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**Building a Sustainable Coffee Sector Using Market-Based Approaches: The Role of
Multi-stakeholder Cooperation**

*A Background Paper for the Meeting of Sustainable Commodity Initiative:
“Sustainability in the Coffee Sector: Exploring Opportunities for International
Cooperation—Assessment and Implementation”*

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Global coffee production and trade is faced with sustainability challenges which are as diverse as they are deep. From declining prices to threatened forests; from water contamination to chemical exposure of workers; from diminishing biodiversity to persistently uncertain revenues. The coffee sector manifests countless examples of an imperfect market in action. While the causes of market imperfection vary considerably from region to region, and market to market, three broad causes stand out as prominent obstacles to building long-term sustainability in the sector: 1. imperfect information 2. disparities in market power and 3. externalization of public goods.¹

Addressing these obstacles has been notoriously difficult in the coffee sector and this, in large part, due to the international context within which they arise. The implication of different stakeholders with diverse social, cultural and economic backgrounds, makes it particularly difficult to generate efficient strategies for change within the sector. The persistence of this difficulty points towards the need for international instruments and international cooperation in the promotion of sustainability within the sector. Below we consider some specific initiatives where such action is underway as well as other promising opportunities for reducing the impacts of market imperfection in the coffee sector.

Improving Market Information

Producers, policy makers, roasters and even consumers are constantly faced with asymmetric information on the actions of other players within the coffee market. In order for producers to successfully reap the benefits of the international market, it is critical that they have dependable, understandable and up-to-date market information as well as information on efficient strategies for adjusting to market changing market conditions. To a certain degree, global oversupply and the current coffee crisis, can be traced to production decisions based on inadequate market information. Similarly, consumers under normal circumstances have very little access to information on market practices beyond the store shelf. These two examples represent extremes of a persistent context of imperfect information within the coffee sector—a context which frequently leads individual actors to adopt unsustainable strategies in their decision-making.

While it would be unreasonable to hope for anything close to “perfect” information, improved information generation and dissemination could enable more sustainable economic decision making along the supply chain. The International Coffee Organization is largely charged with this task, and has played a significant role in both generating and disseminating information on international coffee markets both to

¹ These three obstacles, each widely recognized sources of market imperfection by economists, were specifically identified by stakeholders as “key” obstacles facing sustainability in the coffee sector at the Sustainable Commodity Initiative Brainstorming Workshop “Sustainability in the Coffee Sector: Exploring Opportunities for International Cooperation”, February 17, 2003. See *Summary report: Sustainability in the Coffee Sector: Exploring Opportunities for International Cooperation towards an Integrated Approach* at <http://www.iisd.org/trade/commodities/>.

producer and consumer countries. There nevertheless remains considerable work in bringing this, and other information, to specific stakeholders along the supply chain.

For producers, existing information technology has the potential to deliver unprecedented levels of information to remote locations at minimal cost. The development of a comprehensive electronic information system accessible by farmers, extensionists, producer organizations and others along the supply chain, could provide an invaluable tool for empowering producers and improving the effectiveness of their production strategies. CABI is currently exploring such a process.² Meanwhile, CIRAD's coordination of a global network of researchers³ to address sustainability issues from an integrated approach provides an unprecedented opportunity for generating and sharing information on issues related to sustainability within the coffee market. Through its cooperative platform, the CIRAD project holds the promise of enhancing the consistency and depth of research efforts towards sustainability in the coffee sector. USAID in collaboration with the Coffee Quality Institute, on the other hand, have launched the Coffee Corps, a volunteer technical assistance program which closes information gaps in the market by providing producers with first hand information from industry players on market needs and techniques for satisfying them.⁴

Exporting institutions in producer countries occupy the most direct link between international markets and producers. As such, they may have a special role to play in bringing market information to producers in a timely and transparent fashion. Government coffee authorities and marketing boards have often played the dual role of exporter and provider of extension services however, with the liberalization of many markets, these institutions have been weakened and even disappeared in many countries.⁵ The re-integration of the dual role of export and extension services could play a critical part in ensuring up-to-date information on the trends and practical realities of the market. Qualicafé X⁶ in Brazil and Nestlé's provision of farmer extension services based on activity and trends further down the supply chain under its various direct purchasing programs⁷ both provide examples of ways in which exporting institutions can play dual roles.

