ARTICLE

Organizing for social sustainability: governance through bureaucratization in meta-organizations

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The difficulties nation states face when attempting to use traditional legal means to cope with transnational phenomena such as environmental degradation, international labor conditions, and global trade have created an opportunity for the emergence of new types of regulations. These rules are often issued by organizations that produce voluntary measures such as standards and action plans to influence the behavior of individuals and institutions. These are in many cases meta-organizations that have other organizations rather than individuals as members. They are important links in the process of creating and diffusing dominant definitions in the “ideoscape” of influential policy concepts such as sustainable development. This article explores how two meta-organizations, Fairtrade International (FLO) and Organic Forum, shape the concepts of fair trade and organic food by providing ideas and content to the ideoscape of sustainable development. We argue that this process takes place by governance through bureaucratization in which fair trade and organic food become formalized, precisely defined, and made visible. This in turn determines how—or even if—the social dimension of sustainability can be made into policy. Furthermore, we find explanations in these processes as to why the social dimension of sustainability tends to be the most underdeveloped. We conclude that bureaucratization is also a form of politics, although not one that is as easily recognizable as an open power struggle.

KEYWORDS: sustainable development, globalization, standardization, organizations, food industry, bureaucracy, social conditions

Introduction

The difficulties nation states face when attempting to use traditional legal means to cope with transnational phenomena such as environmental degradation, international labor conditions, and global trade have created opportunities for new types of regulations (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000). Most often, organizations issue these measures as voluntary or soft rules such as standards, action plans, rankings, and indicators to influence the behavior of individuals and institutions. These organizations are often meta-organizations that have other organizations rather than individuals as members (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). Even though they do not have much formal authority over their members, meta-organizations are crucial for understanding the mechanisms through which globalization occurs (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). Among other things, they play an active role in giving meaning to powerful concepts that shape organizations’ (as well as individuals’) reality and activities (Meyer et al. 1997).

One such concept is sustainable development and its three dimensions: economic, ecological, and social. Of these three facets, the social dimension is often the most difficult to incorporate into actual projects and policies (Dillard et al. 2009; Casula Vifell & Soneryd, 2010). The social dimension generally includes human welfare, quality of life, social justice, social cohesion, cultural diversity, democratic rights, gender issues, workers’ rights, broad participation, social capital development, and individual capabilities (Boström, 2010). An explanation for the difficulties might be found in the way that the concept is filled with meaning and disseminated.

It is therefore vital to study meta-organizations because they are important links in the process of producing powerful definitions in the “ideoscape” of sustainable development, in particular social sustainability (Appadurai, 1996). The notion of an ideoscape suggests that ideas and policies transcend national borders. Traditionally, political and ideological boundaries have been confined to nation states and intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU). In the new landscape, competing political and ideological communities become more important. Many of the actors involved in shaping the ideoscape of sustainable development are meta-organizations that perform meta-governance, which we understand as gov-
ernance of self-regulatory networks (Sørensen & Torfing, 2007). Such a perspective recognizes that some actors are more powerful in defining and controlling the ideoscape.

Studies of meta-governance have investigated the role of state actors as meta-governors (O’Toole, 2008). Our approach to the study of meta-organizations and meta-governance is somewhat different—as are the particular consequences that follow from it. As states are not the only ones trying to govern networks, we argue that meta-organizations carry out particular types of meta-governance practices that we call “governance through bureaucratization.” Even though the content of a certain policies might be soft (in the sense of not being legally binding), meta-organizations are able to exercise authority over their members by effectively forcing them to comply with certain established processes. Some actors are also better at coping with certain types of informal procedures than others (Bryer, 2010). Temporal disciplining and process governance have been identified as important tools for controlling the activities of participating organizations (Jacobsson, 2004). Having them perform the same type of tasks at a specific time and establishing common deadlines are two examples of governance through bureaucratization.

We argue that such governance in meta-organizations affects strong policy concepts such as social sustainability. Governance through bureaucratization is an often neglected area of policy research, which tends to focus on open negotiations and bargaining between actors (see Johansson & Tallberg, 2010). In this article, we examine how two meta-organizations, Fairtrade International (FLO) and Organic Forum (Ekologiskt Forum), a Swedish platform organization for organic food production, shape the social dimension of sustainability, infusing the concept with ideas and content via governance through bureaucratization.

