

Sustainable Development and Certification Practices: Lessons Learned and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the extent to which certification auditing can contribute to the realization of organizational accountability for sustainable development. A theoretical framework based on a critical analysis of financial and ISO auditing practices is proposed to shed light on the misconceptions, paradoxes and rational myths underlying the institutionalization of auditing practices in the area of corporate sustainability. As such, this paper casts doubt on the imagery of impartiality, rigor and accountability projected by organizations through discourses of certification. It also illustrates the pertinence of studying the auditing function from a cross-disciplinary viewpoint, and of paying attention to the processes by which auditing travels from one discipline to another. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd and ERP Environment.

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Introduction

IN RECENT YEARS, CERTIFIABLE STANDARDS ON REPORTING AND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES FOR SUSTAINABILITY HAVE BEEN INCREASINGLY adopted by organizations across the world. Standards on sustainability reporting, such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) framework, mainly aim to improve the reliability and transparency of environmental, social and economic disclosures (Unerman *et al.*, 2007; Deegan *et al.*, 2006; Owen and O'Dwyer, 2005). Standards on management practices, such as ISO 14001, are focused on the implementation of control systems, the central purpose of which is to manage an organization's environmental and social responsibility (Jiang and Bansal, 2003; ISO, 2008; KPMG, 2008). Although the scope and technical requirements of these two types of standards are clearly different, their respective certification mechanisms are driven by similar institutional arrangements and rely on the same basic assumptions: auditor independence, collection of sufficient audit evidence, compliance with comprehensive international standards, etc. Whatever the type of standard considered, certification can be defined as the confirmation, through an audit performed by presumably independent auditors, of an organization's conformity with specified and agreed-upon rules or standards. Thus, in spite of their differences, the certification practices which underlie sustainability reporting and manageability fundamentally reflect a similar quest for social

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legitimacy, are rooted in common rituals of verification and contribute to the spread of the audit society and its obsession with control (Power, 1994, 1997).

This paper analyzes the extent to which certification auditing practices can reasonably contribute to the realization of organizational accountability in the domain of sustainable development. This paper does not examine the proposals and technicalities of specific standards on accountability for sustainability, but explores, from a critical perspective, institutionalization processes underlying certification auditing mechanisms. According to the Accountability AA1000AS standard on accountability for sustainability, accountability is made up of three principles: 'transparency (to account to its stakeholders), responsiveness (to respond to stakeholders concerns) and compliance (to comply with standards to which it is voluntarily committed, and rules and regulations that it must comply for statutory reasons (Institute of Social and Ethical Accountability, 2003, p. 33). From this pragmatic perspective, accountability for sustainability involves the organization demonstrating the extent to which it meets social, environmental and economic responsibilities through compliance with standards and established rules in the area. Whatever the interpretation of sustainability and the type of standard used by organizations, accountability typically involves verification and certifying mechanisms (Power, 1997). Thus, for organizations and stakeholders alike, one of the key questions is: to what extent is certification auditing reliable, relevant and trustworthy enough to significantly contribute to the realization of accountability for sustainability?

Previous research (Gray, 2010; Unerman *et al.*, 2007; Owen and O'Dwyer, 2005; Bebbington *et al.*, 2007; Springett, 2003) has shown that organizations often fail to demonstrate convincingly their accountability for sustainability. Our analysis extends this stream of research by focusing on one of the mechanisms which can help, if adequately designed and implemented, to improve an organization's demonstration of its sustainability development: certification. Specifically, our paper is juxtaposed alongside two movements, that of analogical reasoning and that of phronesis. We initially rely on literature on financial and ISO auditing to identify key problems that have characterized the spread of auditing technologies in society. We then analogically argue that these problems are likely to reproduce in the emerging context of accountability for sustainability, as actors in new areas of social life tend to import practices, recipes and standards developed in other areas (Etzion and Ferraro, 2010), especially those which are established and thought to be related to the importing area. Analogical reasoning is therefore at the very heart of our paper. Not only do actors in the field rely on analogical reasoning in developing new fields and practices, but this logic also permeates our own line of thinking, in that we assume that lessons that have been learned (or that should have been learned or at least noticed and pondered about) in a particular field (financial and ISO certification) may be useful in elaborating reasonable extrapolations of the implementation of practices in other fields (sustainability certification).

In so doing, our paper participates in a broader epistemological movement, founded on phronesis which promotes a conception of research 'as a practical, intellectual activity aimed at clarifying the problems, risks, and possibilities we face as humans and societies, and at contributing to social and political praxis' (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 4). Instead of unnecessarily trying to adhere to imageries of research as a neutral and objective activity, phronetic research provides input to the ongoing social dialogue about the problems and risks which confront us as a society, and how things may be done differently (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Changing institutionalized practices is always challenging. Nonetheless, since human practices are made, they can be unmade and changed, as long as we know how they have been made (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Through the realization and publication of phronetic research, readers can become more aware of the socially constructed nature of their environment and of the array of disciplinary power which is deployed on them, often in subtle ways. This type of knowledge constitutes an ingredient that can play a role in sustaining reforms.

Our phronetic examination is structured as follows. Relying on literature, we set the stage of our study by discussing the emergence and institutionalization of certifiable standards for sustainability. We then analyze and compare critical debates about financial and ISO audits, especially with regard to gaps between their imagery of rationality versus their concrete processes and outcomes, in order to identify some key misconceptions that generally underlie the deployment of auditing practices in society. These misconceptions are likely to characterize sustainability auditing. Indeed in the third section of the paper, we present a dynamic model that sheds light on rational myths likely to hinder the demonstration of accountability for sustainability via certified procedures. Finally, as a way to contribute to social debate, we propose possible solutions which may be considered for preventing these problems.

The Quest for Sustainability and Accountability

The demonstration of accountability for sustainable development has become a key concern for many organizations that are exposed to increasing pressures from various stakeholders calling for more responsiveness and transparency in this area. To meet these social pressures and demonstrate their commitment, organizations have implemented various certifiable standards focused on the reporting of information or the development of appropriate management practices. Nevertheless, the credibility and effectiveness of these standards remain unclear, not least because of their novelty.

The Standardization of Sustainability Reports and Practices

Over the last two decades, the way to define, interpret and implement sustainable development by organizations has been widely debated in the literature (Markus and Gray, 2007; Bebbington *et al.* 2007; Springett, 2003; Devinney, 2009). The very broad definition of sustainable development, that claims to 'meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43) has certainly contributed to fuel ambiguities over the implications of this concept for organizations (Aras and Crowther, 2009; Springett, 2003; Bebbington *et al.* 2007). Many studies have also stressed the biased and superficial interpretations of sustainability by organizations using this concept mostly as a marketing tool disconnected from internal practices (Springett, 2003; Devinney, 2009; Moneva *et al.*, 2006; Markus and Gray, 2007; Boiral and Roy, 2007).

