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"It's still a north to south relationship"

A critical discourse analysis on the power of evaluative research and representations of social change within Voluntary Sustainability Standards

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Abstract

Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSSs) build on market-based governance mechanisms to create fairer and more equitable terms of trade within smallholder-dominated agricultural value chains. Various frameworks and theoretical approaches have arisen to assess social impacts generated through VSSs; however, the findings are scattered and inconsistent. This thesis aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the conceptions of social change that guide evaluative research approaches. It examines how conceptions grounded in different development paradigms drive representations of social change and how these representations affect producers' power and voice. The study draws on secondary data sources for empirical evidence. It integrates a qualitative systematic literature review with poststructuralist critical discourse analysis. The study identifies significantly diverging and imbalanced representations of social change driven by underlying assumptions grounded in three main theoretical propositions of development: Liberal, Marxist and poststructuralist theory. The research establishes a linkage between representations and power dynamics and demonstrates the effects on producers' power and voice. The findings highlight the need to problematise discursive, subjectification and lived effects created through the conceptions of social change and to direct attention to persisting silences within social impact assessments of VSSs.

Key words: Voluntary Sustainability Standards; agricultural value chains; social change; development theories; power asymmetries; power and voice; agricultural producers

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
LMICs	Low- or middle-income countries
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
RQ	Research question
SLR	Systematic literature review
VSS	Voluntary sustainability standard
VSSSO	Voluntary sustainability standard setting organisation
WoS	Web of Science
WPR	"What's the problem represented to be?'

1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose and Aim

The concept of development and its underlying notion to bring about change for countries and inhabitants has been inherently linked to classic economist and early modern capitalist thinking since the 16th century (Peet & Hartwick, 2015; Potter et al., 2019). Until today, development remains closely linked to global capitalist structures of the economic system, which bears significant risks to the people in low- or middle-income countries (LMICs) who are supposed to be the 'beneficiaries' of development. At the same time these countries and their people are particularly vulnerable to market fluctuations or economic crises, as the current Covid-19 pandemic has shown (World Relief, 2022).

However, an increasing number of international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), industry associations, and other private actors are promoting market-based governance mechanisms to address environmental, social and economic sustainability challenges in smallholder-dominated agricultural value chains (Dietz & Grabs, 2021a). One of the most prominent market-based approaches to development are so-called voluntary sustainability standards (VSSs). The United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards defines VSSs as "rules that producers, traders, manufacturers, retailers or service providers may be asked to follow so that the things they make, grow or do don't hurt people and the environment" (UNFSS, n.d.).

While the definition remains relatively broad, it suggests a rather passive understanding of sustainability: the avoidance of harm. By contrast, representative agricultural VSS organisations such as Fairtrade International (2021:2) claim to pro-actively build "a world in which all producers can enjoy secure and sustainable livelihoods, fulfil their potential and decide on their future". The spectrum of potential outcomes for smallholders and other producers within VSSs seems broad, almost conflicting: from avoiding harm to secure, sustainable and empowered livelihoods. Especially the latter seems somewhat contradictory within a system that relies on standardised rules and control mechanisms to ensure compliance (COSA, 2013).

The ambiguity has provoked a variety of scholars from different disciplines to discuss and assess the sustainability outcomes of VSSs. Over the last three decades, economic and environmental effects have received significant attention within the academic debate, while much less consideration was given to the social dimension. However, more recently, the number of studies assessing the social impacts of VSSs is

growing. Nonetheless, as the concept of social sustainability remains debated within the development field, very different conceptualisation and theoretical approaches have arisen to evaluate the social impact of VSSs. Within these conceptions, what can be understood as the social dimension of sustainability standards continues to vary greatly (Janker & Mann, 2020).

This thesis aims to take a step back and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the social dimension of VSSs by reviewing and critically analysing the different conceptions that have emerged within evaluative research studies in the field. To this end, it examines what kind of social change these conceptions represent and what this reveals about their underlying theoretical development approaches. It further explores how these conceptions justify different forms of producer representations and recognition and how this affects producers' power and voice. Or, to use Fairtrade International's words, the producers' ability to 'decide on their future'.

Accordingly, the following research questions (RQs) will guide this thesis:

1. How is social change represented within evaluative research on agricultural voluntary sustainability standards in LMICs, and which underlying development theories can be identified to motivate these representations?
2. Which effects has the problematisation of social change on producers' power and voice?

A few terms within these RQs and the study at large might be contested or unclear and therefore need further clarification.

First, the term *social change* in this study incorporates two different but closely linked dimensions. On the one hand, it is based on the definition of social impact assessment by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) (2016:1): "a process of research, planning and the management of social change or consequences (positive and negative, intended and unintended) arising from policies, plans, developments and projects". This definition already alludes to the interlinkage of social impact assessment, social change, and development. It illustrates how different development interventions invoke the processes of social change. Building on this, the second dimension draws on the most common understanding of *development* as defined in the Cambridge Dictionary

(n.d.): “the process in which someone or something grows or changes and becomes more advanced”. Accordingly, in this study, social change reflects the notion that development is a process of change, which is assessed through social impact research and other evaluative studies.

It must be acknowledged that the concept and understanding of development are contested and evolving (and a proper reflection on it could fill many theses, probably without finding an exact answer). For the purpose of clarification, in this study development will be understood as “change, either for the better or for the worse“ (Brookfield, 1975, as cited in Potter et al., 2019:8). Accordingly, John Harris (2019:17) defines *development studies* as “a cross-disciplinary field of enquiry, concerned with analysing and understanding processes of social change”. The author adds that much of social science is interested in change but that development studies are concerned explicitly with structural and institutional change (ibid.) However, the type of processes, its focus and the strategies for achieving change, are considered to depend on the applied theoretical propositions, the so-called development theories (Harriss, 2014). *Development theories* in this study are thus defined as the theoretical propositions that allow development researchers and practitioners to understand how processes of change take place within institutional and societal structures.

Lastly, this study’s concept of *power and voice* draws on several sources. In the eminent book ‘*Voices of the poor: Can anyone hear us?‘,* Narayan *et al*. (2000) describe that the concept of power and voice reflects the perspective of poor people. The authors further describe that poor people experience a lack of voice and power within state as well as market interactions. Accordingly, in the latest IISD report, Elder *et al.* (2021:3) extended the concept to encompass people’s ability “to affect the rules and relationships governing their access and opportunities to use resources”. Finally, Sida (2017) defines power and voice as the ability of people to express their concerns, rights and priorities and to take part in decision-making affecting their interests on a household, community and national level. Accordingly, within this study, the concept of power and voice is understood as the ability of producers to make their perspectives heard, participate in decision-making and affect the rules that govern their access to markets.

1.2. Scope

It can be argued that this thesis takes a meta-level approach, which can seem a bit abstract and blurs the line between what it sets out to examine and what remains outside its focus.

It is thus essential to clarify the levels and parameters of inquiry in this study:

Level	Parameter
Macro	The plurality of perspectives and propositions that justify different conceptions of how development scholars perceive social change.
Meso	**The representation of social change in evaluative research on VSSs and the effects for producer communities.**
Micro	Subject the representation of this thesis to critical scrutiny.

Table 1. Levels of analysis and parameters of inquiry.

The main focus of this study is thus a meso-level approach for analysing representations of social change and their underlying theoretical conceptions within a specific group of academic literature to identify the effects this creates, especially for producer communities. The meso-level further connects the macro level - how development theories shape conceptualisation of change - with the micro-level - the problem representation this thesis creates through its theoretical approach.

However, it is equally important to consider what falls outside the scope of this thesis. The focus lies on evaluative research studies that consider the social dimension of sustainability across VSSs; hence this research does not aim to make any assertions about the representation of social change within development studies and theories more generally. It lays further outside the scope of this study to assess the performance across VSSs or identify and evaluate what prevailing social impacts have been identified.

Instead, this study aims to set the focus on analysing the underlying notions of social change, the effects that this creates, and whether specific theoretical assumptions can be identified within these representations. In order to do so, the thesis follows a clear structure, which is lined out in the next section.

1.3. Thesis Outline

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows: The subsequent chapter will situate the institutionalisation of VSSs into the broader paradigm shift of economic and

rural development during the neoliberal era. It will thereupon identify how the governance processes are debated within current academic research. The third chapter will outline the transformative and poststructuralist thoughts and concepts that guide this research and will present their application within the theoretical framework of this thesis. Chapter four considers the research design, data collection and extraction, as well as the positionality and limitations of this study. Applying the theoretical and methodological framework to the collected data allows for the analysis of this study to unfold. Chapters five and six will present the findings and discuss their implications and contributions to the broader scholarly conversation and debates within development studies. Lastly, a summary and reflection on the findings and their answers to the research questions will be provided, while implications for future research are pointed out.

2. Background

The following chapter aims to situate VSSs within the development era of their establishment as well as within the wider discussion on the implementation of VSSs.

2.1. The establishment of market-based governance mechanisms

The following chapter aims to give a brief overview of the central economic theoretical thinking during the development era of the 1970s-1990s, during which private standards and certifications developed and grew as a market-based governance mechanism.

VSSs developed in an era of economic and theoretical turnaround. The Keynesian social democracy, built on favouring state intervention for offsetting market inefficiencies, which has come into place in times of poverty and insecurity after the Second World War, became increasingly under attack by neoliberal proponents of free trade. Import substitutions and other state interventions into pricing and trading mechanisms were deemed misguided and argued to have distorted the standard economic principles (Peet & Hartwick, 2015). The 1970s and 1980s became an era of neoliberal economic thoughts and arguments for regaining free trade mechanisms. Liberal theorists such as Deepak K. Lal embraced the idea of 'mono-economics', based on the unbalanced growth theory of Albert Hirschman. The latter considered development as a series of disequilibria and tension to induce and channel human economic action (ibid.). Based on these beliefs, Lal (2000) claimed in his best-known book *The Poverty of 'Development Economics'* that 'traditional' liberal economics are applicable in the same way to developing as developed countries. These views promoted a return to a nearly free trade regime by restricting economic control and government interventions.

The rhetoric of free markets and trade liberalisation were most famously echoed in the neoliberal 'Washington Consensus' policy recommendations for encountering the debt crisis in developing countries during the 1980s (Peet & Hartwick, 2015). The era can thus be described as a promotion of market-led development strategies. Liberated markets were intended to result in global economic growth, which would ultimately 'trickle-down' and benefit all economies, developing as developed.

These neoliberal beliefs and policies set the stage for the development of market-based governance mechanisms promoting universal regulatory trade strategies and the

repositioning of agricultural producers within the dynamics of global production, trade and consumption (Fraser et al., 2014). While the first standard for quality and sustainability control, Demeter, emerged as early as 1928, the economic and political climate of the 1990s led the number of VSSs to grow exponentially (Marx & Wouters, 2014). However, it must be acknowledged that the development era has not only encouraged the establishment of VSSs but a larger paradigm shift in rural development approaches and policies.

At the core of the paradigm shift in rural development sits the notion that local agents must be given greater importance in driving social, economic, and political changes in their territories (Ambrosio-Albalá & Bastiaensen, 2010). The OECD (2006) describes the new rural paradigm as a policy and governance shift from the subsidisation of declining sectors towards an approach of strategic investments to develop productive activities in rural areas. It portrays the pushback of state interventions and an emphasis on endogenous growth mechanisms based on steady improvements in rural knowledge and production capacities (Peet & Hartwick, 2015). The strategy incorporated the prevailing concerns that the proportion of the rural population has steadily decreased, driven by rural out-migration, particularly the outflow of jobless young people, population ageing, a general drop in agricultural activities, and a collapse in rural labour force productivity (OECD, 2006). Delgado Serrano (2004) positions the new rural development approach as an attempt to produce processes of fundamental structural change in rural lands.

VSSs and their governance processes over smallholders in agricultural value chains can be considered on attempt for creating fundamental structural change. However, market-based approaches and neo-liberal rural development ideologies have spurred significant controversy concerning the "further unfolding of capitalism in rural areas" through the "expansion of capitalist forms of production and exchange" (Bebbington, 2001:3578). The next section will expand on such controversies in the current literature.

