestation activities to market forces (Larsen et al., 2018) and hence ‘beyond territorial politics’. Certification under these standards tends to overlook the fundamental issue of local communities’ dispossession from their lands, as well as the broader issue of industrial production that is driving agricultural expansion. Indeed, promoted by dominant players, certification schemes can give a false impression of ‘sustainability’, comforting the consumer, while in practice promoting agribusiness models over alternative ones, e.g., small-scale family agriculture.

As such, rather than bringing about fundamental changes in commodity production and consumption models, these agricultural ‘sustainability’ standards support only a marginal improvement of the dominant model. Based on large-scale standardised production, long distance trade and homogenisation of mass consumption, this model has been criticised as being responsible, at a global scale, for biodiversity loss, climate change and social inequity (GRAIN, 2016), as well as under-nutrition and obesity (Swinburn et al., 2019). In addition, these standards poorly protect local communities and indigenous

peoples’ ecologies and attachments to their lands, and actually further marginalize those actors whose custodial sustainability practices are increasingly recognized (Porter-Bolland et al., 2012).

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