One of the most dominant interpretations of organizational sustainability is the triple bottom-line rationale based on environmental, social and economic performances (Henriques & Richardson, 2004). According to the AA1000AS standard, 'sustainability performance refers to an organization's total performance, which might include its policies, decisions, and actions that create social, environmental and/or economic (including financial) outcomes' (Institute of Social and Ethical Accountability, 2003, p. 31). Nevertheless, the triple bottom-line approach remains equivocal and difficult to verify. Environmental, social and economic performances are far from being concepts independent of one another (Hopwood, 2009; Delmas and Blass, 2010; Schwartz and Carroll, 2008; Devinney, 2009; O'Dwyer, 2007). Further, criticisms have emphasized a legitimacy gap between social expectations over corporate commitment for sustainability and what is effectively demonstrated or delivered by organizations (Moneva *et al.*, 2006; Dey, 2007).

The adoption of recognized international standards has been described as having a potential to contribute to the quest for corporate sustainability (Kolk and Perego, 2010; Rasche, 2009; KPMG, 2008; Yin and Schmeidler, 2009). Given the complexity and multidimensionality of sustainable development, various standards have been proposed to address specific issues (environmental, social, economic) or practices (reporting mechanisms, management systems, etc.). Various studies have attempted to analyze and classify the large array of evolving standards (Manetti and Becatti, 2009; KPMG, 2008; Rasche, 2009). In particular, the classification schemes differentiate between two types of certifiable standards in terms of scope and verification focus: standards on external reporting and standards on management practices and systems.

The first type of standard is centered on the reporting of reliable information through sustainability reports (Deegan *et al.*, 2006; Owen and O'Dwyer, 2005). For example, the GRI guidelines promote comparable reporting on economic, environmental and social performance through the use of a common sustainability reporting framework. The GRI framework is increasingly being used by large organizations across the world. In 2007–08, about 70% of the 100 largest companies in 22 countries (N100) followed the GRI guidelines in their corporate responsibility reports (KPMG, 2008). Importantly, in the context of the present paper, corporate responsibility reports are more and more detailed and increasingly tend to be verified by some professional assurance provider. In this respect the KPMG International Survey of Corporate Responsibility Reporting (KPMG, 2008) indicates that 39% of the N100 companies included some formal assurance statement in their corporate responsibility report, against 27% in 2002. It is important to stress that even when they are not formally verified by a third party, sustainability reports predicated on GRI standards are nonetheless coherent with the logic of auditability (Power,

2003b). In this context, formal audits can be viewed as an ultimate step in making organizations auditable; ensuring that the organization is able to produce auditable numbers comes first.

Moreover, audits on the reporting of sustainability information are increasingly structured and standardized (Manetti and Becatti, 2009). The two main audit standards used by assurance providers in the area are ISAE 3000, issued by the International Federation of Accountants, and AA1000AS, issued by the non-profit organization AccountAbility. In 2008, ISAE 3000 is referred to in 54% of the 1100 companies' assurance reports while the same proportion referring to AA1000AS is 36% (KPMG, 2008). The growing use of ISAE 3000 and AA1000AS reflects the professionalization of auditing practice in the area and the significant quest for legitimization within corporate circles.

Of course, the reporting of sustainability information, even when it is verified, is not sufficient on its own to demonstrate an organization's actual commitment to environmental and social responsibility. It is typically considered that to limit the risk of greenwashing and decoupling from internal practices, the information reported downstream of the accountability process needs to be supported upstream by effective management systems and clear commitments (KPMG, 2008).

Accordingly, the second type of standard is focused on internal practices and management systems which aim to foster commitment to sustainability within organizations. The principles and practices proposed by these standards can address social, environmental and/or economic issues (Rasche, 2009). Standards focused on social issues generally address problems covered by International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions: child labor, health and safety, freedom of association, forced labor, disciplinary practices, etc. This is the case, for example, of the Social Accountability 8000 (SA 8000) launched in 1997 by the Council on Economic Priorities Accreditation Agency, and of the Code of Labour Practices launched in 1998 by the Ethical Trading Initiative. Standards focused on environmental issues are generally based on the implementation of an environmental management system. This is notably the case of the EcoManagement and Audit Scheme (EMAS) launched by the European Commission in 1995 and of ISO 14001 launched by the International Organization for Standardization in 1996. Certain standards address both environmental and social issues. ISO 26000 for example, which is targeted for launch by 2011, addresses both environmental and social issues (precautionary approach, polluter pays, environmental risk management, etc.), although it is mostly focused on corporate social responsibility (stakeholder identification and engagement, organizational governance, human rights, labor practices, etc.). Very few standards encompass social, environmental and economic issues. Nevertheless, organizations can adopt different standards in order to cover the environmental, social and economic aspects of sustainability. For example, organizations can adopt ISO 14001 (environmental management systems), ISO 9001 (quality management systems) and ISO 26000 (corporate social responsibility) to address the environmental, economic and social issues of sustainability.

Most of these standards have been developed by various stakeholders and representatives from different countries, thereby giving the standards an aura of globalization. Moreover, with the exception of ISO 26000, the above-mentioned standards can be certified by external auditors. Whatever the relevance of the principles proposed, the credibility of the standards depends, to a large extent, on the certification mechanisms supposed to guarantee their effective application by organizations.

The Institutionalization of Sustainability Certification Practices

Certification mechanisms are supposed to guarantee, through auditing procedures, the compliance of organizational practices or accounts with specific standards (Power, 1997; KPMG, 2008; Rasche, 2009). Thus, according to ISO 19011, auditing is a 'systematic, independent and documented process for obtaining audit evidence and evaluating it objectively to determine the extent to which audit criteria are fulfilled' (ISO, 2002, p.1). The compliance rationale with recognized standards and criteria is a key aspect of accountability, which is based on 'the readiness or preparedness of an organization to give an explanation and a justification to relevant stakeholders for its judgments, intentions, acts, and omissions when appropriately called upon to do so' (Crane and Matten, 2004, p. 55). Various measures, such as performance assessments, codes of conduct, management systems and organizational disclosures, can contribute to accountability (O'Dwyer, 2007). In spite of this diversity, external and independent verification through a well-established certification process is often considered essential for demonstrating

organizational compliance and responsiveness in the eyes of stakeholders (Power, 1997). External auditing can legitimize organizational disclosures and practices.

The institutionalization of certification practices in the area of sustainability is influenced by the exemplification of certification in other domains (Etzion and Ferraro, 2010), especially financial accountancy and ISO standards. Exemplification does not imply a complete and unadapted imitation. Instead the older and more widely used certification practices represent reference models that can inspire actors in elaborating norms, deontological principles and practices in the importing area.

