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Conceptualizing inclusiveness of smallholder value chain integration

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The integration of male and female smallholders in high-end value chains (e.g. those for tree crops like cocoa, oil palm, avocado, and mango), has been promoted throughout the global South as a strategy for poverty alleviation, economic growth, employment generation, gender equality, and improved wellbeing. More critical literature, however, questions the inclusiveness of farmers' value chain engagement. Despite rapid mainstreaming of inclusiveness in policy discourse, remarkably little literature sheds light on the operationalization of the concept. This paper addresses this gap. Based on a comprehensive review of three bodies of literature with the prefix 'inclusive' (inclusive business, inclusive value chain, and inclusive development) it unravels economic, social, relational and environmental dimensions as a basis for analysing and enhancing the inclusiveness of smallholders' value chain engagement.

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Introduction

Responding to rapid changes in the agri-food sector over the past two decades, smallholders' participation in – often global – value chains (VCs)[4] emerged as a new strategy towards poverty alleviation[5] [1,2]. Governments consider it a way to enhance farmers' access to markets, inputs and credits and to improve productivity and efficiency – assuming positive effects on livelihoods, food security, climate resilience, and gender equality [3–7]. Coupled with a changing aid structure ('trade-not-aid') and a changing role for public and private actors (for profit and not-for-profit), such strategies assign a key role to partnerships [8] that increasingly move 'beyond the chain' [9]. These cross-sector partnerships [10] have been labelled as VC collaboration [9], public–private(-producer) partnerships (3Ps/4Ps) [4] or insetting [7]. Often driven by companies'[6] need to secure future supply, they aim to support the organization and livelihood security of farmers and improve the sustainability of production, generally through voluntary certification and verification standards [2,7,11]. The focus on smallholders[7] – who constitute the majority of agricultural commodity producers, yet are the group that benefits least from VCs [12•] – aligns with the aim of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [13] to 'leave no one behind' and Sustainable Development Goals 1 (No poverty), 2 (Zero hunger), 5 (Gender equality), 8 (Decent work and economic growth), 10 (Reduce inequality), 12 (Responsible consumption and production), 15 (Life on land), and 17 (Partnerships for the goals). Companies widely embrace Agenda 2030 that assigns a key role to them in achieving the goals, reflecting their increasing responsivity to societal concerns along their own economic interests and 'Creating Shared Values' [14].

Assumptions regarding positive development effects of market integration and company–producer partnerships are however contested. First, they may aggravate existing (gender) inequalities and exclude people who based on

[4] Value chains are defined as 'the full range of activities that firms and workers perform to bring a product from its conception to end use and beyond' [1] (p.7). This encompasses a broad range of VC types that differ according to product, geographic scope (global, regional, national, local), and governance mode (markets, modular, relational, captive, and hierarchy) – thus adding nuance to Gereffi's initial distinction between demand-driven and supply-driven value chains [1]. This paper focuses primarily on global agricultural value chains.

[5] Poverty is understood here as deprivation in multiple dimensions of wellbeing, both income and non-income (e.g. housing, schooling, nutrition, access to clean water and sanitation) [78], as well as the lack of 'freedom of choice and action and the power to control one's life' [79] (p.8). Poverty alleviation comprises both mitigation or avoidance (e.g. when a rural household uses forest resources as a safety net) and elimination (eradication of poverty) [80].

[6] In this paper, 'companies' refer to for-profit private sector actors operating in global value chains.

[7] We use 'smallholders' to denote small-scale farmers, acknowledging the heterogeneity among them [81].

gender, ethnicity or age have less access to land and capital [15,16•,17••]. Second, VC inclusion in itself is often insufficient a condition for poverty reduction [9,18••,19]. Third, 'adverse inclusion' occurs where structural market and tenure conditions and farmers' limited agency and access to assets lead to participation without material gains and capital accumulation [20–22]. Fourth, VC inclusion may lead to disempowerment, as power imbalances and weak state institutions may induce land grabbing, unequal sharing of benefits and risks, and companies unilaterally setting the terms of inclusion [22]. Fifth, VC inclusion is assumed to be a desired state, ignoring that farmers may deliberately disengage from commodity production [18••]. Finally, gender inequalities inscribed in formal institutions (e.g. laws, regulations, standards) and informal institutions (e.g. norms and attitudes) often limit women's ability to participate in VCs and reap the benefits thereof [23–26]. Such critique calls for a more nuanced conceptualization of VC integration.