We divide governance through bureaucratization into three analytical dimensions. First, we have formalization, when an increasing number of organizational procedures—for example meetings—become routinized and scripted by formal structures. Second, precision involves ongoing efforts to clarify and refine the definition of a particular concept. Finally, visibility entails making the policy apparent through published action plans and standards. It is thus possible to argue that governance through bureaucratization pushes the idea of social sustainability through a filter of procedures that package it accordingly into different categories (cf., Handelman, 2004).

Before turning to the analytical section of this article, we describe the organizations that we investigated. FLO is a meta-organization that was born out of the fair-trade movement which has been active since the 1940s. However, it was not until 1988 that the first fair-trade label, Max Havelaar, was developed in the Netherlands. In the intervening two decades, a number of fair-trade labels were established. Many of these organizations began to cooperate, an arrangement ultimately formalized as FLO in 1997 (see, e.g., Renard, 2003; Raynolds et al. 2007; Reinecke, 2008; Thedvall, 2010). In 2002, FLO developed its own label that most national labeling initiatives now use. Standards have been developed to which products must adhere to keep the FLO label. The process of organizing FLO’s work and developing the standard defines and makes the notion of fair trade more precise. FLO’s ambition is to take into account on policies that are closely linked with sustainable development. FLO develops policies that establish fair trade as a way to create sustainable market interactions (see, for example, Young & Utting, 2005) while Organic Forum works on policies that promote organic food as a means to achieve more sustainable production and consumption. The two cases focus on topics highly relevant for understanding how the social dimension of sustainability is defined and subsequently used by other organizations. Our empirical analysis contributes to an understanding of how meta-organizations influence the definition of social sustainability.

We speak of bureaucratization in the Weberian sense: policy processes are guided by formal rules, clearly defined policies, and decision-making hierarchies, and produce archived, written documents (Weber, 1958). Furthermore, a central feature of bureaucratization is that it generates predictability in decision making within organizations (Ahrne, 1989). The process of organizing FLO’s work and developing the standard defines and makes the notion of fair trade more precise. FLO’s ambition is to take into account on policies that are closely linked with sustainable development. FLO develops policies that establish fair trade as a way to create sustainable market interactions (see, for example, Young & Utting, 2005) while Organic Forum works on policies that promote organic food as a means to achieve more sustainable production and consumption. The two cases focus on topics highly relevant for understanding how the social dimension of sustainability is defined and subsequently used by other organizations. Our empirical analysis contributes to an understanding of how meta-organizations influence the definition of social sustainability.

1 Formerly known as the Fairtrade Labelling Organisations International (FLO).
2 The data have been collected through participant observation, interviews, and document studies. We have followed FLO’s work in determining its standards and criteria for fair trade since 2006 through interviews and document studies. In the case of Organic Forum, we studied the development of its Action Plan 2010 for increased organic production and consumption in 2008–2009. In the FLO case, eleven interviews were conducted with members of the FLO Board of Directors and the FLO Standards Committee. Interviews have also been carried out with Rättvisemärkt (the Swedish representative in FLO) in Sweden as well as FLO’s certification organization, FLO-Cert. The changes of the standards and the organization of FLO have also been investigated through extensive document studies. In the Organic Forum case, ten interviews were conducted with members of the steering group as well as with representatives from other organizations taking part in the process. Participant observations were carried out during presentation of the finalized plan and during hearings and activities organized by Organic Forum related to implementing the plan. In total, four participant observations were conducted during such activities, which usually lasted 2–4 hours.
3 For a historical overview, see Raynolds et al. (2007).
account all the dimensions of sustainable development, with a focus on social sustainability.

Organic Forum is, as most meta-organizations, national. Established in 2002, it functions as a meeting place for actors interested in developing organic production. In addition, it brings together organizations interested in shaping Sweden’s position in the EU concerning these issues. The organization is partly financed by the Swedish Board of Agriculture (Jordbruksverket) and housed within the Royal Swedish Academy of Agriculture and Forestry (Kungliga Skogs- och Landbruksakademien–KSLA). Organic food production has steadily increased in Sweden over the last two decades, but supply shortages were still seen as a persistent problem. To increase production and consumption of organic food, Organic Forum enlisted stakeholders to help develop an action plan. The participating organizations were producers and consumers, labeling organizations, environmentalists, and public authorities (Ekologiskt Forum, 2007). The action plan aimed to increase overall production by 25% and for 20% of cultivated land to be farmed sustainably by 2010. The targets were political goals determined by the Swedish government and parliament (Jordbruksdepartementet, 2006).

