Metagoverning Aquaculture Standards: A Comparison of the GSSI, the ASEAN GAP, and the ISEAL

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Abstract
The presence of multiple eco-certification standards for sustainable aquaculture is thought to create confusion and add cost for producers and consumers alike. To ensure their quality and consistency, a range of so-called metagovernance arrangements have emerged that seek to provide harmonized quality assurance over these standards. This article aims to answer the question of how these metagovernance arrangements differ and whether they actually reduce confusion, with a focus on aquaculture in Southeast Asia. We compare three metagovernance arrangements, the Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative, the International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling Alliance, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Good Aquaculture Practices, with respect to differences in their goals, their levels of inclusiveness, and their internal governance arrangement. The findings indicate that these metagovernance arrangements differ with respect to their goals and approaches and do not seem to directly reduce confusion. More critically, they represent a new arena for competition among market, state, and civil society actors in controlling the means of regulation when aiming for more sustainable aquaculture production.

Keywords
aquaculture standard, metagovernance, GSSI, ASEAN GAP, ISEAL, environmental governance

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There are currently more than 29 government, nongovernmental organization (NGO), and corporate-led eco-certification standards available for assessing and assuring the environmental and social performance of aquaculture production and trade (Parkes et al., 2010). Common to all these standards is a process of setting norms and rules, conflict resolution, learning, and exerting authority toward the improvement of aquaculture production and trade (Hatanaka, 2014; Hatanaka & Busch, 2008; Pattberg, 2005). However, these standards also differ because they represent a diverse set of public and private actors, have diverse internal procedures, and provide assurance against divergent claims, including responsible, legal, organic, or sustainable aquaculture production (Bingen & Busch, 2007; Ponte, Gibbon, & Vestergaard, 2011). The result is a highly variated landscape of eco-certification standards and labels, with different levels of credibility in the market, accessibility for producers, and (ultimately) effectiveness in steering the improvement of production.

There are differing ideas on what implications this multiplication of standards holds for improved production. On one hand, having multiple standards is thought to increase competition for achieving higher overall improvement toward broadly defined sustainability goals a so-called race-to-the-top scenario (Cashore, Auld, Bernstein, & McDermott, 2007). The consequence of more stringent “top” standards may then be the exclusion of some producers because of the added costs of complying with their requirements (e.g., Lee, Gereffi, & Beauvais, 2012; Neilson & Pritchard, 2010). On the other hand, multiple standards might lead to a “race-to-the-bottom” if standards put accessibility by producers above measurably improved production practice (Ponte & Riisgaard, 2011). In this scenario, the credibility of the standards may come into question as criteria for producer compliance are relaxed. For consumers and producers alike, the consequence of multiple standards is also thought to be confusion over multiple and ambiguous claims by eco-labeled products (e.g., Harbaugh, Maxwell, & Roussillon, 2011; Kolk, 2013). But despite these various claims, the actual effect of multiple standards for producers and consumers remains unclear.

One response to the proliferation of standards in a number of industries has been the emergence of so-called metagovernance arrangements that essentially set standards for standards (Derkx & Glasbergen, 2014; Glasbergen, 2011). Metagovernance arrangements provide a framework for standards to ensure their performance and ultimately strengthen their legitimacy to producers, buyers, and consumers alike (Washington & Ababouch, 2011). Multiple types of metagovernance arrangements are observed, ranging from initiatives designed to assess the equivalence of standards against a set of (normative) metastandards, such as codes of conduct or principles (Derkx & Glasbergen, 2014; Loconto & Fouilleux, 2014) to initiatives that seek harmonization of different standards by creating a new “super-standard” (Möckel, 2015; Mutersbaugh, 2005). As the number and type of these metagovernance arrangements proliferate each with different goals, methodologies, levels of accessibility, and
requirements for improved performance of the standards they seek to govern it is unclear what the consequences are for producers and consumers.

This article examines three metagovernance arrangements aimed at strengthening the effectiveness of public and private standards in the aquaculture sector: first, the Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative (GSSI), which is a global public–private partnership initiative that developed a benchmarking tool for comparing different sustainable seafood certification schemes; second, the International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling Alliance (ISEAL), a global NGO-led membership-based organization that sets codes of conduct for its members, which includes the Aquaculture Stewardship Council; and, third, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Good Aquaculture Practices for shrimp (ASEAN Shrimp GAP), which is a Southeast Asian inter-governmental effort to set up a common recognition mechanism to strengthen national standards in a region that leads global aquaculture production.