Certification practices of sustainability reporting (also called assurance) are influenced, to a large extent, by the exemplification of financial auditing. Sustainability reports often appear as a logical and necessary extension of financial reports, considered by many as too narrowly focused on economic indicators and shareholders' interests (Yongvanich and Guthrie, 2006; Bebbington and Gray, 1993; Unerman *et al.*, 2007). Accordingly, justifications of sustainability reports tend to invoke a more complete and comprehensive account of business performance than traditional financial reports (Owen, 2007). A relevant trend in this respect is more and more financial reports encompassing environmental and social information (KPMG, 2008). Also, professional accountants are often involved as certifiers of sustainability reports (Deegan *et al.*, 2006; Manetti and Becatti, 2009; KPMG, 2008; Edwards *et al.*, 2002).

Not surprisingly, most research on sustainability reports has been undertaken by researchers in the area of financial accountability. In reviewing research on sustainability accounting, Thomson (2007) found around 700 articles grounded in the financial accountability area. His mapping of the field reveals that the mainstream of the literature is dominated by descriptive and non-critical analyses of environmental and social disclosures. Contrary to self-declared conformity, external audits of sustainability reports are seen as providing stakeholders with a high degree of assurance regarding the appropriate implementation of standards (Kolk and Perego, 2010). Nevertheless, a growing body of critical research relates to sustainability reporting (Thomson, 2007; Unerman *et al.*, 2007). Critical studies have argued that although sustainability reporting and assurance practices are, respectively, supposed to convey unbiased information and opinion to various stakeholders (Institute of Social and Ethical Accountability, 2003), they are mostly driven by corporate interests (Stiller and Daub, 2007; Spence, 2009; Brown and Fraser, 2006; Moneva *et al.*, 2006). The reliability of sustainability reports, whether certified or not, has been widely criticized in the literature (Brown and Fraser, 2006; Unerman *et al.*, 2007; Spence, 2009; Deegan *et al.*, 2006). Critics have also deplored civil society for not being intensively involved in the development and certification of sustainability reports (Unerman, 2007; Dey, 2007; Bebbington *et al.*, 2007).

For its part, the certification of sustainable management practices is shaped, to a large extent, by the exemplification of quality audits and ISO certification. ISO standards are by far the most widely used certifiable management standards (ISO, 2008; Boiral, 2003b). By 2008, nearly a million ISO 9001 certificates on quality management and 130,000 ISO 14001 certificates on environmental management had been issued across the world (ISO, 2008). Because organizations must renew their certification every 3 years, hundreds of thousands of ISO audits are carried out every year. Further, since the launch of ISO 9000 in 1987, ISO certification mechanisms have been increasingly structured, professionalized and codified (ISO, 2002, 2006). In particular, standards on auditing (ISO 19011) and professionalism of certification bodies (ISO 17041) have been developed. These standards apply to ISO 9001 and ISO 14001, which have become reference models for implementing certifiable management systems, including in the area of sustainability (Jiang and Bansal, 2003; KPMG, 2008; Boiral, 2007). In this context, the third-party certification process is viewed as providing opportunities for organizations to better manage and control internal sustainability practices – for instance through the identification of deficiencies by the external auditor (KPMG, 2008). Implementing a certifiable management standard for sustainability can also represent a comparative advantage and differentiate certified companies from non-certified competitors (Christmann and Taylor, 2002; Jiang and Bansal, 2003). Although ISO certification has been criticized for its opacity, lack of trustfulness and uncertain impacts (Walgenbach, 2001; Jiang and Bansal, 2003; Boiral, 2007; Yin and Schmeidler, 2009), the mainstream of the literature remains largely uncritical. The reliability and usefulness of certification tend to be taken for granted in the literature and also in the domain of practice, as demonstrated by the expansion of ISO certificates across the world.

All of this is consistent with Power's (1997) thesis regarding the 'explosion' of auditing – the diffusion of the logic of auditability across boundaries constituting a key trend in modern society. We argue that a key feature

of the explosion is exemplification, which we define as reliance on approaches and institutional arrangements from fields in which auditing practices are already well established. Auditing practices in the area of sustainability can therefore be viewed as reflecting a process of normative isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), based on the role of professionalization in the development of similar practices, procedures and structures.

Thus, in spite of their diversity, the different certification mechanisms used in the sustainability area share a number of key institutional features: examination by a supposedly independent auditor; an operational objective of detecting significant discrepancies between the object being audited and a set of audit criteria; the extent to which the auditors' investigation is influenced by the notion of risk; reliance on assurance standards which promote an imagery of rationality and rigor; focus on procedures and standard conformity rather than performance, etc. Moreover, all forms of certification auditing are primarily intended to produce trust and social legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders (Power, 2003a). In the light of these important similarities, it is warranted to consider the auditing function from a cross-disciplinary viewpoint, and pay attention to the processes by which auditing travels from one discipline to another, often through a logic of exemplification. Specifically, we argue that the debates and controversies surrounding financial and ISO auditing can help us understand, from a critical perspective, the implications of an increasing reliance on auditing in promoting accountability for sustainability. This relates to the point we developed in the introduction about phronesis. Although some criticisms of sustainability certification are found here and there in the literature, the emerging certification discourses and practices are so centrally involved in the spread of sustainability development that they should be the object of a more exhaustive and comprehensive social critique – in the hope of contributing to social dialogue about what kind of environment and business we want as a society.

Accountability and Certification: Lessons From Financial and ISO Standards

Promoting trust and accountability represents one of the main *raison d'être* of financial and ISO certification, which have influenced the constitution of auditing practices in various areas, including that of accountability for sustainability (Deegan *et al.*, 2006). However, the widespread use of financial and ISO auditing in their original domains is paradoxically characterized by indications of significant discrepancies between their imagery of rigor and impartiality and what they can concretely provide to organizations and stakeholders. This section sheds light on some misconceptions which characterize auditing practices in general, and are likely to affect their implementation in other areas.

Financial Auditing: a Trust-providing Mechanism?

Financial auditing is a key component of modernist conceptions of corporate accountability (Gendron *et al.*, 2001). Financial statements, which are prepared by the auditees' management in order to account for their stewardship responsibilities, are typically seen as being trustworthy only when they are sanctified via the work of an independent auditor. As argued by Power (1997), auditing legitimizes the information on which financial accountability rests – to the point that it is very difficult to imagine capital markets operating without audits being continuously performed.

Financial auditing is often seen as a trust-providing mechanism, allowing stakeholders to become comfortable with financial statements. Comfort notably ensues from the deployment of a series of rational techniques, such as statistical sampling (Power, 1992). Common standards of practice also participate in the legitimization of financial auditing. Standardization implies that professional processes can be reduced to mechanical and rational techniques that can be reliably and consistently used (Porter, 1995). Accordingly, financial auditing involves detailed standards prescribing the scope of audit work, ways to collect evidence and how the latter should be assessed. Perhaps the pinnacle of professional standardization among all established professions is found in the form of the typical financial audit report, which invariably uses the same wording to disseminate the results of an audit. The message is clear: financial auditing, as a rationally predicated technology, is replicable and portable to any type of organization – whether a small convenience store, an oil and gas multinational or a space agency.