2.2. Literature review

The previous passage has given an insight into the economic ideologies and rural development approaches that have shaped the development of private market-based

governance mechanisms. The following section will now proceed to situate this thesis within the current academic debate on the power asymmetries within VSSs governance structures and implementations processes for achieving social change.

2.2.1. Institutionalisation of VSSs

While standards in agricultural practice have existed in many forms, such as industry, quality or safety standards, VSSs have gained recognition rather recently (Marx & Wouters, 2014). The authors describe VSS as a private, market-based, transnational governance tool for pursuing sustainable development (ibid.). The description highlights the fact that VSSs are based on and governed privately from within market dynamics, thus operating independently from national public intergovernmental bodies (Bakker et al., 2019; Marx, 2017). Neilson (2008) outlines that many VSSs were established by joint arrangements of enterprises and NGOs in the 'North' to specifically address agricultural commodity production in the South.

Wijaya and Glasbergen (2016) point to the fact that governments from both 'North' and 'South', are rarely recognised as members of the governance arrangements, although VSSSOs maintain extensive ties with them. The authors further stress that the new certifying schemes reproduce liberal ideas of achieving sustainability through market mechanisms in situations where governments are unwilling or unable to address many of the sustainability aspects of agricultural value chains (ibid.) This highlights a very critical point and potential for tension, as such an approach could be argued to weaken further, or at least to have no positive influence on the different local public governance systems in the countries and regions targeted by VSSs. Furthermore, it positions the producing countries as incompetent in establishing the 'right' governance criteria, where 'right' is defined from a position of superiority of expert knowledge in the predominantly developed nations from which VSSs originate. However, the interlinkages between private and public governance mechanisms have been assessed in a growing body of research, and some studies have presented evidence of the successful cooperation and inclusion of private standards into public governance mechanisms (Gulbrandsen, 2014; Marx, 2017).

Nevertheless, the institutionalisation in public policies is only one aspect within the growing scope of interdisciplinary research on sustainability standards. Marx et al.

(2022) identify three more major areas of research: the variation in the institutional design of VSSs, and the effectiveness of VSS first, in terms of adoption and secondly, concerning their impact on the sustainability dimensions. The remainder of this literature review will focus on gaining a better understanding of the scholarly debate surrounding the effectiveness of VSSs, especially regarding the social dimension of sustainability.

2.2.2. Social impacts and the problem of asymmetries in power and structures

Scholars interested in assessing the social impact of VSSs seek answers concerning the effectiveness and changes that the implementation provides for producers on the ground; or simply, do VSSs work?

Among such research, the majority focus on agricultural and forest crops (with coffee production being the most dominant) governed through some of the most prominent private regulatory standards: Fairtrade International, Rainforest Alliance, UTZ Certified and 4C (Marx et al., 2022). However, number of VSSs has increased rapidly. Globally, it has risen to more than 400, of which one third is estimated to operate in the agricultural sector (IISD, n.d.; Marx & Wouters, 2014).

Conversely, this has not led to a diversification in the product range or geographical focus across VSSs. Within agricultural value chains, sustainability certifications continue to focus on the production of coffee, cocoa, tea and bananas. The main production regions are Latin America, Sub Saharan Africa and South-east Asia (COSA, 2013). The proliferation has resulted in confusion and difficulties for producers and consumers alike to evaluate the legitimacy of the various standards (Marx & Wouters, 2014; Seifert & Comas, 2012) and might ultimately result in lower social standards across VSSs (Bacon, 2005). Haack and Rasche (2021:6) describe this problem as the "diffusion-impact paradox", thereby emphasising the conflicting nature of cognitive legitimacy (as enhanced by conventional dissemination) and moral legitimacy (strengthened through impact).

Other scholars have raised the concern that the increasing number of standards has become a prerequisite rather than an option for accessing specific global markets (Brandi et al., 2013; Dietz & Grabs, 2021b). Such findings point toward the questionable extent of power that VSSs have in setting the regulatory framework or the "right to rule" over

market access and exclusion (Buchanan & Keohane, 2006:405 as cited in Haack & Rasche, 2021). Krauss and Krishnan (2022) draw on the concepts of power and agency to develop a constellation of priorities model to examine diverging priorities between standard setters in the 'global North' and producers in the 'global South'. The authors found significant tensions between Nicaraguan cocoa producers and German standard setters in the understanding of social 'sustainability', resulting in farmers countering hegemonic forces and asymmetrical power structures to renegotiate the terms of engagement (ibid.). In line with these findings, Nicholls and Opal (2005) identify that less attention is paid to social impacts while being of equal or even more value to producers than pure financial impacts.

Unequal and concentrated power relationships between the actors involved in VSSs can create exploitative relationships that hinder agency and bound farmers to satisfy conditions that might diverge from their actual local priorities and societal context (Baglioni & Campling, 2017; Havice & Pickles, 2019; Kahneman & Tversky, 2012). On this aspect, Wijen (2014) elaborates that better effects for all parties in the value chain can only be achieved if requirements and standards are flexible enough to encompass necessary adaptations to the given local context; otherwise means and ends of standards might decouple and dimmish the potential to achieve social improvements.

These findings highlight the importance to allow for and integrate the voices and priorities of producers to jointly construct meaningful standards that have the potential to achieve sustained social change. Accordingly, VSSSOs position themselves as multi-stakeholder initiatives that include a *broad range* of stakeholders, including producers, NGOs or civil society organisations, producer associations, private companies and academic researchers (Potts et al., 2014). However, especially the fair and representative inclusion of producers remains debated. One of the most extensive reviews of organisational governance structures of various socially orientated VSSSOs found great diversity in the extent to which organisations give a voice to producers (Bennett, 2017). Most VSSSOs were found to exclude producers from the highest governance bodies, showing how power structures dominate supposedly inclusive multi-stakeholder governance structures.

Lastly, across the existing research on VSSs and their impacts on producers, social impacts generally lack consideration. ISEAL Alliance (2017), the most significant international social and environmental accreditation and labelling alliance, has not mentioned social impacts in their 2017 report on *Sustainability Standards and SDGs: Evidence of ISEAL members' contribution.*

The next chapter will now consider the theoretical thoughts and ideas that this thesis draws upon to emphasis the social dimension of VSSs.

3. Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is a collection of thoughts and concepts that enables us to 'see' the social world and to guide our thoughts, research, and actions. It offers a systematic approach to assessing social challenges and providing recommendations for change (Connelly & Barriteau, 2000). The following chapter aims to present the collection of thoughts and concepts that guide this research.

This thesis is centred around the concepts of *social change* and *development theories* and *power and* voice, along with their connection to the aspect of *representation* or *problematisation*. Consequently, this chapter sets out to explore the notion of social change and power in research based on the broader theoretical groundings of the transformative paradigm. Subsequently, it will be established that there are fundamentally different development paradigms that rely on a certain set of assumptions and conceptualisations of change. Thirdly, a post-structuralist approach will be introduced to guide the critical reflection on representations and problematisations in this thesis. Lastly, these different theories will be integrated and operationalised in a combined analytical framework.

3.1. Transformative paradigm

The transformative paradigm has been developed by the American researcher Donna M. Mertens with the aim to critically examine the dynamics of power and oppression at the intersection of evaluation and research (Mertens, 2008). The paradigm is grounded in the philosophical assumptions that reality is socially constructed, and that certain individuals hold a position of greater power than others in defining how knowledge is constructed through the research focus, the questions being asked or dismissed, and other methodological parts of the investigation (Mertens, 2007). In this way, the paradigm emphasises the need to acknowledge how the issues of power, oppression, and discrimination can aggravate existing inequalities – even within the "supposedly neutral and objective worlds of research and evaluation" - and thus undermine the potential for transformative social change (Mertens, 2008:30).

The philosophical assumptions of the transformative paradigm provide a first broad guidance for this thesis to critically examine how the aspect of social change is constructed within evaluative research in the field of VSSs and how this effects the opportunities that producers have in making their voices heard and become an active

part in the construction of their realties. The transformation that this paradigm encourages lays in questioning and changing the practices of knowing and doing; the fundamental theoretical approach of this thesis. The next section will hence consider more in depth how practices of knowing are constructed through development paradigms and the inherent epistemologies and conceptualisations of change.

3.2. Development theories

In line with the reflections of power on research and evaluation, it is necessary to also consider the aspect of power within development theories. The post-development theorist and anthropologist Arturo Escobar emphasises that development operates in a context of power, implied within different development paradigms (Escobar, 2008b). Escobar's view on development is influenced by the French philosopher Michel Foucault's belief that power is formed in and through all that we do, rather than merely being something that (powerful) people have over others (Foucault, 1991).

Accordingly, this thesis aims to establish that conceptions grounded in development theories have the power to subordinate certain realities, create a dominant discourse and reproduce knowledge asymmetries. It us thus necessary to establish the main concepts and development theories that guide the analytical view on existing research and knowledge in this thesis.

This study argues that there are radically distinct development paradigms that rely on divergent assumptions about the nature of development, embed contrasting questions and concepts, and propose opposing strategies for change (Connelly & Barriteau, 2000). Each development paradigm is grounded within a set of categories and concepts which provide a systematic way of examining social issues. This thesis builds on these theoretical assumptions and practically applies them to identify dominant development paradigms and criteria for social change across evaluative research in the field of VSSs. The following development framework (see table 2) established by Escobar (2008b:172–173) will guide the analytical approach and frames the main development theories and their root paradigms that will be assessed in this study; liberal, Marxist and poststructuralist theory.

Theoretical orientations according to the root paradigms			
Issue	Paradigm		
	Liberal theory	Marxist theory	Poststructuralist theory
Epistemology	Positivist	Realist/ dialectical	Interpretivist/ constructivist
Pivotal concepts	▪ Individual ▪ Market	▪ Production (means & mode) ▪ Labour	▪ Language ▪ Meaning (signification)
Objects of study	▪ "Society" ▪ Market ▪ Rights	▪ Material conditions ▪ Social structures ▪ Ideologies	▪ Representation/ discourse ▪ Knowledge-power
Relevant actors	▪ Individuals ▪ Institutions ▪ State	▪ Social classes (working class, peasants) ▪ Social movements ▪ State (democratic)	▪ "Local communities" ▪ New social movements ▪ NGOs ▪ *All* knowledge producers (including state, individuals, social movements)
Question of development	▪ How can societies develop / be developed through a combination of capital and technology and individual and state actions?	▪ How does development function as a dominant ideology? ▪ How can development be delinked from capitalism?	▪ How did Asia, Africa, and Latin America come to be represented as "underdeveloped"?
Criteria for change	▪ "Progress", growth ▪ Growth plus distribution (1970s) ▪ Adoption of markets	▪ Transformation of social relations ▪ Development of the productive forces ▪ Development of class consciousness	▪ Transformation of the political economy of truth ▪ New discourses and representations (plurality of discourse)
Mechanisms for change	▪ Better theories and data	▪ Social (class) struggle	▪ Change *practices* of knowing and doing

	▪ More carefully tailored interventionism		
Ethnography	▪ How culture mediates development and change ▪ Adapt projects to local cultures	▪ How local actors *resist* development interventions	▪ How knowledge producers resist, adapt, subvert dominant knowledge and create their own.
Critical attitude concerning development and modernity	▪ Promote more egalitarian development (deepen and complete the Enlightenment Project of modernity)	▪ Reorient development toward satisfying requirements for social justice and sustainability (critical modernism: delink capitalism and modernity)	▪ Articulate ethics of expert knowledge as political practice (alternative modernities and alternatives to modernity; decolonial projects)

Table 2. Theoretical orientations and root paradigms. Source: Escobar, A. (2008:172-173); lightly adapted (emphases in original)

The root paradigms as defined by Escobar (ibid.) do not claim to be exhaustive but rather represent the underlying ideologies from which main theoretical orientations and associated criteria of change emerged. This study acknowledges that these orientations might overlap, however for the purpose of this analysis and to disentangle current debates concerning the social change of VSSs, they may be distinguished.