We compare how these metagovernance arrangements differ with respect to their goals, inclusiveness, and governance with respect to sustainable aquaculture standards. In doing so, we contribute to debates around impact of metagovernance arrangements in the perceived proliferation of aquaculture standards, by assessing their legitimacy and influencing the range of interests behind both public and private sustainability standards. In doing so, we explore the apparent politics of metagovernance arrangements and the struggle over what we term the means of regulation over a sector that contributes 50% of global fish protein and is predominantly located in the tropical low and medium income countries of Asia (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2016).

The following section elaborates the conceptual framework used for our comparison of the three different metagovernance arrangements. We then present the results of this comparison before reflecting on these findings and concluding on the significance of these benchmarking arrangements for the promotion of sustainable aquaculture in Southeast Asia.

Comparing Metagovernance Initiatives

Defining Metagovernance

Metagovernance refers to arrangements designed to create order and coordination across a number of public and private standards (Sørensen, 2006; Sørensen & Torfing, 2005) while allowing those in control of these initiatives to maintain a requisite level of autonomy to pursue their particular aims (Jessop, 2003). Metagovernance arrangements also provide a basis for controlling standard proliferation while strengthening the legitimacy, effectiveness, and fairness of governance initiatives (Kooiman & Bavinck, 2005). In doing so, they can seek control and coordination over the process of developing steering instruments
(such as standards, rules, and incentives), their content, and their outcomes (Peters, 2006).

Like the standards they seek to control, metagovernance arrangements also have divergent interests and goals. The actors developing these arrangements vary and may include private sector, civil society, and local, regional, or supranational governmental actors (Sørensen, 2006). Moreover, metagovernance arrangements may steer interactions among the different standards in directions that reflect the interest of the actors that control them (Derkx & Glasbergen, 2014; Steurer, 2013). This might mean market actors may seek commercial gain, while civil society led initiatives seek environmental outcomes and states seek alignment with national legislation. However, metagovernance arrangements may alternatively exhibit overlapping or entwined commercial, environmental, and legislative goals (Foley & Havice, 2016). When taken together, these metagovernance approaches represent a diversity of approaches that lead to different outcomes for the standards concerned.

Smith and Fischlein (2010) argue that the presence of multiple standards should be seen as the consequence of competition between rival private governance networks, which seek to exert control over a particular issue (like sustainability) in a particular sector (like aquaculture). However, they argue it is difficult to compete on the basis of the content of a standard. It is therefore not the quality of the standard that defines success in this competition, but the composition of the actors in the network and their relation-specific capabilities and resources.

Others, like Reinecke, Manning, and von Hagen (2012), claim that the presence of multiple standards results in the creation of a “standards market” that promotes convergence between these standards on their core aspects at a higher level. They argue that standards accept each other because they have a shared goal of promoting sustainability, even though they differ on the particular dimensions of sustainability they put central, the target group they address, and on the position they take in the market as basic or premium standards. This combination of convergence and differentiation results in a process of partial metastandardization, where some standard elements converge (to some extent) while competition is maintained over other attributes that allow standard-setting organizations to maintain their individuated identities.

We therefore expect that the form and function of metagovernance arrangements have direct consequences for the content of the standards and the relationship between them. When starting from the perspective developed by Smith and Fischlein (2010), we can expect the development of another field of competition where multiple metagovernance arrangements represent different networks of actors and their interests. From the perspective of Reinecke et al. (2012), however, we can expect metagovernance arrangements to offer opportunities for the (partial) harmonization of standards through the formulation of general rules. This in turn opens the question of whether we will see a convergence of
continued proliferation of standards over time in direct response to metagovernance arrangements.

**Comparing Metagovernance Arrangements**

To understand the influence of the three metagovernance arrangements relevant for aquaculture standards, we explore how they self-regulate, what relationships they create between the actors involved, and what level of (self-)reflexivity they foster in the further improvement of standards (Torfing, 2012). We translate these dimensions of metagovernance into three observable variables: their goal orientation, degree of inclusiveness, and internal governance structure.

Goal orientation refers to how objectives of metagovernance arrangement are determined, by whom and with what outcome in mind. Is this goal recognized by those standards the metagovernance arrangements seek to control and coordinate? Is the stated goal of the arrangement to foster competition by creating a best practice “benchmark”, or do they aim to create harmonization of existing standards? As argued by Busch (2011), by identifying this goal, we can determine the direction of a metagovernance arrangement and assess its influence and legitimacy claims in steering multiple standards.

