

The legitimacy of certification actors in forest climate governance

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Background

- Non-state actors continue to play an important role in transnational climate governance (cf. Paris Agreement, Art. 6).
- Since the late 1990s this has also been the case with emission trading where non-state actors were involved in project-based global carbon markets, namely in the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and voluntary carbon market.
- In the voluntary carbon market carbon credits were generated, certified and sold, also from A/R and REDD+ projects.



Fig 1: © <http://carbonfinanceforcookstoves.org>

- Non-state actors shape climate governance and hold „private authority“ (Green, 2013)
- Need for legitimacy concepts to analyse these actors
- Focus on the Gold Standard Foundation (GSF)
 - (Co-) founded by the WWF in 2003
 - Acknowledges elements of FSC certification in forest projects
 - Certification includes sustainable development benefits

Research Questions

RQ1: How can legitimacy and legitimation of non-state certification actors be conceptualized?

RQ2: As how legitimate is the Gold Standard Foundation perceived at the transnational level?

Theoretical Assumptions

Legitimacy concepts can either refer to (1) legitimacy as claim of a ruler (*Legitimitätsanspruch*), (2) or legitimacy as belief held by those ruled (*Weber's Legitimitätsglaube*) or (3) the reciprocity of both.

Analytical Framework RQ2

The analysis builds on Bernstein (2011) definition of legitimacy as “the acceptance of shared ruled by a community”. Legitimation is seen as a dynamic process of justification and acceptance. Bernstein's approach is combined with argumentative discourse analysis (Hajer, 2009) based on the definition of discourse as:

“a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities” (Hajer 2009: 44)

Methods

Conceptual review (RQ1)

Review of concepts based on selected key authors of

- legitimacy beyond the state and/or
- legitimacy of non-state actors and hybrid governance in the field of sustainability governance.

Analysis of the Gold Standard Foundation (RQ2)

Qualitative document analysis and 27 expert interviews
Argumentative discourse analysis (-> storylines)

References

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Results (RQ1)

Table 1: Legitimacy approaches to analyse non-state certification actors

	Democratic legitimacy	Results-based legitimacy	Sociological legitimacy	Discursive legitimacy
Type of approach	Normative	Evaluative (performance)	Sociological institutionalist	Discursive
Legitimacy understood as	Obeying legal rules Democratic institutional mechanisms Deliberative process	Performance of actors and policies	Appropriate decisions & actions according to existing social structure	Power dynamics in legitimation processes
Criteria	Stakeholder Representation & Participation	Effectiveness / Goal-achievement	Social structure (norms, rules, discourses)	Dominant and alternative discourses
	Accountability & Transparency		Legitimacy communities (perceptions, epistemic authority)	Discursive coalitions
	Deliberation			Endorsement practices
Key Authors	Dingwerth, Bäckstrand		Bernstein	Hajer, Black

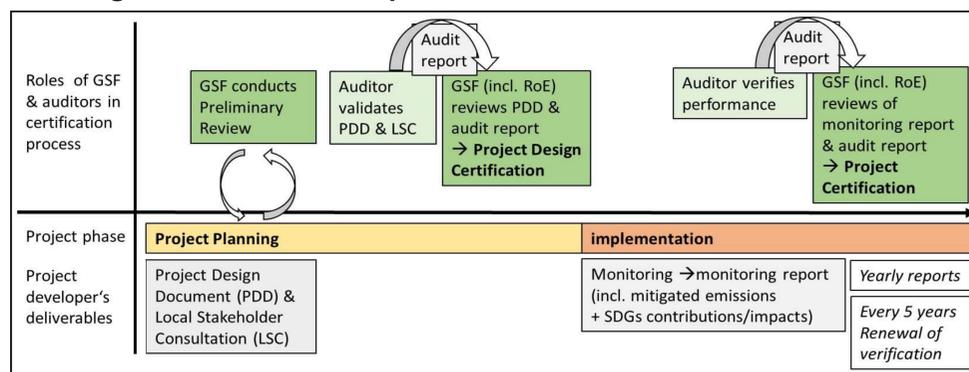
Own elaboration, 2017.

Results (RQ2)

The Gold Standard Foundation claims:

- To be a best practice standard → sustainability benefits (SDGs)
- To be expert-led and inclusive
- To have rigorous rules and safeguards
- To ensure accurate data through third-party auditors
- To be supported by civil society

Fig. 2: The certification process of the Gold Standard Foundation



Own elaboration, 2017.

Perceptions of legitimation communities at UNFCCC level:

- Dominant discourse accepts most claims; pro carbon markets, GSF seen as valuable “add-on” to Clean Development Mechanism
- Alternative discourse → Carbon offsetting is the wrong way to address climate change, involved certification actors are seen as illegitimate

Main Findings & Conclusions

- Four types of legitimacy concepts could be identified: democratic, results-based, sociological and discursive legitimacy.
- The combination of the latter two was most helpful to analyse non-state certification actors like the Gold Standard Foundation.
- Legitimation is considered as socially constructed process of justification and acceptance, (re-)produced by discursive coalitions and shared storylines.
- While the dominant discourse supports and accepts the GSF's claims and carbon offsetting in general, the alternative discourse raises fundamental critique on global carbon markets and the involved actors.



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