Supply and demand are pillars of the coffee economy. The generation of real demand for coffee produced and traded according to sustainable practices will be essential to ensuring the economic viability of such practices. At present most consumers either are

²CABI has launched a process for putting together a user friendly "Coffee Compendium" to allow producers to gain access to market and related information. See CABI website at <http://www.cabi.org>.

³CIRAD International Research Initiative on Coffee Sustainability, http://www.cirad.fr/en/pg_recherche/initiativecafe.pdf.

⁴ See Coffee Corps website at <http://www.coffeecorps.org/index.html>.

⁵ Ponte, *supra* note 13. Note that in addition to being providers of such valuable services, government marketing boards and related institutions have also often been accused of absorbing precious financial resources which otherwise might go to producers.

⁶ QualicaféX website at <http://www.qualicafex.com/index-ing.htm>.

⁷ See the Nestlé Sustainability Review at <http://www.ir.nestle.com/Pdf/English/Sustainability.pdf> at p. 16.

not aware of, or are unclear about, sustainability issues related to coffee.⁸ Similarly, industry, is only beginning to grasp the full implications of sustainable production and trade along mainstream supply chains. Promoting consumer and industry awareness will be an essential component of generating solidly sustainable supply chains. At present many of the sustainability standards systems in the coffee sector also play an important role in generating consumer and industry awareness on sustainability issues within the sector.⁹ More recently, the formation of the Sustainable Agriculture Initiative Platform,¹⁰ is enabling a deeper understanding of sustainability issues among industry by providing a pre-competitive forum for dialogue and information sharing. The identification and promotion of compatible and mutually supportive strategies for sustainability will likely be an essential part of building a strong consumer base for sustainable practices further up the supply chain. Further animation and coordination of existing information dissemination activities, perhaps in the form of a broad-based, generic research and information campaign promoting “recognized” sustainable practices within the coffee sector, could play a role in generating improved awareness, acceptance, demand, and ultimately, prices, for sustainable coffees.¹¹

Improving Producer Autonomy

Just as there is great diversity in the level and degree of information available to players along the supply chain, so too, there is great diversity in the flexibility and power to affect market outcomes—particularly those related to personal or contractual relations. The coffee sector, like other commodities sectors, is marked by high degrees of concentration at various stages along the supply chain.¹² Moreover, a growth in the concentration of decision-making authority along the supply chain has been observed over the past two decades—particularly since the disintegration of economic clauses within the International Coffee Agreement and the corresponding dismantling of national coffee authorities.¹³ This context has aggravated a long-standing imbalance in bargaining power between small producers and other actors along the coffee supply chain. The existence of substantial imbalances in bargaining power under “liberalized” market

⁸ Consumer surveys in Canada and the US, show overall awareness of all sustainable coffee eco-labels to be below 15%.

⁹ Many of the standards initiatives are accompanied by consumer and industry information campaigns. For example, in the Netherlands, campaign activity has resulted in 74% of consumers being aware of Fair Trade coffee and, presumably, some of the sustainability issues which inspire the standard initiative. Jean-Marie Krier, Fair Trade in *Europe 2001: Facts and Figures on the Fair Trade sector in 18 European countries* (EFTA, 2001) at p. 14 accessed at <http://www.eftadvocacy.org>.

¹⁰ Sustainable Agriculture Initiative Platform website <http://www.saiplatform.org/our-activities/coffee/default.htm>.

¹¹ Some other possible tools for improving information dissemination include the establishment of a news bulletin on sustainable coffee and/or the organization of a regular sustainable coffee convention/conference.

¹² Ten roasters account for 63% of global sales of processed coffee while five trading companies account for 40% of total green imports. See International Trade Centre, *Coffee an Exporters Guide* (Geneva: ITC, 2002) at 29.

