



Interviewing a tractor driver in Bolivia.

A smallholder oil palm farm

## The Food Security Standard – addressing the Right to Food in sustainability standards and certification

Although more and more agricultural goods that are produced in food insecure countries are certified, most sustainability standards do not specially address food security and the Human Right to Adequate Food. The “Food Security Standard” aims to close this gap. It has recently been tested in five pilot countries with different crops in plantations and smallholder settings in Asia, Latin America and Africa – with promising results.

By **Rafaël Schneider, Tina Beuchelt and Liliana Gamba**

With the shift from petroleum-based to bio-based economies, the international demand for agricultural commodities is growing. More and more biomass is needed for food, feed, energy and industrial purposes, leading to increasing competition between the different uses. This can have adverse impacts on food security in biomass-producing countries, for example through agricultural production for exportation and local food production competing for land and water and through labour exploitation, environmental pollution or unfair labour contracts.

Consumers and civil society in Europe are becoming more concerned about the environmental and social impacts that imported products have had in their countries of origin. In the last two decades, voluntary sustainability standards addressing concerns regarding the environmental and social sustainability of agricultural commodities have proliferated, although with great differences in the scope of sustainability and feedstock types. While some focus on a specific commodity such as the Cotton Made in Africa Standard or the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO),

others refer to multiple crops such as the International Sustainability & Carbon Certification Standard (ISCC) or the Rainforest Alliance.

### Integration of the Right to Food in sustainability standards

With the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), governments, business and civil society have agreed on pathways to achieve sustainability. Governments are adjusting their strategies and legislation. Companies increasingly need to demonstrate sustainability in their international value chains and have to adjust their import or production structures. The primacy of food and nutrition security is highlighted in the SDG 2 on “Zero Hunger”. Its application within the agricultural and forestry sector, especially in food insecure countries, is widely discussed at the international level and stipulated along the civil society landscape. Yet only few proposals have been made for assessing food security aspects in voluntary, private certification standards for agricultural production, and they are hardly applicable in the context of voluntary certifi-

cations because of the extensive data collection and analysis they require.

This is where the “Food Security Standard” (FSS) comes in. Developed jointly by the Center for Development Research (ZEF) at Bonn University, Germany and the NGOs Deutsche Welthungerhilfe and WWF Germany, the Standard provides a set of practicable and measurable criteria ensuring the Right to Food (see Box on page 34). It is designed as a set that can be integrated in any existing sustainability standard in the agricultural sector and is applicable to all biomass types and uses, farm sizes and business types. The FSS is based on the Human Right to Adequate Food and the four dimensions of food security, i.e. availability, access, utilisation and stability.

The auditability of the FSS criteria and indicators and the practicability of the tools have been tested in cooperation with local producers and certification schemes within the framework of regular sustainability audits in food insecure regions in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Additionally, stakeholder workshops were carried out in each pilot region. The field



on the Kinabatangan River in Sabah/ Malaysia.

Auditing a group of smallholders in Zambia.

Photos: FSS Project

tests took place in smallholder as well as in large-scale agricultural settings, while the crops involved were oil palm, sugar cane, cotton and coffee. The following shows three pilot cases with contrasting but complementary results.

### Testing the Food Security Standard in plantations – the example of Bolivia

The FSS was tested in Bolivia in November 2018 within the regular audit of a group of sugar cane producers for the sustainability standard ISCC. According to the Global Hunger Index, the hunger situation in Bolivia is moderate. Food security has strongly improved in the last decade, but there are still concerns in some regions because of factors such as water scarcity and land conflicts. In the sugar cane production areas, social issues include precarious income of seasonal farm workers and their families, child labour, lack of employment contracts and bad conditions in the accommodation facilities of temporal workers. However, the situation has improved in the last decade thanks to better regulations and law enforcement.

The sugar cane is supplied to the Aguaí Sugar Mill, located in the Bolivian province of Santa Cruz. Aguaí's suppliers are diverse in size and organisational structure, but most of them are rather large, with areas varying from 800 to 15,000 ha. In addition to Aguaí's headquarters, five farms were visited on-site. They were different in their managing structure and facilities, but all were highly mechanised. Compliance with the FSS was audited through the inspection of documents, inquiries about the farms' management and interviews with farm workers about their food security situation,

labour rights, payments, etc. The auditors also interviewed representatives of municipal governments and a trade union as well as a physician. The interviews with external stakeholders are an integral part of the FSS and help to cross-check and complement information. They also serve to identify potential negative, or positive, impacts on communities in the area of influence.

The pilot audit showed that the auditors had no difficulties in assessing compliance with the FSS criteria within the framework of the ISCC audit. The interviews with farm workers and key stakeholders provided a good overview of the food security situation of workers and communities. The FSS pilot audit in Bolivia reveals that large and medium size farms are in a position to comply with the FSS with acceptable additional efforts.

### Oil palm smallholders in Malaysia – close to compliance

Mixed results were obtained from a pilot test with RSPO-certified oil palm smallholders in Malaysia. Sustainability certification was commonly mentioned during stakeholder meetings and workshops with governmental departments, oil palm producers and mills, NGOs, farmers and researchers as having contributed to improving the living and working conditions on plantations and among smallholders. However, the stakeholders also pointed out that food insecurity persisted, mainly among (illegal) workers on plantations, casual workers and poor families. The visits to the certified smallholders showed that food insecurity was a problem for very small farmers with only

one or two hectares of oil palm. Smallholders with around seven hectares were food secure, had casual workers and lived in decent houses, while some even owned cars, especially when they had additional income opportunities. With some additional efforts within the farm setting (e.g. better working conditions for workers) the majority of smallholders could comply with the FSS. Additional support would only be needed for a few farmers to tackle their precarious situation – for instance through job creation programmes, promotion of other production models and by providing social security schemes.

