

**Global Solution Networks for
Climate-Resilient Agriculture and Global Food Security**

Transcript of Interview with Andre de Freitas

Guest:

Andre de Freitas, Executive Director of the Sustainable Agriculture Network, has a long history of supporting social and environmental sustainability initiatives. He has worked to improve workers' rights through support for the adoption of certification schemes and codes of practice at the International Federation of Building & Wood Workers, and he was a Social & Environmental Manager at Rabobank in Brazil. Most recently, Andre served as the Director-General of the Forest Stewardship Council, where certification grew by more than 85 million acres under his tenure.



Interviewer:

Alastair Marke, a project leader of Global Solution Networks and a fellow of the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA), dedicated to driving social progress and spreading world-changing ideas. Previously a researcher at the Overseas Development Institute and The ResPublica Trust in the UK, he has extensive policy research experience in with various publications on climate change, sustainability and new economies issues.



The Interview:

Marke: Let's start with a brief overview of how the Sustainable Agriculture Network started some years ago.

de Freitas: Several years back, there were some people who realized that you need to engage with agricultural production systems to make a difference. There was space for us, a group of NGOs thinking similarly, to engage with farmers, support them and work with them to implement best practices and achieve their environmental and social objectives. The Network was not so formally structured in the beginning – we formalized in 2010 by establishing the lead organization to coordinate and support the network.

Marke: Have governments and international institutions done enough to promote sustainable agriculture?

de Freitas: I really think that there is a lot of room for governments to further support sustainable agriculture with smart regulations. If you look at all the subsidies that go to agriculture in the world, they could be used in a much smarter manner.

Marke: You've just mentioned subsidies that were not used in a smart way. Could you give us some examples?

de Freitas: Well, I think it's the farm bills or agricultural legislation that exists. Parts of them deal with subsidies either in the United States or Europe. Or you can look into countries like Brazil, and you will see that they usually try to finance and support very conventional agriculture – which means monoculture with large use of pesticides and other chemical inputs. If you want to get resources or support to do intercropping with trees, agroforestry systems, restoration of woodland areas or river streams, there's not that much compared to the traditional conventional subsidies. Those are all clear examples where you can say, "Look, you could design these systems in a better way." That would promote and lead to sustainable agriculture.

Marke: Could you tell me how your network creates standards?

de Freitas: We have a committee that is multi-stakeholder, composed of companies, other NGOs and experts. Social and environmental standards get drafted and developed by that committee, and ultimately, approved by our membership. For more technical standards, we normally have a smaller committee which we call our Technical Operations Committee, which includes just experts in their areas. There are eight members coming from NGOs and certification bodies mostly. They work on the development of specific standards. They're not really social and environmental standards. They're more like quality assurance standards.

Marke: I've seen there are a lot of tea bags, fruit, coffees and other agricultural produce sold in the market that come with Rainforest Alliance certified stamps. Is that something that you are doing?

de Freitas: That's exactly what we do. The products that are carrying this Rainforest Alliance stamp come from the farms that comply with our standards.

Marke: Would you like to clarify regarding the difference between the certification work by the Rainforest Alliance and the work of Sustainable Agriculture Network?

De Freitas: We are different organizations, but we have a joint system. We do the standards and most of the quality assurance, while the Rainforest Alliance does the market development and the label.

Marke: Do you need to monitor the companies that perform the certifications to ensure that their work is compatible with your standards?

de Freitas: Yes, it goes into part of our quality assurance systems. It's internal monitoring where we check how the implementation of the system is going. There are two levels there. One is an annual visit by a team of ours. And then there's a second layer which is an independent entity that looks into the work that these other organizations do. We call them certification bodies. There is another body called an accreditation body that looks into the performance of certification bodies.

So there's a two-layer structure in that. We ourselves are monitoring the work of the accreditation body, and trying to understand the issue of quality in the whole system.

Marke: During your certification process, have you come across any obstacles?

de Freitas: There're tons of obstacles! A key obstacle is always how you are able to deliver enough value to producers. The value they gain from engaging in your system has to be enough to cover the costs of changing practices. That's the key challenge we have to get right. Say you're a producer, and you need to adopt new practices to comply with the standards. That means cost. You have to take some areas out of production because you need to plant trees, for example. Not everything is a win-win financially, especially in the short term. But the benefits can be substantial too: better contracts, better prices, better delivery conditions, benefits for implementation of the standards themselves, because your productivity increases.

