

Making “minority voices” heard in transnational roundtables: The role of local NGOs in reintroducing justice and attachments

Emmanuelle Cheyns

Abstract Since the beginning of the new millennium, initiatives known as roundtables have been developed to create voluntary sustainability standards for agricultural commodities. Intended to be private and voluntary in nature, these initiatives claim their legitimacy from their ability to ensure the participation of all categories of stakeholders in horizontal participatory and inclusive processes. This article characterizes the political and material instruments employed as the means of formulating agreement and taking a variety of voices into consideration in these arenas. Referring to the specific case of the “Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil” (RSPO), I undertake a detailed analysis of the tensions relating to different forms of participation, which create a gap between “local minority voices” and international stakeholders — either NGOs or industries. Local communities and small-scale farmers face difficulties when making their voices heard in the form of debate proposed. Firstly, some participants attempt to re-impose a vertical hierarchical relationship between small-scale farmers or affected communities and company managers/directors in order to deprive the former of their powers of representation and of being able to transform reality. Secondly, the liberalism of interest groups in the roundtable accords value to experts, global knowledge, strategy, and detachment, at the expense of other capabilities of rooted or attached people who come to defend their real lives with a desire to raise critical issues of injustice. In this context, I highlight the capacity of local NGOs to relieve some of those tensions and to help locally affected communities and small-scale farmers introduce public stages for debates, by accommodating other forms of participation apart from the liberal one. By being close to and by restoring their dignity through a specific work of solicitude and care, local NGOs prepare affected people for public speaking.

Keywords: Multi-stakeholder initiatives, palm oil, forms of participation, minority voices, local NGO, empowerment.

Abbreviations

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MSI	Multi-stakeholder initiative
NGO	Non-governmental organization
Q & A	Questions and answers
RSPO	Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil
SPKS	Indonesian Oil Palm Farmers Union (<i>Serikat Petani Kelapa Sawit</i> in Indonesian)
SW	Sawit Watch

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Introduction

Roundtables in the agricultural sector emerged in the early 2000s as global Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives (MSIs) to regulate, in voluntary form, the social and environmental impacts of commodity global value chains. They fit into the context of a European and global policy¹ that promotes governance partnerships in the environmental domain, in particular between NGOs and the business community (Utting 2002; Glasbergen 2006; Mert 2008; Boström 2010).

Multi-stakeholder initiatives aim at coordinating the interests of different stakeholders in order to define rules of good resource management (Turcotte 2001) and to induce more responsible business practices (Utting 2002; Fransen and Kolk 2007) in a non-hierarchical and consensual manner. Their private legitimacy is supposed to be based on a balanced representation of, and participation by, all categories of stakeholders, which favors the sharing of knowledge and expertise between stakeholders (Jenkins et al. 2002; Bostrom 2010). This participation of all stakeholders under the principle of representing a wide range of interests is at the heart of a political model for building “coalitions and balance of interest groups and power” (Thévenot and Lamont 2000).

Concerned about the expansion of major crops such as palm oil, soybean and sugar cane in forest areas, representatives of the World Wildlife Fund have launched a series of multi-stakeholder roundtables, of which the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) is the first.² The goals of these roundtables are to define sustainable agricultural practices through “voluntary standards” (Busch 2011) and their implementation and monitoring through third-party certification mechanisms (Hatanaka et al. 2005). RSPO, formally launched in 2003, includes seven stakeholder categories: growers, processors and traders, consumer-goods manufacturers, retailers, banks and investors, environmental and nature conservation NGOs, and

¹ The Brundtland Report of the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, published in 1987, and the Earth Summit, which took place in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, together introduced the concepts of sustainable development, of the participation of civil society and of the necessity of reconciliation between economics and ecology (Mert 2008).

² The RSPO was followed by the Roundtable on Responsible Soy (RTRS) in 2005, the Better Sugar Cane Initiative (Bonsucro-BSCI) and the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) in 2006, and the Roundtable on Sustainable Biofuels (RSB) in 2008. In parallel to these, a number of Aquaculture Dialogues were promoted by the World Wildlife Fund from 2005 onwards.

social/developmental NGOs. Involving participants from the five continents, this roundtable was launched to address environmental and social issues, mainly in Indonesia and Malaysia – which together account for 85% of global palm oil production. Its multi-stakeholder composition is given shape in the Executive Board,³ but also at the annual conferences — during which plenary sessions and group-based discussions are organized — and in the several working groups. In addition to being the expression of different stakeholders’ interests, the RSPO process resulted in the development of a sustainability standard, its specification being adopted in 2005.

Family farmers (also called smallholders) account for between 30 and 35% of the total palm oil production. In 2005, two years after the launch of RSPO, social NGOs pushed for the creation of a specific group within the RSPO to promote the inclusion of family farmers: the Smallholder Task Force. This movement led to the creation of an Indonesian Oil Palm Farmers Union (*Serikat Petani Kelapa Sawit* in Indonesian or SPKS) in 2006. In addition, social NGOs have regularly invited (and funded) Indonesian rural communities (including indigenous communities) to attend and participate in the annual conferences. Local communities and family farmers seized the opportunity to participate in the RSPO to report violations of their rights and damage to their proximate surroundings — in and around their living and working areas — all in connection with the expansion of palm oil cultivation (pollution, loss of resources, especially the dispossession of customary lands, indebtedness, subordination to companies, criminalization of their political actions. See, for example, Colchester et al. 2006). Yet, despite their inclusion in the process from 2006 onwards, these local entities feel that they struggle to be heard in this roundtable.

My purpose here is to explain what in the RSPO process leads to the discrediting of family farmers and local community voices, taking the RSPO as a place of possible or prevented articulation between different “formats of participation” (Thévenot 2006; Richard-Ferroudji 2011). These formats of participation are identified based on the French Convention theory, and more specifically on the related sociology of engagements of Laurent Thévenot (2006; 2013). I argue that smallholder and local-community voices are discredited by the predominance of one specific format of participation in this roundtable: the one where stakeholders act within a “liberal” format and assert their interests therein (Thévenot 2013). This format excludes other

³ In 2011, the RSPO had 569 ordinary members. The General Assembly elects 16 representatives of the different categories of stakeholders to make up the Executive Board.

formats of participation required by smallholder unions or local communities, who come with a desire to raise and solve critical issues of injustices and/or engage in the most familiar attachments of their daily lives, sometimes with strong emotions. I also emphasize the role played by local NGOs in easing tensions between these different participation possibilities because of their capacity to accommodate other forms of participation (open to injustice issues and affected people) apart from the liberal one.

The next section introduces the concept of “participation formats” based on the Convention Theory framework and the related sociology of engagements. Therein, I introduce the issues that local communities and smallholders want to raise and the difficulties they experience when attempting to be heard in the RSPO. The following sections present the results based on an empirical analysis. I first stress the processes of excluding local communities and smallholder voices and then the role that local NGOs play in facilitating their participation through integrating different formats of participation.