Inclusiveness refers to the degree to which the metagovernance arrangement allows for the participation of members, those affected by standards and other institutions either in support or opposition to sustainability claims and their standardization. Inclusiveness plays a direct role in establishing the credibility and authority of metagovernance arrangements (Dingwerth, 2007). Both the inclusion of relevant and the affected actors are considered key to establishing legitimacy and authority, as well as willingness to participate in the exchange of resources and the identification of solutions (Torfing, 2012). The more inclusive a metagovernance arrangement is, the more likely it is to foster interactions between actors or members, formulate a joint mission, and build capacity through the creation of collective rules. The identification of who is included or excluded also reveals the dominant interests that are present. As Sørensen and Torfing (2005) argue, the way in which a metagovernance arrangement is organized influences who determines the inclusion or exclusion of certain actors and their ability to steer the scope of the scheme.

Finally, understanding the internal governance structure of a metagovernance arrangement shows how it establishes and renews rules over its subjects, resolves disputes, and exerts enforcement. Metagovernance arrangements govern standard setting, either by controlling its network through a series of subtle or indirect forms of governance instruments (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009), or by shaping participant’s actions in accordance with predefined procedure (Sørensen & Torfing, 2005). They may also apply formal elements, such as strict entrance and exit rules or measures to secure consensual results (Meuleman, 2011) or develop clear procedure for adjusting conditions or resolving conflicts.
Furthermore, relations between the metagovernance arrangements and the standards concerned not only involve how these standards are regulated, but they also influence interaction between standards, including how conflicts between them are settled (Temmerman, De Rynck, & Voets, 2015) and how their diverging interests are dealt with.

**Methodology**

The GSSI, the ISEAL, and the ASEAN Shrimp GAP were selected to get a more in-depth understanding of different kinds of metagovernance arrangements and how they interact and influence certification standards in a single sector (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2013). As outlined earlier, each case is regarded as independent to the extent that they represent different governance arenas (see, e.g., Levy & Newell, 2005), that is, market (the GSSI), civil society (the ISEAL), and the state (the ASEAN GAP). As such, it is assumed that the three metagovernance selected compete with each other in terms of the level of legitimacy that offer standards that are able to subscribe to more than one metagovernance arrangement. But it is also recognized that such a strict separation in these arenas is blurred by the interaction observed between them, through advising, informing, or even by benchmarking each other. The comparison of these metagovernance arrangements, therefore, offers an opportunity to take into account both their independence and interaction and in doing so seeks generalizable observations of the phenomenon of metagovernance.

The basis of the case comparison are the three analytical variables: goal, inclusiveness, and international governance structure, broken down into subvariables, as described earlier (see Table 1). Multiple sources of data are drawn upon to operationalize these variables. First, data were collected through a review of policy documents, reports, and press releases associated with GSSI, ISEAL, and ASEAN Shrimp GAP. Second, 21 semistructured interviews were conducted with representatives of each arrangement, with standard-setting organizations and individuals who have acted as advisors to both the standards and metagovernance arrangements between October 2014 and April 2015. All interviews were transcribed and systematically analyzed with respect to the three core issues of goal, inclusiveness, and internal governance structure.

**Comparison of Three Metagovernance Arrangements**

**Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative**

**Goals.** GSSI was launched in 2016 as a public–private multi-stakeholder platform funded by the German development agency GIZ and a consortium of retailers to create a precompetitive evaluation of the equivalence of the multiple seafood certification schemes. As claimed by an advisor to GSSI, its goal is to
| Indicators | Topic list |
|------------|------------|
| (1) Goal—interests behind development of benchmarking | - Identify the objective and direction of metagovernance arrangement  
- Understand how the goals of metagovernance arrangement are agreed upon  
- Determine how the direction of metagovernance arrangement assess its influences and legitimacy in steering standards in toward their directions  
- Identify different actors and their input in the process of setting the goals  
- Examine the goals of the arrangement to enhance positive coordination between standards, develop joint solutions or cooperation strategies  
- Steering interaction in specific direction of benchmarking, harmonization of standards, or creating methods for assessment |
| (2) Inclusiveness—accessibility to participate in benchmarking | - Inclusiveness as an instrument for establishing credibility, authority, and legitimacy  
- Participating in the exchange of resources or solutions  
- Establishing joint mission though the creation of institution or collective rules  
- Degree of metagovernance arrangement in coordinating and facilitating between standards or members  
- Degree of freedom members have in maintaining their own rules  
- Degree of interaction within the network and metagovernors and improve interactions among actors  
- Identifying who is included or excluded and dominant interests |
| (3) Internal governance—membership and representation | - Understand how metagoverning practices are established and shaped by internal rules  
- Identify procedures, activities, and rules of metagovernance arrangement  
- Enforcing or shaping member’s participating through subtle or indirect forms of instruments or rules  
- Monitoring member’s action against predefined procedural standards to ensure accordance with defined objectives  
- Introduce hierarchical elements, such as entrance or exit rules to secure consensual results  
- Use of knowledge and authority to influence benchmarking or rules framing process, and monitoring and evaluation of the outcome |
assess the content of standards, and their governance with respect to developing and renewing environmental sustainability criteria (see Figure 1). In doing so, the GSSI aims to reduce confusion throughout the seafood value chain over the claims and quality of different public and private seafood standards. In the words of the GSSI, “certified once, recognized everywhere.” It also aims to create both competition and collaboration, with the goal of reducing duplication and increasing comparability between different seafood certification schemes (GSSI, 2016a, 2016d; Nolting, 2011).