However, this thesis aims to go further than identifying reoccurring development paradigms and categories of thinking. It aims to question how such thinking constructs knowledge and creates effects of empowerment or oppressions on those being represented. Escobar (2012:9) already set out to establish this relation in his famous work 'Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World', describing the emergence of development as a „regime of discourse and representation". He goes on to suggest that "[r]egimes of representation can be analysed as places of encounter where identities are constructed and also where violence is originated, symbolized, and managed" (Escobar, 2012:9). The aspect of violation can be directly

linked back to Escobar's assertion on power and development processes, as described earlier, as well as the notion of power and oppression in evaluation and research that Mertens identifies and seeks to address through the transformative paradigm.

The next section will thus build on these two theoretical approaches discussed so far, to explore in depth how concepts and identities of development are constructed in evaluative research.

3.3. Problematisation, power, and governance

"Do you know up to what point you can know?" (Foucault, 2007:49)

Carol L. Bacchi, Canadian-Australian political scientist, describes this question, posed by Foucault as a critical examination on the concept of 'knowledge' and an extension on Kant's reflection on 'what is enlightenment?' in 1784, as the essence of poststructuralism. Bacchi (2009a:33–34) draws on constructionist and constructivist premises to dismantle the construction of knowledge and 'problems', which has led her to develop a poststructuralist approach that emphasises the political dimension of 'problems', the 'What's the problem represented to be?" (WPR) approach. While the methodological applications of the approach will be described in the next chapter, this section aims to outline the theoretical reflections on 'problem' representations, critique, and governance that underpin the approach. The section will be guided by the following three key propositions by Bacchi (2009a:xxi) and outlines how these thoughts support and conceptualise this research .

1.	We are governed through problematisations.
2.	We need to study problematisations (through analysing the problem representations they contain) rather than 'problems'.
3.	We need to problematise (interrogate) the problematisations on offer through scrutinising the premises and effects of the problem representations they contain.

Table 3. Three key propositions (WPR approach). Source: (Bacchi, 2009a:25)

However, before the propositions are considered more in detail, it needs to be established what Bacchi regards as 'problematisations'.

The concept of problematisation in the WPR approach refers to the way in which particular concerns are viewed as 'problems,' revealing the logic behind particular forms of rule (Bacchi, 2009a). Problematisations are understood to indicate the need for critical interrogations (Freire, 1972) and encourage to question taken-for-granted assumptions (Foucault, 1988). In turn, the word 'problem' is not used in its common way, as in something that is difficult or needs to be solved, but simply refers to the kind of change that is implied in a particular discourse (Bacchi, 2009a). Consequently, Bacchi (ibid.:xi) suggests that "the ways in which issues are problematised - how they are thought about as 'problems' - are central to governing processes". This brings us to the first proposition:

1. *We are governed through problematisations.*

Bacchi (2009a) argues that questioning how a problem is represented is closely linked to understanding how governing takes places and what consequences this has for those who are ruled, drawing on the notion of 'dividing practices' and the concept of 'governmentality' by Foucault (Walters and Haahr, 2005 and Foucault, 1982, as cited in Bacchi, 2009a). Consequently, the conceptualisation rather emphasises „the *knowledges* through which rule takes place, and the influence of experts and professionals *on and through these knowledges",* instead of the direct role of participants in the political process (ibid.:26, emphasis in original). It is encouraged to consider actors beyond the state that put in place rules to govern conduct, including the people that shape governing knowledge, such as social science researchers (ibid.) The approach of this thesis to examine knowledge created by researchers and its potential implications for those who are ruled – producers – by governing mechanisms beyond the state – VSSSOs - is grounded in this proposition.

2. *We need to study problematisations (through analysing the problem representations they contain) rather than 'problems'.*

The second proposition brings together the previously emphasised constructionist view on knowledge and the aspect of power implied in development paradigms. It further draws on the first propositions by picking up the concept of social construction by Colebatch (2006, as cited in Bacchi, 2009b), directing the attention towards social practices and organisational forms through which governing takes places. Social construction further refers to the forms in which people in power make sense of the

world, while social constructionism points out how individual understandings of the world are a product of social forces and political processes, ultimately shaping forms of knowledge (Burr, 2015; Phillips, 1995). Bacchi (2009a) extends the concept of constructionism to problem representations, arguing that problematisations depend on the conceptual framework or paradigm that one applies to the 'problem'. Inspired by Foucault's representation of power as a productive rather than a possessed aspect, shaping one's own conception of oneself and the world around, Bacchi (2009b) argues that it is necessary to study the effects that power creates through representations. She encourages a shift from problem-solving to problem-questioning, which entails to scrutinise the prevailing social and power relations, linking to the third proposition (ibid.)

3. *We need to problematise (interrogate) the problematisations on offer through scrutinising the premises and effects of the problem representations they contain.*

Bacchi argues that it is not sufficient to identify assumptions and presuppositions but rather to destabilise the framework and paradigms that are taken for granted within problematisation to create room for new set of realities to emerge (Bacchi, 2009b; Darkins, 2017). The third proposition combines Foucault's reflection on productive power, as previously described, and his conceptualisation of 'critique' as a chance to challenge accepted ways of thinking and create forms of individual autonomy based on knowledge (Bacchi, 2009a; Foucault, 2007).

In order to go from solving to problematising, Bacchi present three possible effects of problem representations that need to be examined:

- discursive effects: the limits imposed on what can be said or thought;
- subjectification effects: how subjects are constituted within problem representations; and
- lived effects: the material impact of problem representations on bodies and lives." (Bacchi, 2009a:40)

In conclusion, it can be established that this research is motivated by these three propositions on governance and knowledge, problem representations and paradigms, and ultimately power and effects of problematisations.

3.4. Analytical framework

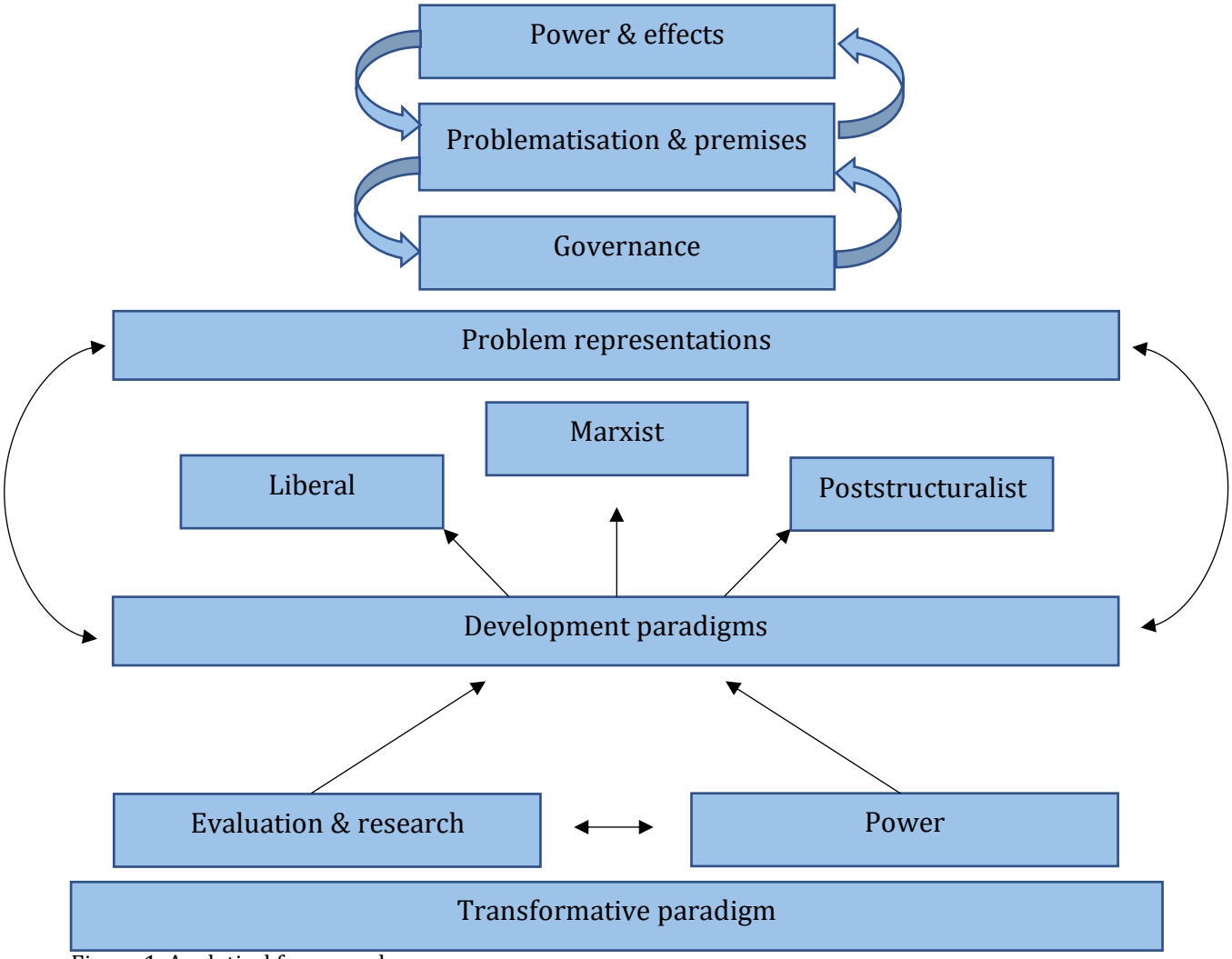

Figure 1. Analytical framework.

Ultimately, the outlined concepts and propositions combine into an operational analytical framework for this research. The framework above proposes an interdependence between development paradigms and problem representations, creating the outlined effects. It asserts that problem representations are inherently rooted in certain development paradigms and their implied epistemologies and perspectives. These contentions are grounded in the belief that evaluation and research hold inevitably a certain power about those being assessed, which, however, can be turned into transformative social change if the aspects above are being taken into account and respected. The encouragement of transformative social change by scrutinising the effects that problematisation can create but by also showing that there is potential to

jointly deconstruct the ‘problem’ of social change in VSSs, is the ultimate goal of this research.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research design

The methodology applied for the secondary data collection and extraction of this master thesis is a combined approach consisting of a systematic literature review (SLR) and a critical discourse analysis based on the WPR approach. Both approaches will be implemented through a qualitative thematic analysis that aims to go beyond codes and themes to carefully abstract the larger meaning of the data to identify and scrutinise dominant representations and alternative notions (Patton, 2015, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2016). A constructivist paradigm will guide this research to allow for various representations of reality to emerge in the findings.

The following chapter will set out by presenting the application of the systematic literature review method for the data collection and will then go on to explain how the WPR approach was implemented to guide the thematic data extraction. The methodological implications will be complemented by a reflection on the limitations and ethical considerations of this study and lastly, the influence of my positionality as a researcher.

4.2. Data collection

4.2.1. Systematic literature review

A SLR is an essential tool of academic research that allows for a critical analysis and synthesise of theories, findings, and practices relevant to the area of research. This study applies the method to critically examine academic research evaluating the social dimension and the representation of producers in the field of VSSs.

This thesis adopts a qualitative research design, based on the Campbell Collaboration guidelines for SLRs (Campbell Collaboration, 2001). The Campbell Collaboration is a global renowned social science research network that aims to promote positive social and economic change through the creation and application of systematic reviews (Campbell Collaboration, n. d.). The guidelines were adopted to ensure scientific rigour, increase transparency, and minimise bias. In line with the guidelines, the research protocol and the screening procedure for the data collection are now presented.

I. Research protocol

The research protocol systematically outlines the review process. First, the criteria for the inclusion and exclusion of studies in the review were identified, as presented in the following table:

Criteria	Factor	Reasoning
Document type	Peer-reviewed academic articles	Reduce methodological bias and increase validity and integrity of reviewed studies
Language	/	No language restriction was applied to reduce bias
Geography	LMICs	According to United Nations country classification (United Nations, 2014) – ensure relevance to RQ
Time span	1990 onwards	Start of the promotion of universal regulatory strategies in global markets & growth of VSSs (Marsden & Arce, 1995).
Unit of analysis	Social dimension / Producer role	Ensure relevance to RQs and purpose of this thesis
Research design	Evaluative research	Ensure relevance to RQs and purpose of this thesis
Study context	Agricultural & tree crops in VSSs	Increase consistency and limit the scope of the search

Table 4. Inclusion criteria for SLR.