Multiple forms of participation: perspectives for studying inclusion

I will refer to the Thévenot’s theoretical framework to understand the different processes of excluding smallholders and local community voices in the RSPO resulting from participation formats, and the role that local NGOs can play in their inclusion. As one of the founders of French Convention theory, Thévenot (2013) extended his conceptual framework through both practical and theoretical ways of integrating differing concerns into common issues. His comparative studies have led to the identification of three “grammars” which guide actors in their “constructions of commonality and difference.” These are different ways for individuals to “communicate” (express their voice and differ) and to “compose” (arranging the differing voices to form a whole, which can then be referred to as commonality). In this paper, I will rely on these three grammars (or constructions) to consider different possibilities of participation.

One of the three grammars is based on a plurality of evaluation forms, named “orders of worth,” which claim legitimacy by linking worth to the common good (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006 [1991]). In this construction, “communicating” implies linking one’s concerns with a specification of the common good, which goes beyond specific interests. “Composing” the

difference (in the sense of settling a dispute) is done by exercising a critical capacity and compromising between a plurality of “orders of worth,” which refer to different principles of justice⁴ (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006 [1991]). These principles of justice define the characteristics of the common good and formalize a sense of what is just and unjust in practice. Composing requires taking into account the plurality of principles of justice to allow for differences. This construction makes explicit the problem of inequalities and allows a highly “critical participation.” This participation is the one required by local communities, family farmers and even some external NGOs (external to the roundtable) to criticize “injustices.” Family farmers attempt to use roundtables as forums to criticize the subordination to which they are subjected: a dependence on the companies and on “paternalist” contract farming (“domestic” subordination), on fluctuating prices (“market” subordination) and an over-emphasis on high productivity and biotechnologies (“industrial” subordination) (Cheyns 2011; Schouten et al. 2012). They have, at the same time, argued for “civic” requirements on the basis of solidarity and the reduction of inequalities. However, as we will see in more detail below, this format of participation is sidelined in roundtables where participants are oriented towards another, less confrontational, format of participation that is governed by the “liberal” construction.

In the “liberal grammar of individuals in public,” the relevant evaluation format is that of individual or specific interest. This construction is the one supported by roundtables, which call for a language of a “balance of interests.” In this construction, “communication” implies expressing a choice among options, which are named interests, opinions, or preferences. Individuals compose an agreement by negotiating and finding trade-offs between stakeholder interests (Thévenot 2011). Negotiated options are presented in the form of plans or projects to be implemented. Participants are more committed to implementing these practical plans or accomplishing a series of actions than to discussing the purpose of the plan or the content of the actions themselves (Thévenot 2012). Politics are reduced to the technical notion of quantifiable and achievable objectives (Thévenot 2012).

Likewise, in roundtables, participants are more oriented towards focusing on the standards’ end-results and measurable achievements than on defining the (different) way(s) to

⁴ Based on political philosophy, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006 [1991]) identified six “orders of worth” which are different ways of characterizing the common good: the “market” competition, the “industrial” efficiency, the “fame” in public opinion, the trust and reputation based on customs (“domestic”), the “civic” solidarity aiming at a greater equality, and the creative “inspiration”.

achieve sustainable development (i.e., the substance of the standard) (Cheyns 2011; see also Poncelet 2001). Discussions in RSPO are usually configured so that there is reduced critical participation and participants are freed from the pressure of moral responsibility (Cheyns 2011). Differences are not expressed by calling upon a common good, but through the expression of interests formulated as (individual) needs or choices for options. The debate on sustainability has been formatted through the negotiation of technical criteria, without dwelling in the debate on the definition of the principles of sustainability itself, whose “political” dimension has led to the fear of major disagreements (Cheyns 2011). This limited format has tended to avoid exposing differences among the participants concerning issues of justice.⁵ The agreement resulted in a negotiated list of technical criteria. This list of criteria expressed preferences for options which promoted economies of scale, productivity, rapidity, and profitability in the content of sustainability, ultimately favoring agro-industrial and intensive production (Cheyns 2011; Schouten and Glasbergen 2011 and 2012) without being discussed as such.

Furthermore, this liberal grammar is less confrontational. Disagreement is softened by a “liberal civility” (Thévenot 2008; 2013), which takes the form of a particular oral and body language, which aims not to frighten the others. The “professional style” found in the roundtable calls for a technical and smooth way of speaking that avoids major confrontations and promotes indirect formulations and a cautionary approach (Cheyns 2011). A participant who defends his convictions with “heart and soul” soon finds himself unwelcome in this type of roundtable mechanism.

Finally, individuals can construct commonality and difference through a grammar of “personal affinities,” where communication is achieved through personal “affinity to a commonplace.” Commonplaces are not to be understood as superficial clichés, but as symbolic places, objects, images, quotes, etc. through which participants express their personal affinities, short-circuiting any other intermediation in their communication. This short-circuit between a highly personal concern and a shared commonplace results in an emotional arousal. By contrast to the other constructions, this one makes room for personal attachments (Thévenot 2013). In this grammar, people can construct commonality by soliciting attachments and personal relationships

⁵ For example, the “economic pillar” of sustainable palm oil production has been translated through criteria for the “economic viability” of agricultural production by the interest group representing farmers (big companies), whereas public consultation over the Internet indicated other possible conceptions, which on the contrary were not considered (in particular, a principle of equity or value sharing, which would enable small-scale farmers to undertake long-term investments).

with their environment. They can also reveal and talk in person about the adverse circumstances that they have suffered, in “affected and emotional participation”: “Do you know what it means to lose one’s land? Many of our compatriots have ended up in a psychiatric hospital!” (Indonesian villager, in plenary debate of the RSPO). This construction recognizes the importance of “care” as a support for commonality; care which can emerge from familiarity with another or with the environment “in all its peculiarities” (Pattaroni 2001). Indeed, “taking care of another person presupposes a concern with what touches and affects this person most directly in his/her proximate surroundings” (Thévenot 2009). In the case of the roundtables, this concern can be acquired by participants – such as local NGOs – who are directly engaged with the people affected where they live. However, it becomes highly abstract when participants, such as the majority of the international community, have neither put down any roots nor have any attachments there.

Based on this framework, I will argue that local NGOs have played a key role in facilitating the expression of local community and smallholder voices in the RSPO by integrating several constructions of commonality. Indeed, local NGOs have played a dual role. Firstly, they have played an intermediary role by transforming the expression of these voices so that they can be inserted into the liberal grammar expected by the RSPO process. Secondly, and more crucially, by being close to and concerned with the fate of affected persons and the way of restoring their dignity through the work of solicitude and care, local and national NGOs have prepared these affected people for public speaking.

This analysis helps us to go beyond a classical vision of empowerment, which normally focuses on technical and negotiation capacities. We will see that “bringing local interests to international negotiating tables” (Arts 2004) or “connecting local and international spaces” (Pesqueira and Glasbergen 2013) are not enough in themselves to ensure that the voices of vulnerable groups are heard and considered. Exclusions also result from some specific formats of participation favored by roundtables.

This analysis will also help us achieve a deeper understanding of the “intermediary” role attributed to NGOs (Aldaba 2002). We will see that local NGOs play a key role especially in potentially transforming the formats of expression of local voices (see also Silva-Castaneda 2012) or accommodating other forms of participation required by affected or vulnerable groups.

