

Real Reason

“developing political imagination”

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Situation Assessment Brief:

Communicating Voluntary Standards

October 2009

Produced in partnership with the Pacific Institute

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I. Introduction

I.1 Executive Summary

How do people—both experts and non-experts—*make sense* of the complex and varied landscape of international voluntary social and environmental standards and certification?¹ Are dominant conceptions of standards in alignment with those of the standards community itself? If not, what is needed to help people understand the importance and value of these standards? How might different ways of reasoning about standards impact efforts of the standards community?²

Cognitive linguistic analysis helps to answer these questions. This discipline detects *reasoning patterns embedded in language* in order to identify the underlying *cognitive models*³ and other conceptual phenomena that shape and simplify people’s understandings of everything from schools to economies to social justice.

In partnership with the Pacific Institute, Real Reason conducted a three-month *situation assessment* of the cognitive models currently in use for understanding voluntary standards and their certification. This research and analysis was designed to help identify those models as well as to understand their entailments and implications.

This brief presents our findings, describing the dominant and minority patterns identified. Its goals are to describe the effects current framing⁴—based on existing models—is having on popular understandings of standards and their certification, and to recommend the steps needed to proceed with the work of proactive framing.

Main Findings

Real Reason has found a remarkable degree of linguistic and conceptual complexity in the discourse around standards and their certification (see, for example, inset below). Amidst this complexity, two main findings emerge from the data evaluated:

¹ International voluntary social and environmental standards are referred to in myriad ways throughout the data on which this report is based. In the interest of simplicity, throughout this report, we will generally use “standards,” though we will sometimes employ longer forms for clarity when needed. References to “certification” follow the same principle.

² This work is based on a corpus of textual data from advocacy, policy, and academic sources, as well as live observation, conversation, and elicitation with representatives of the Pacific Institute, ISEAL and its member organizations, and other advocates and practitioners in the field. This report is intended to be of value to all of these constituencies. It is this diverse group we reference as the “standards community.”

³ Cognitive models are ways in which our minds organize knowledge about complex and abstract ideas. Their existence enables us to share understandings within a cultural community.

⁴ For our purposes in this document, “framing” refers to the conscious or unconscious *expression* of one or another cognitive model when communicating about standards.

(1) Three approaches now dominate communication and reasoning about standards and certification: a **market framing**, a **governance framing**, and a **communication framing**. Each offers a set of advantages and disadvantages to the standards community. While other less-dominant framing approaches can also be identified (see Appendix), it is these three main framings that are likely to shape the agenda for coalition-building efforts in the near future.

(2) This standards community has work to do to identify together a clear vision of what standards are and why they matter. This is a necessary next step in order to develop a proactive framing strategy that is both conceptually coherent and consistent with the values, goals, and theory of change of the community. The strongest long-term framing efforts⁵ are authentic expressions of an internally consistent set of ideas, beliefs, and commitments.

“Standards” are Conceptually Complex

Many voices in this standards community remark on what they see as the “arcane” nature of standards and certification. While the bulk of standards discourse is quite technical (see next inset), it is common for language used in any field to have basic meanings and usages as well as expert meanings and usages. Given a topic that is especially technical, arcane, or otherwise esoteric, it is that much more important to understand where its terminology comes from, and the range of other meanings key terms may have.

(1) **Multiple senses** - The word “standard” is extremely *polysemous*—it has many senses, each related but semantically distinct. And the challenge is that many of these senses are closely related, but not synonymous. For example, “standard” can point to a *practice*, a *requirement*, a *touchstone*, a *measure*, or an *exemplar*, to name just a few possibilities.

(2) **Contrasting images** - Thinking about standards involves multiple *image schemas*—basic building blocks of cognition that structure more abstract reasoning. For example, standards are often understood using VERTICAL ORIENTATION: you can “live up to” standards, for instance. But interestingly, while standards can be thought of as something *high*, they can also be understood as something *low*: as in minimum or bottom-line standards.⁶ And separate from this vertical orientation, standards can also be about *interchangeability* or *uniformity*, as in standard-width screws or a standard-wattage light bulb.

⁵ This is in contrast with a more reactive, or even disingenuous, kind of “spin.”

⁶ This issue appeared in practice—at a convening of standards professionals tackling the challenge of defining the best role for voluntary standards. Specifically, should voluntary standards be used to establish minimum performance levels or to set a higher bar—or even a gold standard—for sustainability practices?

Superordinate Language is Pervasive

Members of the standards community have expressed concerns that the language they use is too “technical” and “jargony” for the public, and Real Reason’s analysis confirms that these concerns are well founded. There is extensive use of *abstract* and *superordinate* terminology in communications about standards.

Phrases like “management systems,” “conformity assessment,” and “mechanisms for evaluation” are just a few examples of jargon that is abstract and does not provide points of accessibility to lay audiences.

These terms were never intended to connect to with all audiences, of course. But ideally this language would exist alongside a more informal standards and certification lexicon to serve the goal of triggering vivid images, or offering “hooks” to connect your content with concrete, everyday experiences that are readily accessible to a broader audience.