These criteria aim to strike a balance between the inclusion and exclusion of relevant literature according to the research focus of this thesis, thereby avoiding that relevant literature is excluded erroneously. In order to apply these criteria to any data collected, a search strategy must first be established to locate pertinent literature.

II. Search strategy

The Web of Science Core Collection was selected as the main database for the search due to its comprehensiveness, editorial integrity, and multidisciplinary (Clarivate, 2022). The collection covers more than 250 science disciplines, inter alia, the Social Science Citation Index and the Science Citation Index Expanded, which are of specific importance to the scope of this study.

The search strategy was established based on the key concepts of the first RQ and other related terms, synonyms, or abbreviations to ensure that any relevant literature was covered to the best extent possible. As a reminder, the first RQ reads as follows (key concepts underlined):

How is social change represented within evaluative research on agricultural voluntary sustainability standards in LMICs and which underlying development theories can be identified to motivate these representations?

Even though 'development theories represent another key concept of this RQ, researchers rarely express the exact theories and paradigms that have guided their research and thus the term does not serve the purpose of a search term. Furthermore, the second RQ and its main concept of 'producers' power and voice' was not included as this would have narrowed down the results to those studies which already explicitly consider the aspect of producer representation and participation. However, this study aims to reveal a broader range of how producers are represented and what constitutes producer participation by including implicit forms of representation which are not labelled as such. However, as seen above, a study must touch upon the role of producers in some way to pass the inclusion criteria.

Jumping back to the first RQ, terms related to the highlighted key concepts were derived based on literature previously studied for this thesis. These terms were then combined by using the Boolean operators AND (for narrowing the search) and OR (for extending the search), as visualised in the tables below (table 5):

Key concepts	Related terms, synonyms, abbreviations
social change (OR)	Social impact, social sustainability, social development, social progress, social improvement(s), social value, social power
(AND) voluntary sustainability standard(s)	sustainability standard(s), sustainable label(s), sustainable practice(s), certified sustainable practice(s), fair trade, fairtrade, VSS(s), multi-stakeholder initative(s), MSI

Table 5. Final key words and related terms derived from the first RQ.

This resulted in the first search string as shown in the table below (table 6). The table further presents how the search strategy was updated to be as inclusive but also as specific as appropriate.

Nr	Steps	Search string	Data points
1	Connect terms through Boolean operators / use of truncation operator (*) to identify synonyms, plurals, etc.	("social change" OR "social impact" OR "social sustainability" OR "social development" OR "social progress" OR "social improvement*" OR "social value") AND ("voluntary sustainability standard*" OR "sustainab* standard*" OR "certified sustainab* pratice*" OR "fair trade" OR "fairtrade" OR "VSS*" OR "multi-stakeholder initiative*" OR "MSI")	99
2	Search was narrowed by specifying study context	("social change" OR "social development" OR "social progress" OR "social improvement*" OR "social value" OR "social impact*" OR "social sustainability") AND ("voluntary sustainability standard*" OR "sustainab* standard*" OR "certified sustainab* pratice*" OR "fair trade" OR "fairtrade" OR "VSS*" OR "multi-stakeholder initiative*" OR "MSI") **AND ("agricult*" OR "farm*" OR "smallholder*" OR "commodit*" OR "rural")'**	35

Table 6. Search strategy 1 & 2 including steps taken and resulting data points.

As there is already a significant overlap between the searches, in line with the Campbell guidelines, it can be argued that the returns for the search efforts are diminishing (Campbell Collaboration, 2001). Keeping in mind that the search, screening, extraction, and analysis is done by one researcher alone, the results were considered sufficient for answering the research questions given the resources available.

The second search strategy resulted in 35 search results, of which all abstracts, titles, and keywords were screened and evaluated according to the above-mentioned

criteria. The screening and literature identification process is presented in the following flow diagram.

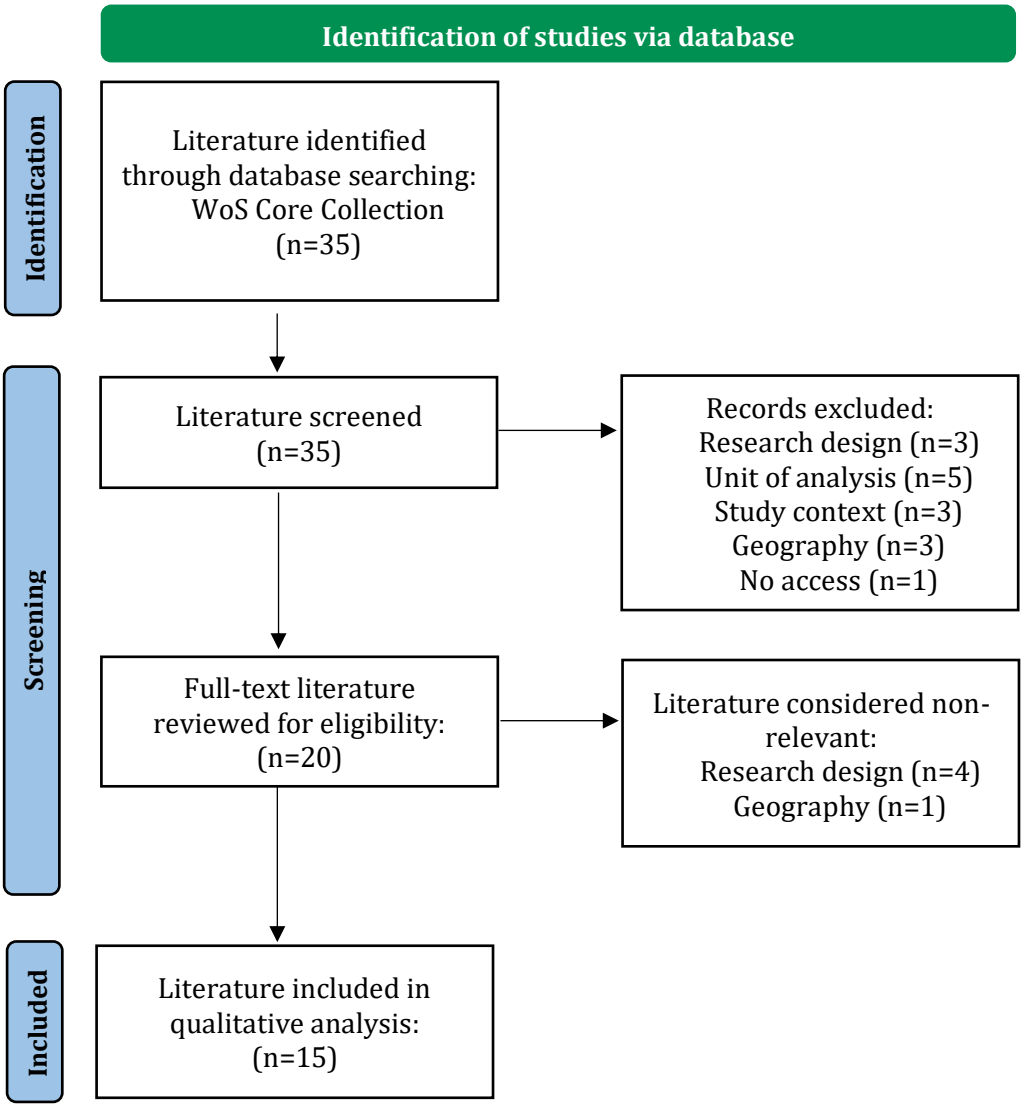

Figure 2[1]. Literature identification and screening process.

A total of 15 articles forms the sample size are selected for further analysis in this study. The majority of them are case studies and almost half of the articles focused on coffee production, while the remaining studies considered diverse crops, such as banana, cocoa, palm oil, or wine. Fairtrade International was the dominant VSSSOs examined. However many studies compared a set of VSSSOs, including other renown organisations, such as Rainforest Alliance, UTZ Certified, or 4C. Two articles examined local VSSs from

[1] *Adapted from:* Page, M. J., *et al*. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ 71*(372).

India, Ecuador and Peru. The articles range from 2002 until 2021 and cover different disciplines, such as human geography, political economy, and development economics. The main research designs were evidence-based comparative, ethnographic, case, and case-control studies. The selected articles draw mainly on field-work research, applying ethnographic, survey, and interview methodologies to collect data, but also statistical analysis to assess impacts. For a complete list of the articles and the in-text numbering applied in this thesis, please refer to appendix A1 and A2.

Following the systematic review guidelines, the data extraction is guided by a qualitative thematic synthesis method based on descriptive themes derived from the research questions and the theoretical framework of the study (Kugley et al., 2017; Suri & Clarke, 2009). The general themes for the data extraction of this study were thus derived from the research questions and resulted in the following main categories: (a) social change, (b) producer participation (in the research), (c) producer representation (as a concept within VSSs) and (d) development paradigms.

While these themes provide a broad frame for the data extraction, they lack precision and analytical depth. Therefore, this study aims to close this gap and enrich the methodological grounding of this research based on the theoretical framework established in the previous chapter. While the development theories along with their underlying paradigms provide some guidance for identifying and thematising research paradigms and perspectives, it would not sufficiently cover the theoretical concept of 'problematisation' that this thesis aims to cover. Accordingly, the next section will present Bacchi's WPR approach to critical discourse analysis and explore its methodological implications for the data extraction and analysis.

4.3. Data extraction

4.3.1. Critical discourse analysis: 'What the problem represented to be?' approach

The WPR approach by Carol L. Bacchi (2009a) is a critical interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse. It is composed of six guiding questions and one directive to be applied to one's own problem representation, as presented in the following table.

1. What's the 'problem' of social change represented to be in the academic literature on voluntary sustainability standards?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?
3. How has this representation of the problem come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the problem be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?
6. How/where has this representation of the problem been produced, disseminated, and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?
Apply this list of questions to your own problem representation.

Table 7. WPR approach to policy analysis. Source: (Bacchi, 2009a:2)

While the questions are interrelated and designed to be applied as a full set, I argue that not all of them are of equal relevance to the objective of this study. Moreover, the analysis of all six questions including their recommended forms of analysis as outlined by Bacchi (Bacchi, 2009a) would go beyond the scope of this research and would prevent a more detailed analysis of those particularly relevant to this study. The first question allows to examine more closely how social change is conceptualised and represented as a problem in research, whereas question two gives room to analyse the underlying assumptions connected to different research paradigms, along with the related ontologies and epistemologies. Question one and two thus guide the analysis to answer the first RQ of this thesis.

However, this thesis aims to go further by reflecting on the potential effects that the problematisation might create, in this case specifically on the representation of producers within evaluative research on VSSs. More specifically, following the WPR approach, the analysis will consider more in dept the discursive, subjectification and lived effects that the representation creates, as discussed in the theoretical framework. I therefore argue that the fifth question of the WPR approach directs and informs the analysis for answering the second RQ. Linking to question five, the final directive will serve as an impetus for self-reflexivity concerning the origin, motivation and effects of the problem representation that I create in this research, while simultaneously being shaped by it (Bacchi 2009b:19). This perspective provides guidance to position and discuss the findings in a reflective and conscious way.

It is argued that answering the aforementioned questions will provide the analysis with the needed analytical depth and critical scrutiny. Answering questions three and six would require immersing much deeper into the historical, political, and social forces that have given rise to the formation of the different development ideologies and theories and how these interrelated with the growth of various social and economic institutions. However, such perspectives would provide further valuable insights and could complement the findings of this study.

Next, I will outline how these questions have guided the data extraction and the analytical process. The remainder of this chapter will further reflect on the implication of using this method for analysing academic literature. Finally, my own positionality, the limitations, and the ethical aspects of this data collection and analysis will be considered.

4.3.2. Analytical process

The main themes described earlier were refined into more specific subcategories based on the applied questions of the WPR approach (see table 8 on the following page). These analytical themes were further complemented by the extraction of rather technical information such as the article information, the study context and the methodology applied in the research (see appendix B1 for the full extraction matrix).