Finally, this analysis will help us understand why it is difficult for some international NGOs, distant from the local terrain, to represent vulnerable groups (Fransen and Kolk 2007; Utting 2002), even if they are eager and willing to do so. This work allows going beyond a cultural analysis, which ascribes those difficulties to the differences in international NGOs' and local groups' work cultures (Pesqueira and Glasbergen 2013). Instead, I will highlight through the experiences of some local NGOs, the necessity to be close to and concerned with affected people in order to support their participation.

The results presented here are based on participatory observation conducted between 2003 and 2011 within the RSPO in Asia. They are also based on regular interviews with RSPO participants in Europe and Indonesia (local and international NGOs, plantation firms, industry, sponsors, governmental agencies, consultancy firms, certifiers, family producers, and local communities). The interviews with local communities and family farmers of the new SPKS union in Indonesia were conducted in 2008 and in 2009, in Jambi, Riau, West Kalimantan, and East Kalimantan districts. In the interviews conducted in 2009, I also used videos that I took during the 2009 RSPO conference, which depict different moments of participation. I asked the farmers who participated in the conference to comment on these videos.

In the next section, I present the reasons the voices of local communities and smallholders – called “minority voices” in the liberal grammar – attempt to be heard in the roundtable and the difficulties they encountered in doing so. In following sections, I explore the tensions caused by their participation in the RSPO, and then the key role that NGOs, especially local ones, could play to facilitate the participation of these local voices in transnational MSIs.

The RSPO and the issue of smallholders' and local community voices

Why participate in roundtables?

The SPKS farmers' union was created in 2006 with financial and logistical support from two NGOs, Sawit Watch⁶ (Indonesia) and Forest People Programme (UK), partly to promote the

⁶ The Indonesian NGO Sawit Watch (SW) was established on 25 July 1998, subsequent to large forest fires linked to the conversion of forests into oil palm plantations, and with an impetus from the Walhi NGO (a member of the Accepted for Agriculture and Human Values. DOI [10.1007/s10460-014-9505-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-014-9505-7)

representation of family farmers in the RSPO. The roundtable and NGO support opened up new horizons for Indonesian farmers and local communities: the opportunity to express one's voice, to criticize injustice in front of the international community in a context where, on the ground, they feel that local authorities and palm oil companies do not allow them any outlet for the same criticisms.

Social NGOs inform the world that problems exist. (...) Some of them involve themselves here, directly on the ground, and see the facts themselves, for example, the existence of a land conflict, while many parties say that there is no conflict. (...) SPKS's interest is to raise awareness of these issues and to convince people that there are problems that we really need to solve. We must put an end to this. There is something which is not just. And this thing we express in this forum. This is why I took the initiative to ask to go up to the podium (speak publicly in the RSPO plenary). (SPKS member, interview, West Kalimantan 2008).

SPKS members and rural communities seized the opportunity the roundtable offered them to reveal a local reality, and little known at the global scale, and then to bring about change in their living conditions. They engaged in critical participation, denouncing "domestic" and "market" subordination to the integrated agri-business model of palm oil production. Their claims have been oriented toward the right to manage "one's smallholder affairs" and toward a more equitable system for distributing value. In addition to the thorny issue of land conflicts that have arisen with the arrival of plantation companies, the SPKS members' concerns in the RSPO focus on the revaluation of the "k index" (a measure of the monetary share of the oil sold by the factory that comes to the smallholders, the rest remaining with the factory), a desire not to be marginalized by certification,⁷ the need for transparent contracts, and, finally, the possibility of becoming independent of plantation companies. The development model implemented in Indonesia does envisage contracts between family farmers and plantation companies. In these,

Friends of the Earth network). SW promotes the rights of indigenous and local communities, farmers and those working on palm oil plantations. In 2012, SW had a staff of 26 people and consisted of a network of 140 individual members (themselves most often connected to a civil society organization at the local, national, or international level).

⁷ The sustainable palm oil standard was defined between 2003 and 2005 without direct smallholder representation. Negotiated by industrial producers, it requires practices – such as impact assessment studies – that are specific to industrial plantations and which cannot always be adopted by the farmers.

family farmers, called “scheme smallholders,”⁸ are obliged to deliver their entire production of palm bunches until the credit extended to them (for planting and maintenance costs) is repaid. Some family farmers denounce this “neo-colonialist” type of contract, which they believe to be non-transparent and abusive (interviews, family farmers 2008).⁹ They hope to replant their plots by accessing funds without going through plantation companies.

A difficulty for local communities and farmers in making their voices heard

Although participating since 2006, family farmers and local communities feel that their voices are not heard and that their concerns are not taken into account. This is partly due to the lack of importance accorded to smallholders compared to other stakeholders. Smallholders have no direct representation on the Executive Board, nor do they have direct representation in the expert group that drew up the criteria for sustainable palm oil. Even in the most open forums, like the plenary or parallel workshops, their voices are most often replaced by those of other stakeholder categories, sometimes even those of the companies with which they are in conflict. With very few exceptions, family farmers do not have a chance to speak in plenary sessions, even when the session specifically relates to their category or condition.

Furthermore, discussions on the topic of smallholders since 2007 have focused more on how they can “conform to the standard” defined by the RSPO, especially in terms of productivity – increasing their yields and increasing the palm oil industry’s efficiency – than on the substance of the standard itself. This has not allowed smallholders to integrate their own visions of sustainability into the standard (such as their “civic” requirements about value sharing or resource distribution). Similarly, the government-initiated replanting program, which proposes a renewal of the contracting system between scheme-smallholders and oil palm companies, was considered in the RSPO, for reasons of efficiency, a suitable means of increasing smallholder

⁸ Smallholders have two different statuses. They can be “independent”, which means that they planted their plots independently of a company, or they can be “tied” into a “scheme”, which means that they are under a binding contract with a company, which is the form encouraged by the government

⁹ Family farmers recall situations in which they felt cheated because the terms of the original contract were not upheld. They struggle to access official documents — such as Memorandums of Understanding, which bind companies and farmers contractually — to be heard when prices in multi-party commissions are being fixed, etc.

productivity¹⁰ and a path to rapid certification¹¹ without considering smallholder voices and their struggle for more independence from companies.

Since 2007, the farmers' attempts to influence the content of the standard were generally rebuffed. The opening to the expression of their voices was squelched by an injunction not to go beyond the complying-with-the-standards framework proposed by the general agenda. Many cases are illustrative of this, but here I will focus on one particular case, which will serve as a common thread for the rest of this paper.