1.2 Project Goals

Real Reason’s role in this work was to locate the ways in which standards and certification are conceived, identify assumptions and associations triggered by the dominant conceptions, and assess their alignment with the aims of the social and environmental standards community. The analysis involved using cognitive linguistic tools to identify regularly repeating reasoning patterns, whether in the form of *frames*, *metaphors* or other phenomena, and determine their *entailments*—what each conceptual model brings that is helpful and what is confusing or harmful. Given those entailments, one framing approach may have more potential than another to help people “see” what kind of social change is necessary; the goal in this project phase is to enable a conversation about the tradeoffs involved.

In order to assess the help or harm likely to be done by a particular approach, it is necessary to understand the communications aims of the standards community in this framing effort—and there are many. The consultation period with the Pacific Institute that preceded the launch of this project; the opportunity to observe and participate in ISEAL’s 2009 Annual General Meeting; and the set of language data sourced from members of the standards community—together these contributed a strikingly wide range of motivations for undertaking framing work. All of the following needs were identified:

- Broadening *awareness* of standards and certification
- Identifying accessible *lay terminology* for communications
- Locating *simpler models* that clarify standards by analogy
- Distinguishing among standards systems on the basis of *credibility*
- Ensuring that people’s understandings of standards systems are *accurate*

- Establishing standards as something *positive* and *beneficial*
- Conveying the overall *importance* of standards and certification

No framing approach can optimize all of these factors simultaneously, of course; each brings its own tradeoffs. The goal is to take best advantage of framing that is resonant and supportive without compromising integrity or core values.

Real Reason’s research questions at this stage of the work included:

- *What do your audiences now assume about the nature of standards—where do they come from, why are they needed, how do they function and what kind of effect do they have?*
- *What “cognitive anchors” ground understandings of standards? Are there images or other sensory or motor experiences regularly associated with standards and certification?*
- *Where are there conceptual gaps, or even obstacles, in current understandings of standards systems? What are their particular consequences?*
- *What are the main contexts in which people situate standards and certification? In other words, what are standards understood to be “about”?*
- *Are there multiple, competing contexts and models that are used to reason about standards?*
- *What are the genuine disagreements about the appropriate role for standards and what are simply miscommunications or willful misunderstandings?*
- *What are the cognitive tradeoffs of framing based on one existing conceptual model versus another?*

None of the three main models that emerged is used exclusively by experts or exclusively by laypeople, and as they are described below, none should sound foreign or unusual. Each brings focus to a different aspect of the issue of social and environmental standards, and each provides a different set of opportunities and challenges. They should each matter to the standards community for several reasons:

(1) Whatever the context or frequency of their individual use, each represents an *available* way for people to organize their thinking about social and environmental standards. While one model may be more dominant than a second, or another may be more prevalent in expert reasoning than lay reasoning, for instance, each represents a way that our minds are *capable* of thinking about standards and certification.

(2) Reliance on a particular model leads people to particular conclusions, some of which may be different from those of the standards community. The nature of the underlying cognitive models in question can help to explain why some partners and audiences may not be aligned with you, and can help pinpoint sources of confusion, resentment, apathy, or alienation.

(3) If significant debate within or from outside the standards community is the result of conflicting cognitive models—rather than genuine disagreement—then there exists an opportunity to understand an “opponent’s” motivations and help them shift to a different model by reframing communications.

1.3 Project Scope

Real Reason collected and evaluated a targeted set of *language data* from a variety of sources and genres. These data included extensive stakeholder materials, including items from the standards community such as the ISEAL archives, communications with and to members and conference proceedings, and the promotional materials of specific standards systems.

Also reviewed were: print media coverage of standards; public discussion and commentary; online blog sources; June 9, 2009 U.S. Congressional hearing on greenwashing; the transcripts of a June 22, 2009 ISEAL Annual General Meeting facilitated session and two individual elicitations; a set of linguistic databases; academic analyses of standards and eco-labeling; and an August 6, 2009 “language laboratory” session with a group of lay participants.⁷ Finally, the complete data set includes thematic patterns and limited language observations (not direct transcriptions) from a Fall 2009 convening of interested standards advocates and practitioners.

Real Reason’s team expertise is in linguistic analysis of American English, so the significant majority of data reviewed were from American English sources. The remainder of data were from British English and other global English varieties. Our application of cognitive-linguistic tools and methodologies draws on certain universal human cognitive capacities and also on culture- and language-specific speaking and reasoning patterns. Readers can anticipate that some of the fundamental conceptions of standards treated here will prove relevant to other language communities—for example, it would be reasonable to imagine that many languages show evidence that the *idea* of VERTICAL ORIENTATION helps to structure understanding of standards (consider expressions like *high* bar and *low* expectations in American English)—while specific word patterns will vary across languages.⁸

⁷ Not to be confused with a focus group, this language lab was designed to elicit generally accessible ways of thinking and talking about standards and certification in Standard American English. Language lab findings make no claims to represent specific demographic segments.

⁸ For instance, American Sign Language (ASL) regularly expresses the same senses of ‘optimal performance,’ ‘routine or commonplace’ and ‘minimum acceptability’ as English does, but ASL uses separate word forms for each while English draws on the same word, *standard*, for each.