### Challenges in highly food insecure countries – the example of Zambia

In Zambia, one of the most food insecure countries of the world, the FSS was tested in the context of smallholder cotton farming. It was expected that reaching compliance with the FSS would be difficult as the majority of the cotton farmers were confronted with food insecurity situations. Therefore, besides assessing the applicability of the FSS instruments, it was important to explore the question of whether and how the FSS instruments could be used in sustainability certifications in such contexts and how to pave the way towards compliance.

The test was carried out in cooperation with the sustainability standard "Cotton made in Africa" (CmiA) and the company Alliance Gineries Ltd. The CmiA standard encompasses social, environmental and economic criteria and is designed to improve the living conditions of African smallholder farmers and to promote environmentally friendly cotton

### THE FOOD SECURITY STANDARD AT A GLANCE

The Food Security Standard (FSS) is rooted in the Human Right to Food and the related 'Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security' which were adopted unanimously by all Member Nations of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in November 2004. Although these guidelines predominantly address national governments, they also oblige the private sector to respect and support the implementation of the Right to Food. In this regard, the FSS is not raising the bar, but aims to ensure the fulfilment of internationally recognised rights and hence is a means for the private sector to prove its due diligence regarding the Right to Food.

The Food Security Standard provides a set of practicable and measurable criteria. It is not a stand-alone sustainability standard but is designed as a best-practice set which is to be added as a whole to the existing sustainability standards. The FSS catalogue consists of 35 criteria categorised under 17 themes ranging from topics like the respect of national food security strategies to gender equity. It is applicable to all biomass types and uses, farm sizes and business types. The FSS was jointly developed by the Center for Development Research (ZEF) and the NGOs Welthungerhilfe and WWF. The FSS Project is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL) via Fachagentur für Nachwachsende Rohstoffe e. V. (FNR). The final version of the FSS is expected to be available by mid-2020.

For more information, see [www.welthungerhilfe.org/food-security-standard-project/](http://www.welthungerhilfe.org/food-security-standard-project/)

production. Alliance Gineries receives cotton from around 40,000 smallholders countrywide under an outgrower scheme. As a CmiA verified company, Alliance Gineries trains the farmers not only on good agricultural practices, but also on the social, environmental and economic aspects covered by CmiA criteria. The FSS was tested within the field visits of small farmer groups located in the Central and Southern provinces.

Cotton is an important income source for the farmers. The revenues are used to cover household expenditures such as school fees and materials, medical treatment, etc. By complying with the CmiA requirements, Alliance Gineries is likely to positively impact farming practices through trainings and cotton purchasing practices. However, all farmers interviewed are confronted with at least temporary food insecurity. They have to reduce their usual food intake from three to two or even to one daily meal for several weeks or even months throughout the year. Several factors drive their food insecurity, among them the irregular rainfall pattern in the last two to three seasons. Other factors include reliance on just a few food and cash crops, poor road infrastructure, insufficient storage capacity, extremely low levels of mechanisation, limited energy supply, lack of extension systems, other employment opportunities and social services such as health and social security systems. Addressing the complexity of food insecurity among smallholders in such an extreme setting is a challenge. Cotton gineries can play an important promoting role, but their capacities

are limited when it comes to providing solutions to structural problems.

The test showed that given these multiple challenges, the audited farmers would currently not be in the position to comply with the FSS. Moreover, the pathway to compliance is expected to be long and difficult. Not being able to get FSS certified within sustainability certification could bring disadvantages for the smallholder farmers, such as the exclusion from lucrative and increasingly demanding European markets. This has to be avoided. Further disadvantages for food insecure small farmers would even worsen their precarious situation. The question is how to deal with this challenge.

#### **Paving the way for food insecure smallholder farmers – what role for the FSS?**

While highly food insecure situations are the result of several factors, the private sector can still contribute to food security as part of its responsibility and obligations regarding the Right to Food. One option in food insecure settings is to use the FSS criteria and tools for monitoring progress towards food security. This approach, referred to so far as Food Security Sensitive Management (FoSSeM), could support sustainability-certified smallholder farmers and first buyers in identifying gaps and assessing their progress towards food security. It helps all actors along those value chains to assume and show their responsibility for the Right to Food. The responsibilities and action

pathways for each actor along the value chain still need to be defined, and criteria have to be identified how these can be assessed and monitored. This is a highly complex and difficult endeavour since overcoming food insecurity requires government action. At the same time, missing governmental initiatives should not relieve private actors from their responsibility to be a driver of change.

As the results of the pilots have shown, the FSS can be integrated into a regular sustainability audit with a reasonable additional effort. With structured interviews and clear criteria and indicators, the FSS can reliably capture the food security situation of workers, farmers and communities and identify gaps. While plantations can integrate the FSS requirements without major difficulty, only better-off smallholder farmers will, with some external support, be able to meet all requirements of the FSS criteria. Stakeholder workshops in several countries highlighted the relevance of and need for a Food Security Standard. While questions regarding the FSS were of course raised, there was general agreement that it is a practical way forward to address food security in agricultural settings. Although plantations, smallholder organisations or their representatives have indicated their willingness to implement the FSS, they clearly link additional investments to comply with the FSS to market demand and price premiums. The responsibility along the value chain, especially in consuming countries, hence needs to be addressed as well, and a demand for the FSS has to be established. The European Union became the first region worldwide to call on its governments to develop specific National Action Plans to implement the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. All actors involved in agricultural value chains, including the private sector in consumer countries, can and must commit themselves to overcoming hunger and to protecting the Right to Food. This should be done in a credible and comprehensible way. The FSS can support the efforts of companies by providing an approach to facilitate the assessment and monitoring of their impacts on the local food security.

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