Striking the right balance is probably the key challenge we have. The more we are able to deliver value, then the more successful we'll be.

Marke: Right. Let's talk about technology. Are digital technologies like the Internet or smartphones important to achieving sustainable agriculture?

de Freitas: That's something we're exploring. But we're just starting. We want mechanisms to collect more information in the field about best practices and we need platforms to share those best practices. The idea is to make our systems more efficient. If we increase transparency, we can better support the producers.

As technology improves, we can gather data more efficiently, we can analyze that data more efficiently. We can make changes to our system that make the system run better, because we have better understanding about the information coming from the ground. It will be cheaper as well because you're not going to spend a lot of time manually collecting data and manually compiling reports. We can also justify our investments and priorities better because we'll be able to analyze the impact. So I think there's a huge potential.

Marke: Given that the Sustainable Agriculture Network is a multi-stakeholder or multi-organization network, what barriers to success have you come across so far?

de Freitas: One of the challenges is getting new members on board. We are still a fairly small organization in terms of the number of members. We want to grow our membership, especially in Africa and Asia where we see more of the system being implemented.

Another challenge is convincing governments and companies to source products from a sustainable source. Many companies or governments are financially motivated to accept lower-bar systems. Our standards are very demanding. **But** what we are trying to do is to build a system that uses the market as a driver for improvements in agriculture.

Marke: As a "multi-organizational" network, who is now responsible for convening the network in your management structure?

de Freitas: We have a secretariat. I'm the director of that secretariat. We have our general assembly of members and a board of directors. We have our rules of governance that are

established in our statutes. And there's a special role played by the Rainforest Alliance. Certified farms are certified according to our standards, but they actually use the Rainforest Alliance label. So they have a special role, they have a unique role as a member.

Marke: What benefits do you think have been derived from having this multi-stakeholder model? What challenges has this governance model raised so far?

de Freitas: I think the benefits are that you can get a very rich set of perspectives. So you get great discussions, and that is very good for the organization because you can take a lot into account when making decisions. Having that great understanding of conditions on the ground and different views has been very helpful. The challenging part is that sometimes it's difficult to make fast decisions. Often you need quite a bit of discussion in order to move things ahead.

Marke: How does your network achieve legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders?

de Freitas: Well, I think a lot of it has to do with impacts. The more we are able to show the impact of our work, the more legitimacy we will have. The other part is how we engage people in discussions and setting our standards. That also drives and supports legitimacy.

Marke: Can you tell me what some of the notable achievements of the network are?

de Freitas: The biggest achievements are when you look at the impacts on certified farms. You have impacts that are more on the social front, where you have workers' rights, health and safety, freedom of association. On the environmental side, you have improved soil health, you have improved water stream quality, and you have restoration of degraded areas. So there's a whole set of impacts! I think those are really the drivers for us. Those are the things we judge our success on.

Marke: How do you measure the impact of your work?

de Freitas: We look into the reports from certification. We encourage research on certified farms. We try then to learn from the results that these guys have. As part of our collaboration with the Rainforest Alliance, there's a team of experts that looks into impact on the ground.

Marke: How do you fund the activities of your network?

de Freitas: Well, as a network, we are funded by fees associated with the implementation of our standards. Usually we link farmers through their supply chains to a market in order to participate in our system. Somewhere in the supply chain, not the farmers usually, but the exporters or the importers pay a fee. It's almost like a royalty-based fee.

Marke: Is this model sustainable?

de Freitas: I believe it is. This kind of systems has to be self-sufficient. If you're always dependent on donors' money, it's very easy for you to start running after and responding to donors' agendas. You will potentially be compromising what you're trying to do.

Marke: From a broader perspective, do you have any views as to the wider impact of your work on fair trading?

de Freitas: What we don't have is a minimum pricing guarantee. We think that those things sometimes distort the reality. But what we do is set up mechanisms to support producers, in capacity building and in negotiations by producer groups. And we work with farms that have hired laborers. We work on freedom of association and supporting the workers themselves to organize, collectively bargain and negotiate benefits for themselves. And by improving practices, the result may be a better product, and then a better negotiating position to sell that product for higher prices. And there is a study showing that in farms certified according to our standards, there's significant increase in involvement of women in production and household decision-making.

Marke: Thank you for your time, Andre.

de Freitas: You are very welcome, Alastair.