Theme	Subcategory	Definition	Related question: WPR / RQ
Social change	Representation	How is social change represented in the article?	Q1 /RQ1
	Problematisation	How is social change problematised in this article?	
	Objectives of social change	Identify the three main social change objectives that the article focuses on	
Producer participation (Research)	Active / passive	What role play producers within the research design?	Q4 / RQ2
	Exclusion / Inclusion	Does the research include producers in the problematisation of social change or not?	
Producer power and voice (VSSs)	Representation	How are producers represented in the article?	Q5 / RQ2
	Conceptualisation	How is producer representation conceptualised?	
	Change	How is producer representation problematised in the literature? What change is implied?	
	Producer power and voice	Are producers found to have power and voice in problematizing social change within VSSSOs?	
	Why?	Why are producer found to have full / some / no voice?	
Development theory	Paradigm	Identify the development paradigm that best describes the representation of social change (Dropdown: liberal theory / Marxist theory / poststructuralist theory)	Q2/ RQ1
	Legitimisation	How is the representation motivated?	
	Assumptions	Which assumptions are made?	
	Silences	Which issues and perspectives are silence through the identified development paradigm?	Q4 / discussion

Table 8. Data extraction matrix & related WPR questions/RQs.

The outlined themes and subcategories provide a frame for guiding the synthesis of the data. However, Bacchi (2009b: 20)emphasises that the WPR approach "encourages a sceptical stance toward claims to 'knowledge', and aims to disrupt taken-for-granted 'givens' wherever they are found". Accordingly, the data extraction in this thesis must go beyond a mere text extraction to avoid an overly simplified and thus counter-productive application of the approach (ibid.). The analytical process thus requires and embodies an interpretative dimension to do justice to the complexity of the approach and to the selected materials, in this case academic research. The aspects of text selection, complexity, and the embeddedness of problem representations ('nesting') are thus considered below.

I. Text selection

Before going into depth into the interpretative dimension of the text selection, it is necessary to emphasise that this thesis applies the WPR approach to a different type of discourse. While the approach is developed and mainly applied to policy documents, Bacchi explicitly encourages the extension of the approach to other forms or mediums that represent a problem, such as politician statements or academic theories and texts (Bacchi, 2009a). The author reasons that "since all [academic] theories posit forms of explanation, they necessarily contain implicit problem representations that demand scrutiny" (ibid.:xviii). It is encouraged to go beyond the study of governmental policies by including "other 'governing' parties, such as professionals and social scientists" (ibid.:xx).

It is therefore argued that the application of the WPR approach to evaluative academic research is aligned with the inherent logics and objectives of the method. Moreover, it constitutes a valid extension of the approach to a new field of study and might encourage further critical reflection of how knowledge is claimed and created in research on VSSs.

Justifying the application of the method to the data collected in this thesis is crucial for developing a methodologically sound research design. However, it is equally important to recognise that the decision to choose academic literature for the data collection and analysis is in itself an interpretative exercise. Bacchi (2009b) acknowledges that the selection of the material already involves the researcher in the analysis and reflects specific interests or concerns. Accordingly, I want to highlight that the selection of academic literature as a data source in this thesis is a deliberate choice.

From my own constructivist ontology towards reality, I was eager to better understand how knowledge and truths are constructed, especially in evaluative research, which inherently strives to present necessary future change. Thereby, academic research has the power to create real world implications for the people that form part of the complex lived experiences and realities which are being evaluated (Gregor, 2005).

II. Complexity

Academic research sets out to underline tensions and contradictions based on the voices of other researchers in the field. It is thus important to acknowledge the context in which something is stated and to consider the interrelation and the complexity of arguments and positions that build on one another. This research pays specific importance to minimising the risk of distorting documents by considering how specific issues fit into the wider debate within and beyond the article, and thus carefully choosing the text segments that were extracted and interpreted in the analysis (Bacchi, 2009b).

III. Embeddedness of problem representations

Bacchi (2009b:21) stresses the need to recognise how certain problematisations embed differing views and perspectives on more than one concept or 'problem' and thus contain various 'nested' representations. Therefore, this thesis aims to deepen the understanding of the problematisation of social change by considering how the representation of producers and the broader development ideologies link to or are embedded within the former. However, this study acknowledges that various other conceptualisations and representations may 'nest' within the representation of social change and cannot be fully covered by this research. Further limitations of the study will now be discussed in the following section.

4.4. Limitations

The data collected for this study spans various geographies, agricultural crops, and certification schemes. While the variety in the data set might be beneficial for uncovering diverse representations of the selected problem, it is however not suitable for associating specific issues to a more concrete context or revealing any trends in the data. There are large differences between the individual studies and their approaches, theories and

methodologies which must be acknowledged when trying to identify commonalities and divergences in their conceptualisations.

Furthermore, the representativeness of the study is limited by the small sample of data collected. This can be linked to two different reasons. On the one hand, the amount of research that incorporates producer perspectives or their representation in some way into the evaluation of social aspects is still very limited. This already gives an indication on the lack of importance attributed to producers and their voices in defining and evaluating what is claimed to be 'necessary' social change across VSSs. On the other hand, this thesis has a limited amount of resources at its disposal. A systematic literature review is generally carried out by several researchers to ensure a larger set of data can be considered while its integrity is enhanced due to the possibility of investigator triangulation and cross-checking the procedures of screening and extracting data (Kugley et al., 2017; Wanden-Berghe & Sanz-Valero, 2012). This research however was performed manually by one single researcher and is thus limited by the lack of external validation and the size of data screened and collected.

Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that the collection of secondary data comes with the limitation (and potential opportunity) of having a predominantly outsider perspective on the situation being studied. The interpretation of the analysed problematisation is restricted by a limited awareness of the regional particularities, the cultural norms, and values, as well as the dynamics and historical interconnections of relevant social groups and communities.

Furthermore, assessing the compliance of the data with the necessary ethical and methodological criteria is rather challenging. However, this is mitigated to a great extent by relying solely on peer-reviewed academic articles which comply with the highest standards of validity and integrity in research. On the other hand, secondary data is always filtered and presented through the lenses of the implementing researcher(s) and delivered to the reader based on their ontologies and epistemologies on the perceived realities. This thesis aims to transform this limitation into a strength by exploring the implications that these different perspectives have on the studied events and concepts. However, this study refrains from evaluating and comparing specific findings across studies, such as social impacts.

Having said this, it might be the right time to explore my own subjectivity and conceptual premises that have guided this research.

4.5. Positionality

After having critically examined the limitations of the collected data and the methodological approach to it, it is appropriate to reflect how I, as a person, have shaped, influenced, and limited different aspects of this research process. I must acknowledge that I am part of the social world that I am researching in or as Bacchi (2009b:19) puts it: "because who we are (…) is at least in part shaped through the very problem representations we are trying to analyse". It is therefore crucial to identify and critically examine the fundamental assumptions, values and believes that I bring to this research.

The concept of positionality is closely related to the notion of reflexivity or as Holmes (2020:2) puts it: "Reflexivity informs positionality." The concept of reflexivity suggests that researchers should recognise and disclose their selves in their research in order to comprehend their role or influence on it (Cohen et al., 2011). Accordingly, defining and constructing my positionality will be strongly guided by the principle of reflexivity. Drawing on Malterud (2001), I want to begin by identifying preconceptions that I might bring into this research and reflect on previous personal and academic experiences and perspectives which have shaped these conceptions.

Based on my pre-study experiences within my social surroundings, I would consider myself as a person with strong values of justice, respect, and empathy. These values have further been nurtured through my professional background, especially through my contact and collaboration with indigenous youth leaders in the south of Ecuador, and my academic education in my master's programme. Both experiences have taught me to acknowledge that there cannot be one single reality or truth, but rather multiple versions of the same aspect, depending on one's own perspectives, conceptions, and beliefs. Accordingly, I increasingly consider reality to be constructed through subjective interpretations of it, and thus turned away from the idea that truth can be captured and measured in an objective and neutral manner through technically sound approaches, as conveyed during my Bachelor studies. These assumptions and perspectives have guided

my interests and are reflected within my theoretical foundation and the interpretation of my results.

Notwithstanding, I strive to avoid all kind of obvious, systematic, or conscious bias while being as objective as possible in the collection, analysis, and presentation of the data. However, I need to embrace that my own values will subconsciously guide my interpretations.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge that positionality in this research is ubiquitous and multi-faceted and goes beyond my position as the researcher. The emphasis on the effects of positions and perspectives within this particular research highlights the importance of this aspect and has reminded me to remain reflective throughout all parts of this research and in my future academic and professional work within development in general. At the end of this research, I will come back to subject my own representation to the necessary scrutiny.

4.6. Ethical considerations

The following section must take a different approach compared to a primary data collection, where the ethical considerations commonly relate to the privacy, anonymity, and safety of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016). However, a secondary data collection does not come without ethical risks, as I will establish now.

First, I would like to touch upon the concern of reciprocity. Even though no participants were directly engaged in this research, reciprocity can be considered as an opportunity to validate or discuss the data with those directly and indirectly impacted by the results of this study, in other words, the researchers engaging in the evaluation of social change related to VSSs, as well as producers and VSSSOs. However, this is not feasible within the given scope and resources of this thesis, and while not directly representing an ethical concern, it could be considered as an ethical limitation of this study.

Second, I would like to emphasise that this secondary data collection effectively minimises the potential of any kind of psychological, social, physical, or legal harm to participants as data is obtained from the manyfold existing sources and collections and in this way reduces the burden on respondents to get repeatedly involved into research processes. This issue might be particularly prevalent for communities with longstanding

relationships with VSSSOs, which represent a popular contact point for researchers in the field.

Lastly, as emphasised earlier, I aim to present and communicate my results in the most reliable, honest, and credible manner possible by applying the methods thoroughly while remaining aware of my personal influence on this study. Accordingly, all processes and decisions that this research has taken are documented and can be provided upon request at any time.

5. Results

"Ce qui limite une connaissance est souvent plus important, pour les progrès de la pensée, que ce qui étend vaguement la connaissance." [What limits knowledge is often more important for the progress of thought than what vaguely extends knowledge.] (Bachelard, 1993:87)

After having established the theoretical and methodological foundations of this thesis, this chapter will proceed to highlight some of the most important findings of this research. It will do so by presenting some of the main themes and theoretical underpinnings of social change that have been identified in the analysed scholarly literature. Secondly, it will outline three kind of effects that were identified in relation to producers and their position within processes of knowledge construction and implementation of VSSs. This will allow to critically analyse the conceptions of what social change ought to be based on different development theories, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the different perceptions within the scholarly debate on the social dimension of VSSs. The chapter further aims to revisit the RQs and identify any answers that this research provides.

The majority of sources were identified to draw on liberal theories, which has shaped this analysis. However, the distribution of the findings accurately represents the dominance of the liberal paradigm, and the effects that this entails are reflected upon in the analysis.

5.1. Development paradigms and problematisations of social change

This section aims to bring the concepts of 'problem representation' and 'development theories' of the theoretical framework together by identifying and critically examining liberal, Marxist, and poststructuralist conceptualisations grounded within and giving rise to certain representations of social change. The analysis will therefore draw on the development framework by Escobar (2008a), as presented in chapter three, to identify the theoretical root paradigms and underlying assumptions that frame different representations of social change.

The first and second question of the WPR approach will hence be considered jointly to analyse the findings in relation to the first RQ. This allows "to open up for questioning something that appears natural and obvious" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016:20).

The identified representations and assumptions of social change will be presented according to each theoretical root paradigm.

5.1.1. Liberal theory

I. Social change through alternative market values

The first dimension is composed of liberal theory representations where market and trade mechanisms are considered the main driving forces for realising social change within VSSs. Within this type of discourse "social change is considered a model that shows the benefits of trade to development" (2L:1). This can be attributed to the underlying 'question of development' as outlined by Escobar (2008a:172): "How can societies develop/be developed through a combination of capital and technology?". Furthermore, it can be identified that social change is represented in terms of transforming the capitalist market from the inside "to pursue alternative values and objectives such as social justice and environmental sustainability without being captured by the market's conventional logic, practices and dominant actors" (6L:130). The paradox that this creates is described by one author as being "in the market but not of it" (ibid.), avoiding "the pitfalls of dominant economic growth models and contribute to development inspired on sustainability and social responsibility" (2L:2).