1.4 About Real Reason

*Real Reason was founded as a nonprofit organization in 2006, and is based in Oakland, California. In close partnerships with allies, Real Reason applies the tools of **cognitive linguistics**—an academic field that uses language as data to understand how people reason and make decisions—to help advocates for democratic social change do their work more effectively.*

*Real Reason begins where traditional research ends. Conventional polls and focus groups are not adequate for understanding key questions, such as why certain concepts resonate with the public while others do not. We explore **not just where people are right now, but where they are capable of going** and how to help start them on that journey.*

*Our work is designed to help people tap into innate capacities that are either underdeveloped or in a state of atrophy: flexibility in thinking, tolerance for ambiguity and complexity, understanding of interconnection, adaptability, and a sense of agency. By aligning efforts with these core elements of democratic thought and action, Real Reason helps to ensure that **work done in the short term on a particular issue will also support long-term, cross-issue efforts.***

2. Market Framing

Many explicit discussions of the market appear throughout the language data evaluated for this study. The standards community continues to debate the role of the market in international voluntary social and environmental standards, so it should not come as a surprise that **market framing** emerged from the data as the most dominant way of conceptualizing standards. The following quotes from the data are samples of one simple way market framing shows up—through regular appearance of actual words and concepts from the market domain, such as *branding, incentives, efficiencies, price volatility, and market chains*:

*Another possibility for an **incentive mechanism** is the provision of preferential financing...*

*...this is expressed as the need to **develop a common branding strategy**, potentially including a common label.*

*...that standards systems are **financially sustainable** (driving **structural efficiency gains**).*

*In addition to the potential for **market access and improved prices**, standards systems may enable other **economic benefits** including **healthy resilient businesses, reduced costs, higher efficiencies, greater market security, lower price volatility, and improved communities**. The **globalization of markets, concentration of market chains** coupled with increased pressure for transparency and responsibility in the supply chain has created a **demand for the products and services of standards systems**.*

2.1 Features of Market Framing

From a cognitive linguistic perspective, what is remarkable here is not just the ubiquity of explicit references to the market, it is how understandings of standards are often structured by a cognitive model that *imposes market reasoning* on the whole of the standards and certification arena. That is to say, what people know and learn about standards gets structured by this market framing. This means that beliefs about markets and market functions—not social policy, not sustainability—most naturally flow into any gaps left open in communications.

The Power of Conceptual Frames

Separate from the sense of “framing” in public communications, the concept of standards comprises a frame in a more technical cognitive linguistics sense. This use of “frame” refers to the basic sets of roles and relationships that exist in the “scene” of a particular concept. The scene always includes certain players, props, events, and relationships that can be fairly clearly and discretely spelled out.

In the case of *standards*, the frame roles—the “players” and the “props”—include

Setter (e.g., a government, a standards-setting organization)

Affected entity (e.g., bananas, labor practices)

Person responsible for the affected entity (e.g., producer)

Domain (e.g., toxicity, recycled content)

Level (e.g., the specific degree of toxicity)

Familiarity with frame roles is valuable. The more roles you have to work with in the key frames in your issue area, the more perspectives you have from which you can present your issue to different audiences, and so the more flexible your communications can be.

Primed by a market frame, what do we expect to see? What’s “normal”? What seems like common sense in a market setting? Well, from the perspective of a consumer, we might expect to see buyers, sellers, and commodities. It would be normal for information to come in the form of advertisements. We expect that different brands will be competing for our attention. And we expect motivation to come in the shape of profit.

Market framing of standards has some clear advantages:

- It *speaks to business* interests; it signals businesses that they can think of standards as their “home turf”
- It connects with people’s *familiar* consumer experiences and provides moderately *accessible* language
- It “*makes sense*” to many in a US political context in which there is a strong orientation toward the primacy of the market

But this framing also has serious drawbacks:

- It compounds the overall *credibility* challenges that the standards community faces, by facilitating multiple key misunderstandings
- Members of the public are viewed only through their roles as consumers; in fact, an overall market framing may even encourage a passive stance with regard to broader social and environmental action: once incentives are in place in the market system, change is understood to follow somewhat *automatically*
- Market framing naturally *highlights market principles*—such as cost efficiency and profit seeking—rather than the ideals and values of the standards community; a market focus is a focus on the strategy for achieving change, rather the motivation

2.2 Ethical Labels and the Market Blend

In order to understand the full impact of the market framing approach, it is necessary to look at the salience of ethical labels.⁹ Real Reason’s analysis suggests that, for lay audiences and even many experts, ethical labels are the image most salient in thinking about standards and certification. Ethical labels are *metonymic*: they often stand in for, and structure comprehension of, standards and their certification. We know that people’s minds are engaged by mental “images”—the more embodied, concrete, and tangible a cognitive anchor, the better chance an idea will “stick.” A challenge for the standards community, however, is that *when viewed against a market backdrop, ethical labels feed into cynicism*.

From a technical perspective, this is an understanding of ethical labels, and by extension standards, that is built out of a complex *conceptual blend*—a subconscious process that results in the mental integration of a set of elements and relations from different source scenarios. Here the relevant scenarios come from basic *market frames* (which contribute the “roles” of Producer, Consumer, Goods, and even Advertising) as well as both a *standards frame* (offering a Standards Setter, Affected Entity, Domain, and Level) and a *certification frame* (Certifier, Certifiee, Certificate, Status). When laypeople make quick judgments about

⁹ We use this term as an umbrella for what are variously referred to as *ethical labels*, *eco-labels*, *certification marks*, *certification seals*, *ethical marks*, and *green marks*.

ethical labeling, *they are often collapsing actors, events and relations across these frames*. For example, Producers, Standards Setters, and Certifiers are regularly confused or conflated.