Inclusiveness. The GSSI benchmarking tool is based on a set of baseline criteria against which the performance of standards can be individually measured and relative improvement demonstrated (Mallet, 2014b). Interviews with aquaculture standard organizations (considering) themselves to GSSI benchmarking see both risks and opportunities.

Private standards generally see a risk that GSSI recognition will lead to greater cost and bureaucracy, given they already comply with the Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification on which the GSSI is based or the ISEAL codes (described later). They argue that the perceived need to subscribe to multiple benchmarks can undermine their credibility. However, one respondent argued that this is a pessimistic perspective and that the GSSI in fact represents an opportunity to consolidate their market position. Some national standards, including those interviewed from Southeast Asia that are widely regarded as less stringent but more inclusive of producers (Samerwong, Bush, & Oosterveer, under review), are overall more critical of the role of GSSI, arguing that their already marginal recognition in export markets would be
further eroded. Others, however, see an opportunity to critically evaluate themselves, with the expectation that GSSI benchmarking will lead to a level playing field in the global market.

Retailers and food service respondents were overall positive about the potential of GSSI to identify credible standard and reduce proliferation and consumer confusion. They were generally positive about the potential to reduce the number of standards but fitting with their wider corporate sustainability goals also voiced concern that the GSSI would simply recognize already stringent standards, rather than improving standards that are inclusive of a wider group of producers and global production.

**Governance.** The GSSI assessment framework has been developed through a consultative multi-stakeholder process. During this developing stage, the GSSI involved working groups that provided strategic briefings to an international Steering Board consisting of 15 representatives from retailing companies (including Grobest, Metro, Ahold Delhaize, and Sodexo), NGOs (including WWF, SeaWeb Europe, and New England Aquarium), public institutions (FAO, GIZ, and the Dutch Initiative for Sustainable Trade), and ISEAL. These working groups consist of experts from NGOs, public and private organizations, industry, and academia who translated a series of FAO normative frameworks and guidelines such as the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, as well as ISO normative standards and the ISEAL Codes, into a benchmark assessment tool (GSSI, 2016c; Nolting, 2011).

Overall, the governance structure of the GSSI, by its own admission, sets an appropriate and achievable level of compliance for standards that allow standards to demonstrate a requisite level of legitimacy (GSSI, 2016c). But GSSI also provides as an add-on to allow standards to showcase their diversity and differences (also see GSSI, 2015). The review process for standards that apply for GSSI recognition is then carried out first by experts before public consultation and before being sent to a steering board for final review (GSSI, 2016b).

Seafood importers and retailers participating in GSSI reported that the main benefit of GSSI to them is the simplification of the sustainability claims represented by standards for consumers and reducing the duplication of effort created by each buyer conducting their own benchmarking. Other partners, like the FAO, see the GSSI as an opportunity to identify gaps in national standards, as well as an opportunity to assist developing countries to develop partnerships across the global seafood value chain (Subcommittee on Aquaculture, FAO as cited in GSSI, 2016a). NGOs participating in the multi-stakeholder process saw the GSSI as an opportunity to move beyond the minimum acceptable criteria sought, they claim, by retailers and the industry. Instead, they see the GSSI as a means of setting different expectations above such a baseline to encourage overall improvement of standards and practices (Mallet, 2014a).
ISEAL

Goals. The ISEAL was founded in 2002 by a group of sustainability standard-setting organizations including the Forest Stewardship Council, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, Fairtrade International, and Marine Stewardship Council (ISEAL, 2016). The ISEAL initially developed a Code of Good Practice for Setting Social and Environmental Standards to assure and promote the credibility of private sustainability standards. Conformity to the code was also the main requirement for becoming a member of the organization (see Figure 2).