Governance through Bureaucratization in FLO and Organic Forum

**Formalization of the Process**

The formalization of activities leads to the adoption of certain types of structures, procedures, and working methods, while others become inappropriate (Røvik, 2000). Formalization is understood as the establishment of hierarchical decision-making structures and institutionalized rules, as well as specialization and division of labor so as to create predictability—a central bureaucratic value (Simon, 1957). We view required participation in the actual formalization of activities, such as establishing committees that meet regularly and in developing document templates, as a governance tool. This is an example of governance through bureaucratization, which in this case consists of processes and structures that gently force the participating organizations to develop internal policies and ideas that match the goals of the meta-organization.

There are ongoing efforts within FLO to divide and categorize the various units and departments, as well as their associated tasks and roles. During its fourteen years of existence, the organization’s governance structure has expanded both vertically and horizontally. The membership has changed dramatically, from including only the national labeling organizations to encompassing fair-trade producers. FLO’s growth has resulted in the need to define specialized tasks, including the creation of several committees that assist the board of directors. The FLO website lists the Standards Committee, the Nomination Committee, and the Finance Committee in its organizational chart. The board is now also assisted by a Governance Committee that deals with terms of reference, voting procedures, and so forth and an Audit Committee that monitors the organization’s finances. Furthermore, a specific group known as the Leadership Team was established in 2009/2010 to handle future opportunities and problems in promoting fair trade.

The process of developing the FLO standards has subsequently been formalized, in turn affecting the division of tasks among the participants. Another example given by one member in the Standards Committee is that the group used to be more involved in the details of standard setting, but has recently begun to delegate an increasing share of this work to the standards unit (which itself has grown in size). Furthermore, in 2004, the organization was divided into FLO e.V and FLO-Cert. This split was partly prompted by the fact that FLO-Cert received ISO 65 accreditation (from the International Standards Organization) and this status does not allow the standard-setting activities to be carried out by certifying organizations. Accordingly, FLO-Cert is an independent profit-making organization that certifies producers and traders according to the FLO e.V standards.

These changes have resulted in increased formalization in the processes of defining, as well as determining, which companies and what products can...
use the fair-trade label. The more formal forums and
decision-making hierarchies that the definition of fair
trade passes through, the less room for maneuver
there is for the various actors to interpret the concept
in accordance with their own interests (see also
Thedvall, 2006). In the formalization process, com-
promises and agreements occur that are difficult to
overlook and defy. Governance through bureaucrat-
ization affects what fair trade, and in turn what the
ideoscape of sustainable development, might include.

The action plan for increased organic food pro-
duction and consumption was developed as a tempo-
rary project which, as is often the case, took place
within the framework of a more permanent organiza-
tion, Organic Forum (Sahlin-Andersson &
Söderholm, 2002). This proved important in how the
project was formalized in terms of developing spe-
cialized tasks.

First, according to the Organic Forum leadership,
organizations included in the steering and the synthe-
sis groups were found in their preexisting network of
actors. These tended to be organizations dealing
primarily with agriculture and nature conservation,
notably the Organic Farmers, the Federation of Swe-
dish Farmers, KRAV (the national labeling organiza-
tion for organic food products), and the Swedish So-
ciety for Nature Conservation. This configuration of
organizations was mainly concerned with the eco-
logical and economic dimensions of sustainability
and issues pertaining to social sustainability were
excluded from the plan at the outset although nothing
in the mandate required this particular orientation
(Jordbruksdepartementet, 2006). Other issues that
could have been included in the action plan but were
left unaddressed were ecological aquaculture and
organic fish products. These items were clearly re-
lated to organic food production and consumption,
but Organic Forum mainly included organizations
that worked specifically on organic farming rather
than food products in general.