¹³ Stefano Ponte, *The ‘Latte Revolution’? Winners and Losers in the Re-structuring of the Global Coffee Marketing Chain* (Copenhagen: Centre for Development Research), 2002 at 16.

conditions has been associated with the generation of increased inequities in value retention and wealth distribution in international markets.¹⁴

Producer autonomy is perhaps nowhere more evidently constrained than in the contract of sale. The vast disparity in market power between small producers and major industry players within the coffee sector is well documented.¹⁵ Moreover, there is considerable evidence that such inequities are becoming deeper as global integration progresses. The existence of such disparities effectively reduces the ability of producers to negotiate terms that effectively serve their long-term interests.¹⁶

Although it would be entirely unrealistic to expect contractual formation to make a “detour” around market forces, some very specific contractual practices and instruments may offer significant economic benefits to producers at negligible costs to others along the supply chain. The use of long-term contracts, for example, may offer a low cost approach to improving predictability and stability for producers, exporters and consumers alike. Starbucks, Fair Trade Labelling Organizations International and Utz Kapeh have all experimented with the development of novel contractual arrangements for promoting sustainability among producers. Such contractual arrangements provide a direct in-road to the development of an integrated approach addressing basic economic issues within the context of other production and trading practices. The development of model contractual arrangements or even a model “S” contract,¹⁷ could provide a reference point for all players along the supply chain and, in so doing, enable contractual settings which enhance producer autonomy.

A lack of market information and market presence among small producers reduces their ability to retain value along the supply chain through “market negotiations”. In some settings producer organizations have demonstrated themselves as effective tools for addressing these challenges. Transparency, accountability and inclusiveness represent some of the principle challenges facing such organizations. By encouraging sustainable production and governance practices within producer organizations, producers may be able to link improved information flow to improved sustainability more effectively. The

¹⁴ Between 1975 and 1993 the international price of coffee declined by 18% on world markets. Over the same period, the price paid by the consumer in the US increased by 240%. This pricing trend follows a move towards increased concentration in the coffee sector. See Morisset, J. *Unfair Trade? Empirical Evidence in World Commodity Markets over the past 25 years*, World Bank (1997). For a general account of the correlation between liberalization and increased disparity in wealth distribution, see the UNDP, *Human Development Report 1999 : Globalization With a Face* (New York: UNDP, 1999).

¹⁵ Ponte *supra* note 13. John Talbot, “Where Does Your Coffee Dollar Go?: The Division of Income and Surplus along the Coffee Commodity Chain” in *Studies in Comparative International Development*. Spring, 1997. Vol. 32.

¹⁶ The critical issue of price is fixed within contracts. The manner in which price is determined through a combination of references to world market prices, quality differentials and other market conditions, provides the backdrop against which efforts for improving producer prices must be built. While it is well known that supply and demand are the principle determinants in this relationship, it is also equally well known that they are not the *only* determinants in the coffee pricing structure. Investigation into alternative methods for improving pricing for contractual formation (based on sustainability indicators) might be able to play a role in reducing externalities in the pricing mechanism.

¹⁷ Summary Report, *supra* note 1.

Mexican Consejo Civil de Mexico de Café Sostenible provides a unique example of a producer organization, specifically devoted to promoting an integrated approach to sustainability among its members. Similarly, producer organizations linked to the Fair Trade system through the FLO “registry” are required to make generic commitments to sustainable governance practices. Meanwhile, other producer organizations, such as the Federacion Nacional de Cafeteros (Colombia),¹⁸ have come to represent important market forces with strong bargaining positions on international markets. The creation, promotion, and pooling, of producer led institutions could conceivably generate a more significant and unified producer voice for sustainability on worldwide markets while reducing the power imbalances faced by individual producers.

A needs based approach to sustainable development places a priority on helping the poorest members of society out of systemic poverty. Small rural producers with less than ten hectares are responsible for an estimated 70% of the world’s coffee.¹⁹ Many, if not most, of such producers, are faced with significant economic challenges when making the transition to “recognized” forms of sustainable production.²⁰ Restrictions on access to credit and start-up funds for small producers limit the ability of such producers to enter into such markets. Restrictions on access to capital also limit the ability of producers to adopt strategies towards diversification both along the coffee supply chain as well as into other product areas. On the other hand, there is evidence that the adoption of clear and transparent management practices, combined with the enhanced information on market conditions typically associated with recognized sustainability systems, improves the risk profile of producers, thereby making them more worthy clients for credit.²¹ This context points towards a potentially virtuous circle accessible through the provision of reasonable credit and start-up capital to small farmers wishing to adopt and/or committed to sustainable production practices.