Enhancing Credibility of Standards

It is clear that this standards community cares about credibility. Several of your documents discuss the need to convey that there is a distinction between *standards setters* and *third-party certifiers*, with the goal of enhancing the credibility of independently verified standards.

However, in our data, we observed people struggling to make an even rougher cut—to reliably recognize that there is (whether thought of as a setter *or* certifier) an *entity separate from profit-motivated producers*.

The distinction with which people need the most help may actually be a very basic one: between those pursuing profit and all others.

As a result of these mental shortcuts, people can have difficulty making certain distinctions—distinctions that are critical to the perceived integrity of the standards community.

- Without an inordinate amount of attention to the intricacies of standards and certification systems, people seem to have difficulty recognizing the non-market actors beyond their existing conception of profit-driven producers and retailers (raising overgeneralized concerns about “greenwashing,” for instance).
- When reasoning through a market blend, people also have difficulty seeing ethical labels as something distinct from advertising (resulting in the common response to such labeling as an “advertising gimmick”).
- With such a strong profit drive coming out of a market frame, it may not be surprising that some standards practitioners have reported encountering producers who understand requests for participation in a standards system as request for “charity.”

Mediating the counterproductive contributions of the market frame requires concerted effort. Work in the field of cognitive linguistics suggests that direct attempts to challenge these misunderstandings with factual statements (such as, “...but our standards are independently verified...”) will be ineffective. When people are understanding standards through a market blend, the facts that do not fit will simply bounce off.

The Problem of Cynicism: Example Data

Who benefits from standards? Who is impacted by the good accomplished through standards, certification, and ethical labeling? When we asked the participants in our language laboratory these questions, their responses—while consistent with other textual data evaluated—were quite striking:

- “The group selling the products”
- “The organizations doing the certifying”
- and, “the ink companies”

The above were all first responses from language laboratory participants. Each of these was asserted before the group finally began to name entities like “Guatemala”, “society,” or “the environment”—and the list was rounded out with “people who [can] afford certified products,” “rich people,” and the “elite.”

Lab activities using actual labeled packages and produce yielded these responses:

- What are these [ethical labels]?*
 - “Marketing gimmicks.”
- How do you understand [this organic and this conventional apple] to be different?*
 - “One is more expensive.”
- Why’s the [USDA “organic”] sticker there?*
 - “A marketing gimmick.”
 - “Someone slaps a sticker on it.”

2.3 Issues for Proactive Framing

If broader support for standards were to be sought through market framing, then a number of issues would need to be addressed. First, the standards community would need to develop a narrative that contains *a clearer conceptual distinction between market and non-market actors* in standards systems. Effort in this area is complicated by the fact that (1) the data does not currently reveal much public awareness of distinctions among standards setters, accreditors, and certifiers, and (2) the details of licensing and certification fee structures may easily be misconstrued by target audiences once awareness does grow. A market framing of standards in our current environment seems to predispose people to see self-interested profit-seeking activity in all parts of standards system.

Second, work would be needed to manage stereotypes of businesses and industry. Real Reason repeatedly observed doubt as to the trustworthiness of businesses involved in ethical labeling. At this point in time, the strength of that doubt is

enough to discourage us from recommending strategies designed to fight those stereotypes. Rather, it would be important to develop approaches that recognize a few leaders as role models in a way that de-emphasizes their profit motivation, while acknowledging and allowing most laypeople to *hold on to their general skepticism*.

Third, the standards community would need to find ways of redefining or moving beyond the limited role of “consumer” that is provided to the public in a market blend, if attitudes and actions more in line with social activism are desired.

3. Governance Framing

While market framing of standards is pervasive, it is by no means the only way of thinking and talking about social and environmental standards. Another we will call *governance*¹⁰ *framing* is also well represented in the language data evaluated:

*[Our] standard-setting process is **transparent, democratic and inclusive** with many opportunities for the interested **public to participate**.*

***Citizens learn when to advocate**, when to use standards that are appropriate, credible, democratically enacted, multi-stakeholder.*

*We have voluntary initiatives because of the **governance gap** in national level industrial systems. We need to make sure that those voluntary initiatives, which are very important, contribute to overcoming that **governance gap** and do not perpetuate it.*

*So their standards are developed in a way that is **democratic and inclusive**. And that way these members distinguish themselves from the other social and environmental standards organizations **that might be just a puppet of big corporations**, for example.*

Consider the assertion that voluntary standards exist to address the absence of sufficient regulation in the international sphere—this absence is often explicitly called a “governance gap” in the data. Even more compelling from a cognitive-linguistic perspective is the prolific invocation of such ideas as establishing *credibility*, demonstrating *transparency*, and engaging in *democratic decision-making* with a *multi-stakeholder* group. These and related priorities were found nearly everywhere throughout the rationale statements of standards setting organizations. And while relatively rare, a handful of references to members of the public as *citizen(s)* were found. Communication choices like these make sense when standard-setting is conceived of as a process of governance.