Drawing on Escobar's (2008a:172) framework, such thinking can be described a "adoption of markets" and "[g]rowth plus distribution" mentality, where the miracle of economic growth remains the focal point for development and social change, however the experienced social inequities in the markets are assumed to be offset through distribution or a so called "share[d] responsibility" (11L:26). Accordingly, it is assumed that more growth provides more distribution and hence more social change, expressed through the idea that the so-called 'mainstreaming' of VSSs, the increase of contracts with major conventional market players such as Starbucks to sell fair products, is pursued in the names of the producers: "Fair Trade moves toward mainstreaming in order to generate benefits for more impoverished coffee farm families." (6L:143) However, the understanding is challenged by one study questioning whether "efficient trade" can be

combined with respecting “whole livelihoods and the priorities of the community" (14L:109).

II. Social change through top-down *private* actor interventionism

Remaining within the concepts of liberal theory, another main representation that has emerged in the academic discourse is the representation that VSSs are either "filling the regulatory vacuum created by the lack of state regulation and effective global environmental policies" (11L:26) or "challeng[ing] the social forces underpinning the prevailing institutional order" (4L:213). The state is assumed to be either deficient or absent in creating the necessary regulatory and institutional framework for ‘fair’ global value chains. VSSs are stepping in to fill in the void: “The core logic of sustainability certification is to promote responsible production by verifying that products are produced in accordance with agreed upon environmental and social requirements." (12L:2016).

The majority of the studies representing liberal theoretical thinking based their assessment on ‘agreed upon’ requirements, mostly drawn from guidelines of VSSSOs or large international organisations, such as the FAO[2]. This can attributed to a ‘positivist’ ontology and epistemology, assuming that there is only one reality of social change, as set through ‘expert’ criteria in a top-down approach, and that reality (or ‘what is social change?) can be measured through “better theories and data” (Escobar, 2008a:173) and “comprehensive quantitative research designs” (9L:86) that improve the “scope, precision and directness of criteria and regulations” (ibid.:75). Within the liberal development paradigm, eight out of eleven studies were found to exclude producers in the problematisation of social change. In one case, “qualitative, descriptive and anecdotal data" methods were identified as an unreliable source of knowledge (ibid.:86).

In a few cases, studies acknowledged that as “farmers are not involved in the process of defining indicators, they could not understand the logic and relevance of some indicators" (15:13). However, the relevance of the indicators and the passivity of the producers in the process remains unchallenged, the problem is rather perceived in the

[2] By its English acronym, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

lack of producer understanding. Accordingly, only one study applying a liberal theoretical approach was found to include "the experiences and subjective priorities of farmers" (13L:376) in examining the concept of social change.

Furthermore, the notion of 'verification', is deeply rooted within the market-based mechanisms of VSSs and propagated in the literature in terms of "provid[ing] credible enforcement mechanisms" (9L:80). Certain authors extend the representation of social change to be correlated with "three social processes – surveillance of supply chain actors, normalising judgement on what responsible behaviour should encompass and education/training" (4L:206). The notion that rules need to be enforced and producers judged on their compliance is a recurring assumption, also expressed in terms of 'sanctioning' smallholders for breaking the imposed rules (5L, 10L) "in order to generate social pressure" (11L:32). Such thinking can be attributed to the idea to reconceal individual selfishness through modern social institutions, or in other word to "deepen and complete [the] Enlightenment Project of modernity" (Escobar, 2008a:173).

III. Social change through capacity building

The following dimension focuses on the representation of social change through a focus on creating "decent livelihoods" (15L:11), where 'decent' is assumed to correspond to economic support, human health, food security, and labour rights (5L, 13L, 15L). The notion of decent livelihoods can be described as promot[ing] more egalitarian development" that meets consumers aspirations of 'doing good' (9L, 10L, 11L) and brings "progress" to producers and communities (Escobar, 2008a:172–173).

However, a 'decent' standard of living is not exclusively understood in terms of a fundamental human right, but often assumed a concept that needs to be fostered or "embed[ded] (..) in local cultivation sites" (4L:219) through "empowerment and capacity building" and "training and institution building" to increase farmers' knowledge and strengthen communities" (13L:380). Such liberal discourse seems to be grounded in the assumption that producers lack of knowledge and capacities, which can be delivered through educating producers and their communities in the South according to Northern standards. Touching upon these structures characterised by colonial convictions, an African Fairtrade representative expressed: "It's still a north to south relationship. As

much as they do studies, research, etc. here on producer level, decisions and perspectives and paradigms are created, maintained up north." (1M:2015)

5.1.2. Marxist theory

The following section presents the representations of social change according to assumptions drawing on Marxist theoretical approaches.

IV. Social change through social justice

Research applying a predominantly Marxist theoretical approach was found to focus on the inherent tensions that form part of the operations of VSSs: "while the terms of solidarity within global Fairtrade may be set by the transnational elite (..), there remains a constant tension within the system between such marketisation and social protection against it" (1M:334). The discourse draws on dialectical epistemologies by questioning the opposing forces of "global capitalism" that VSSs create through "continu[ing] the kind of paternalism and dependency characterized by colonialism" (3M:1086). Colonialist dependency structures are assumed "to cultivate an illusion of fairness that is rarely questioned" and "appropriate[e] surplus value from (..) vulnerable and displaced workers" (3M:1098).

The struggles of the social classes are found to be emphasised based on the assumption that development needs to be "delinked from capitalism" to satisfy "requirements for social justice" (Escobar, 2008a:173). "Global asymmetries of power" (1M:336) are described as disempowering producers on a local level, and as "promoting paternalistic or potentially harmful practices" (1M:337) on a broader scope. Accordingly, studies grounded in Marxist theory were found to emphasise the role and autonomy of producers within the conception of social change and scrutinising the effects that social relations of production and power structures create.

In contrast to liberal thinking, Marxist reflections are found to be grounded in the assumptions that integrating development into the capitalist market structures "may fail to capture the broader historical, social, political, and geographic context in which farmers deliver the goods" (8M:178). It is assumed that contracts between smallholders and VSSs remain "entangled in place-based histories" (ibid.), linking to the assumption

that dependencies and social struggles are created which will enforce colonial exploitative relations.

5.1.3. Poststructuralist theory

Lastly, the identified poststructuralist representation of social change and the underlying presuppositions will be presented.

V. Social change through problematising ideologies and producer engagement

The study drawing on poststructuralist theory is also encountered to emphasis aspects of social injustice and power dynamics: "how to deal with the conflicting interests, ambiguities and incompatibilities enfolded in notions of a common identity and livelihood as associated with seeking social justice through markets?" (7P:69). The study assumes the need to "engage with the political economy of agrarian change, considering the character of everyday life and broader socioeconomic and political configurations" (ibid.:53) to gain an "understanding of the historical and political" circumstances (ibid.:69). While this is in line with the Marxist reflection on contextual influences and place-based histories, the argument goes on to promote a "change [in the] practices of knowing and doing" as established by Escobar (2008a:173). The discourse is found to assume that the ideologies and understanding on which the market-driven development structures are grounded contain inherently problematic representations and need to be question and reframed (7P).

Furthermore, the aspects of advocacy, engagement, and participation were identified as dominant drivers of social change, aligning with the assumption that poststructuralist theory is grounded in the premise that "*all* knowledge producers", including "local communities" are considered relevant actors of development (ibid.:172, emphasis in original).

The analysis found that none of the study that were identified to draw on liberal perspectives considered the aspects of power asymmetries, social and historical structures, or producer representation.

The findings have shown that each development theory and underlying assumptions create significantly different representations of social change, as summarised in the following table.

Root paradigm	Representation of social change	Assumptions based on theoretical development framework
Liberal theory	Social change through alternative market values	• Adoption of markets • Growth plus distribution
	Social change through top-down *private* actor interventionism	• Better theories and data • Deepen and complete Enlightenment Project of modernity
	Social change through capacity building	• "Progress" • Promote more egalitarian development
Marxist theory	Social change through social justice	• Reorient development toward satisfying requirements for social justice and sustainability • Critical modernism: delink capitalism and modernity
Poststructuralist theory	Social change through problematising ideologies and producer engagement	• *All* Knowledge producers • Change *practices* of knowing and doing

Table 9. Development theories, representations of social change and assumptions based on theoretical development framework (see table 2, chapter 3).

5.2. Producers' power and voice

The second part of the analysis aims to interrogate the identified problematisations "to see where and how they function to benefit some and harm others" (Bacchi, 2009b:15). Drawing on the transformative paradigm, the analysis aims to consider the aspect of power in evaluation and research, more precisely the position of power that researchers hold in creating discursive, subjectification and lived effects that enhance or limit the producers' power and voice. The effects, as outlined in the theoretical framework, are touched upon again briefly in the table below and complemented by a set

of sub-question which will be explored more in depth in the following section of the analysis:

WPR effect	Description
Discursive effects	"If some options for social intervention are closed off by the way in which a 'problem' is represented, this can have devastating effects for certain people." (ibid.:16)
Subjectification effects	"draw attention to how 'subjects' are implicated in problem representations, how they are produced as specific kind of subjects" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016:23)
Lived effects	"How 'problems' are represented directly affects people's lives" (Bacchi, 2009b:17)
Guiding questions	
"What is likely to change with this representation of the 'problem'? What is likely to stay the same?" (ibid.:18)	
"Who is likely to benefit from this representation of the 'problem'? Who is likely to be harmed by this representation of the 'problem'?" (ibid.)	
"How does the attribution of responsibility for the 'problem' affect those so targeted and the perceptions of the rest of the community about who is to 'blame'?" (ibid.)	

Table 10. Three effects of problematisations and sub-questions as outlined in the WPR approach (Bacchi, 2009a).

I. Discursive effects

Building upon the established deep-seated assumptions and presuppositions within the representation of social change, it is now considered how these different perspectives of social change limit how producers can be thought about in VSSs, especially in terms of their recognition and participation in affecting VSS governance processes.

This study argues that the dominant discourse as identified above limits the possibilities for producers to make their realities and perspectives heard. Most of the studies analysed do not explicitly consider the role that producers play in shaping VSS processes, and thus how producers and their position within VSSs can be thought about. Some studies recognise producers in terms of ensuring a 'fair' distribution of financial benefits (3M, 6L, 11L) and a few studies draw on pre-established 'good governance' criteria to assess producer participation without problematising further what kind of

participation is considered under such categorisations (2L, 6L, 15L). Even less studies acknowledge the potential of producer recognition and participation as a form of power, engagement and visibility within the VSS governance system (1M) and encourage joint decision-making, negotiations, communication and empowerment among producer cooperatives and wider VSS structures (1M, 5L). However, as shown earlier, many studies emphasise control over participation.

One study highlights that the lack of visibility of local experiences is rarely acknowledged or questioned in regard to the social categorisation that such discourse representation creates (7P). The absence of "accountbility, participation, care or responsiveness" contributes to the feeling of "being disempowered, voiceless and invisible within a global machine" as expressed by varies wine producers in South Africa, Chile, and Argentina (1M:337). This highlights the harmful effects that dominant representations can have on the power and voice of producer by limiting their abilities to make their perspectives heard and thus on a larger scale limits their potential to contribute to a joint conceptualization and governance of social change within VSSs mechanisms.

II. Subjectification effects

Second, it will be analysed how "discourse makes certain subject positions available" and thus produces specific kind of subjects (Bacchi, 2009b:16). The analysis pays specific importance to the concept of 'dividing practices' that has the potential to stigmatise targeted minorities, as established in the theoretical framework.

Within the studies influenced by liberal theoretical thinking, producers are portrayed as either:

- a supply side factor of global value chains (2L),
- as a "problem" (4L:209) or threat to the environment due to their inefficiency and unproductivity (4L, 9L),
- as a passive witness and source of information of the situation on the ground to which survey are "applied (..) for fulfilling the social well-being dimension" (15L:7),

- as a “small, resource-poor” (12L:2015) or deficient beneficiary in need of support, someone who "receives prices (..) and training (14L:104), or
- as a subject judged based on their performance and adherence to rules and regulations (9L, 15L).

The findings show effects of power asymmetries and oppression created through the position adopted by the researchers and the discursive and subjectification effects that this position of subordinating opinions and voices creates. Bacchi (2009b:17) highlights that “representations of 'problems' usually have built into them implications about who is responsible for the 'problem'”. The produced discursive subjectification as outlined above, stigmatise producers as being responsible for their situation or being the ‘problem’, and are thus required to ‘change’, ‘improve’ and ‘adhere’ to sustain the image of responsible small producers to consumers and businesses in the north. Interestingly, however, producers are simultaneously positioned as a passive entity in the creation of social change, a passive subject of the imposed rules. However, the responsibility for adapting to and executing the requirements created in the north, remains.