Different possible mechanisms for improving access to credit and/or start-up funds for producer entry into sustainable production and supply chain systems include the development of a global sustainable credit facility, sustainable credit window or guarantee fund (within existing credit facilities or institutions such as the World Bank, the Common Fund for Commodities the Global Environment Facility etc); the development of a global coalition of existing micro-finance initiatives; and the establishment of a “sustainable coffee fund” designed to provide start-up capital to producers wishing to make the transition to such practices.²²

¹⁸ See website of the Federacion Nacional de Cafeteros de Colombia at <http://www.cafedecolombia.com/>.

¹⁹ OXFAM GB, *The Coffee Market: A Background Study* (OXFAM, 2001) at 3.

²⁰ “Recognition” for sustainable production practices typically requires the implementation of new management systems and certification fees—not to mention costs associated with modifications in actual production practices. A study based on Mexican experiences with sustainable coffees estimates costs associated with compliance to certain sustainability standards to be threefold over production costs for conventional markets. See Willem Boot, Christopher Wunderlich and Armando Bartra. *The Impact of Ecolabled Coffee In Mexico* (Boot Coffee Consulting and Training, 2002) in Annex 1.

²¹ Production systems based on sustainability criteria in Mexico over a 5 year period demonstrate higher and more stable benefit/cost ratios. Production levels per hectare were found to be double that found from conventional production practices. *Ibid.*

²² Many of these options were suggested at the SCI brainstorming workshop. See Summary Report, *supra* note 1.

Volatility in market prices can severely restrict the ability of producers to pursue social, environmental and economic planning towards sustainable development. Although economic clauses within the International Coffee Agreement may provide the only “global” remedy to such volatility, which is ultimately rooted in the functioning of international markets,²³ the World Bank, through its “Taskforce on Commodity Risk Management”²⁴ has been developing the ability of producers to take advantage of insurance and hedging instruments by pooling producer resources and building technical capacity. There remains a great potential for expanding the Bank’s activities in this arena through collaborative dissemination and organization efforts.

Protecting Public Goods

The majority of the world’s coffee production occurs in or near highly bio-diverse ecosystems.²⁵ Similarly, with high levels of dependency on coffee production as a source of employment and revenues in coffee producing regions, coffee production had marked impacts on the social conditions in coffee producing countries. Given the “public” nature of the impacts which coffee production and trade have on the global community, the preservation of basic social, economic and environmental well-being depends, not only upon the efforts of those directly implicated along specific supply chains, but upon society at large.

The absence of a clear system of rules and enforcement mechanisms for the protection of public goods such as the environment and labour standards along the coffee supply chain, allows some players to draw competitive advantage by externalizing the costs associated with public goods use.²⁶ Although national regulation does, and must, form the foundation of public goods protection, the international character of the coffee industry, combined with the absence of enforcement infra-structure either at the national or international levels, places severe limits on traditional regulatory mechanisms as tools for protecting basic public goods within the coffee sector.

²³ Analysts are generally in agreement that the integration of economic clauses in the International Coffee Agreement were successful in reducing the volatility of world coffee prices. Ponte, *supra* note 13 at 9.

²⁴ International Taskforce on Commodity Risk Management website <http://www.itf-commrisk.org/>

²⁵ More than 80 per cent of the 11.8 million hectares devoted to coffee production around the world are planted in areas of former or current rainforest. Coffee is currently grown in 13 of the world’s 25 biodiversity “hotspots”—areas of high biodiversity importance and vulnerability. Halweil B. (2002) “Why Your Daily Fix Can Fix More than Your Head.” *World Watch* Vol. 15. No.3 May/June 2002.

²⁶ In a survey of coffee plantations in Guatemala, for example, it was found that *none* paid the country’s minimum wage and that a majority of them did not even pay half the minimum wage. See Bart Ensing, “The viability of a code of conduct in the coffee sector in Guatemala,” Fair Trade Organizatie July 2000. Meanwhile, in Latin America, a 50 per cent reduction in avian biodiversity has been observed under sun growing conditions. In addition to aggravating soil erosion, reduced forestation associated with sun and mono-culture production reduces overall carbon sequestration. The shift from “diverse shade” systems to “mono-culture shade” systems has been estimated to have reduced carbon sequestration by 30 to 50 per cent in Latin America. Rice, R. and J. Ward, *Coffee, Conservation, and Commerce in the Western Hemisphere*. (Natural Resources Defense Council and Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center. Washington, DC, 1996.)

