COURSE ON KEY ISSUES ON THE INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC AGENDA

Short courses for Permanent Missions in Geneva
Organised by the Division on Technology and Logistics-Technology, Innovation and Knowledge Development Branch
Policy Capacity Building Section / P166 courses

UNCTAD on Voluntary Sustainability Standards and how they interrelate to Sustainable Production, International Trade, and Market Access

Tuesday, 3 November 2026
Delivered by the Division on International Trade and Commodities

UNCTAD

PROGRAMME

Geneva, Palais des Nations	Council Chamber
10:00 - 10:15	Welcome address, Mr. Angel Gonzalez, Head, Technology, Innovation and Knowledge Development Branch, UNCTAD. Moderator, Ms. Randa Jamal, Economic Affairs Officer, Policy Capacity Building Section/P166, Technology, Innovation, and Knowledge Development Branch-DTL, UNCTAD
10:15 - 11:15	**Session 1 – Definition and Significance of Voluntary Sustainability Standards in Trade** This session will begin by introducing Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) and their significant role in sustainable production, international trade, and market access. It will zoom on how VSS are used to mitigate the environmental impacts of production and, in some cases, the social and economic impacts that influence long-term economic growth and sustainable development. By addressing environmental, economic, and social dimensions, VSS can contribute to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the broader sustainable development agenda. Therefore, delegates will gain a solid, evidence-based understanding of VSS and their impact on trade, market access and sustainability. Presented by Santiago Fernandez de Cordova, Economist, VSS Lead, Trade and Environment Branch, UNCTAD Q&A
11:15 - 12:10	**Session 2 – Challenges, Opportunities, and Tools of VSS** This session will zoom on the growing integration of VSS into trade policy, free trade agreements, public procurement, and sustainability due diligence frameworks, highlighting the challenges and opportunities they present for developing countries, as well as the supporting role of the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS). This session will deepen delegates' understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with VSS and their practical application. As tools to support sustainable development, VSS can improve market access and help producers and countries participate more effectively in sustainable global markets.

	Presented Santiago Fernandez de Cordova, Economist, VSS Lead, Trade and Environment Branch, UNCTAD Q&A

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This short course introduces Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) and their significant role in sustainable production, international trade, and market access. It explores how VSS are used to mitigate the environmental impacts of production and, in some cases, the social and economic impacts that influence long-term economic growth and sustainable development. By addressing environmental, economic, and social dimensions, VSS can contribute to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the broader sustainable development agenda.

The course also examines the growing integration of VSS into trade policy, free trade agreements, public procurement, and sustainability due diligence frameworks, highlighting the challenges and opportunities they present for developing countries, as well as the supporting role of the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS).

The course aims to deepen delegates' understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with VSS and their practical application. As tools to support sustainable development, VSS can improve market access and help producers and countries participate more effectively in sustainable global markets.

However, implementing VSS can generate additional costs for producers. At the same time, trade policies are increasingly incorporating VSS, and these standards are exerting greater influence on market access and trade flows.

At the end of this course, delegates will have gained knowledge of:

- Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) and their role as important market tools for demonstrating environmental and, to a lesser extent, social and economic sustainability performance.
- How VSS can enhance market access, competitiveness, export opportunities, and potentially generate price premiums for certified products.
- How VSS can contribute to the achievement of multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- How governments are increasingly incorporating VSS into trade policy, free trade agreements, public procurement, and sustainability due diligence frameworks.
- The implementation challenges that are associated with VSS, including compliance costs, fair revenue distribution, and living income, and their implications for developing countries.

Santiago Fernandez de Cordova

Santiago Fernandez de Cordova is a Senior Economist at UNCTAD's Trade Analysis Branch and the Coordinator of the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS). With over 25 years of experience in trade policy, he specializes in market access, sustainability standards, and structural adjustment. He advises governments on economic development strategies, trade negotiations, and trade promotion. Mr. Fernandez de Cordova has been a featured speaker at more than 200 international conferences on trade liberalization and economic development. He currently serves as a Visiting Professor at the Center for International Development, Universidad de Navarra, and was previously a Visiting Scholar at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. He is the Editor of the UNFSS Flagship Report Series, with the sixth edition titled "The Future of Sustainable Trade: Due Diligence Initiatives and Developing Countries." In addition, he authored the book "Coping with Trade Reform" (Palgrave Macmillan) and has published extensively on trade policy and development. His expertise has been recognized by institutions such as the World Bank, OECD, and the World Trade Organization, for which he has served as an expert and consultant. Before joining the United Nations, he worked in management consulting and investment banking. Santiago holds an MBA from LUISS Guido Carli University and a degree in Economics from Universidad de Navarra.