¹⁰ The selection of *governance* as the label for this framing rather than *government* is not accidental; the observed language differentiated this framing from institutionalized *government*.

3.1 Features of Governance Framing

As with market framing, the mere fact that Real Reason’s analysis identifies a governance theme framing standards and certification should not be surprising. But how does governance framing impact reasoning? When we reason using frames related to governance, certain things simply “make sense.”

For instance, when we reason about governance—specifically democratic forms of governance¹¹—we accept with ease that the concept of *influence* will be relevant. It is ideal for *authority* to be determined by attributes such as *representativeness*; we expect *accountability*; and we seek *transparency*. We can easily focus on people’s roles as *citizens*, *decision makers*, or *members of a community*. *Establishing agreements*, *setting social priorities*, *building accountability mechanisms* and *allocating resources* are all seen as appropriate activities, to be expected rather than suspected.

Governance framing of this type has three main potential drawbacks:

- The concept of governance may be closely enough associated with an idea of institutionalized *government* as to be interpreted as undue by vocal individuals, groups, and institutions already opposed to “governmental interference.”
- Governance is not an everyday concept. Its understanding likely varies much more from person to person than does a more familiar concept such as “education.” Its current level of abstraction may make it the most elusive and hardest to conceptualize of the three main concepts treated here—and therefore the most challenging to trigger in a controlled way when framing proactively.
- When applied to voluntary social and environmental standards developed and administered by NGOs, it requires a crucial missing idea, which is *non-governmental governance*.

But it also offers these advantages:

- Offers *more than an individual consumer role* for audience members (e.g., *citizen*, *leader*, *community member*...)
- Supports the idea of *power and authority residing in representative structures* rather than private financial interests
- *Aligns closely with values* of the standards community as represented in the data evaluated—values that have the power to connect with and motivate audiences

¹¹ Concepts like transparency and representativeness are particularly at home in a frame representing a *democratic* type of governance. Our use of “governance framing” from here forward assumes some version of democratic governance.

3.2 Comparing Governance and Market Framing

Identities like “consumer,” “profit-seeker,” and “producer” (and even the concept of “advertising”) are still *comprehensible* when primarily relying on a governance framing, but those particular identities do not have the same focus as they do inside of market reasoning. Looking through a governance lens, standards initiatives are no longer obstacles to an otherwise unconstrained market exchange. Instead, they become part of establishing our society’s expectations—in fact, they help make rules for the market. Individuals are not just living in the moment of consumption as consumers—insofar as they are able to act in a coordinated, organized way, they can be *participants in the governing process*. Beyond their ability to generate profits, corporate actors are evaluated according to the values, expectations, and agreements established by the community.

A governance framing offers “the rest of us” *more than a consumer role*. It provides the opportunity *to identify as citizens, a leader, members of a community*, and so on. Notice also that some of these roles are automatically assumed to be part of a larger group. While the consumer identity in the U.S., for example, is quite individualized, other identities are more group oriented. If coordinated action on the part of citizen groups plays an important role in achieving the goals of the standards community, consider whether your framing reflects the value of that action.

To a large extent, this governance framing appears to be in alignment with the values and goals of the standards community. And to a certain degree, your audiences may already be receptive to understanding standards through this lens: the language data reviewed suggests that some people may even be going as far as mistaking non-governmental standards initiatives as un-nameable yet trusted government programs.¹² When a standards organization adopts certain appearances of government—such as the official-looking code numbers used by ISO—the effect may be even more pronounced. To the extent standards are understood through a governance lens, the flavor of skepticism and cynicism so prevalent in our data around market-based eco-labeling appears significantly minimized.

3.3 Issues For Proactive Framing

If governance framing is compelling to the standards community, what is needed to build public support for standards-as-governance? The most significant challenge is that many lay audiences may have trouble conceiving of governance taking place outside of an actual government, and could well be surprised and even concerned to discover that so much of standards governance is being conducted by non-governmental entities.

¹² This is particularly notable given other patterns in US public discourse that express aversion to government.

In the short term, it may be possible to bridge this gap by presenting standards initiatives as an effort to provide a *role model* or *blueprint* for government entities (if this is in fact what the standards community believes). But in the long term, Real Reason has identified a need for the strengthening and elevation of a deeper *missing idea*: that various forms of governance can be, are now, and will always be practiced in places other than “official” government institutions—and that the key is recognizing those forms of governance and evaluating them against democratic principles.

This concept, if broadly held, would enable people to see as common sense the idea that governance practiced by “non-governmental” standards system actors can be fully legitimate. Legitimacy, here, would not be established by formal standing as a government institution, but by a practice of governance that is demonstrably transparent, accountable and representative. The need for voluntary social and economic standards might then be understood not as filling a “governance gap,” but instead replacing poor governance (whether by corporations or ineffective governments) with good governance.

Development of the missing idea of non-governmental governance may be particularly important for the standards community, given that the NGOs that comprise it do not currently have formal legal power. The legitimacy and influence of standards systems may need to be supported by a more accurate understanding of power in global society. Currently, it is not clear to what degree the public is ready to broadly accept non-governmental (and non-industry) entities as setters of social and environmental standards.