The implementation of an integrated approach to sustainability necessitates the promotion of specific production, trading and consumption practices at the international level. Over the past decade and a half, a rapid growth in different types of sustainability standards has generated an unprecedented interest and experience in the management of sustainability related supply chain activities at the global level. Some of the more established sustainability standards include: Rainforest Alliance's Eco-OK;²⁷ IFOAM Organic standards;²⁸ Fair Trade Labelling Organizations International Coffee Standards;²⁹ Utz Kapeh criteria;³⁰ Eurepgap coffee standards;³¹ Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center Coffee Criteria.³²

In addition to improving awareness of sustainability issues in the coffee sector, these various standards systems have, to varying degrees, generated unique systems for implementing and enforcing international, rules-based systems for protecting widely recognized public goods. However the precise impacts and appropriateness of diverse systems to specific environmental, economic and socio-political contexts remains, to a large degree, a mystery.³³ Moreover, the proliferation of a variety of sustainability labels and standards systems risks diluting consumer and policy support for such initiatives through the potential confusion and contradiction associated with juxtaposed definitions of sustainability.³⁴ In addition to reducing clarity on the meaning of sustainability overall, the propagation of multiple systems exposes coffee stakeholders to higher costs through the multiplication of "management" procedures which can operate as non-tariff barriers to market entry.³⁵ For smaller producers, such barriers are often prohibitive. Finally, systemic barriers to market penetration of existing "sustainable" standards

²⁷ See Rainforest website at <http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/>.

²⁸ See IFOAM website at <http://www.ifoam.org/>.

²⁹ See FLO coffee standards at <http://www.fairtrade.net/pdf/sp/english/coffee%20.pdf>.

³⁰ See Utz Kapeh criteria at <http://www.utzkapeh.org/Utzkapeh/ukwebsite.nsf/portal?Openframeset>.

³¹ See Eurepgap website at http://www.eurep.org/sites/index_e.html.

³² See Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center coffee criteria at <http://nationalzoo.si.edu/ConservationAndScience/MigratoryBirds/Coffee/Certification/criteria.cfm>.

³³ There is, to our knowledge, currently no in-depth study comparing the social, economic and environmental impacts of existing standards systems at the international level. Wangeningen University Research Centre has, however, launched an effort designed to develop a sustainability index for the coffee sector which could play an important role in clarifying knowledge on the impacts of such systems.

³⁴ According to a study published by the ICO, UNCTAD, IISD and the World Bank, 70% of those surveyed in the swiss coffee industry believe multiple certification systems to be confusing for consumers. Similar observations have been made in other countries in Europe and in North America. See Daniele Giovannucci, *The State of Sustainable Coffee: A Study of Twelve Major Markets* (London: ICO, 2003). See also, Daniele Giovannucci, *Sustainable Coffee Survey of the North American Specialty Coffee Industry* (May, 2001).

³⁵ A number of initiatives have begun addressing the problem of standards compliance for producers directly. Social Accountability in Sustainable Agriculture (<http://www.isealalliance.org/sasa/>), Chemonics (<http://marketstandards.chemonics.net/>) and the Sustainable Trade and Innovation Centre (<http://www.commonwealthknowledge.net/documents/THESUSTAINABLETRADEANDINNOVATIONCENTRE.doc>) are all involved in improving producer access to sustainable markets.

systems within mainstream channels necessitates a rethinking of sustainability strategies with these markets specifically in mind.³⁶

Proactive cooperation and coordination among existing standards initiatives may provide a path to reducing inconsistent messages and outcomes arising from the propagation of standards systems and, as such, improve efficiency and effectiveness in the protection of public goods. Although it would be unrealistic, and perhaps even undesirable, to have existing standards systems harmonized under a single “super seal,” many other opportunities for collaboration and cooperation exist for improving the efficiency and benefits derived from standards management more generally. For example, the International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling Alliance (ISEAL) has embarked upon a process of identifying a Code of Good Practice for Setting Social and Environmental Standards³⁷ as a common benchmark for standard setting activities while Social Accountability in Sustainable Agriculture (SASA) has investigated the potential of offering different standards-based products through consolidated supply channels.³⁸ The Consumer’s Choice Council, on the other hand, has led a multi-stakeholder process to the identification of a set of Conservation Principles for Coffee Production.³⁹ Finally, the Common Codes for the Coffee Community has adopted a multi-stakeholder process for identifying a set of baseline sustainability standards for mainstream industry drawing, in part, from existing standards systems.⁴⁰