After several failed attempts to express his voice relating to the standard's purpose and content in the 2009 annual conference, one SPKS member made one last effort during a plenary session. Upon their discovery that four presentations in the "smallholder session" in the plenary were to be made by certification companies and parastatal agencies, and given that SPKS members themselves were denied the opportunity to make a presentation in this session, two determined SPKS members decided to take advantage of the short "Questions and Answers" (Q & A) session at the end of the presentations to speak publicly in the assembly. They relied on a text prepared the day before by some members of their group. One of the two, Mandiri,¹² did not want to read this text word for word so he took time to absorb its contents. At the end of the four presentations, during the Q & A session, Mandiri asked to speak and was handed the microphone. He began his speech in the Indonesian language to the 550 participants. Most of the attendees did not understand what he was saying. He introduced the SPKS union, and clarified that the statements he would make could be converted into questions (so as to conform to the Q & A format). He skillfully linked his statements to the previous presentations: one from a certifier, who established that smallholders would find it difficult to comply with the standard and to obtain the certification, and another one which reminded the audience of the widely accepted observation that climate change impacts people unequally, with the poor suffering more than the rich. Then he expressed some critical issues. He spoke quietly at first, then his voice became louder and its pitch higher. His movements became animated; he often pointed to the dais with the papers in his hand. He asked that, before the assembly would discuss certification

¹⁰ Contract farming facilitates access to credit and involves the supervision of smallholder agricultural practices by oil palm company managers.

¹¹ The RSPO standard requires long-term planning operations, documentation to be produced and maintained on the practices, and funding of impact assessment studies conducted by experts. In such cases, all of this is taken charge of by the managers of the company contractually connected to smallholders.

¹² For reasons of anonymity, the names of individuals and companies have been replaced by pseudonyms.

schemes, the participants first strive to improve the unequal partnership between scheme-farmers and companies, and to facilitate their independence (in accessing credit or processing). He also asked the participants to consider the “inequitable” mechanism used to fix palm bunch prices (“k index”). He expressed his fear that the roundtable was sustainable only for companies, not for smallholders. He concluded by asking the participants if they could accept what the farmers were demanding. His speech was long, longer than usual for this setting. Then, the President of the plenary spoke again, “Is there any chance that our translator can summarize ... [he paused, lots of laughter in the hall] ... what was said?” The translator, who had the text written the day before in front of him, simply read it out, very stiffly, in a monotonous voice, without any of the oratorical precautions Mandiri had taken at the beginning and the end of his speech (like the useful links with the other plenary presentations, etc.). In addition, he was reading a text that was harsher than Mandiri’s relatively diplomatic statement. That which was emotionally expressive and rooted in experience became cold, detached from the context and accusations. The President’s reaction was to refocus the debate:

Thank you very much. Let’s try to avoid statements. This was a presentation, not a “question-answer.” RSPO is always open to all statements, and we will continue to be open. But just in respect to all the others, as we cannot stay here until 8 or 10 at night, we have to try to shorten our questions or statements or comments a little bit. So let’s move to another question. Sir, in the centre, please.

Mandiri’s intervention appeared to be a failure. The companies’ and governmental agencies’ representatives found it rude and inappropriate. The international representatives, including those of NGOs, saw it as “too emotional” (in its perceived expression of anger and passion).

Setting a multi-stakeholder standard in a liberal world: tensions with other forms of participation

Listening to all voices in the expected liberal format: with what sacrifices?

The RSPO’s multi-stakeholder dimension is based on a specific idea: to give a balanced weight to a wide variety of participants through horizontal discussions and decision-making processes,

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resulting in a “consensual” output. In contrast to hierarchical structures, different categories of stakeholders defending different interests are represented and supposed to express themselves, and this in various bodies. This horizontal political form of discussion and decision-making is part of the “liberal grammar,” which certainly has *a priori* useful features. Firstly, it facilitates the acceptance of differences, useful in the context of rapid composition (of accords, responses, etc.) and this for entities separated by distance.¹³ Secondly, it allows an autonomy that is emancipatory from hierarchies and offers “horizontal” equality between individuals (Thévenot 2008; 2013).

The liberal grammar of participation thus allows the accommodation of a large plurality of participants, all taken as stakeholders. But this cannot be done without severe sacrifices. The first one is that of giving up, through the process of commonalization, the ability to refer to some specification of the common good (Thévenot 2012; 2013), in this case, the ability to specify the definition of sustainability by referring to a plurality of principles of justice. There is a fear of confrontation between the different claims referring to a common good in the liberal grammar because such a confrontation could reveal or even generate irreducible differences that could, in turn, lead to the dissociation of the community or very strong hostility (Thévenot 2012; 2013). The liberal grammar prefers the more limited format of the ‘specific interest’ to grasp and evaluate what is good, which allows for a less confrontational composition (Thévenot 2012; 2013). The second sacrifice is the requirement to transform personal and even intimate attachments into interests as inputs for the “balance of and negotiation between interests,” which is far from easy for persons affected in their daily lives. This requirement supposes that persons are able to detach themselves from that which affects them. Emotions are discredited because they are seen as too attached to a person, and not sharable with people who do not experience the same concerns (Thévenot 2008). Roundtables accord value to the participant who can demonstrate detachment, who is mobile, not rooted, and capable of multiple connections. Participants who are isolated, rooted and attached, or even “victims” (seen as negative, pessimistic, sometimes less capable of volunteering) disrupt the liberal and enthusiastic horizon (Cheyns 2011).

¹³ This was important for the constitution of a transnational arena, with heterogeneous stakeholders, and with emphasis placed on rapid (re)action of a business community.

Furthermore, in roundtables, the liberalism of “interest groups” inserts an additional stage to the horizontality that disrupts the participatory ideal. This liberalism of interest groups allows, for example, the entry of tactical and strategic operations: behind-the-scenes coordination of positions, lobbying, external pressures, control of key leadership roles and/or drafting of documents, attempts to “monopolize” discussions, etc.

As I will argue below, this liberal grammar — accorded value in the roundtables (for a broader presentation, see Cheyns 2011) — comes into tension with other forms of participation, which are nevertheless necessary for a composition that includes the voices of local communities and smallholders. In this section, I will explore the processes disqualifying smallholder and local community voices in the roundtable, notably through the example of Mandiri described above. Firstly, I will report a failure internal to the mechanism, which contravenes the liberal requirements themselves. The RSPO is supposed to offer an emancipatory outlet given its liberal form through a horizontal process that the farmers would want to embrace. But this opportunity is denied to them because some participants try to impose – for strategic reasons – the hierarchical relationships with the farmers that prevail at the local level. These hierarchical relationships lead to a lack of recognition of the smallholders’ ability to represent themselves and to a substitution of their voices. Secondly, I will raise a more subtle process of disqualification. By raising issues of justice (in a critical participation) and strong attachments, narrating their real life histories (in an affected and emotional participation), smallholders and local communities do not fit into the required “consensual” and liberal participation expected in the RSPO.

What contravenes liberal requirements?

If we consider the case of Mandiri’s intervention in the plenary session, we first observe that the family farmers’ ability to participate in the debate is compromised by a lack of symmetry in the equipment. For partly economic reasons, simultaneous interpretation via headphones works in only one direction, from English to Indonesian, for the sake of those Indonesian participants who do not speak English (some local employees of plantations and almost all family farmers and local community representatives). But there is no provision in the other direction – when the Indonesians wish to speak their language in public there is no simultaneous interpretation into

English (this would require the other 500 to 800 participants to also wear headphones, something which has never been arranged). Therefore, a translator has to summarize aloud the speech once it is completed or read a text written in advance. This lack of simultaneous Indonesian-to-English interpretation is in itself a weakness since it does not allow for the symmetrical expression of voices expected from a “horizontal” mechanism.