In setting this code, ISEAL aimed to contain the proliferation of existing standards through benchmarking against best practices and promote good practices and procedures in standard development and enforcement (Djama, Fouilleux, & Vagneron, 2011). ISEAL’s Codes of Good Practice has three separate codes for assessing standards: (a) a Standard-Setting Code, which provides guidance on the standards development process, and the structure and content of the standard; (b) an Impacts Code, which provides guidance on the expectations and approaches for assessing short- and long-term impact of a standard; and (c) an Assurance Code, which provides guidance for assuring that a standard supports sustainability and setting measures of effectiveness for verification and certification models (ISEAL, 2017).

Inclusiveness. ISEAL’s Codes of Good Practice are applied by leading standards and acts as a guidance for their implementation. As such, the ISEAL sets a bar for membership by developing an improvement path through these codes against which ongoing membership is defined (Djama et al., 2011). Any organization is welcome to use its codes as a guidance, but only those that go through the

Figure 2. ISEAL Alliance governance and assurance process.
Note. ISEAL = International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling Alliance.
evaluation process and show their compliance with the codes over a longer time period can be recognized as ISEAL members. For instance, despite the fact that other aquaculture-related standards (e.g., GAA, GLOBALG.A.P.) have been assessed as being compliant with ISEAL codes (Donal, 2017), only the Aquaculture Stewardship Council is a member.

The ISEAL includes a wide range of actors in the revision of their codes, including standard-setting organizations, accreditation organizations, consumer-facing companies, NGOs, researchers, and governments (Djama, 2011). It is notable that despite the ISEAL’s involvement in the development of the GSSI, the GSSI is not a subscriber of the ISEAL. This network of so-called subscribers extends beyond the ISEAL’s immediate membership to assist greater input and recognition of the ISEAL’s codes as a reference for good practice (ISEAL, 2015d). Nonetheless, membership has continued to grow because, it is argued, of the increased scrutiny and therefore demand for assurance of private standards in the international market. Member standards are able to draw more credibility and legitimacy to themselves by being associated with the ISEAL and are able to use their membership to provide greater assurance to the business community that credibility has been accredited.

The ongoing legitimacy of the ISEAL appears dependent on its own expansion. If the ISEAL can increase its membership, it can strengthen its position as an arbiter of standard oversight (Loconto & Fouilleux, 2014). However, respondents from standard organizations and the private sector argue that expansion of membership alone is not an effective strategy. From their perspective, the overall impact of the ISEAL on its members remains limited by the generality of the codes and the lack of measurable improvement that can be used to hold members to account. Over the long term, this opens up the possibility for alternative metagovernance models.

Governance. The ISEAL is governed by a board of directors (ISEAL, 2015a) along with subcommittees composed of ISEAL members to oversee its strategic plan and approve new membership applications after a review by independent evaluators (ISEAL, 2015b). In addition, a Stakeholders Council, comprising sustainability experts, provides strategic advice on the further development of the codes (Leipziger, 2009). Within this internal governance setting, the ISEAL manages the different interests of its diverse members by using pragmatic and strategic objectives that are “fit for purpose” (Loconto & Barbier, 2014). This means they discuss issues case by case or, alternatively, leave some specific issues out of discussions to achieve general consensus on the major issues.

The way the ISEAL frames credibility also differentiates them from other metagovernance arrangements. For instance, external stakeholders can collaborate with members of the Technical Committee on the content of new and revised codes (ISEAL, 2015c). In addition, members can provide input to discussions and the code revision process, with the ISEAL secretariat moderating
the views of different stakeholders. As outlined by Loconto and Barbier (2014),
the ISEAL also interacts with its members through annual individual meetings
and its annual conference. During these meetings, the ISEAL provides a plat-
form for members and nonmembers to interact and discuss their experience,
offers learning opportunities, provides recommendations for improvement,
and during the peer-review process among members when discussing the develop-
ment or revision of their codes.

**ASEAN Shrimp GAP**

**Goals.** The ASEAN Shrimp GAP was established in 2011 by the ASEAN Shrimp
Alliance (ASA): An intergovernmental initiative consisting of 10 ASEAN
member countries aimed at harmonizing existing shrimp production standards
(Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center [SEAFDEC], 2013; Yamamoto,
2009). Despite there being more aquaculture species standards at the national
level, shrimp was selected because of its contribution to regional economic develop-
ment and because of the proliferation of national level shrimp standards.

