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Book Review:

Coffee Certification in East Africa: Impact on Farms, Families and Cooperatives Edited by Ruerd Ruben and Paul Hoebink. Wageningen Academic Publishers, 2015

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In the context of growing global awareness of ethical sourcing and sustainability in agriculture, the book *Coffee Certification in East Africa: Impact on Farms, Families and Cooperatives* presents a much-needed empirical examination of whether certification schemes truly deliver on their promises. Edited by Ruerd Ruben and Paul Hoebink and published by Wageningen Academic Publishers in 2015, this 265-page volume addresses a crucial gap in both academic and development literature by investigating the actual impact of certification on smallholder coffee farmers in three East African countries—Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia.

The central premise of the book is straightforward yet powerful: while coffee certification—particularly schemes such as Fair Trade and Utz—are widely promoted as tools to empower farmers, improve household welfare, and integrate producers into sustainable global value chains, the real-world evidence supporting these claims remains limited and often anecdotal. This book seeks to change that by providing a rigorous, data-driven analysis grounded in a multi-layered and mixed-methods research design.

The authors set out clear research goals. They aim not only to measure the direct economic outcomes of certification—such as income, productivity, and price benefits—but

also to explore broader social and institutional effects. These include trust and investment within cooperatives, risk perceptions among farmers, and perhaps most significantly, gender dynamics within coffee-producing households and communities. The book's strength lies in its comprehensive and systematic approach to understanding how certification operates in different contexts and at different levels of rural life.

Structured in three major parts, the book first examines household-level impacts using longitudinal survey data collected in 2009 and 2012. These chapters provide robust comparisons between certified and non-certified farmers across a range of economic and social indicators. Particularly notable are the findings on the varying effects of single versus multiple certifications (e.g., Fair Trade, organic, and Utz) in Ethiopia. The second part of the book shifts focus to the cooperative level, analyzing how certification affects internal governance, service delivery, and market strategies. These chapters explore how certification interacts with institutional trust and farmers' willingness to invest or engage in collective action. The final part offers a deep dive into intra-household impacts, focusing specifically on gender equity, women's bargaining power, and the often-overlooked question of how certification shapes family and community roles.

The introductory chapter by Ruben and Hoebink outlines the development of sustainability certification in the coffee sector, contrasting the approaches of Fair Trade (price guarantees) and Utz (on-farm improvements). It introduces a six-level impact framework—ranging from plot to market—that guides the book's analysis.

Chapter 2 focuses on Utz certification in Uganda, revealing that while certified farmers saw income and efficiency gains, benefits varied based on certification duration and cooperative effectiveness.

Chapter 3 assesses certification in Kenya using a difference-in-differences method. While some certified cooperatives saw improvements in price and support services, challenges like weak governance and low farmer awareness limited overall impact.

Chapter 4 examines multi-certification in Ethiopia, showing that triple certification (Fair Trade, organic, and Utz) can improve income, credit access, and food security—but at the cost of increased complexity and compliance burden.

Chapter 5 explores how Utz certification in Kenya affects risk perception and market behaviour. Certified farmers were more diversified and risk-aware, with greater trust in cooperatives, indicating behavioural shifts beyond economic metrics.

Chapter 6 evaluates how certification influences trust and investment in Ethiopian cooperatives. Findings suggest that cooperative leadership quality, not certification alone, drives positive outcomes.

Chapters 7 and 8 address gender dynamics. Chapter 7 shows that certification improves women's formal roles in Kenyan cooperatives, but not household decision-making. Chapter 8 uses experimental methods in Ethiopia to show that empowerment gains are limited by entrenched cultural norms, suggesting that certification alone is insufficient for transformative gender equity.

One of the most commendable aspects of the book is its methodological sophistication. The authors employ a triangulated research strat-

egy that combines household surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and behavioural experiments. This mixed-methods approach allows for both breadth and depth, providing a nuanced understanding of how certification affects not just economic outcomes, but also attitudes, behaviours, and social norms. Quantitative methods such as propensity score matching and difference-in-differences analysis are used to isolate the effects of certification from confounding factors, while qualitative data bring the lived experiences of farmers into focus.

Stylistically, the book manages to strike a delicate balance between academic rigour and accessibility. The chapters are well-organised and clearly written, with each study contributing coherently to the overarching theme. The language remains analytical yet approachable, making the book suitable not only for academics and researchers but also for practitioners and policy-makers. The inclusion of detailed tables, figures, and annexes enhances transparency and allows readers to engage critically with the data.

That said, the book is not without limitations. Some of the more technical chapters may pose a challenge for readers unfamiliar with econometric methods, and while the book acknowledges the issue of exclusion (i.e., the poorest farmers being left out of certification schemes), it could have explored this dimen-

sion more thoroughly. The geographical focus—though rich in detail—is confined to East Africa, which may limit the applicability of findings to other coffee-producing regions.

Nonetheless, these are minor caveats in what is otherwise a substantial contribution to the literature on sustainable agriculture and rural development. The book is especially valuable for those interested in the intersection of agricultural economics, institutional development, and gender equity. For academics, it offers a model of how to conduct rigorous, impact-oriented research in complex settings. For development practitioners and NGOs, it provides evidence-based insights that can inform program design and policy advocacy. For cooperatives and certification bodies, the findings serve as both validation and critique—highlighting where certification has succeeded, and where it has fallen short.

In conclusion, *Coffee Certification in East Africa* is a timely, relevant, and thoroughly researched volume that advances our understanding of how sustainability standards operate on the ground. By anchoring its analysis in real data from real communities, it moves the conversation about certification beyond theory and into the realm of lived impact. It is a recommended read for anyone serious about making global supply chains not only more sustainable but also more equitable.

Notes on contributors

Natanya Meyer is a professor University of Johannesburg in South Africa. She commenced her career as a lecturer in 2012. She completed her B.Com and Honours degrees in Economics and Risk Management, her Master's degree in Development and Management, and thereafter her PhD in Entrepreneurship. Prior to joining academia, she owned and managed three successful businesses, highlighting her passion for entrepreneurship. She has been involved in the development of entrepreneurial student societies, served as an executive member of the Golden Triangle Chamber of Commerce (GTCOC), and as a community of practice member

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