Connecting these diverse efforts may provide a still broader understanding of the linkages between different sustainability efforts thus enabling market actors and policy makers to promote sustainable practices in the most effective way possible based on geographic, market and policy differences around the globe. Regardless of the precise modalities for generating deeper understanding across sustainability standards, it is clear that there exists a great need for clarifying our understanding of the concept of sustainability and the roles various agents play in developing and promoting this concept.⁴¹

Conclusion

Although the above themes outline some broad areas which may spell special promise for further action and work in the short to medium term, the true promise and nature of any specific market-based initiatives will depend upon a vast array of political, economic, geographic and social factors. Over the past two decades, great advances have been made in the identification and implementation of sustainable systems of production and trade applicable to the coffee sector at large. Nevertheless, there is clearly still a great

³⁶ The Common Codes for the Coffee Community project is an important example of such an effort. See <http://www.sustainable-coffee.net/> for more information.

³⁷ See ISEAL website at <http://www.isealalliance.org/>.

³⁸ See SASA website at <http://www.isealalliance.org/sasa/>.

³⁹ See Consumers Choice Council website at http://www.consumerscouncil.org/coffee/coffeeprinciples_52501.pdf.

⁴⁰ See Common Codes for the Coffee Community website at <http://www.sustainable-coffee.net/>.

⁴¹ A survey conducted by the Sustainable Commodity Initiative revealed a clear consensus among stakeholders on the need for greater clarity in definitions and understandings of sustainability in the coffee sector.

deal of work to be done in identifying global strategies for sustainability within the sector. Stakeholders to the coffee supply chain, as the principle beneficiaries of coffee production and trade, as well as through their practical experience and privileged information on supply chain constraints, have a special role to play in the identification of practical and meaningful strategies for sustainable development.⁴²

Direct and equitable stakeholder participation in the development of policy and strategy through a transparent, accountable and inclusive process will therefore be crucial to building long-term sustainability in the sector.⁴³ At present, no formalized structure exists for the participation of all stakeholders towards the development of sustainable practices and sustainability strategies for the sector as a whole. The formation of a global Sustainable Coffee Partnership provides a first step in this direction.

Stakeholder participation alone, however, does not provide direct mechanisms for overcoming externalities and other imperfections in the international coffee market. Efforts towards this end will ultimately require sacrifices and these cannot “sustainably” be born unilaterally by any particular stakeholders or stakeholder group. The elimination and/or reduction of market imperfections, within a free market environment, requires cooperation among stakeholders towards a common end and/or the development of supportive policy tools which effectively “generate” such cooperation through market and regulatory mechanisms. The development of a multi-stakeholder, participatory platform for cooperation, coordination, project development, research and policy generation, under the auspices of a Sustainable Coffee Partnership, promises to provide a direct path for the development of practical, targeted sustainability strategies and policy ultimately leading to improved efficiency in the coffee market. The Sustainable Commodity Initiative invites your participation in the development of such a platform, the beginnings of which will be discussed on Dec. 8th and 9th at the workshop “Sustainability in the Coffee Sector: Exploring Opportunities for International Cooperation” at the Palais des Nations. We look forward to seeing you there.

⁴² Technoserve’s coffee program (<http://www.tns.org/news/AM03.htm>), OXFAM’s Global Alliance on Coffee and Commodities (http://www.oxfam.org/eng/pr030519_coffee_ico.htm) represent two stakeholder processes currently underway looking at policy and sector wide strategies for improving sustainability in the coffee sector. The Sustainable Tree Crops Program (<http://www.treecrops.org/index.htm>), although primarily focused on five West African countries, has built a multi-stakeholder program for strategy development in coffee production based on an integrated approach to sustainable development.

⁴³ See, for example, paragraph 23.2 of Agenda 21 at <http://www.unep.org/Documents/Default.asp?DocumentID=52&ArticleID=71> .