In addition to this missing idea, there are other issues to address when using governance framing. More work is needed to build the referenced governance values into a *coherent narrative* that tells your story clearly and compellingly. What kind of governance role do standards fulfill? How can the relevant relationships among players across standards and certification systems fit into a larger story of governance? How are voluntary standards cast—as preempting government or as a blueprint for government to follow? And how, in particular, does that governance narrative provide *roles for an active, engaged citizenry*?

4. Communication Framing

Real Reason has also found a significant amount of language, reasoning, and imagery reflecting the use of a third, *communication framing* for understanding and conveying issues of standards and certification. For instance, the standards community talks explicitly about the way certification “confirms claims” and standards allow companies to “communicate their environmental credentials” to consumers. Metaphorically, we listen to “the language [an ethical label] speaks.” Communication framing even happens without words, through the use of certain

types of images found in texts produced by the standards community. Ethical labels are an especially common topic for communication framing.

...an ecolabel ... communicates social expectations to IKEA, communicates IKEA's requirements to its suppliers, and helps suppliers communicate their compliance back to IKEA.

...the availability of a medium for communicating an environmental message...

Eco-labelling is direct conversation with consumers.

Eco-labels ... communicate a message from producers and suppliers to consumers. Whether that message is clear and understood, effective, legitimate and worthwhile is the focus of this paper.

"Picturing" Communication

Photographs like these were common in the data studied. They depict workers from the global South, in a setting related to their work, though they are usually not working at the moment. Instead, in many images their faces are central, oriented toward the camera, and the worker appears to be looking directly at the viewer, creating simulated eye contact and feeling of personal connection.



Through a variety of technologies, it is of course possible and increasingly commonplace to communicate across great distances. However, the basic conceptual frame for communication continues to default to face-to-face exchange. This requires a shared location. The critical sense of presence, of proximity, that these images offer us is heightened when they include just a bit of foliage or another item—something to spill blurrily onto the edges of the photo, giving the impression that we as observer are standing right there with the worker, in the factory, in the field, in the forest.

4.1 Features of Communication Framing

In the project data, the “things that standards and certification do” were often understood as processes of communication—in virtually any of the stakeholder dyads. Standards may be about a certifier conveying to a procurer, “we’ve vetted this product for you,” or a retailer telling a consumer, “we share your values,” or standards setters letting a producer know, “these are our expectations.” The use of a communication frame also provides an opportunity to conceptually “bridge the distance” that is otherwise very real between a consumer and a worker, allowing the former a sense that the latter is telling a personal story—“this was my experience creating this product for you.”

*Through [this ethical label], producers secure greater control over their lives and futures, and **consumers around the globe can express their support** for fairer conditions in global supply chains.*

*Ecolabels remain one of the most widely accepted ways **for a company to communicate environmental credentials.***

The observed communications framing has much to recommend its use:

- Offers a simplifying perspective on standards and certification *accessible to lay audiences* that also draws on familiar language, including colloquial expressions
- Supports and facilitates conversation about *accountability*
- Provides a tool for tapping into natural *empathy*

But it also has its challenges:

- Permits *continued lack of clarity* about the complex internal workings of standards and certification systems
- May focus energy and concern on simulated connections with individual “others” rather than on broader structural problems—a *potential kind of complacency*
- *Lacks role with natural moral or political authority* for standards systems to fill; interlocutors are underspecified

As with the market and governance framings, Real Reason’s identification of communication framing patterns should not be surprising; ethical labels, for instance, so prominent in standards efforts, are an intentional strategy for information conveyance. What matters here is that awareness of how communication framing works offers yet another conceptual framework for thinking about standards and for conveying ideas about them to audiences in a coherent, “packaged” way. Communication framing usages, like usages of the market and governance framings above, encourage particular assumptions, reasoning paths, and conclusions—and these can be harnessed.

Communication is such a natural and constant process that it can be difficult to pay it direct attention. But when we do, what do we notice? What is unconsciously elevated or highlighted when thinking through a filter of communication? Our minds naturally look to identify the “interlocutors”—the participants in the communication. We also quickly wonder what is being conveyed—what’s the message? We’re not surprised to learn there is a goal to the communication; we know that the message itself might be clear or confusing.

And there are certain other things that seem very natural. For example, when we reason using a communication framing, we may naturally privilege the kinds of things that affect the success of everyday communication: things such as *accessibility, clarity, relevance, and truthfulness*. We aren’t likely to be surprised to encounter *explanations, claims, or questions*, as these are common communication events. A communication scenario may also, not surprisingly, be evocative of *interpersonal* ties. And since a prototypical communication scenario is a basic scene of two people face to face, talking to one another, *proximity* and *connection* are common associations.

4.2 Variations on Communication Framing

In discourse on social and environmental standards, Real Reason has observed that two distinct types of communication framing are used. The first profiles the *function* of these standards as, among other things, a means of conveying *expectations* and promoting *accountability*. In this sense, the communication focus is on the transfer of information about how producers are or are not staying faithful to established standards, and the way in which producers are “answerable” to established ethical norms in the form of standards.