The rhetoric of auditor independence is another mechanism conferring legitimacy upon financial auditing. Independence is often proclaimed as the cornerstone of auditing (e.g. Levitt, 2000) because audit work cannot provide any value if the auditors are closely associated with those who produce the statements they audit, namely, the auditees' corporate managers. Various mechanisms are used to reassure the public that the profession is in control of auditor independence, such as the promulgation of codes of ethics, practice inspections to test compliance and civil lawsuits against auditors alleged to have breached the profession's standards for independence.

While on the surface financial auditing is a sensible set of practices, it is not beyond reproach. Over the years, a range of criticisms have been consistently expressed in the media, especially when financial scandals are revealed – to the point that financial auditing is alleged to be confronted by an 'expectation gap' (Humphrey *et al.*, 1992) between what the public expects from auditors and what the latter actually provide to stakeholders and users of financial statements. Also, recent research has begun to provide data questioning the aura of rationality and neutrality surrounding financial auditing, obtained via inquiries behind the scenes of public accounting (Power, 2003a). We now know that financial auditing promotes a specific view of accountability, which favors the production of quantifiable and verifiable measures across contexts – to the detriment of more idiosyncratic forms of accounts (Gendron *et al.*, 2007). Research also shows that the model of accountability conveyed by financial auditing engenders distrust in society (Power, 1994): one should consistently doubt the honesty of the parties with whom one interacts, thereby necessitating reliance on auditing to restore trust.

Further, the sporadic occurrence of audit failures indicates discrepancies between the imagery of rationality and rigor associated with financial auditing, on the one hand, and the actual audit processes in the field. However, although audit failures bring to light discrepancies and decoupling, most stakeholders are usually quick to renew their confidence in the financial audit function (Guénin-Paracini and Gendron, 2010). In normal times, stakeholders are not really aware of or concerned about decoupling.

As illustrated by the Enron scandal, audit failures that catch the attention of the media often provoke a flow of criticism targeting auditor independence, which is quickly followed by the profession's standards of independence being changed and their enforcement mechanisms being apparently strengthened. Although they are often effective in appeasing public criticism of auditors (Humphrey *et al.*, 1992), these changes tend to remain superficial in scope, because they typically fail to address what several authors view as fundamental structural weaknesses characterizing modern financial auditing. These structural shortcomings include the auditor nomination process, which can be influenced (more or less covertly) by the auditees' top managers (e.g., Moore *et al.*, 2006), and the commercialistic culture which now prevails in accounting firms (e.g. Gendron and Spira, 2010). Power (1997) adds that reforms remain superficial because audit failures are constructed idiosyncratically – thus, by emphasizing the role of special circumstances or of unrepresentative individuals in carrying out deficient audits, the logical conclusion is that a diligent auditor would have been able to audit properly. In short, crisis episodes in which the legitimacy of financial auditing becomes overtly viewed as a social problem always remain ephemeral, in that stakeholders tend to renew their faith in auditing as soon as some sensible (but minor) reform is advocated.

A central question concerns the extent to which financial auditing can reinforce the accountability relationships between auditees and stakeholders. On the one hand, auditing encourages organizations to configure their internal processes to ensure that they are auditable (Power, 1996). Auditing also instills accountability and technical vocabulary into auditees' and stakeholders' interpretive schemes (Gendron *et al.*, 2007). Further, from a Foucaultian standpoint, auditing helps establish a disciplinary and self-disciplinary system which aims to govern, and often actually influences, actor subjectivity according to a hierarchical conception of accountability (Roberts, 1991), which promotes a low degree of trust between parties and makes top managers worry about how others see them. However, assuming that one of the fundamental goals of accountability is to make actual behavior visible, then the criticisms reviewed above cast doubt on the operational efficacy of financial auditing. The reoccurrence of audit failures indicates that auditing has difficulties in meeting stakeholders' expectations. Also, today's mechanisms for protecting auditor independence are logically inappropriate; under current institutional arrangements, it is psychologically difficult for auditors to maintain their objectivity: 'Many challenges [to independence] arise because auditors are hired, paid, and even fired by the organizations that they audit rather than by the people they ostensibly represent' (Bazerman *et al.*, 1997, p. 90).

ISO Auditing: a Certification of Good Practices?

Although ISO certification is focused on management systems, its basic rationale and social discrepancies are very similar to those observed in financial auditing. ISO certification aims to produce trust, legitimacy and accountability about the extent to which certain standards are appropriately established and followed by the organizations that adopt them. ISO 9001 and ISO 14001 are both driven by a quest for institutional legitimacy through the adoption of internationally recognized practices that aim to demonstrate the organization's accountability with respect to quality and environment. The certification logo signals to stakeholders the conformity of the organization with regard to agreed-upon requirements. Just as financial auditing, ISO certification assumes a rigorous audit performed by external auditors. ISO audits are not focused on performance improvement but on organizational conformity with a management system supposed to improve quality or environmental performance. With regard to auditor independence, ISO 19011 and ISO 17021 on audit practices reaffirm the importance of impartiality and professionalism (ISO, 2006, 2002).

The systematization of ISO audits and the launch of specific auditing standards are clearly intended to reinforce the credibility and legitimacy of ISO certification. Certification is depicted as a formal, objective and rational process sustained by rigorous standards and institutional mechanisms. From a functionalist perspective, ISO certification is implicitly considered as a sort of technology whose implementation follows a rigorous and effective approach to making certified organizations more accountable (Boiral and Roy, 2007). Just like financial auditing, ISO certification assumes that standardization applies unproblematically across organizations and cultures, and that the auditor's subjective discretion can be circumscribed in the name of generalizability and objectivity (Porter, 1995).

However, ISO certification is predicated on assumptions and discourses often disconnected from actual audit and organizational practices. The gap between assumptions and practices is reflected in three major discrepancies: tendencies to inflate the reliability of certification; ceremonial aspects surrounding the audit process; and the problem of auditor independence. Although audit failure crises have not been as prominent in the context of ISO audits as they have been in the context of financial audits, there is a significant gap between the imagery of rationality and infallibility surrounding ISO audits and what these audits can actually deliver.

First, the decoupling between the image of rigor of ISO certification and the backstage of internal practices is reinforced by the degree of commercialism underlying the standard's implementation. For many organizations, ISO certification is often more of a commercial requirement than a tool to strengthen accountability and improve managerial practices (Walgenbach, 2001; Boiral, 2003a). Many organizations implement the standard and subject their systems to audit scrutiny, not necessarily to improve accountability and internal practices but primarily to meet customers' demands. ISO certification can therefore be seen as a sort of trademark. The decoupling between the external image of rationality, rigor and responsiveness of ISO certification and the actual internalization of the standard can be misleading for customers and other stakeholders (ISO, 2005; Boiral and Roy, 2007).