There is another, less obvious, form of internal failure in the liberal process. It is based on the intimidation of family farmers by the representatives of plantation companies in order to deny them autonomy and to silence their direct representation. Company representatives view smallholders within a “domestic” relationship (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991). In this relationship, the “worthy” ones,¹⁴ such as bosses, managers of industrial plantations and parastatal agencies, can legitimately and comprehensively represent the “unworthy” ones, such as the smallholders who are “attached” to them (smallholders “bound” through contracts) and who they assist and guide, and thus speak for them. When smallholders show their capacity for emancipation in roundtables, managers try to bring them back to this “domestic” hierarchical relationship, which exists at the local level. This substitution of the farmers’ voices (criticized as a “paternalist” relationship) runs contrary to the requirements of the roundtable, based on autonomy and horizontal equality. But it is consistent with a strategic game where lobbying is used to occupy the empty space (here it is first confiscated) or where attempts are even made to remove the actors who could threaten entrenched interests.

Thus, Mandiri’s intervention was directly followed by an attempt by a company director to intimidate him. The director referred to their common *Batak* ethnicity (from Sumatra) and suggested that an overly critical behavior – “too noisy” – by a representative of the SPKS union towards industry, the Indonesian government and the roundtable would bring “shame” to their common lineage.

Mandiri: [After my speech] there were many comments by many people, starting with the companies. They said, “Who is that?” An official of the Indo Oil company said to a Sawit Watch official, “Why is it that my ‘young fruit’ [referring to Mandiri as his child] makes a noise like that? (...)” Because it turns out that this company person is a *Batak* too. Since we

¹⁴ The “worthy” ones are the guarantors of a given “principle of coordination” (an “order of worth”). They are worthy in this order of worth but can become “unworthy” in other orders of worth (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006).

are of the same ethnicity ... he went to Wyan (of Sawit Watch) to ask, “Why is it that one of mine protests so much?” (...)

Us:¹⁵ How can he call you his “young fruit”?

Mandiri: Because we are both Bataks. (...) And because he knows his position... he is a director, I am a smallholder. (Interview, West Kalimantan 2009)

Faced with this criticism, Mandiri first tried to avoid a meeting requested by the director of Indo Oil, who wanted to bring him back to a “domestic” relationship where Mandiri is one of the “unworthy.” Eventually, the meeting took place, and Mandiri seized the horizontal legitimacy of the roundtable to very skillfully invalidate the position in which the company director was placing him, his “young fruit” (i.e., his child). Mandiri reminded him that he is not appearing at the roundtable as a *Batak* (in a “domestic” relationship), but as a representative of his farmers union, SPKS (in a “civic” relationship). Thus, by positioning this legitimacy, Mandiri underlined his right to independence, and direct representation through his farmer union.

The director of Indo Oil had briefed me at dinner on the last day, at the Istana Hotel, he asked me to sit next to him and so that we could talk while eating. (...) He put it like this, “Do not bring shame to the *Batak*!” So I said, “I do not speak on behalf of the *Batak*, I speak on behalf of SPKS.” (...) And I also told him, “All this here is neo-colonialism.” He replied, “Do not generalize!” He added, “Control your language otherwise you will bring shame to X!” [X being Mandiri’s and the director’s common family name.] So I reminded him, “I do not speak on behalf of the X’s, I speak on behalf of SPKS.” (Mandiri, interview, West Kalimantan 2009)

Mandiri’s public intervention described above caused a similar reiteration of position from parastatal agencies who often see smallholder voices as illegitimate in plenary sessions.

Regarding Mandiri’s intervention, this representative explained:

The objective of the government is to make smallholders rich, wealthy and happy. (...) They are not happy? Why? We can solve their problems. The only answer we have for them is, “Start using ‘good agricultural practices’ [to increase yields], and you will be happy. We cannot solve the problem in this room [the RSPO plenary]! Ask us to visit your field and see what the problem is!” (Indonesian parastatal agency, interview, RSPO conference 2009)

¹⁵ Interview that included my colleague Philippe Barbereau.

This representative – we'll call him Aman – demonstrates, on the one hand, that he does not recognize the reasons behind the dissatisfaction of farmers (who, in his view, have just to adopt “good agricultural practices” to be happy) and, on the other hand, denies their rights or capacities to raise these issues by themselves in public arenas. Instead, he suggests moving their participation back to the local terrain (“ask us to visit your field”), in other words, in a hierarchical relationship that accords value to science and engineering knowledge (“good agricultural practices”). In this “industrial” convention (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), farmers are poorly qualified – or even disqualified. Regarding Aman, who was frequently invited by the organizing committee of the RSPO to expound on smallholder issues in plenary, a SPKS member explained:

Aman sees Mandiri as disrupting his work. And he believes he knows more than us: he is a Doctor in chemistry. He thinks, “I am better placed than you to speak on farmers’ behalf.” (Interview, Bogor 2009)

The family farmers, who are made aware of these complaints from Indonesian companies and parastatal agencies after their speeches, admit that they are exceeding the limited scope of expression that was, *a priori*, granted to them (in this case, for example, Mandiri made a long statement during a short Q & A session). But the farmers feel these “excesses” on their part are necessary given the failure of the others to represent them and because they are regularly denied the right to occupy a symmetrical position in the debates, which the roundtable is supposed to offer to them:

Aman is offended. He believes that Mandiri has no legitimacy. But we see Aman as irrelevant. For example, he does not speak of the “k index.”¹⁶ He only speaks of compliance with “good agricultural practices.” Mandiri only had that one opportunity to speak up [in the Q & A session]. And our requests for plenary presentations are regularly denied. If we wait for the right place or time to make our statements, it will never happen! (SPKS member, interview, Bogor 2009)

And yet, speaking in public is a trying ordeal for smallholders. They either have to ignore or overcome the consequences in their lives that their interventions may provoke. Some members of the SPKS or local communities involved in the RSPO have already spent time in prison for

¹⁶ The “k index” issue supposes a debate about farmer prices and about a more equitable sharing of the value along the chain.

reasons related to their earlier militant activities. They attribute these punishments to collusion between companies and local authorities to advance their common interests. They reported cases of intimidation that took place once the farmers returned home just after their critical participation in the RSPO.

These cases indicate that political grammars other than those expected also get used. In particular one that unfolds behind the scenes at the local level, where a “domestic” and “industrial” hierarchy prevails between plantation managers and smallholders, even while it is subject to criticism from the smallholders. That said, another criticism also emanates from the SPKS members and local communities who, instead of reporting an internal defect in liberal participation, require the roundtable to open up to other forms of participation apart from the liberal one. I will explore this now.

Tensions with attachments and justice: Going beyond liberal participation

Mandiri likes to say that one must be able to speak “from the heart” at the RSPO, and this is what he did in his lengthy and determined speech in the plenary. Yet it is this very language that is rejected by the other participants, even from the international community, who describe the form of expression of smallholders and local communities as being “too emotional.” Even though some international social NGOs recognize the appropriateness of the content of such speeches, they generally feel that “farmers are still wrong in the manner of conveying the message.” The high pitch, visible body emotion and contents that publicly challenge the participants on issues of injustice are not in keeping with the “liberal civility” required in this type of arena. These farmers are frequently discredited by some participants, who for example accuse them of not being “real farmers” but rather activists¹⁷.