Similar to the GSSI, the ASEAN Shrimp GAP process followed the FAO
Technical Guidelines for Aquaculture Certification to develop its modules
(SEAFDEC, 2014; see Figure 3). It, as such, serves as a guidance and encour-
agement for member states to align, develop, or improve their national stand-
ards and shrimp farming operations (ASEAN, 2011) and for ASEAN member
countries aiming to align their national GAP standards. One potential outcome
in the future may be a regional standard for all aquaculture species that com-
bines the ASEAN Shrimp GAP and the ASEAN GAP (SEAFDEC, 2016).

**Figure 3.** ASEAN Shrimp GAP governance and assurance process.

*Note. ASEAN Shrimp GAP = Association of Southeast Asian Nations Good Aquaculture Practices for shrimp.*
The first rationale for the ASEAN Shrimp GAP standard is to counter the proliferation of standards for shrimp that had emerged in major producing countries like Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam (ASEAN, 2011). The second rationale is to increase the overall credibility of Southeast Asian shrimp production in export markets, which supplies 80% of the global shrimp output (ASEAN, 2011). Market access to the European Union and United States is a particularly important goal for ASEAN countries, given their experiences with non-tariff barriers for shrimp around quality and food safety issues. The third rationale is to promote greater harmonization between countries in the region in the ongoing transition to the ASEAN Economic Community which aims to integrate regional markets and regulation following a (long-term) model similar to the European Union (see, e.g., Jetschke & Murray, 2012).

**Inclusiveness.** The ASEAN Shrimp GAP is a voluntary standard for member countries. This means it covers only national standards and not any private standards. However, according to respondents, while the ASEAN Shrimp GAP has not had interaction with the GSSI or the ISEAL, some of the national standards (notably Vietnam and Thailand) have had preliminary discussions by GSSI for developing an improvement plan with the goal of being benchmarked. Concern was also expressed over their involvement, particularly with respect to losing sovereign control over standard development to what they perceive to be the private sector.

As a regional state-led initiative, the ASEAN Shrimp GAP has brought together a range of countries to align their national shrimp standards. But there remains a high degree of variance in how the standards and harmonization process is interpreted. This means that harmonization in the future will remain complex, and as seen in the implementation of other ASEAN “good agricultural practices,” individual countries are likely to introduce GAP based on their own priorities rather than those of the region (Premier & Ledger, 2006). According to respondents reflecting on the experience of these “good agricultural practices,” it also appears that greater efficiency might be sought in moving to equivalence and mutual recognition of existing national standards, rather than formulating a harmonized regional standard and associated label. This may allow for wider impact of the ASEAN Shrimp GAP, given it is currently only Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia that have currently aligned their national standards (Agricultural Commodity and Food Standards, 2014; Nguyen, 2015).

**Governance.** The ASEAN Shrimp GAP standard was developed by the ASA through a series of meetings between public and private sector experts and subsequently endorsed by the ASEAN and announced to its members (SEAFDEC, 2012). The alliance supports its member countries to improve ASEAN’s negotiation power in the international market and to establish joint coordination mechanisms among regional governments and private commercial sectors.
(ASA, 2009). The alliance also acts as a communication hub for sharing information on shrimp product development and for collaborative action among its members. Its functions include annual reviews to provide recommendations for member countries on the alignment process with the aim of improving the performance of national standards (SEAFDEC, 2013).

ASEAN member states, led by Thailand, have been discussing the creation of a regional certification scheme based on the ASEAN Shrimp GAP that could be recognized within the region and beyond (SEAFDEC, 2014; Suntornratana, 2014). But while the ASEAN Shrimp GAP aligns to national standards across the region, it is also noted by government respondents that it still lacks an institutional body at the ASEAN level to govern such a regional standard in terms of implementation and auditing.

**Discussion**

Common to all three metagovernance arrangements is the ambition to curtail the proliferation of aquaculture standards, as well as create trustworthy and therefore effective sustainability standards. As outlined in our analysis earlier (and summarized in Table 2), each arrangement attempts to foster control and coordinate standards; they set out to varying degrees of rules for inclusion, dispute resolution, enforcement, and control. Each of the arrangements also sets out reflexive processes of internal governance, through which multiple stakeholders from a variety of sectors are involved in setting guidelines, codes, and standards for the standards they seek to steer. While there are clear differences between exactly how these metagovernance arrangements operate, they ostensibly seek the same outcomes for the standards that subject themselves to assessment, guidance, and ultimately improvement.