Second, the credibility and seriousness of ISO certification is undermined by some of its ceremonial aspects. Being relatively short, certification audits do not imply an in-depth verification of the standard's implementation (Walgenbach, 2001; Boiral, 2003a). ISO auditing is, to a large extent, based on the examination of documents, which are presumed to reflect organizational practices. Overreliance on the examination of documents represents one of the main pitfalls of ISO certification (Jiang and Bansal, 2003). In particular, many organizations prepare for certification in a superficial way, their efforts being limited to the updating of documentation and the implementation of processes that minimally meet the audit requirements (Walgenbach, 2001; Boiral, 2003a, 2007).

Third, the issue of auditor independence is problematic as ISO auditors are directly contracted and remunerated by the organizations they audit. Similar to financial auditing firms (Gendron *et al.*, 2006), ISO auditors tend to behave as consultants engaged in a customer-supplier type of relationship. The potential conflicts of interest resulting from these multiple roles have been stressed by the International Organization for Standardization, and by some auditors concerned about the credibility of ISO certification (Business Improvement Network, 2002; Paterson, 2002).

In short, these weaknesses imply a commodification of ISO auditing, which can be understood, in a number of cases, to be a relatively superficial assessment. Commodification clashes with the increasing number of certified organizations, therefore increasing the discrepancy between the institutional pressures for ISO standards and the uncertain reliability of these standards in promoting trust and accountability.

Demonstrating Accountability for Sustainability: an Integrative Model

Our analysis of financial and ISO auditing indicates that their legitimacy is predicated, to a significant extent, on common and questionable assumptions regarding the effectiveness and legitimacy of the audit function: appearance of rigor, objectivity and trustworthiness underlying the certification process, independence and professionalism, etc. Since sustainability auditing is intended to meet the same types of institutional pressures and is often carried out by the same auditing firms, it is reasonable to assume that auditing practices in the sustainability domain are not immune from these questionable assumptions. In other words, sustainability auditing is well positioned to become a site for the reproduction of rational myths that surround the spread of auditing practices in society. Rational myths reflect the ceremonial and superficial adhesion to apparently rational structures, beliefs and practices primarily intended to meet external pressures and reinforce organizational legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Accordingly, the concept of rational myth can be defined as 'the rupture between the reassuring image of rationality, formalism, and intellectual rigor that an organization attempts to project by adopting somewhat superficial structures and systems perceived as legitimate on the one hand, and the organization's real practices on the other hand' (Boiral, 2007, p. 128).

That being said, the institutionalization of sustainability auditing and the extent to which it is exposed to the same misconceptions as observed in financial and ISO auditing remain to be empirically examined. As a first exploratory step, we develop a theoretical framework of the institutionalization processes, predicated on a logic of analogical exemplification, surrounding the development and legitimization of certifiable standards on accountability for sustainability. In particular, the framework takes into account the formation of rational myths and several underlying mechanisms that can reinforce these myths. Not only is the framework relevant for the understanding of the development of auditing practices in the sustainability area, but it can also be used to study the spread of certification (i.e. the audit explosion) in a variety of domains.

Institutionalization Process and Rational Myths of Accountability for Sustainability

Figure 1 illustrates the main institutional forces driving the institutionalization and the development of rational myths of accountability for sustainability. The numbers in parentheses refer to relationships between concepts which we discuss specifically in the text. Figure 1 only illustrates what we view as the most important relationships.

Social pressures for accountability and sustainability have increased significantly since interest in this matter began in the 1980s (1). These pressures are driven not only by those stakeholders traditionally concerned with corporate social and environmental responsibilities – citizens, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government agencies, municipalities, customers and the media – but are also increasingly sustained by financial markets and shareholders, as illustrated by the rapid growth of ethical and environmental investment (KPMG, 2008; Aras and Crowther, 2009). The increasing role of financial markets is reflected in the growing importance of market indices such as the Dow Jones Sustainability Indexes, which are based on a selected group of companies considered as leaders in the area of social and environmental responsibility (Baskin, 2006).

As demonstrated by neo-institutional approaches, the quest for recognition, credibility and social legitimacy often represents one of the main motivations for the adoption of new practices by an organization (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Kolk and Perego, 2010). The increasing external pressures enumerated above clearly affect the social legitimacy of organizations and call for the adoption of new certifiable standards that are seen as likely to build trust and accountability (2). These standards concern responsibility reporting processes (GRI, ISAE 3000, AA1000AS) as well as management systems (ISO 14001, SA 8000). Alternatively, once adopted and implemented, the standardization and certification rationale exerts influence in constructing the notion of accountability for sustainability in the eyes of stakeholders (2).

Standardization also results from the exemplification of financial and ISO audits (3). The use of standardization and certification rationales is largely modeled on the examples of financial (in the case of reporting initiatives) and ISO (in the case of management systems) audits which are often considered as well-established tools for generating trust and satisfaction among stakeholders (Deegan *et al.*, 2006; Power, 1997).