The effects of subjectivation change when considering studies predominantly applying a Marxist theoretical approach. The analysis finds very diverse positions. On the one hand, producers are considered part of the production space and trade relations (1M), while little consideration is attributed to their individual characteristics or their roles outside of the productive forces, for examples as a community or family member. On the other hand, one study pays specific importance to the social structures that surround producers by recognising them as historically and socially linked individuals, perceiving their experiences and struggles as constructed through past and current political, historical and social structures (8M). Lastly, another study extends the understanding of who is considered a subject by acknowledging that the existence of temporary and family workers on smallholder farms is denied in most of the VSS discourse (3M). The study highlights how this puts these individuals in a particularly vulnerable position.

The findings suggest that studies applying a Marxist theoretical perspective, implicate producers as productive forces and a subject of their social and historical context. However, the analysis show that producers and other groups impacted by the operations of VSSs are considered in a more holistic and integrated approach.

Lastly, the little evidence on poststructuralist influenced research in this analysis suggests that the voices and opinions of producers and the extent to how their perceptions of realities, contexts and structures differs from northern neoliberal perspectives, are considered highly relevant. This creates room for engagement and recognition, while avoiding stigmatisations. The perspective encourages producers to create new knowledge and define concepts of change from their understanding (7P), hence considering them an active and valued subject in the conceptualisation of social change within the governing processes of VSSs.

III. Lived effects

Finally, the material effects that the problem representation and underlying assumptions have on the lives of producers are analysed. While it can be argued that this study takes a predominantly theoretical approach, it aims to show precisely that the positions and representations assumed within research go beyond theory and can create lived effects for those impacted by the representations.

As shown, representations of social change have the power to emphasise certain dimensions while obscuring persisting contradictions, logics and oppressive patterns. This can create real effects for producers, as academic research informs practical development work of all kinds of organisations, including VSSSOs. If the perspectives are not at equilibrium, certain assumptions and representations might consolidate, slowing down the emergence of new perspectives and thus inevitably reducing the chance for transformative social change.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that the notion of producer recognition and participation is not yet established within the majority of evaluative research, indicating a lack of documented experiences and lessons learned from the varying participating parties. Consequently, in practice the producers might either not at all have the possibility to contribute and make their voices heard or it might be done very differently by the diverse VSSSOs, which could lead to confusion and frustration across producers. This would ultimately hinder successful participatory processes that satisfy all parties involved.

Lastly, the analysis identifies that unaddressed power dynamics within value chains create similar tensions between communities and producer organisations (8). This suggests that the lack of consideration of power structures within research might also impede the recognition and deconstructions of fundamental structures of inequality and inequity within process of global fair trade and development in the long-term.
In conclusion, the findings highlight that the problematisation of social change based on its underlying development paradigms has effects on the opportunities for producers to participate in the construction of knowledge concerning social change academically as well as practically.

The findings of this analysis will now be further reflected and discussed in the next chapter of this thesis.

6. Discussion

The following chapter will allow to explain and interpret the findings of this thesis in a thorough and coherent manner, thereby situating them in terms of the RQs. It further aims to critically reflect on the relevance of the results by positioning them back to the controversies identified in previous literature (chapter two). The reflection will be enriched by evaluating the silences within the data to identify research challenges that remain unaddressed and encourage new ways of looking at the 'issue' of social change. Lastly, and maybe most importantly, the representation and thinking that this study has provided needs to be subjected to critically scrutiny to fully embrace the notion of self-reflexivity before leading into the final concluding chapter of this thesis.

6.1. Main findings

Before diving into the interpretation of the main findings of this study it might be useful to restate the research purpose and the derived RQs as introduced at the very beginning of this thesis.

This study has set itself the goal to contribute toward a more nuanced understanding of the main themes and representations of social change that have emerged in studies evaluating the social impacts of VSSs by critically examining prevailing theoretical conceptions. It also intends to contribute to a greater awareness concerning the potential effects and consequences that problematisations can have on producers. The main findings will now shortly be summarised in relation to each RQ before being interpreted more in detail in the next section:

1. *How is social change represented within evaluative research on agricultural voluntary sustainability standards in LMICs, and which underlying development paradigms motivate these representations?*

The analysed studies represent all three theoretical paradigms (liberal, Marxist and poststructuralist). However, the findings suggest vastly diverging representations of social change between, on the one hand, predominant liberal theoretical representations and, on the other hand, less represented Marxist and poststructuralist root paradigms. The section will now go on to identify the central representations of social change and

embed them even clearer within each theoretical approach to give a clear answer to the first RQ.

Within the liberal paradigm, the analysed evaluative research studies were found to emphasise the potential of market powers for redistributing benefits and creating more equitable social development outcomes. Four principles are identified to guide social change:

- Replacing weak public governance mechanisms with more precise and tailored private social sustainability standards
- Ensuring decent livelihoods, through labour rights and working conditions concerning safety and health
- Enforcing rules, compliance and judgement of responsible behaviour
- 'Empowerment' through training, education, knowledge and capacities improvements of producers

The representations suggest a top-down representation of social change concerned with transferring expert knowledge and regulatory order to local cultivation sites.

Far fewer studies were identified to represent predominantly Marxist and poststructuralist influences. However, differences in the representation of social change could still be perceived, especially concerning the problematisation of capitalist market forces for achieving social change. The following themes were identified:

- Creating social justice through delinking development from capitalism
- Encountering disempowering power structures through increased advocacy and engagement
- Integrating contextual and historical struggles to generate more respectful and participatory relationships

In conclusion, the central representations of social change among predominantly liberal theoretical representations were identified to cover market adoption, distribution, rule enforcement, livelihood improvements and capacity building. In turn, Marxist and poststructuralist root paradigms suggest a representation of social change in terms of social justice, equity, and deconstructing contextual structures and power dynamics.

2. *Which effects has the problematisation of social change on producers' power and voice?*

The analysis suggests three main effects: discursive, subjectification and lived effects.

The dominant top-down discourse is identified to limit the opportunities for producers to articulate their concerns and participate in the construction of social change, both within research and global value chains.

Second, it was found that the responsibility for the 'problem' of social change was attributed to the producers, creating effects of stigmatisation and oppression of producers. Such subjectification effects deprive producers of their power and voice.

Within studies applying a Marxist paradigm, producers were identified as subjects of productive forces and their social and historical context. Lastly, the analysis suggests that the study drawing on poststructuralist theory positions producers as subjects with individual perspectives and valued contributions to advance social change. This creates positive effects on producers' power and voice.

Third, dominant representations were identified to have the power to create lived effects by emphasising or obscuring specific patterns or dynamics, which might ultimately distort development practice.

Relating to the RQ, the findings indicate direct and indirect effects on producers' power and voice in the construction of social change, both within evaluative research designs and within practical VSSs processes.

After having related the main findings to each RQ, the following section will proceed to interpret the findings and the silences within the analysed studies to position them within current debates in the existing research and the field of rural development at large.

6.2. Problematisation of findings

The significantly diverging representations of social change are argued to depict the relevance of critically analysing development paradigms and their effects on conceptualisations within evaluative research on VSSs and, arguably, more general within development research.

More specifically, the analysis of underlying theoretical conceptions has provided relevant insights into the disbalance of approaches within the examined studies. This

study argues that the dominance of the liberal theoretical assumptions can be linked to the emergence of VSSs within fundamental neoliberalist thinking, as outlined earlier in this thesis. However, it indicates the crucial need to readdress the social dimension of VSSs from more varied theoretical research approaches to make room for new themes and discussions to evolve around largely omitted aspects. Otherwise, the dominant discourse and positions could become so entrenched that knowledge asymmetries might grow and increasingly overshadow less strongly represented perspectives and concerns. In line with the theoretical foundation of this thesis, it is argued that these findings support the importance of allowing for transformative change within evaluative research (Mertens, 2007).

The transformative paradigm further emphasises the need to consider how power dynamics reside within evaluative research. Researchers can potentially hold greater power in defining how knowledge is constructed based on the chosen methodological approach and the questions asked (Mertens, 2007). It can be argued that the findings of this study provide a clear example for the construction of power through unquestioned theoretical assumptions and approaches that create oppressive effects within evaluative research. Or in Bacchi's (2009b) terms, social change is problematised through evaluative research and its crucial to study the effects that power creates through representations.

However, one another level, most studies do not only create new power dynamics, but they also fail to question those persisting within VSSs structures. The lack visibility of local opinions and priorities within VSSs mechanism is barely questioned. The exception is the study drawing on poststructuralist notions to emphasise the need to see realities from different perspectives to allow for locally initiated social change (7P). While no assertion is possible, it can be argued that the study portrays one possible approach for enforcing producers' power and voice in constructing transformative social change.

The remaining analysed studies were found to stay largely silent on the aspects of including and empowering producers within VSSs governance systems as a form of social change. However, the current scholarly debate stresses the importance of encouraging producer representations within governance mechanisms to allow for a more inclusive and flexible design of sustainability standards (Bennett, 2017; Havice & Pickles, 2019; Wijen, 2014). It might be valuable to relate to the first proposition within the problem representation framework of this research: "how governing takes place through

problematisations" (Bacchi, 2009a:25). Bacchi (ibid.:26) emphasises that the WPR approach focuses "on the knowledge through which rule takes place, and the influence of experts and professionals on and through these knowledges". It is thus argued that it is highly relevant to consider how governing takes place through problematisations within knowledge production - as this thesis has set out to - but also within institutional VSS governance mechanisms. Within previous chapters, it has been established how the institutionalisation of VSSs, historically but also within current academic discourse, matters. The consideration of how governance through knowledge and rules creates social effects for those 'governed' is thus argued to be highly relevant. While this thesis has scratched the surface, more reflection is needed to encounter increasingly consolidated power structures if necessary.

6.2.1. Apply scrutiny to your own research

The last directive of the WPR approach "requires a form of reflexivity, which involves subjecting the grounding assumptions in one's own problem representations to critical scrutiny" (Bacchi 2009b:48). The reflections of this thesis could not end without subjecting its representation to a similar degree of scrutiny as applied to the studies in this analysis.

This thesis has examined representations of social change and their underlying development paradigms. As described in the positionality section, this thesis applies a constructivist approach. It aims to remain open to various representations of reality to give different actors or studies room to express their positions. However, the breadth of positions analysed remains relatively limited, and the various conceptions of social change within the different paradigms cannot be studied to their full extent. Based on the small sample of predominantly liberal theoretical approaches, this thesis problematises social change within VSSs as a 'north to south relationship' that obscures patterns of power asymmetries, inequities and exploitation through a liberally penetrated discourse of promoting local agents as drivers of change based on 'good governance' and 'capacity building' initiatives.

Nonetheless, as stated earlier, the problematisation does not provide any generalisability. Its purpose is, however, to provide an impetus for widening the dialogue on the social dimension of VSSs to a more nuanced field of researchers and practitioners. This thesis aspires to create inclusive and unbounded discursive effects. It strives to

broaden the discourse to include new theories and viewpoints, as well as realities and voices of those so far marginalised. This goes far beyond what this thesis has covered. However, it is argued that this thesis has laid a foundation for doing so.

7. Conclusion

Finally, the last chapter will look back at the initial problem statement, reiterate the key points this research has provided and identify the implications of this work.

Private market-based governance mechanisms have evolved over the last three decades and continue to manifest their role within various development fields and challenges. One of the challenges sought to address includes creating fairer and more equitable terms of trade within smallholder-dominated agricultural value chains through VSSs. While the economic and environmental sustainability dimension of VSSs has received significant attention within existing studies, much less consideration has been given to conceptualising the social effects that VSSs might or might not have on producers in LMICs. Various frameworks and approaches have arisen to assess social impacts generated through VSSs; however, the findings are scattered and inconsistent. Accordingly, this thesis has set out to contribute to a better understanding of the social dimension. It does so by analysing how social change is represented within studies evaluating the social impact of VSS. It further examines whether underlying theoretical assumptions can be identified to create diverging representations that might drive the findings' discrepancies.