Second, the format for developing the action
plan purposefully entailed the establishment of short
deadlines and this meant that members of already
established networks were recruited to serve within
the formal governing bodies. Furthermore, because
the first steering group was unable to complete its
task due to divergent opinions about the content of
the plan, a new steering group, with even narrower
representation, was subsequently appointed by the
first steering group. Several interviewees from this
group stated that they expected the discussions to
become easier if those actors guided by strong man-
dates and ideologically biased arguments were ex-
cluded. That the group was reorganized to meet the
deadline illustrates the importance of governance
through bureaucratization. As the first steering group
appointed to deal with the plan failed to reach agree-
ment, the original deadline was breached and a re-
quest for an extension was submitted to, and granted
by, the Ministry of Agriculture. However, this delay
meant that once the draft plan was complete, there
was no time to circulate it for comments from inter-
ested parties.

The formalization process meant that actors
dealing with social aspects of organic food were nei-
ther represented in the steering groups nor invited to
take part in the hearings, as no such organizations
belonged to the Organic Forum network. Since the
plan was not circulated after it was finalized, no other
mechanisms existed to bring social issues to the table.
The formalization took on specific traits due to the
particular model of collective action (e.g., deadlines,
steering groups, synthesis groups) that was adopted.
The process of governance through bureaucratization
limited the representation of stakeholders, and
thereby potentially also the plan’s policy impact, as
not all concerned with organic food were inclined to
assume responsibility for implementation.

**Precision of Scope**

Precision entails the process of defining the
scope of fair trade and organic food. Processes of
precision are central features of bureaucracies as they
aim to organize activities in a rational and stable
manner (Weber, 1958; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004;
Handelman, 2004). Governance through bureaucrat-
ization takes the form of classifying individuals,
things, and ideas into categories, which shape the
objects of policy making by providing definitions of
what is desirable, possible, and thinkable in the ide-
oscpe of sustainable development. They affect the
way that policies are formulated and, in turn, what
can be seen as fair trade and organic food. The fol-
lowing section shows how the scope of fair trade and
organic food has become more precisely defined and
restricted through the creation and definition of spe-
cific categories, such as research and development or
nondiscrimination. This process determined the ac-
ceptable meanings of social sustainability. It is visi-
ble in our two cases, FLO and Organic Forum.

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5 The organizations represented in the first steering group were the
Swedish Association for Daily Commodities (Svensk Dagligvaruhandel), the Swedish Board of Agriculture, the Centre
for Sustainable Agriculture/Swedish University for Agricultural Sciences (CUL/SLU), the Federation of Swedish Farmers, the
Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, the Organic Farmers (Ekologiska Lantburkarna), KRAV, KSLA, and the Swedish
Cooperative Union (COOP/KF). The final steering group that
presented the action plan consisted of representatives from the City
of Göteborg (Göteborgs Stad), Milko, the Swedish Board of
Agriculture, the Swedish Cooperative Union (KF), the Federation
of Swedish Farmers, and the consultant firm Goodpoint (which
 spearheaded the project).
FLO aims to promote sustainable development by improving working and trading conditions for disadvantaged producers, according to the FLO website, in this case producers in the global south (FLO, 2008). To meet this vision, the organization has developed a fair-trade label that is governed by a set of standards. Standards are in themselves bureaucratic because they have to be defined to form objective and stable categories that can be used in a variety of contexts. Built into the bureaucratic processes is the ongoing, but ultimately unattainable, pursuit of the “best” and most rational standards. Such circumstances create a need to continually improve the existing standards, and this is what has happened in the case of FLO. Even though on the surface they appear to have remained the same since the larger categories have been relatively stable, the FLO standards have been in constant flux as their definitions and structures have been redrafted to be more precise.

As an example (see also Thedvall, 2010), the previous version of the Generic Fairtrade Standards for Small Producer Organizations (valid from December 17, 2007) and the current version (valid from August 15, 2009) both have the following rubrics under the heading “Social Development”: Fairtrade adds Development Potential, Members are Small Producers, Democracy, Participation and Transparency, and finally Nondiscrimination. While similar to the previous version, however, the current standards are much more detailed. One example is the minimum requirements for Democracy, Participation, and Transparency (see Appendix). The previous version stated:

> An organizational structure is in place which enables effective control by the members. There is a General Assembly with direct or delegated voting rights for all members as the supreme decision-taking body, and an elected Board. The staff answers to the General Assembly via the Board. The organization holds a General Assembly at least once a year. The Annual report and accounts are presented to and approved by the General Assembly. Administration is in place.