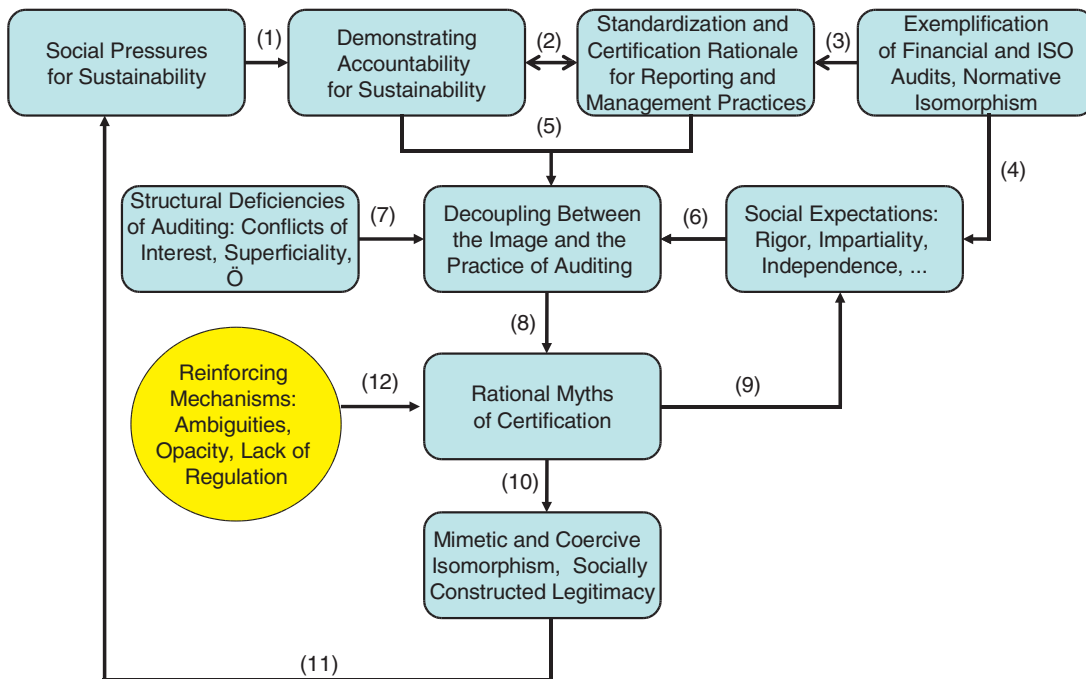


Figure 1. Rational myths underlying sustainability certification

Exemplification from financial and ISO audits is partly driven by a normative isomorphism that implies the transposition of professional practices, rules and procedures in the area of certification. This transposition also encompasses general attitudes towards audit technologies, including social expectations that stakeholders commonly have regarding the nature and effectiveness of audit work (4). As a result, the socially constructed image of rigor and impartiality surrounding financial and ISO audits is likely to be projected, especially when sustainability audits are performed by accounting firms and ISO certification consultants – which is most often the case (KPMG, 2008).

The current institutional arrangements surrounding certification make sustainability auditing likely to be characterized by contradictions and decoupling between a front-stage imagery of rationality (5, 6) and the concrete back-stage nature of audit processes and outcomes (7). Indeed, to respond to social pressures for certification (5), organizations may tend to cursorily adopt sustainability standards. Further, our analysis of structural deficiencies characterizing financial and ISO auditing suggests that auditing practices and institutional arrangements as analogically transposed in the sustainability area may result in a number of auditors carrying out their work in a superficial way or without being sufficiently independent from auditees. Organizations may therefore be inclined to conform only in appearance to the emerging standards for sustainability without significantly changing their internal practices, except in the very brief moments when external auditors carry out their ritualized and ceremonial procedures (5, 6, 7).

Decoupling plays a key role in the production and reproduction of rational myths surrounding certification (8). Rational myths are likely to arise because the appearance of legitimacy, rigor and rationality of certification auditing reflects above all social expectations, which, however, tend to be disconnected from actual audit practices. Conversely, the imagery of impartiality and rigor projected by organizations through formal discourses of certification (via the disclosure of certification reports and logos, announcements in the press, etc.) is likely to strengthen stakeholders' expectations of rationality (9). In this context, rational myths surrounding certification can be thought of as a way for organizations to appear to address institutional pressures without actually calling their daily activities into question, except during the short audit period.

As a result of all this, organizations may tend to find it quite easy to become certified as compliant with sustainability standards, thereby fueling a proliferation of certification among other organizations that are increasingly inclined to adopt the same recognized standards in order to demonstrate their own social legitimacy. The spread of certifiable sustainability standards is especially driven by the imitation of certified organizations (mimetic isomorphism) and the external pressures from stakeholders to adopt specific standards (coercive isomorphism). Organizations are therefore expected to become more isomorphic (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) – that is to say more identical in their quest for accountability (10). By its nature, the movement toward isomorphism will increase social pressures for sustainability through the adoption of similar standards (11).

Further, reinforcing mechanisms strengthen the influence of rational myths in the sustainability area (12): ambiguities surrounding the concept of sustainability; opacity of impact measurement; and lack of regulatory and professional guidance. First, rational myths are likely to arise given that accountability for sustainability remains an ambiguous, emerging and unstructured field that continuously raises social expectations which, in turn, reinforce the need to rely on recognized and apparently trustworthy certification models. As stressed by Springett (2003, p. 71): ‘The discourse of sustainable development reflects the particular interests and stakes in the ground of groups, including corporates, who contest the definition of the concept’. Given the ambiguities underlying the interpretations of sustainability (Aras and Crowther, 2009; Springett, 2003; Gray, 2010), standards on this matter tend to be focused on a procedural rationale which gives organizations considerable room to maneuver in defining the precise nature of their commitments.

Second, environmental and social performance remains opaque, heterogeneous and controversial and cannot be measured by unequivocal criteria (Delmas and Blass, 2010; Aras and Crowther, 2009). Certification based on recognized standards (e.g. ISAE 3000 and ISO 14001) can therefore be viewed as a mechanism to transform the opacity inherent in the notion of accountability for sustainability into a sort of sign or trademark easily recognizable in the eyes of external stakeholders. No matter how serious audits and auditors are, certifying corporate accountability for sustainability involves an ill-defined and unstable object, making it doubtful that a meaningful commitment can be achieved.

Third, the myth of auditor independence and professionalism is expected to persist and even to increase with the wider use of audits for sustainability. Contrary to financial audits, these new types of audits are often not regulated by laws and codes of ethics enforced by monitoring programs carried out by professional associations or arm’s-length entities (e.g. the US Public Company Accounting Oversight Board and the Audit Inspection Unit in the UK).¹ Nor are they necessarily supported by structured training systems designed, among other things, to sensitize would-be and current auditors to issues of ethics and independence. Although more and more universities and consulting firms offer training on sustainability, the sector remains largely unregulated and unstructured (Deegan *et al.*, 2006). As a result of institutional weaknesses regarding ethics regulation and training requirements, it is expected that sustainability auditors will be much influenced by commercial pressures while not being significantly affected by the threat of professional sanctions in case of misconduct or conflict of interest.

Resolving the Structural Deficiencies of Auditing?

The possibility of strengthening the operational effectiveness of auditing as a result of lessons learned from the spread of audit technologies in the financial and ISO domains, and the ability of researchers to modify the interpretive schemes of a vast number of stakeholders through persuasive deconstructions of the mythical edifice of rationality upon which the external legitimacy of the certification rationale is predicated, seem, at the outset, quite limited. The web of mythical rationality surrounding auditing practices is deeply rooted in values, practices and institutions whose legitimacy tends to be taken for granted, and is disseminated by a large array of interested parties: auditees, certification bodies, promoters of best practices, governments, standard-setting organizations, etc. Nevertheless, recognition of structural weaknesses which, from a pragmatic perspective, characterize financial and ISO auditing may help anticipate and reduce some of their pervasive effects in the sustainability area. Because accountability for sustainability is an emergent field and is expected to become ever more standardized, measures

¹It needs to be recognized, though, that accounting firms are subject to their profession’s rules when carrying out any type of audit engagement, including in the sustainability area.

should be undertaken rapidly to prevent, as far as possible, a naïve and misleading use of certification auditing, which is too often perceived as a sort of guarantee of conformity and even as a substitute for regulation. Most of these measures involve a commitment from governments, standard-setting organizations and auditors to develop more stringent sustainability standards and certification mechanisms.