The analysis also shows that each of the metagovernance arrangements differs considerably in terms of its approach to ascribing legitimacy to the standards they govern. In selecting these arrangements as comparative cases, it was assumed that each represents the governance arenas within which their members, subscribers, or partners stem from. For the GSSI, this means the market; for ISEAL, its wider civil society partners; and the ASEAN Shrimp GAP, its member states. However, the results show that these governance arenas and metagovernance arrangements are not mutually exclusive.

Reflecting the findings of other research on multi-stakeholder initiatives and private standards, each of the metagovernance arrangements seeks legitimacy through hybrid combinations of market, civil society, and the state actors and institutions (see Auld, 2014; Foley & Havice, 2016). The GSSI builds the legitimacy of its assessment framework on a combination of FAO guidelines and Codes of Conduct, as well as the participation of public funding organizations, industry, and academia, participating in its stakeholder and technical advisory boards. Similarly, the ISEAL builds its legitimacy through engagement with
Table 2. Comparison of Three Metagovernance Arrangements.

| Variables                                      | GSSI                                      | ISEAL                                      | ASEAN Shrimp GAP                           |
|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| (1) Goal—interests behind development of benchmarking | - Assess credibility of standards          | - Guide development of standard-setting procedures by member standards | - Increase credibility of ASEAN aquaculture products |
|                                                | - Exclusion of noncredible standards from retail product inventories | - Implicit exclusion of non-credible standards based on membership | | |
| (2) Inclusiveness—accessibility to participate in benchmarking | - Industry, retail in development stage. Limited to only fisheries and aquaculture standards | - Membership limited to standards and accreditation organizations from various fields | - Membership restricted to ASEAN national shrimp standards |
|                                                | - Experts contribute to benchmarking tool | - Wider network interaction with ISEAL “subscribers” | - Voluntary assessment depends on interests and capacities of shrimp sector and standards |
|                                                | - Standards voluntarily engage in benchmarking process | - Platform for knowledge sharing among standards | | |
| (3) Internal governance—membership and representation | - Multi-stakeholder platform of seafood industry, retailers, experts, and governments | - Moderates members to focus on collaboration with solution orientation | - Countries with expertise and experience lead development |
|                                                | - Criteria developed through negotiation among industry, NGOs, academia, buyers, and standard organizations | - Conferences and network interaction extends influence of Code of Best Practice to wider community of practitioners (subscribers) | - Lead countries (in particular Thailand) takes initiative in discussions and meetings |
|                                                |                                          |                                            | - Voluntary benchmark for member states to follow and not a mandatory regulation |
|                                                |                                          |                                            | - Ambitions to develop “harmonized” regional certification |

Note. GSSI = Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative; ISEAL = International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling Alliance; ASEAN Shrimp GAP = Association of Southeast Asian Nations Good Aquaculture Practices for shrimp; NGO = nongovernmental organization.
both NGO and company members and subscribers. The ASEAN Shrimp GAP is different to the extent that it draws on the democratic legitimacy of ASEAN member countries (similar to the model of the European Union; Fouilleux & Loconto, 2016). But an underlying assumption is that this legitimacy reflects the wider concerns and interests of broad societal support. Based on such observations, and reflecting the findings of others (Derkx & Glasbergen, 2014; Sørensen, 2006; Steurer, 2013), each of the metagovernance arrangements constitutes a vehicle for shaping social dynamics of power sharing, communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution between sectors.

But despite this mixing of governance arenas, and related sources of legitimacy, what is also apparent from each of the cases is the dominant role of the market. The consequence of this being that while these arrangements provide assurance of market-oriented standards, there appears to be a clear differentiation between the dominance of market actors and the representation of their interests in influencing their goal orientation, inclusiveness, and internal governance. Said differently, the legitimacy of each of these initiatives draws on the interests of the market actors by (aspiring to or already) providing assurance over market standards. This in turn affects the way in which they set their goals and ultimately the degree and ways in which they support the improvement or inclusion or exclusion of standards.

For instance, although the GSSI is outwardly open to a wide range of standards, the goal of the commercial partners appears to favor assurance for standards already active in European and U.S. markets rather than supporting the improvement of apparently lower performing ASEAN national standards (Samerwong et al., in press; Vandergeest & Unno, 2012). Similarly, the membership model of the ISEAL explicitly favors standards that have been developed through civil society–led multi-stakeholder processes rather state- or private sector–led standards. While it might be considered as exhibiting greater independence from the market than the GSSI, the greater civil society involvement in the ISEAL has created suspicion that it is not representative of the wider interests of commercial (seafood) buyers. Indeed, it appears this suspicion contributed to the development of the GSSI in the first place. The ASEAN GAP standard is clearly focused on both setting a harmonized standard, improving the quality of the national standards, and defending interests of the region (and regional political organization) it represents. But given their wider aspirations to take back sovereign control over aquaculture production from global standards, these standards are also marginalized from the market by their lack of commercial support (Vandergeest & Unno, 2012).