This thesis has identified five central representations of social change and attributed their theoretical conceptions to three different root paradigms of development theory: i) liberal theory, ii) Marxist theory, and iii) poststructuralist theory. Within the liberal theory, the following three representations of social change were identified: a) social change through alternative market values, b) social change through top-down private interventionism, and c) social change through capacity building. Within the Marxist theoretical assumptions, social change was identified to represent aspects of social justice. Lastly, the poststructuralist approach was found to emphasise social change based on problematising ideologies and producer engagement.

The analysis further identified three types of effects that these representations generated on producers and their power and voice: discursive, subjectification and lived effects.

In conclusion, this thesis has provided an overview of some existing representations of social change. It further offers a critical analysis of the theoretical assumptions that underpin these representations and the effects that they might

generate. The analysis has thus successfully contributed toward a more nuanced understanding of the social within the academic discourse on VSSs.

The findings further provide relevant insights into the imbalances of theoretical assumptions and, consequently, disproportionate representations of social change within the analysed data. While mainly liberal representations of social change dominated, other aspects of social change and producer engagement received little attention. Accordingly, the research has shown how dominant representations, assumptions and approaches can create power dynamics within and beyond evaluative research that have the power to silence certain views, people, and topics.

It is argued that these findings provide relevant insights into the problematisation of social change and the power created through representations. The findings highlight the need to question dominant 'problems' and aspires to serve as an impetus for developing new ideas and approaches within the field. Furthermore, some of the identified silences might indicate areas left unproblematic and could provide suggestions for further research, as the next section will outline.

Lastly, the findings of this thesis highlight the need for a more diversified and thus more balanced theoretical approach towards conceptualising the social dimension of VSSs and the kind of changes implied. However, it is argued that this thesis has implications beyond the academic discourse, as unquestioned disbalances and obscured power dynamics within research approaches might translate into distorted rural and agricultural development approaches. This research touches upon some direct and indirect implications for producers and their power and voice within VSSs processes. Nonetheless, these insights remain very broad and need to be examined more thoroughly, as the following section will elaborate more extensively.

7.1. Implications for future research

The scope of this thesis is relatively limited. Thus, it is argued that the conceptualisation of social change needs more extensive and thorough consideration within research and practical applications. Future research might thus indicate similar patterns and find support for the findings of this thesis or potentially find very different results and implications. Both constitute a highly valuable extension of this research.

This research has revealed specific patterns and effects of governance through knowledge and rules. However, it has barely scratched the surface, and further reflection and research are needed to identify and potentially encounter increasingly consolidated power structures.

Moreover, this research has focused on potential effects on the producers themselves. However, this is a very narrow focus and by no means aims to exclude the many other groups and individuals that play a role within agricultural value chains and need to be considered within the dimension of social change. This might include wage, migrant and seasonal workers, and family members, particularly children and women. The academic discourse would benefit significantly from widening the scope and considering the implications of market-based governance mechanisms for various directly and indirectly involved or impacted actors.

Lastly, one final aspiration for making this study more inclusive and credible would be to discuss and collate the findings with people and communities involved in or impacted in some form through agricultural market-based governance mechanisms. Thereby, a much better understanding of the local context and subjective perceptions of realities on the ground could be gained. It would allow to consider different producer perspectives on social change and grasp how they feel represented through VSSSOs. Furthermore, and of no less importance, it would allow to problematise and validate to what extent their struggles are accurately represented within the findings of this research. Unfortunately, this would go beyond the scope of this research but could be a possible way to follow up on this study.

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Appendices

Appendix A1: Sample data information and in-text reference numbering

Refe-rence (in-text)	Author(s)	Article title	Year	Journal	Discipline	Root paradigm
1M	Herman, A.	Asymmetries and opportunities: Power and inequality in Fairtrade wine global production networks	2019	Area	Human geography	Marxist
2L	Ribeiro-Duthie, A. C., Gale, F. & Murphy-Gregory, H.	Fair trade and staple foods: A systematic review	2021	Journal of Cleaner Production	Inter-national relations	Liberal
3M	Trauger, A.	Is Bigger Better? The Small Farm Imaginary and Fair Trade Banana Production in the Dominican Republic	2014	Annals of the Association of American Geographers	Human geography	Marxist
4L	Nesadurai, H. E. S.	New Constellations of Social Power: States and Transnational Private Governance of Palm Oil Sustainability in Southeast Asia	2018	Journal of Contemporary Asia	Economics & business	Liberal

5L	Valkila, J. & Nygren, A.	Impacts of Fair Trade certification on coffee farmers, cooperatives, and laborers in Nicaragua	2010	Agriculture and Human Values	Development studies	Liberal
6L	Taylor, P.L.	In the market but not of it: Fair trade coffee and forest stewardship council certification as market-based social change	2005	World Development	Economics & business	Liberal
7P	Fraser, J., Fisher, E. & Arce, A.	Reframing 'Crisis' in Fair Trade Coffee Production: Trajectories of Agrarian Change in Nicaragua	2014	Journal of Agrarian Change	Politcal economy	Post-structur-alist
8M	Wilson, B.	Delivering the Goods: Fair Trade, Solidarity, and the Moral Economy of the Coffee Contract in Nicaragua	2013	Human Organization	Politcal economy	Marxist
9L	Dietz, T., Auffenberg, J., Chong, A.E., Grabs, J. & Kilian, B.	The Voluntary Coffee Standard Index (VOCSI). Developing a Composite Index to Assess and Compare the Strength of Mainstream Voluntary	2018	Ecological Economics	Economics & business	Liberal

		Sustainability Standards in the Global Coffee Industry				
10L	Akoyi, K. T., Mitiku, F. & Maertens, M.	Private sustainability standards and child schooling in the African coffee sector	2020	Journal of Cleaner Production	Development studies	Liberal
11L	Brandi, C. A.	Sustainability Standards and Sustainable Development - Synergies and Trade-Offs of Transnational Governance	2017	Sustainable Development	Development studies	Liberal
12L	Maguire-Rajpaul, V. A. et al.	Coffee certification in Brazil: compliance with social standards and its implications for social equity	2020	Environment, Development and Sustainability	Economics & business	Liberal
13L	Altenbuchner, C., Vogel, S. & Larcher, M.	Social, economic and environmental impacts of organic cotton production on the livelihood of smallholder farmers in Odisha, India	2018	Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems	Development studies	Liberal
14L	Nelson, V., Tallontir	Assessing the benefits of ethical trade schemes for	2002	International Forestry Review	Development studies	Liberal

	e, A. & Collinson, C.	forest dependent people: comparative experience from Peru and Ecuador				
15L	Bonisoli, L. et al.	Benchmarking agri-food sustainability certifications: Evidences from applying SAFA in the Ecuadorian banana agri-system	2019	Journal of Cleaner Production	Development studies	Liberal

Table A1. Sample data information and in-text reference numbering.

Appendix A2: Complete references of data set

In-text reference	Complete reference
1M	Herman, A. (2019). Asymmetries and opportunities: Power and inequality in Fairtrade wine global production networks. *Area*, *51*(2), 332–339. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12467
2L	Ribeiro-Duthie, A. C., Gale, F., & Murphy-Gregory, H. (2021). Fair trade and staple foods: A systematic review. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *279*, 123586. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2020.123586
3M	Trauger, A. (2014). Is Bigger Better? The Small Farm Imaginary and Fair Trade Banana Production in the Dominican Republic. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *104*(5), 1082–1100. https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2014.923720
4L	Nesadurai, H. E. S. (2018). New Constellations of Social Power: States and Transnational Private Governance of Palm Oil Sustainability in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *48*(2), 204–229. https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2017.1390145
5L	Valkila, J., & Nygren, A. (2010). Impacts of Fair Trade certification on coffee farmers, cooperatives, and laborers in Nicaragua. *Agriculture and*

	Human Values, *27*(3), 321–333. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-009-9208-7
6L	Taylor, P. L. (2005). In the Market But Not of It: Fair Trade Coffee and Forest Stewardship Council Certification as Market-Based Social Change. *World Development*, *33*(1), 129–147. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2004.07.007
7P	Fraser, J., Fisher, E., & Arce, A. (2014). Reframing 'Crisis' in Fair Trade Coffee Production: Trajectories of Agrarian Change in Nicaragua. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, *14*(1), 52–73. https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12014
8M	Wilson, B. R. (2013). Delivering the Goods: Fair Trade, Solidarity, and the Moral Economy of the Coffee Contract in Nicaragua. *Human Organization*, *72*(3), 177–187.
9L	Dietz, T., Auffenberg, J., Estrella Chong, A., Grabs, J., & Kilian, B. (2018). The Voluntary Coffee Standard Index (VOCSI). Developing a Composite Index to Assess and Compare the Strength of Mainstream Voluntary Sustainability Standards in the Global Coffee Industry. *Ecological Economics*, *150*, 72–87. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2018.03.026
10L	Akoyi, K. T., Mitiku, F., & Maertens, M. (2020). Private sustainability standards and child schooling in the African coffee sector. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *264*, 121713. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2020.121713
11L	Brandi, C. A. (2017). Sustainability Standards and Sustainable Development – Synergies and Trade-Offs of Transnational Governance. *Sustainable Development*, *25*(1), 25–34. https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.1639
12L	Maguire-Rajpaul, V. A., Rajpaul, V. M., McDermott, C. L., & Guedes Pinto, L. F. (2020). Coffee certification in Brazil: Compliance with social standards and its implications for social equity. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, *22*(3), 2015–2044. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-018-0275-z
13L	Altenbuchner, C., Vogel, S., & Larcher, M. (2018). Social, economic and environmental impacts of organic cotton production on the livelihood of smallholder farmers in Odisha, India. *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems*, *33*(4), 373–385. https://doi.org/10.1017/S174217051700014X
14L	Nelson, V., Tallontire, A., & Collinson, C. (2002). Assessing the benefits of ethical trade schemes for forest dependent people: Comparative

	experience from Peru and Ecuador. *The International Forestry Review*, *4*(2), 99–109.
15L	Bonisoli, L., Galdeano-Gómez, E., Piedra-Muñoz, L., & Pérez-Mesa, J. C. (2019). Benchmarking agri-food sustainability certifications: Evidences from applying SAFA in the Ecuadorian banana agri-system. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *236*, 117579. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2019.07.054

Table A2. Complete reference of data set.

Appendix B1: Complete extraction matrix (including themes & categories)

Theme	Subcategory	Definition
Article information	Author	Author's Name(s)
	Title	Title of the article
	Year	Year of publication
	Journal	Journal Title
	Discipline	Field of study
Method	Case study	Is this a specific case study? (Dropdown: Yes/No)
	Data method	What method was used? (Dropdown: Quant/Qual/Mixed/Review)
	Data collection	How was the data collected?
	Focus group(s)	Group(s) from which data was collected
Study Context	Geography (1-3)	Country(ies) where research was undertaken
	Product type	Type of agricultural product studied (Coffee/Cacoa/Mixed/etc)
	Leaders of the initative	Who leads the certification process?
	VSSSO(s)	Main 'Voluntary Sustainability Standard Setting Organisation(s)' in the article
Social change	Conceptualisation	How is social change conceptualised in the article?
	Problematisation	How is social change problematised in this article?
	Objectives of social change	Identify the three main social change objectives that the article focuses on
Producer participation (research)	Active / passive	What role play producers within the study design?
	Exclusion / Inclusion	Does the research include producers in the problematisation of social change or not?
	Representation	How are producers represented in the article?

Producer representation (VSS)	Conceptualisation	How is producer representation conceptualised?
	Change	How is producer representation problematised in the literature? What change is implied?
	Producer voice	Are producers found to have a voice in problematizing social change within VSSSOs?
	Why?	Why are producer found to have full / some / no voice?
Development theory	Paradigm	Identify the development paradigm that best describes the representation of social change (Dropdown: liberal theory / Marxist theory / poststructuralist theory)
	Legitimisation	How is the representation motivated?
	Assumptions	Which assumptions are made?
	Silences	Which issues and perspectives are silence through the identified development paradigm?

Table B1. Extraction matrix.