While the previous document describes the governing bodies and respective responsibilities in general, the newer standards are more detailed in outlining how tasks should be carried out and by whom. The current page-long version specifies, for example, that the meetings of the General Assembly must be properly minuted and signed by the president of the board, that at least one person is responsible for managing the organizational administration and bookkeeping and that the organization needs to have a bank account. Another example is nondiscrimination. The previous version states:

> The organization does not discriminate against members or restrict new membership on the basis of race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, disability, marital status, age, religion, political opinion, language, property, nationality, ethnicity or social origin. Furthermore, there must be no discrimination regarding participation, voting rights, the right to be elected, access to markets, or access to training, technical support or any other benefit of membership.

The current version elaborates by defining discrimination:

> Discrimination is making an unfair distinction in the treatment of one person over another on grounds that are not related to ability or merit. Where particular forms of discrimination exist within an economic sector or geographical region, the organization is expected to show progress towards removing them. Who may become a member of an organization, and the process for joining, must be made explicit in the constitution and/or the statutes. These may not include restrictions that discriminate against particular social groups on the grounds listed in the standard.

As part of governance through bureaucratization, FLO begins to prioritize the wordings and definitions in the standards to make its intentions more precise and less open to interpretation. In the case of FLO, this process defines the scope of fair trade within the ideoscape of sustainable development, in the process determining what social sustainability might entail. In these examples, social sustainability is democracy, participation and transparency, and nondiscrimination, but the scope of these ideas has been restricted by adding more precise definitions of what, for example, discrimination means. By governance through bureaucratization, the standards, on one hand, expand what may be standardized while, on the other hand, they make the standards more precise for determining what may be governed.

In the case of Organic Forum, the aforementioned formalization process affected the precision of scope since actors representing social issues were absent from the governing bodies and could not help set the agenda. The consequence was that the precision centered on already agreed upon definitions. This process was reinforced by formal deadlines that
limited time for reflection and more extensive discussions on the meaning of particular concepts.

The Swedish government and parliament issued the formal mandate for the action plan, but the formulations were vague and left considerable room for interpretation. The plan explicitly identified sustainable development and sustainable resource management as primary goals, but defined neither the concept as a whole nor its various dimensions (Jordbruksdepartementet, 2006).

For example, the synthesis groups were tasked with different topics related to the plan and asked to produce reports for the steering group. Joint knowledge production is often described as an important part of meta-governance and as affecting the content of interaction within a network (Ehrmann & Stinson, 1999; Klijn & Edelenbos, 2008). Joint knowledge production is an important locus for the definition of concepts and interpretation of data, and may accordingly become decisive for shaping the ideoscape of sustainable development. The synthesis groups covered six areas: primary production, knowledge and competence building, industry sectors, private consumption, large-scale households and restaurants, and commerce and markets. While ecological and economic issues were well represented in these groups, none of them dealt directly with the social aspects of sustainability. For instance, knowledge and competence building focused on disseminating national resource-management research, training in compliance with norms of organic agriculture, and so forth, but not with issues concerning research on the social aspects of converting to organic farming. Several groups drifted from their original mandates, but this was in the end considered a positive development as it revealed issues that the steering group had not initially seen as important. However, no group moved outside the boundaries of the ecological and economic dimensions, of including more topics on the agenda or widening the definitions of organic food.

The scope of the plan was furthermore shaped by previous organic food plans. In 1994, the Swedish Parliament decided to aim to increase organic production by 10% by 2000, and a subsequent plan concentrated on the period to 2005. These plans were clearly focused on ecological and economic dimensions of organic agricultural production and consumption and the new plan maintained the same scope (Jordbruksverket, 1996; 1999; 2001; Jordbruksdepartementet, 2006). In summary, the process of making the plan more precise had the effect of narrowing its original mandate.

Visibility of Policy Output

Visibility of policy output is the third dimension of governance through bureaucratization that shapes the ideoscape of sustainable development. We understand this as part of Weber’s (1958) notion of the importance of the written document as a record of decisions in terms of increasing stability and predictability. In this case, the published fair-trade standards and the action plan for organic food are outputs that make policy decisions visible and possible to circulate. When policies become visible, actors are constrained and enabled in their understanding and usage of, in this case, the concepts of fair trade and organic food. Hence, it becomes difficult to develop policies without referring to the ones published as standards and action plans. This dimension is especially important in meta-organizations using soft governance, since part of their influence is decided via “regulation by publication” (Snyder, 1994).