Although a number of parties may benefit from the adoption of superficial mechanisms and processes, it is our position that society is likely to be better off if accountability for sustainability is predicated on a substantive set of standards and an effective surveillance apparatus. The phronetic question is: do we want accountability relationships predicated on façade or on substance? Our suggestions relate to two main sources of rational myth formation (see Figure 1):

- Pressures that lead many organizations to project a superficial and decoupled image of accountability and rationality through certification (links 1, 2, 5, 9, 11);
- Lack of reliability and rigor of auditing practices *per se* (links 3, 4, 6, 7, 11).

The demonstration of accountability for sustainability implies, apart from reliance on the auditing rationale, a substantive commitment from participating organizations to meet the underlying social expectations (1, 2), and to be transparent in the accounts they provide. However, organizational commitment in practice is often superficial and intended primarily to protect and strengthen the corporate image (5, 6, 9). Measures to prevent accountability from being reduced to a superficial and ceremonial process could focus on exerting greater pressures to encourage substantive commitments to sustainability. Assuming that accountability for sustainability is motivated by external pressures and the search for legitimacy (Kolk and Perego, 2010; Rasche, 2009; Aras and Crowther, 2009), governments and NGOs can reinforce the visibility of companies' efforts to meet accountability expectations (2) by diffusing relevant and reliable information about these companies' social and environmental behavior. Such diffusion could be implemented in collaboration with agencies and organizations that have enough credibility and resources to challenge the dominant opacity with regard to sustainability issues (12).

The production of transparent information on corporate accountability (2) can also be based on initiatives from civil society. For example, NGOs can publicly denounce corporate misconduct or failure to respect social and environmental norms in order to highlight negative performance and question practices conducive to opacity (12). This rationale of denunciation and social control over corporations is at the center of the activities of CorpWatch, an association dedicated to publicly exposing corporate violations of human rights and environmental crimes. In particular, the Greenwash Awards given out by CorpWatch denounce corporations whose sustainability image is based more on public relations efforts than on substantive measures.

Although publicizing information about unethical corporate behavior can be effective leverage for holding some organizations more accountable, this approach cannot realistically be applied to a large number of targeted organizations. It is also unrealistic to believe that exemplar disclosures from a few organizations substantively committed to accountability will be universally and enthusiastically adopted throughout society. We also fundamentally believe that the logic of free markets and *laissez-faire* is unable to address sustainability and accountability in a proper way – as exemplified by the recent oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. These hurdles suggest the need for an accountability approach overseen by regulation. One of the main structural deficiencies of accountability for sustainability is the trend toward deregulation, which has given organizations too much room to maneuver in demonstrating their responsiveness to concerns of public interest (Unerman *et al.*, 2007; Llana *et al.*, 2007) (12). In particular, over the last few years, most debates on sustainability have focused on the promotion of voluntary measures supposed to promote proactive commitment from organizations: codes of ethics, voluntary agreements, internal policies, certification mechanisms, etc. (Christmann and Taylor, 2002). Accountability for sustainability has become a virtuous principle largely left to the discretion of managers who tend to have a quite elastic and discretionary interpretation of what sustainable development really means and implies for organizations (Gray, 2010; Owen *et al.*, 2000; Springett, 2003) (12). It follows that governments and stakeholders in general should not assume that voluntary certification approaches are substitutes for regulation. The increasing demand for sustainability certification services in countries where regulation or constraining institutions are weak (Kolk and Perego, 2010) seems to confirm that this assumption tends to be widely shared. In accordance with Llana *et al.* (2007), we uphold that sustainability constitutes a public good whose importance calls imperatively for government regulation and intervention. Not only should organizations be held accountable in conforming to

regulations, but they should also be required to explain the extent to which they meet the objectives of regulation. Information about organizations' conformity to regulation should be made publicly available in order to reduce the tendency of opacity (12) and the extent of decoupling between the image of sustainability and real accountability endeavors (5, 6, 7). As stressed by Buhr (2007), voluntary and mandatory approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive and should be considered from a large spectrum of actions and commitments towards sustainability. Further, the possibility of regulatory capture by corporate interests cannot be denied (Moore *et al.*, 2006); civil society, including human rights and environmental NGOs, should be enrolled as key actors in constituting, enforcing and revising regulation.

Strengthening the commitment of organizations to accountability for sustainability implies a reinforcement of the auditing function. As argued by Power (1997), it is difficult to imagine accountability mechanisms whose functioning is not dependent on some form of verification. However, as seen above, structural deficiencies characterize current systems of external auditing (7), whose analogical importation into the sustainability area (4) is assumed as unproblematic. Reforms are needed in order to strengthen the effectiveness of the audit function (7) and make it more likely that its effects meet the expectations of stakeholders (6).

In particular, a broad intersubjective agreement prevails in the academic and professional literature regarding the key role played by the notion of auditor independence in making the audit function relevant to society. However, directly importing into the sustainability area the set of structural arrangements currently used to manage auditor independence in financial and ISO auditing (3, 4) is unwarranted. One key step is thus to question the logic of a system that requires auditors to be appointed and paid by the organizations they audit. More sensible arrangements can be established and should be carefully considered by policy-makers. For instance, the International Organization for Standardization can be empowered to select auditors for organizations that aim to become standard compliant. Certified organizations would then pay a fee to the ISO to cover their audit expenses. In order to prevent excessively familiar relations from developing between auditors and auditees (7), the duration of audit appointments should be limited to a few years; the external rotation of audit firms would be compulsory at the end of the appointment. Logically speaking, threats to auditor independence would be considerably reduced if such a selection process were established. Pressure to please auditees to avoid risking the termination of an audit appointment would no longer be pertinent.

The compulsory integration of outside stakeholders in the audit process can also strengthen auditors' independence and diligence (7) (Manetti and Becatti, 2009). Their integration can be made by involving within audit teams a number of stakeholders having training and experience in the sustainability area, or through policies requiring outside stakeholders to be consulted during the certification process. For example, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification process, which promotes sustainable forest management practices, is normally conducted by an audit team comprising auditors and specialists from various disciplines. The team is required to consult some major stakeholders during the certification process. The same type of consultation process and stakeholder involvement can be applied to certifiable standards such as ISO 14001 and the GRI. The participation of outside stakeholders can especially reduce the likelihood of 'managerial capture' (Owen *et al.*, 2000), that is to say the auditing process being under the control of auditees' managers. Moreover, their participation can translate into alternative sources being mobilized alongside traditional sources in producing accounts (Dey, 2007), such as silent accounts (unofficial information from corporate sources) and shadow accounts (counter or alternative information from sources produced independently from the organization). Although silent and shadow accounts have been developed to improve the transparency and reliability of sustainability reports, alternative and unofficial sources of information can also be used by external auditors to verify and question organizational practices from different viewpoints, including those of internal and external stakeholders.