Similarly, at the 2007 roundtable conference, the local communities and smallholders used many plenary sessions to raise, during the Q & A session, their condition and suffering at the village level and especially their desire to address the issue of land rights and disputes with plantation companies, which they accused of having occupied their lands. Those interventions

¹⁷ The first time a smallholder spoke in plenary to share the difficulties they face on the ground, has also remained in the memories and was firmly disapproved of by some Executive Board members, conveying a “Never again!” message as a warning.

were discredited and disapproved for being “off-topic,” breaking out of the imposed framework, and for being too specific. A representative of an international social NGO analyzed that the farmers and local communities were not listened to because they used the forum to complain and accuse plantation companies, and because they relied on specific cases with very long histories.

Me: Local communities are not making accusations each time, they also express their situation: “I have three children, I live in this village, the problem we face is..., etc.”

NGO: Yes, but they have a long story.... It is difficult to contribute to the discussion and there is this tension between somebody expressing his own problem and raising an issue which is of general interest to the discussion. (Interview, The Netherlands 2009)

A Dutch industry representative explained that by raising land right issues during the plenary debate, and how they do so, local communities caused a “negative energy.” He proposed converting their participation to indirect representation (via an NGO) on the Executive Board.

They [local communities, smallholders] were aggressive. For example, they talked about land rights every single time. It was very, very repetitive, and it was not the topic of the discussion. They create more negative energy rather than positive. I wonder if it’s the most effective platform [the plenary] to express their voice. Maybe it should be limited to the Board, through NGO representation. (Board of industries in palm oil, interview, The Netherlands 2009)

Then, during the two subsequent years, the mechanism was modified to recast the voices of smallholders and local communities: if they wanted to intervene in plenary sessions, they were asked to write their questions on half-sheets of paper.

However, few representatives of international or Northern NGOs, who maintain close contact with the locals and have experienced ground realities (as this will be highlighted in the next section), consider that these efforts to disclose the reality, even though emotional, are necessary so that participants “open their eyes.” They consider that in such cases this emotion has to be accommodated. One of them, who has shared a long association with local communities and has had personal experience with the ground realities, stressed that even though emotional expression is perhaps not ideal from a strategic point of view — especially if it is ultimately discredited —, it does result from suffering caused by injustice which must, one way or another, be recognized.

Me: What is your feeling about this emotional speaking?

NGO: Well, I think at the end it was good. People have to know that other people are suffering from palm oil. And to have one being emotional about it. Even if people say, “I do not like this” or “I feel offended,” blah-blah-blah. At least they wake up! (...) Did you look at politics on the ground? It can be violent! (...) There are two things. Whether it is smart to speak in an emotional manner is one thing. Whether it is polite, considering conditions, politics, etc.... But people are suffering from injustice. (Social NGO, interview, The Netherlands 2009)

On their part, SPKS and local community members feel that the only way they can express themselves is by stepping outside the imposed framework since symmetrical treatment is denied to them. Furthermore, they do not concede that the emotion they bring to their public statements is misplaced. They present it as “genuine” and based on a sense of injustice, on a feeling of being undervalued or despised, and on a lack of recognition of their rights and concerns that has been going on “for so long.” This emotion also originates from a suspicion that the other participants are only strategically indulging in rhetoric to support a communications strategy and to bolster the reputations of their businesses. About his intervention in the plenary session, Mandiri explains:

Yes, there I am angry. I feel stressed. I feel oppressed. I know the situation of smallholders on the ground. If they want to fight, they go to jail. And then there are these businessmen who are there [in RSPO], they are the ones who apply this pressure on the ground. In Indonesia, no one listens to the little people. If I were a businessman, people would listen to me, even if I were angry! (Interview, West Kalimantan 2009).

Smallholders and local communities require more from the roundtable mechanism. What Mandiri did with his intervention – “speaking from the heart” – was not only to call upon an emotional physical state. “Speaking from the heart” suggests, first of all, that participants should be able to explicitly initiate critical stances, even if this requires them to sound harsh or shocking.

The RSPO is expected to undertake political work, but we have no right to talk about politics.... In Bali I asked, “What is this certification for? And for whom?” I asked about the outcomes for family farmers. After that, the audience became disturbed. (...) Whenever we [smallholders] speak of politics, the atmosphere becomes “vrooom”! Yet, what I

observe is that ultimately *everything* is politics in the RSPO. (SPKS member, interview, RSPO conference 2009).

Secondly, speaking “from the heart” assumes a close relation with the environment based on practical and experiential knowledge rather than the merely global and/or theoretical (which SPKS members contend is what the majority of international participants limit themselves to). Thus, SPKS members demand not only that the mechanism accord value to their local knowledge (Cheyns 2011), but also that other participants “don boots” and join them on the ground in pursuit of a truer and closer engagement.

I’m not convinced that Aman (parastatal agency) has yet been on the ground.

Because, as far as I know, Aman only went to Pontianak. But Aman is wearing shiny shoes, polished and clean. I know the practice in Indonesia. From Jakarta one goes to Pontianak, to the Executive Office, and then one returns. Then they say, “We have already visited the ground.” (...) This is why I told Aman that in the future, if he really wants to come to the ground, he must don boots. (SPKS member, interview, RSPO conference 2009)

Finally, speaking “from the heart” assumes that the participants are genuine, that they are not playing a role or a game, are not manipulative, are not displaying false emotions, but instead have come to represent real lives and defend the rights that make a difference in their daily lives and proximate surroundings. Thus, smallholders and local communities ask that participants interact as honest persons and that the mechanism takes their life stories into account.

[About Mandiri’s intervention in the plenary] Mandiri’s tone? It is still too soft. What is important is to be honest. (SPKS member, interview, Bogor 2009)

I have seen a lot of people make presentations [in the plenary sessions]. They don’t speak from the heart. Some of them lie. (Mandiri, interview, West Kalimantan 2009)

The indignation of smallholders and local community representatives stems from the feeling of being prevented from speaking in the plenary when they want to represent real lives. Instead, they have to make room for people who play a role that does not impact their daily destinies and possessions, and who can change their roles (we can observe a high turnover rate in the roundtables with participants changing the institutions they represent, see Cheyns 2011). They echo the doubts of Bühler (2002) concerning the legitimacy of participants who have no deep-rooted attachment to the place or who have not experienced marginalization and exclusion and

“who might not have to account with their life histories.” From similar observations in Mexico of the participation of the Zapatistas — with a view to rethinking the issue of inclusion —, Bühler (2002) addressed the necessity for placing justice and dignity back at the heart of participation. These proposals may serve as an antidote to forms of manipulation or consensus which do not reflect what participants really think or are too far removed from the fate of the people who engage in the process with their life stories (Bühler 2002). We will now explore how some NGOs, especially the local ones, through their closer engagement, play a key role in addressing these issues.