In the case of FLO, the standards are published and distributed through its website and FLO-Cert. Standard setting makes producers, traders, and retailers aware of what criteria they need to fulfill to use the fair-trade label. As part of the process of making certain standards more visible, related documents need to clearly express the meaning and intent of the label. The visibility of the process consequently becomes an important mechanism for requiring members to comply with the meta-organization’s goals. In the process of making policy visible through standard setting, all sorts of complementary documents—explanatory texts, policies, training manuals, standard operating procedures, and so forth—are written to facilitate interpretation of the standards as intended by the meta-organization. On the FLO website, the number of such documents about the organization and the concept of fair trade has grown significantly over time.

FLO has also sought to increase its visibility as an organization. This has included documenting its operating procedures by recording its terms of reference, nomination procedures, and certification-mark manuals. FLO additionally launched a new approach, “Making the Difference: The New Global Strategy for Fairtrade” in 2009 to explain what it considers to be fair trade. The organization has set up a new version of the website to increase its international and transnational visibility. FLO publishes its standards for a number of products online, the more recent being soybeans and pulses in February 2009 and gold in March 2010. Moreover, the scope of the nuts and oil seeds standard has expanded to cover almonds through an easy entrance scheme that reduces the waiting time for producers seeking fair-trade certification. Similar measures have been implemented for the fresh vegetables standard that includes sweet po-
tatoes. In summary, FLO’s concept of fair trade—what it does and does not encompass—becomes official in the process of making it visible through documents and the website. FLO stakes its claim in the ideoscape of sustainable development by putting forth its version of social sustainability that example includes, for example, notions of democracy, participation, transparency, and nondiscrimination.

In the case of Organic Forum, the visible output of the process consisted of the printed action plan, evaluations, newsletters, and best-practice presentations that were circulated among the stakeholders, government agencies, and beyond. This diffusion reinforced the narrowed conception of sustainability, as no definitions or action items relating to social sustainability were visible in these documents. Hence, it was difficult for organizations approaching organic food from a social perspective to find anything that either supported their activities or that they could augment. The way in which the action plan was made public directed the focus toward the aspects of organic food that had previously been defined and formalized.

The action plan document took the form of a report printed in color and distributed to the participant organizations and was also submitted to the Swedish Minister for Agriculture. Furthermore, Organic Forum published information on the plan both during and after the project on its website. A newsletter from an assigned evaluator was also available on the website. These measures were regarded as an important part of raising awareness of the plan and pushing members to comply as the newsletters presented activities and statistics of the issues raised. Comparisons highlighting both positive and negative examples were also made across different sectors such as meat, milk, and bread production. However, no examples concerning the social aspects, such as how to bridge the divide between organic and traditional farming or how to foster better dialogue between these fields were presented.

In addition to Organic Forum’s promotional activities, some of the project participants posted the plan on their own websites. Other organizations dealing with organic farming also regularly reported on Organic Forum’s activities related to the plan. These organizations dealt mainly with organic agriculture, once again showing that visibility reinforces the narrowed scope and definition of organic production. The accepted understanding only included agricultural products and focused solely on the economic and ecological dimensions. As other actors became aware of the plan and its subsequent effects, they participated in determining the scope of subsequent projects that addressed similar topics. This further reinforced and promoted the accepted definitions of sustainability.

Conclusion: Bureaucratization of Social Sustainability

This article has explored how two meta-organizations, FLO and Organic Forum, have shaped the concepts of fair trade and organic food, thereby providing ideas and content to the ideoscape of sustainable development. We have shown how governance through bureaucratization has accomplished this objective. The meaning of fair trade and organic food has been pushed through a filter of formalization, precision, and visibility that has determined how—or even if—the social dimension of sustainable development could be turned into policy.