*The ISEAL Alliance promotes certification as a mechanism pushing business practices **to better account for** social and environmental sustainability.*

*Supermarket shelves are now exploding with a myriad of colourful labels and **claims that point to changes** in global production practices and trade.*

The second use of communication framing is different. It appears designed to tap into people’s capacity for *empathy* and to encourage *a sense of connection* with, *respect* for, or *concern* about, people with whom one would otherwise have no relationship. This version has the potential to make key connections much more salient—such as those between consumers and the workers who make consumer products available.

*Making that **direct human link between producer and consumer** is one of the most important things we can do.*

*...the possibility of **bringing the consumer closer than ever before to the providers** of certified products and services...*

4.3 Issues for Proactive Framing

A cognitive linguistics perspective suggests significant advantages to further developing a communication framing approach. First, recall that prototypical communication scenarios entail *proximity* and suggest *contact*.

Why are standards used? ... To close the gap between distant producers and consumers...

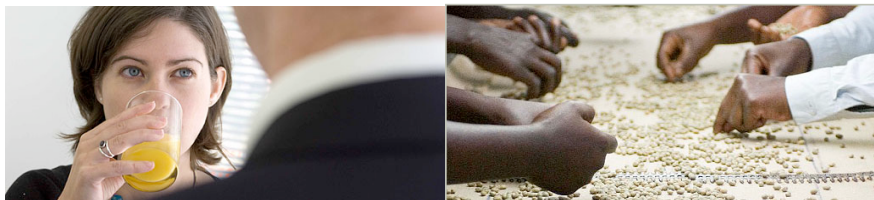
...deepening the connection between consumers and producers

These are powerful concepts for collapsing the conceptual space between otherwise disconnected entities, and could have real potential in addressing the core North/South divide recognized throughout the standards community.

Then again, it's worth asking: what level of increased awareness, personal connection, and respect do standards and certification *actually* enable? While these are powerful concepts, can communication framing be employed to create a motivating sense of personal connection between consumers and workers without inauthenticity or exploitation?

Who is Communicating?

The images prominent in public materials on standards tell their own story about who standards brings together. They tell us standards are for white, upper-to-middle class women, perhaps in their 30s or 40s, to help them communicate with a worker—one with brown skin—who works in a rural setting.



Only you can know if this is a challenge to your goals. Will your target audience see themselves in this story? What is the effect of these prototypes in an arena with a recognized, politically contentious North-South divide?

Second, there may be potential develop the real, tangible items that are circulating the globe into more effective “cognitive anchors” as an alternative to the primacy of ethical labels. This could involve, for example, a heightening of the sense that workers actually handled or fashioned the item that the consumer is now holding.

A third, more practical, advantage is that *communication* is an accessible and familiar “source domain”—or cognitive lens—through which to understand the abstract and less familiar “target domain” of social and environmental standards.

While market processes and forms of governance may be more or less familiar and accessible to different populations and communities, applying the concept of communication is a way of understanding aspects of standards that requires little to no specialized knowledge.

There are, of course, limitations to a communications framing approach, and challenges to be addressed in order to use it effectively. The flip side of its effectiveness as a simplifying model for laypeople becomes an active limitation: applying the concept of communication does not contribute to a deeper or a more accurate understanding of truly complex and multi-layered standards and certification systems, which has been a goal of some in the standards community; instead, it permits the opacity to continue in the name of accessibility.

Due in part to this effect, communication framing doesn't offer the opportunity to talk about as many of the spectrum of issues within the standards arena. For instance, it may elegantly support conversation about accountability, but doesn't offer tools for differentiating among the accountable parties. And while it conceptually simplifies the overall issue of standards, it may slightly complicate efforts to shed light on the actual power and privilege differentials between the global North and South. Finally, communication framing also lacks a role with moral or other natural authority for standards systems to assume; that relevance of authority, expertise, or rule-making—if sometimes problematic—is at least present in market and governance framings.

5. Connecting Governance, Market, Communication

As the main “backdrops” against which simultaneous conversations about standards and certification are being held, it is important to be aware of what governance, market, and communication framings have in common and what they do not. It's also important to recognize that they are not interchangeable—one framing approach does not do the work of another.

5.1 Same Players, Different Games

Governance, market and communication framings each address the same real-life context, but each through a different filter. This is obvious in one way, but its implications may not be. It means that in determining a framing approach, you aren't forced to choose to craft a narrative that is populated with market players *or* one that acknowledges the value of rule-setting *or* one that highlights communication and connection—while artificially abandoning the others. Instead, your real choices are about how the elements of the standards arena are profiled and prioritized.

For instance, in a market framing, the citizen-activists of governance are still in the picture—but the market filter shapes them into individual consumers rather than an organized political group. And communication framing still facilitates talk

about the market's value chain—but it brings into focus the people who populate it instead of its pipeline quality. Similarly, a governance approach can have room for profit-motivated actors—but now they're naturally subject to the rules of representative decision-making, rather than setting the rules of the game themselves. Concepts like *choice*, *credibility*, *decision-making*, *transparency*, *freedom*, *accountability*, and *power* are all relevant to communication, governance, and market scenarios, but remember that the why, and how, and to what extent they matter varies dramatically.