The role of local NGOs: from the recognition of the affected person to his inclusion in public

The differences between the mechanism’s requirements and those of the SPKS farmers lead to tensions between the formats of participation that accord differing values to local and global knowledge, to “language of the heart” and strategic posturing, and to genuine emotion and detachment. What roles do local NGOs play in easing these tensions? I will attempt to answer this question by specifically examining the role played by Sawit Watch¹⁸ (SW), which has facilitated the representation of farmers and local communities. Being close to local communities through its experience in the field, SW has played a key role in accommodating formats of participation other than the liberal one. That said, this NGO has found itself at the core of these same tensions internally, especially between a consensual and a critical participation, since it was, at the same time, also a member of the RSPO Executive Board (from 2006 to 2012).

Empowerment in the liberal grammar

Since it was a member of the RSPO Executive Board, SW was subjected to pressure from the other members to embrace liberal-consensual participation and to limit critical participation, perceived as a threat to the process. SW was also aware of the many steps taken to frame the

¹⁸ We include the SPKS coordinator in SW since his position was created and managed by SW.

debates that led to some exclusionary effects for local communities and farmers. In this perspective, SW empowered these local entities by building up their negotiation capacities, in tune with the interest format prevailing in the roundtable, and helped in recasting their voices to conform to liberal-consensual participation.

Especially since 2009, some staff members of SW have been guiding local communities and farmers towards non-public meetings with companies (“side events”), outside the spotlight of the official sessions. These parallel encounters take the form of bilateral negotiations to address and resolve local conflicts between rural communities and identified companies, on a case-by-case basis, or, in a wider and indirect manner, with international banks that finance these companies. With the support of international NGOs, SW thus promotes interest-group negotiations, linking NGO agendas on land conflict resolution to the concerns of local entities (see also Köhne, this issue). In sessions leading up to the conference, local communities are prepared by SW through role-play, during which they learn to describe concisely the conflict situation that concerns them by focusing on the basics. In these role-playing exercises, they assume a different role (a banker, a businessman and an affected person). While playing an affected person’s role, they are encouraged to present their situation in just one to two minutes. At the actual side event meeting, with one bank or another, local communities (and farmers) present their case in the same limited time span. NGOs play an intermediation role: they undertake a work of generalizing such cases and of negotiating with the company or bank.

The farmers and communities perceive this type of participation as useful given that it allows them to directly enter into negotiations with the directors of companies, which are thus under international pressure from the NGO lobby. However, this approach also leads to frustration, for example, when one has “to present one’s case in two minutes” (interview 2009), summing up all the facts that affect one’s daily life.¹⁹ And it requires sacrifices. When a company was willing to negotiate on the sidelines of the roundtable, SW staff and smallholders and local communities often had to forgo distributing at the RSPO conference an already prepared “fact sheet” documenting a case of conflict or holding of a parallel press conference to publicly express their concerns. The frustration is compounded by the fact that the non public party-to-party side meetings run counter to the aspiration of SPKS members to initiate a public debate

¹⁹ They report, for example, cases of violation of their customary land rights, affecting their livelihoods and attachments to places (lands, graves, etc.).

open to critical tests: “These side events, it is as if you are whispering. What we want is to speak of justice [in the RSPO forum]” (SPKS member 2009). Furthermore, they are supposed to forgo the expression of an affected experience. As mentioned above, following the 2007 conference, local communities and smallholders were asked during two annual conferences to write their questions on half-sheets of paper in the Q & A sessions. Setara, another Indonesian NGO, helped them formulate their questions on the sheets before they (or translators) read them out. “We help them to communicate and express their voice because sometimes they are overwhelmed by emotion, they even forgot what they wanted to say. And to simplify the question. Here, they cannot speak about their lives. So we help them talk about a general problem, not their own case” (Interview 2008). This work of transformation helped generalize their statements and reduce emotional tensions. But, at the same time, it reduced space for the expression of strong attachments.

Thus, local NGOs played a role in making local voices conform to the format of the roundtables, that is, to a liberal grammar where participants express choices for options while being detached from them. Nevertheless, as I will now show, SW’s support for rural community and smallholder participation was much more complex, especially because this NGO favored the accommodation of other formats of participation.

Constructing the common cause by accommodating attachments

By being close to the communities on the ground and sharing an empathetic relationship with them, Sawit Watch members also accommodated the attachments that were often necessary for the participation of rural communities in public formats.

Growing a common cause in proximity

The relationship that SW maintains with the local entities they bring annually to the RSPO relies on making the latter feel at ease. In the meetings that we have observed between Sawit Watch and farmers and local communities, as well as those that occur with the NGO network of SW, the atmosphere is very convivial. Everyone is warmly encouraged and recognized through his or

her attachments. In Bogor, the NGO's premises themselves are conducive to making guests feel at home; people from rural communities coming for meetings can find there a place to eat, rest, wash up and relax.

We attended some of the preparatory meetings between SW and SPKS in 2009 and observed the care that was taken to give everyone a chance to speak. These meetings were held in an atmosphere of concern and recognition for farmers and community representatives. These were welcomed with kindness and solicitude. Each of their observations was accorded value, encouraged by laughs of support and regular applause from the SW organizers, thus creating a climate of confidence necessary for some of them to speak up. This approbation was accompanied by a desire to let everyone have his or her say, share their concerns around personal affects and issues of justice, and to allow a collective and a common cause to grow. In such meetings, even if the SW members clearly had a dominant role, the floor was regularly given to SPKS members by systematically going around the table on each major issue. Farmers were always encouraged to speak when it was their turn, even when they were shy or even when they wanted to avoid the exercise by claiming to have no opinion on the topic under discussion. At such moments, one of the meeting organizers took the time to encourage the farmer to express himself by making him perceive the link that existed between the topic and the personal situation of the farmer, who he knew personally. Even in SPKS's internal meetings organized by their coordinator, this practice of going around the table was scrupulously followed whenever agreement had to be reached for a decision that might impact SPKS's future or when laying out strategies to adopt for the coming months in the union's interactions with the RSPO or for any other topic of importance. Comments, proposals and collectively approved decisions were recorded via the Mind Manager software application and projected on a screen so that everyone could verify the content of the deliberations, as well as confirm that there had been no misunderstanding and that the information truly reflected the group's decisions.²⁰

²⁰ This type of meeting clearly contrasts with the RSPO meetings, where people are expected to voluntarily take the floor by themselves, sometimes on a "first mover" basis, to serve specific interests. It also contrasts with the strategic engagement of some persons responsible for drafting the summary of short group meetings in the RSPO, discarding, for example, some of the opinions expressed (Cheyns 2011).

Accommodating emotions in the RSPO process

SW's commitment to proximity expressed itself in its willingness to share and favor common spaces, including at the RSPO. This could be observed, for example, during some "World Café" sessions, where smallholders, along with SW staff, got together to share their experiences. This fulfilled the wish of some of the smallholders to use the meeting not only to express their feelings to other stakeholders, but also to get together in a spirit of kinship with other family farmers in order to increase their knowledge of the various situations that other union members, who sometimes lived far away, had tried out.

During the group discussion in Bali, I felt comfortable. We sat together at the same table.

