Title: Bovine leather as a (non)forest-risk commodity. Analysing discourses, their implications and governance arrangements on the way to zero deforestation

The list of forest-risk commodities keeps expanding to include those with exposed risk of deforestation in supply chains besides timber, palm oil, soy and cattle. In view of increasing deforestation rates in Brazil, demand side interventions and sustainable sourcing of these commodities are considered as important stepping stones. In this regard, being a by-product of cattle, bovine leather is gaining more attention as a commodity with embedded deforestation in the production system. There is a growing expectation from the downstream actors to put forward deforestation related policies and commitments and ensure that raw materials come from legal and sustainably managed farms. The research argues that deforestation related commitments of the leather industry should be implemented through creating mechanisms to include farmers into vertical supply chain of leather. Fair benefit sharing through this chain can serve as important source of income for farmers to cover costs of sustainable and legal livestock intensification and contribute to the efforts of achieving zero deforestation in Amazon. However, this discourse is confronted by the one that focus only on after-slaughterhouse environmental impacts and consider leather a waste product that would bear no further responsibilities for farm level impacts.

By employing secondary, as well as qualitative data collected through interviews, field visit and observations in Brazil, this research explores how discourses are being articulated and how mobilization of bias in the language lead to power structures and finds its manifestation in strategies and practices. Based on broader supply chain governance approach the interviewee list included those outside of traditional supply chain and their prominence was assessed by their information power, indication of participation in key events, formalized networks, authority of decision making, impact of statements on the public discourse, authorship of key documents, and by snowball sampling. Leather “as a forest-risk commodity” and leather “as a waste product” have been identified as two prevalent discourses different parties adhere to.

Discourses and rationalities held by different stakeholders along the direct vertical supply chain and within the governance arrangement of leather are causing major hindrances for action for positive change. Without proper investment, supply chain development and capacity building strategies, zero deforestation commitments by major retailers and leather manufacturers can bring extra and unfair burden upon upstream actors.