5.2 Three Theories of Change

Real Reason identified three major theories of change in the advocacy work of the standards community, each of which can be associated with one of the main framings discussed above:

- Market: **market forces naturally select for best practices**, so the best will naturally thrive
- Governance: **governments will adopt quality standards** that were originally voluntary into mandatory policy
- Communication: **people will make good choices** as long as we provide the best information, because people are basically good

Each of these change theories profiles a different key “actor” (i.e., “the invisible hand,” governments, individuals) and a different mechanism for change. The presence of three separate theories of change may even suggest the possibility of three standards movements, or three sub-movements.

6. Moving Forward with Standards

The market, governance, and communication framings discussed in this document dominate thinking and talking about international social and environmental standards and certification. Their prominence means that they set a good part of the agenda for future coalition-building and public-awareness efforts by the standards community. In other words, market, governance, and communications framings are central features of the “conceptual terrain” that is standards.¹³ And the necessary next step for the standards community is to determine how to navigate this terrain in a way consistent with its values, goals, and commitments to change.

Real Reason recommends that before moving forward with any coordinated proactive framing work, representatives of this standards community—at least the portion of it that intends to collaborate in promoting standards—work toward consensus on some important unresolved questions. For instance:

¹³ See Appendix for a number of other, less common conceptualizations of standards that were attested in the data examined.

*Are voluntary social and environmental standards about setting the **highest bar** or the **minimum acceptable level**?*

*Do you believe in the same **theory of change**? Do you see the same agents as the key levers of change?*

*What **core conceptual structure** ties together apparently disparate concerns such as poverty alleviation, environmental protection, labor rights, corporate accountability, and climate change?*

*What are the specific **shared values** that motivate work in the standards arena?*

*Which kinds of compromises would just be **temporary delays** along the way to achieving a shared vision, and which would actually be **steps backward**?*

In order to develop effective and authentic proactive framing, you must first dig down into your shared values and vision. The kind of vision that results from such a process makes it possible to create a proactive framing roadmap—a long-term strategy for moving people to a true understanding of the importance of standards, in a way that is both compelling and consistent with your goals.

Whether this means leveraging one of the dominant framings discussed in this report or looking elsewhere, the next step would be to identify conceptual and linguistic techniques for leveraging the particular framing approach effectively: employing appropriate metaphors and entailments, prototypes, and core narratives, for example. Applications of those techniques can then be tested with target audiences.

To be most effective with framing, the standards community needs to be telling the same story—*not the same words, but the same story*—with consistency. The market, governance, and communications framings introduced in this brief describe the current “state of things” in reasoning and communicating about standards. This knowledge of how people are already *capable* of understanding standards, in combination with a clearly articulated vision for the standards community, puts you in a powerful position to make good proactive framing decisions going forward.

Appendix

Real Reason observed a number of other, less common conceptualizations of standards in the data for this inquiry—each with potential utility in focusing attention, providing explanation, or contributing to persuasion. With significant investment of framing resources, each of these has some potential to supplement or be an alternative to the dominant framings discussed in this brief.

Concept: COMMUNITY CREATION/DEFINITION

Standards are community-defining enterprises.

They can be thought of as a core set of agreements made among individuals, the acceptance of which makes those individuals into members of group. As acceptance of a particular standard becomes more and more common, it “grows” its community into an ever-larger sphere.

Sample:

As standards systems gain recognition for their contribution to sustainability, there is a growing global community of users with demands, needs and aspirations for this movement.

Concept: PRACTICE

Standards are created habits.

They prompt certain behaviors to be regular, with the goal of normalizing and routinizing sustainable actions and activities.

Sample:

Together, we contribute to a world where ecological sustainability and social justice are the normal conditions of business.

Concept: GUIDEPOSTS or GUIDES

Standards are navigation aid and support.

Producers and retailers moving toward sustainability can use standards as marks along the trail, checkpoints on a journey—as interim goals, ways to know that they are moving in the right direction. They can even serve as active guides, helping to explain where you’re going, why it matters, and to preview what will happen along the way. (Note: this is distinct from a GUIDELINES understanding focused on rules and boundaries.)

Sample:

It is hoped that this ambitious project will deliver standard performance ...indicators and scoring guideposts for fishery assessments by July 2008.

... address the principles, recommendations, and required baseline standards that guide operators in producing their organic crops...

Concept: RESPECT

Standards are respect or a way to indicate respect.

Standards comprise the recognition we have for as well as each other. Their use is particularly a way for the global North to acknowledge the dignity of and behaving respectfully toward indigenous peoples and the workers who directly produce goods.

Sample:

'Sourcing with Respect'

...ensuring respect for human rights and adequate working conditions, and respecting land tenure.

Concept: EXPECTATION

Standards are expressions of expectation.

Standards convey what we anticipate from each other in terms of behavior. Sometimes that expectation is about predictability, or being able to know you can count on something, sometimes it's about defining the very least that is acceptable, and sometimes it's about identifying aspirational goals:

Sample:

It lets you know what it is you can expect. [...] Well, you buy a can of tuna; you open it up, you expect tuna inside.

The idea was to develop a standard for production which would...raise the general level to an acceptable minimum ...

...providing an independent, impartial, professional third-party assurance programme that is considered a global gold standard.

Concept: FILTER

Standards are filters.

Standards filter out impurities and ensure only the best practices remain.

Sample:

...provides an extra layer of protection to screen out certain controversial, un-certified wood/fiber materials.