What then did social sustainability come to mean in the context of fair trade and organic food? In the case of FLO, the notion of fair trade is devoted to sustainable development with a focus on issues seen as belonging to the social dimension. These include, for example, workers’ rights, broad participation, and democratic rights. However, FLO’s version of social sustainability is of a particular character. Dependent on the organization’s goal of supporting producers and workers in the global south, it is built on the idea of concentrating on producer organizations that have to meet particular requirements with respect to democracy, participation, transparency, and nondiscrimination. The social dimension, then, is connected to a particular geographic area, which in turn determines which products can be fair traded. These products have to be produced and managed in specific ways. In the case of Organic Forum and its action plan, the social dimension is never openly addressed or even articulated. This dimension of sustainable development has been crowded out, leaving little room to address the social aspects of organic food production and consumption—despite that fact that the formal goals of the meta-organization and its action plan target sustainable development in general, including the social dimension.

We have introduced governance through bureaucratization to identify and explain a number of different ways in which the social dimension is shaped. First, by formalizing fair trade and organic food into standards and action plans governed by specific steering groups and committees, the bureaucratization process determines how decisions are made. Furthermore, it affects who is able to participate in the development of the policy at hand. Some actors may be left out depending on the particular way in which the process is formalized.

Second, the precision with which standards and action plans are articulated also plays a role in shap-
ing the meaning of the social dimension. This happens through categorization and the ongoing search for the “best” definition of the standard or the content of the action plan.

Finally, the notions of fair trade and organic food became visible through the publication and the distribution of documents and other texts. These texts presented particular visions of the social dimension that are included in the ideoscape of sustainable development.

Following this line of argument, a comparison between the two cases leads to the conclusion that meta-organizations that do not explicitly focus on the social dimension early on in their proceedings will be less likely to include such aspects as their activities become bureaucratized over time. FLO explicitly focuses on sustainable development in general.

A more overarching issue concerns how the scope of the social dimension is filled with meaning and comes to be understood. We see that governance through bureaucratization moves the process of defining social sustainability from the political arena to the bureaucratic realm thereby obscuring power struggles and the political aspects of such negotiation (see also Miller & Rose, 1990). The bureaucratic processes take on a life of their own as standards and action plans become more precise, formal, and visible through goal setting and evaluation in the quest to find the “best” criteria. Meta-organizations have the power—in the form of bureaucratization—to determine what social sustainability might mean. As issues of representation and participation are very rarely acknowledged in technical bureaucratic processes, the democratic aspects of governance through bureaucratization need to be further investigated. This would enhance our understanding of the legitimacy of the regulatory practices carried out by meta-organizations and how the social dimension has been neglected.

References


http://www.score.su.se/polopoly_fs/1.26403.1320939791!/FS Csocialsustainability.pdf.
Appendix: Democracy, Participation, and Transparency Minimum Requirements

1.3.1 Minimum requirements

1.3.1.1 An organizational structure is in place which enables effective control by the members. There is a General Assembly with direct or delegated voting rights for all members as the supreme decision-taking body, and an elected Board. The staff answers to the General Assembly via the Board.

Fairtrade wants to work with organizations that see themselves as a tool for supporting the social and economic development of small producers. The way in which an organization works can be a key factor in supporting development. Members must be enabled to participate in free, fair and transparent Board elections and to become involved in discussions about major decisions.

Where the organization considers it appropriate, an elected delegate system can be put in place.

The certification body will check whether the organization abides by its own stated rules and regulations (constitution, by-laws and internal policies, including the election processes).

1.3.1.2 The organization holds a General Assembly at least once a year.

The General Assembly is the supreme decision-making body of the organization. It is intended to enable all members to hold the organization’s Board and staff accountable for their activities, and to participate in defining the future strategies and activities of the organization.

For the General Assembly to function effectively, it must meet at least once a year.

The meetings must be properly minuted, signed by the President of the Board and at least one other member, and recorded. The minutes must contain a list of participants.

The organization must communicate the plans for the General Assembly in such a way as to reach all the members in time.

1.3.1.3 The organization’s annual report, budgets and accounts must be presented to and approved by the General Assembly.

This is a requirement common in most legal regulations for organizations of this kind.

For members to be able to hold the organization’s Board and staff accountable, the presentation and approval of the annual report and the accounts during the General Assembly are essential.

1.3.1.4 Administration is in place.

Participating in Fairtrade requires that the organization has an adequate administration.

There is at least one person (or committee) in the organization responsible for managing the organizational administration and book-keeping.

The organization also needs to have a bank account with usually more than one signatory.

The official records and documentation of the organization must be maintained in a central place and be accessible to all members.

Source: FLO, 2009