

Abstract

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“Organic + Fair = sustainable? Shrimp farming and banana production in Ecuador”

This ethnography follows organic and fair trade certified shrimp and banana from Ecuador. The following-study focuses on questions concerning the opportunities, risks, and limitations of certifications as well as possible alternatives. To conceptualize the research field the thesis discusses and combines considerations about commodity chains, networks and circuits. Emphasis is laid on recent contributions based on stakeholder-approach, convention theory, governmentality studies (in debate with virtualism and discourse analysis) and approaches from cultural geography. These contributions complement the 'classics' (Global Commodity Chains, Global Production Networks, Global Value Chains), turning to questions concerning forms of knowledge, programmes and practices applied in trying to coordinate global production, distribution, and consumption processes.

The field study, based on principles of qualitative research and applying a mix of qualitative methods (participant observation, problem oriented interviews, focus groups), leads to selected places, actors and events along the chains and through the networks, especially within the region of production, the coastal plain in the South-East of Ecuador, which unites the country's main shrimp producing zone and the world's most productive banana growing area. Data are generated in interaction with local stakeholders (through interviews and participant observation with small producers, workers, plantations, shrimp farms, mangrove residents, NGOs, standard setting organizations) and by elaborating their historical embeddedness. The interpretations of the data give an insight into current contentions about the future conceptions of organic and fair trade initiatives.

While all stakeholders in the banana sector generally agree that certification is a useful instrument, the discussion centres around how this instrument should be designed, with contentions concerning the integration of different firm types and production systems, spatial limits to scalability, and standard setting organization becoming more and more demanding as well as increasingly influenced by trade corporations. However, the shrimp sector is divided into two camps, with NGOs, dedicated to mangrove protection and speaking on behalf of the native inhabitants of the mangroves, rejecting the idea of certification as a useful tool for sustainable development supported by shrimp producers and certification entities. Hence contentions are rather about whether certifications should be applied in this sector at all.

Whereas the singular implementation of organic and fair trade modes of production leads to relative improvements vis-à-vis conventional practices, the up-scaling and introduction of new operating and production systems increases tensions which the certification entities have not yet addressed. Despite intended benefits behind organic and fair trade certification, it may prove over ambitious to up-scale these initiatives due to limiting contextual factors. Ignoring local forms of knowledge and local initiatives, rapid up-scaling may lead to decreasing depth effects, with standard setting organizations loosing track of their original goals as social movements.