A classic objection is that this type of consultation process and the integration of alternative sources of information will certainly increase audit costs, which is especially problematic for small and medium enterprises (SMEs; Kolk and Perego, 2010). Nevertheless, as stressed by Owen (2007), fee levels for sustainability assurance are generally just a fraction of those pertaining to financial audits. Further, fee considerations, although very legitimate, should not ignore or downplay the imponderable but considerable costs involved in allowing superficial auditing to perpetuate in society: corporate practices which continue to favor global warming; the production of unsecure chemicals; the marginalization of the poor (e.g. child labor), etc. Auditing is far from being only a technical matter; it engenders consequences the importance of which is paramount to the future of society.

In short, fee considerations should not blind us to the significance of encouraging the development of more substantive and less symbolic auditing practices (7).

To many observers (e.g. Wyatt, 2004; Zeff, 2003a, b), one of the main factors contributing to the occurrence of financial audit failures is the spread of commercialism and free-market logic in the audit community, which would have gradually distanced auditors and their firms from the core principles of their logic of professionalism, such as independence and the imperative of serving the public interest (7). The same remark applies, for similar reasons, to ISO certification (Walgenbach, 2001; Boiral, 2003a, b, 2007). As persuasively argued by Freidson (2001), the primacy of competition as celebrated by the logic of the free market is inadequate in professional domains; it carries the risk of profitability prevailing over the quality of professional work. If the external audit function wants to honor its normative and rationalistic promises (3, 4), commercial forces need to be reined in within auditing communities. In this respect, codes of ethics can be seen as devices that can exert disciplinary and self-disciplinary influence on individuals, especially when serious enforcement mechanisms are established (Foucault, 1975). Making auditors subject to the gaze of a rigorous enforcement system focused on compliance with ethical norms of diligence and independence may strengthen auditor professionalism (Lere and Gaumnitz, 2007).

Conclusion

Auditing and certification practices play a key role in most accountability processes which permeate modern society, being viewed by many as an obligatory point of passage in producing legitimacy in the eyes of a large array of stakeholders. The domain of accountability for sustainability is no exception, as audit technologies are increasingly mobilized to (allegedly) provide credibility to corporate responsibility disclosures and systems of sustainability management. This paper analyzed the extent to which certification auditing practices can reasonably contribute to the realization of organizational accountability in the area of sustainable development. Our analysis is based on analogical reasoning, in that we draw on critical literature which identifies structural weaknesses characterizing financial and ISO auditing, to develop reasonable speculations about the probable spread of auditing in the area of accountability for sustainability, and to formulate, from a phronesis viewpoint, some solutions which may help strengthen verification practices and concretize accountability – rather than promoting rationalized imageries virtually devoid of substance.

Our analysis indicates that financial and ISO audits are characterized by significant structural deficiencies, thereby casting doubt on the exemplification assumption used to justify their import in the sustainability area. Although we employ a vast array of empirical research to sustain structural deficiencies permeating the financial and ISO audit domains, it needs to be recognized that we do not mobilize empirical data pointing to specific structural deficiencies in the sustainability audit area. This can be done through empirical and qualitative studies with auditors and organizations that have implemented certifiable standards for sustainable development. Nevertheless, researchers need to be careful when negotiating access to the field, since critical approaches are not necessarily welcome by practitioners in an era where the appearances of rationality and order are central to modern images of expertise (Gendron, 2000). Indeed one of the points that we develop in the paper is auditing legitimacy being supported by a network of mythical claims which celebrate the rigorousness and rational nature of audit processes.

It is precisely because sustainability is a multifaceted and elusive concept that certification appears as a sort of obligatory passage point for the creation of the appearance of clarity, trust and transparency *vis-à-vis* stakeholders – who are not necessarily in a position to evaluate corporate conduct. Just as the occurrence of financial scandals and audit failures tends to reinforce the importance of financial auditing (Power, 1997), the quest for sustainability seems to perpetuate the need for more audits in spite of the dubious and mythical nature of the assumptions underlying the auditing function. Nonetheless, stakeholders do not have to accept passively the ascendancy of dominant institutions and practices. Reform is possible (although challenging to achieve) given that all institutions and practices are socially constituted. Our paper fundamentally aims to contribute to the social dialogue regarding the nature of the verification mechanisms we want, as society, to implement in the area of sustainable accountability.

Moreover, we propose an integrative and dynamic model of the institutionalization process and myth formation surrounding sustainability auditing. Our model indicates that the legitimacy of certification auditing is anchored in

rational myths that reveal significant discrepancies and decoupling between, on the one hand, the imagery of rationality and rigor surrounding auditing and, on the other hand, the actual audit processes as taking place in the field. The model illustrates how these myths are institutionalized through the symbolic role of certification audits whose main function is to respond to external pressures for accountability, at least in appearance.

Another contribution is to propose a critical approach to question the unproblematic transportation of institutionalized expertise and practices from one domain to another. With the exception of a few studies (Spence, 2009; Deegan *et al.*, 2006; Unerman *et al.*, 2007), the literature on sustainability development tends to take for granted the reliability of certification audits, which are too often considered as a sort of trademark of corporate good conduct and accountability. This paper suggests that we should be skeptical of the ability of certification auditing to ensure the accountability of organizations with respect to sustainability, although auditing clearly plays a key symbolic role in producing order by promoting the appearance of rationality and legitimacy.

Our paper also illustrates the pertinence of studying the auditing function from a cross-disciplinary viewpoint, and of paying attention to the processes by which auditing travels from one discipline to another. Although financial and ISO auditing are clearly anchored in specific domains, disciplines and literature, they are shaped by very similar underlying myths, procedures and institutional mechanisms of legitimization. We examine these underlying mechanisms by emphasizing the social construction of the auditing function, whose legitimacy is sustained – except in brief moments following crises (Guénin-Paracini and Gendron, 2010) – through a network of credible myths regarding processes and outputs. From a comparative analysis of different types of audits, we developed a broader and integrative framework that can be used to study and criticize various types of certification arrangements and discourses, notably in the area of accountability for sustainability.

The last important contribution of the paper is to propose suggestions and reforms to address structural deficiencies inherent in auditing and accountability processes. Some suggestions are focused on generating a heightened level of institutional pressure to encourage a more substantive and transparent commitment for accountability and sustainability. Others are more specifically targeted to possible reforms concerning the practice of audits, especially with regard to the notion of auditor independence. These suggestions for resolving structural deficiencies are all the more important because the legitimacy of the audit function has increased in recent decades, to the point that an audit explosion is considered to be in the progress across society (Power, 1997). Reproducing blindly the same structural deficiencies across different domains is unlikely to be a prudent strategy for a society that claims to care deeply about corporate sustainability and accountability.

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