Following Reinecke et al. (2012), the results indicate that plurality of metagovernance arrangements does appear to provide a vehicle for partial metastandardization, which in turn maintains an (albeit more limited) plurality of claims and procedures. However, the trend appears to be toward the convergence of standards in the more narrow interest of key market actors.
Partial metastandardization, nonetheless, still means that there is still room for metagovernance arrangements to distinguish themselves enough to allow for an ongoing plurality of claims and procedures. The result in practice might then be the ongoing “secondary market” for metagovernance arrangements, building on the already established “primary market” for the standards they seek to metagovern (Reinecke et al., 2012). As a result, standards will continue to undertake forum shopping, selecting an arrangement that suits the claims and level of rigor they require for market access (Schleifer, 2013). Under such a scenario, it appears unlikely that metagovernance arrangements will achieve their wider goal of limiting the proliferation of standards. It is even questionable whether they will contribute to the ongoing improvement of standards and therefore of aquaculture production (or any other form of primary production) if, as Smith and Fischlein (2010) argue, ongoing competition is linked more to the composition of their legitimacy networks than the specific content of their assessment frameworks.

Less pessimistically, the existence of multiple metagovernance arrangements might alternatively provide an opportunity for promoting standards with widely different levels of performance and inclusiveness in the industry. Indeed, the divergent standard requirements, internal governance, and assurance (auditing) processes of aquaculture standards raises the possibility of setting out a stepwise improvement pathway for standards placing emphasis on different market claims or societal objectives.

There are different possible ways of structuring improvement pathways for standards and producers alike. the GSSI and the ISEAL currently work on the basis of a binary “in or out” form of assessment that does not necessarily reflect a pathway of improvement for standards. In a different way, the ASEAN Shrimp GAP aims to harmonize potentially 10 different national standards. While reducing a perceived confusion between these standards such harmonization will also remove any differentiation between goals and ultimately undermine the capacity of producers in these countries to comply with a single (and most likely higher level) standard. However, all three metagovernance arrangements could choose to supplement their focus on high performing standards by providing entry to poorer performing standards within their own assessment methodology—akin to a tiered assessment framework (e.g., Bush & Oosterveer, 2015; Tlusty, 2012). Alternatively, they could achieve a similar improvement pathway from one metagovernance arrangement to another. Within or between metagovernance arrangements standards would be mapped out from lower to higher levels of compliance, which could in turn provide an improvement pathway for producers and standards alike to follow.

**Conclusion**

The main goal of the three metagovernance arrangements are to reduce confusion related to the proliferation of standards in the marketplace by excluding
poorly performing standards while providing assurance over the credibility and hence legitimacy of others. But all three differ to a large extent in how they build legitimacy for themselves and standards alike. Like the standards they seek to assess, metagovernance arrangements are neither homogenous nor converging. They instead provide a platform for market, civil society, and state actors to come together to make a variety of claims and structure assurance procedures and processes according to their interests. While there is some tendency for market interests to prevail in these metagovernance arrangements, either directly or indirectly, they ultimately open up alternative venues for standards to (where possible) select one or more venues for assessment and assurance. Paradoxically, the existence of multiple metagovernance arrangements may in fact open up opportunities for an ever-growing number of standards to gain market recognition, rather than limiting their number.

There are already signs that these different metagovernance arrangements can and do cooperate, as is shown by the involvement of the ISEAL in the formulation of the GSSI. While this shows that benchmarking schemes can collaborate at the same time as they compete, either directly or indirectly, it also opens up the possibility for mutually agreed-upon improvement pathways for multiple and differentiated standards. If such cooperation can be strengthened, and shaped into more strategic shared goals, then together these metagovernance arrangements may be able to strengthen the role that voluntary eco-certification standards can play in fostering credible, effective, and more inclusive improvement for the sector as a whole. Doing so would also move the goals of metagovernance arrangements beyond the curtailment of standard proliferation and the defense of specific interests in various governance arenas. Instead, it could place attention on the coordination and improvement of standards and ultimately the practices of primary producers. The form and function of such mutual coordination should be the focus of further research.

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