We could discuss our experiences, speak about our problems. We could relax, and unburden whatever was in our hearts. (SPKS Member, Interview, Sumatra 2008).

During this World Café, smallholders and rural communities — with help and urging from SW staff — transformed particular cases, when they appeared, into general causes, writing all the elements discussed and agreed upon on a paper board. Similarly, the SPKS coordinator accompanying the union members to the plenary sessions (with 500 to 800 participants drawn from all categories of stakeholders) encouraged them to participate in this public arena while maintaining proximity in close groups:

I suggest that we all, six or seven of us [SPKS members], sit in the same place in the plenary room. So it is easier to interact between us: we listen to the speakers, we share our comments and we see what needs to be done? Should we intervene? What should we say?

If we're together it creates energy. (Interview, Bogor 2009)

Commitment to proximity was also expressed by helping these farmers and community representatives relax in a friendly environment on the backstages of the meeting: during breaks, in the SW stand or even at the hotel in the evening for a debriefing, during which they could share their impressions, expectations and disappointments of the day and discuss the next day's program.

SW's commitment was characterized by care and concern toward smallholders and local communities. It helped them endure, in certain situations, the challenge of an unsympathetic – or even dismissive – social and economic environment. Several SPKS members recounted cases of bilateral negotiations with companies where at some point they felt affected and angry, for example, when the facts that they reported from the field were denied by the company's

management. Support in proximity through the presence of an SW person helped ease the tension that had built up.

Apit had to negotiate with the company. But the company had brought other people to the RSPO, from local communities, to support the company! So Apit felt very upset, emotional, but he was accompanied by Nasir (Sawit Watch). Nasir accompanied him everywhere and took care of him. During the negotiations, he sat down next to him, put a hand on him to calm him. This is important because he was very shocked²¹. (SPKS member, interview, Sumatra 2008).

Accompanying critical participation

Finally, some Sawit Watch members also facilitated critical participation, fulfilling the desire of smallholders to speak about justice and freedom. In this perspective, they encouraged the smallholders to dedicate themselves to the family farmers' cause by organizing meetings, helping them draft leaflets, prepare for a joint press conference on the sidelines of the roundtable, and speak up at the RSPO. For example, this was the case when Mandiri took the floor in the plenary session, after consultation with his group and the coordinator,²² to initiate critical stances toward the certification scheme and the content of the standard. His intervention was dedicated to a specification of the common good.

Organized almost every year by SW and SPKS (often with an international NGO), the press conference is a feature introduced by SW — with the participation of rural communities — that one could almost call “against” the roundtable mechanism to support other political grammars. It is based on a civic positioning of a public stance on behalf of a united collective, fighting against inequality. It was, however, becoming increasingly difficult for SW to organize these press conferences, given that it was a member of the RSPO Executive Board (until 2012).

Even though tensions between the different formats of participation are present within SW itself, the NGO played an important role in facilitating the participation of farmers and local communities in this transnational arena. It did so, on the one hand, by transforming the at of participation of farmers and local communities (transforming specific cases and personal

²¹ This farmer mentions his suspicions of corruption (the company arranging false testimonies to go against his own).

²² The SPKS coordinator was an SW member.

attachments into more generic issues, encouraging emotional detachment) and, on the other hand, by supporting grammars of commonality other than those envisaged by the liberal mechanism. Its concern for those affected and the solicitous support it provided on-site at the RSPO had helped prepare smallholders and local communities for public speaking, as well as restoring their confiscated dignity.

The people from the big companies select themselves. They do not try to communicate with farmers. They think they have more prestige, more money, more dignity. RSPO is supposed to reduce that gap. Nasir (SW) and John (Forest People Programme) are between two worlds; they serve as a bridge. Sawit Watch can be the bridge. (Family farmer, interview, Sumatra 2008)

This concern and solicitude are possible because the staff members of local NGOs share common surroundings and environments with the rural communities (at the NGO's premises, during trips that they undertake together, during fieldwork in the villages, etc.) in a grammar of common affinities. Some people from the international community who know how to put down roots in local communities also partly share this grammar. They include, for example, a few representatives of international NGOs who have developed a relationship of proximity and kinship with SW members and share common ground experiences.

That said, today, after seven years of existence, the question before the SPKS union is that of its independence from the very NGO that helped in its creation.

Because right now, in our agendas, the problems of the "smallholders" are represented only by SW. But with the formation of the SPKS national forum (...), we can be directly present – no longer as an object (topic) but as a subject (participant).

(SPKS member, interview, Bogor 2009)

Freed from a relationship of "domination" by companies, union members now want to get out of a relationship of "dependency" from NGOs, resulting from their taking care (Pattaroni 2007) of smallholders.

Conclusions

The RSPO mechanism accords publicity to certain conflicts between farmers and palm oil companies, who, as RSPO members, are then obliged to deal with them. This is one reason why farmers and representatives of “affected” communities participate in the process. They feel that they are more likely to obtain results within the framework of the roundtable than on the local terrain. However, the expression of their voices in the RSPO is far from easy. On the one hand, some participants attempt to re-impose a hierarchical relationship between farmers and company managers/directors in order to deprive the former of their powers of representation and of being able to transform reality. This logic of hierarchy arises from the local terrain, but violates the liberal proposition of horizontality. On the other hand, the liberal construction of the roundtable accords value to global knowledge, interest format, and detachment, at the expense of other capabilities of rooted or attached people who come to defend their real and daily lives with a desire of genuine participation. This construction of interest groups hinders or disrupts the specification of the common good. It results in the exclusion of local communities and smallholders' voices who wish to debate principles of justice. In spite of their formal inclusion, it also excludes the expression of people affected locally through their personal attachments.

NGOs, local ones in particular, play a key role in facilitating the expression of their voices. These NGOs are involved in several ways: by transforming the personal attachments of affected communities into shareable references, by applying generalizations, by organizing specific forums for them to express themselves in common affinities, and by sharing common places. This coming together allows NGOs to support the “affected” people by “building relationships of familiarity to shield them temporarily from the ordeal of third-party judgments and of presenting oneself in public” and thus constructs a basis for voluntary engagement (see Pattaroni 2007). But this work of care and proximity (Bréviglieri et al. 2004) is, at the same time, “necessary to alleviate the vulnerability of people and a threat to their autonomy” (Pattaroni 2007). The SPKS union’s desire today for independence forms part of this perceived threat.

Finally, this work shows that two approaches are possible for building up the capacities of “minority voices” to participate in MSIs. The more common of the two is for institutions to undertake a work of transforming these voices to allow them to be expressed in transnational arenas, that is, to prepare them for the liberal grammar in a classical “empowerment” strategy (focusing on negotiation). The other, less obvious but nonetheless necessary one, is to question the ability of the participatory mechanism itself to evolve and create spaces in order to

accommodate grammars of commonality other than the liberal one,²³ and thereby a plurality of voices.

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²³ Earn recognition for the care and support extended to those affected without it being seen by other participants as a manipulation of their voices by local NGOs, establish forums where they can get together with one another, earn recognition for the legitimacy of local and practical knowledge to express itself in the plenary, accommodate critical participation open to a specification of the common good, etc.

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