Moving beyond simple notions of 'market access', recent policy-oriented publications increasingly add the prefix 'inclusive' to VC participation and development [2,27,28], often explicitly comprising 'gender-sensitive' [29,30] or 'gender-equitable' [25] VCs. However, mainstreaming the inclusiveness concept in policy circles compromises conceptual clarity and risks the concept to be 'black-boxed' [31]. This paper aims to contribute to conceptual clarity by reviewing three bodies of literature published since 2016 that explicitly connect 'inclusive' to their main concept. It thereby moves beyond inclusive business literature (the focus of this special issue), acknowledging that the 'inclusiveness paradigm' has also advanced strongly in inclusive VC and inclusive development debates. A comprehensive review of these three strands provides input to the comparative overview of inclusiveness dimensions in smallholder and VC contexts in the 'Synthesis' section.

Inclusive business

Rooted in Prahalad's theory about the commercial and developmental potential of 'serving the poor' at the Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP) [32–34], inclusive business is generally defined as a business model that includes the poor as consumers, producers, workers and entrepreneurs and combines profit[8] with societal goals in ways that are adapted to local needs [35,36••,37–39]. Combining the capturing of economic value and creating social and/or environmental values is often labelled as the double or triple bottom-line approach [35,39,40].

The inclusive business concept emphasizes the commercial, developmental and poverty-alleviating potential of small-scale farmers' inclusion in global VCs as entrepreneurs or suppliers [41–43]. In the global South, it has been mainly applied to company–smallholder partnerships and contract farming, acknowledging that additional partnerships with government agencies and NGOs are needed to oversee the contracts, to create the inclusive business conditions that individual companies are unable to create on their own, and to support farmers with additional financial and extension services [42–44].

Critics consider the profit, growth and market orientation of inclusive businesses as being incompatible with greater equity, sustainable development, and tackling the root causes of poverty. They point to the risks of adverse inclusion and creating new dependencies [36••,45•,46•]. Profit orientation and competition furthermore bear the risk of companies focusing on farmers who are easy to reach at minimal costs ('the low-hanging fruit') [15] and reducing their investments 'beyond the chain' once the prospects for profits decline.

However, several inclusiveness dimensions emerge from inclusive business literature that are relevant for our smallholder VC context. First is the embeddedness of inclusive business in local 'issue-driven' [39] networks that complement the direct economic relationship between a buyer and producer – mainly in order to mobilize resources and commitment to achieving social and sustainability goals [39,40]. Within such networks a balance ('the right partner mix') is needed between producers, buyers, public actors, and NGOs [43] (p.14), in order to ensure that economic viability or wellbeing concerns such as poverty and food security are not compromised.

Second, inclusive business models should align with local conditions and farmers' diverse livelihood needs and strategies. Particularly relevant here is the need to accommodate (predominantly female) survival entrepreneurs who, unlike growth-oriented entrepreneurs, may not aspire to expand their business [37,47]. Equally important is the inclusion of diverse market outlets so that farmers can benefit from extra services and higher prices elsewhere [43].

The third dimension refers to frugal innovations. These are defined as affordable, simple and resource-efficient products and services with minimal impact on the environment[9] and high use value for the BoP [36••]. Examples include washing powder sachets, mobile banking, and bamboo bicycles [35,36••,48]. More recent work has shifted towards the BoP as co-producers of innovations,

[8] This profit orientation distinguishes inclusive business from social enterprises [35]. This section focuses primarily on inclusive business literature, which has been applied more to smallholders.

[9] Aside from resource efficiency of frugal innovations, inclusive business literature tends to downplay the environmental dimension of sustainable development [37], commonly referring only in general terms to 'the triple bottom-line' or the need to address 'environmental issues'.

pointing to 'novel and innovative combinations of existing knowledge and technologies in order to solve local problems' [48] (p. S137).

Much like inclusive business thinking itself, the frugal innovations concept has been critiqued for its embedding in a growth- and profit-oriented economy. Critics point to the way technology and innovation are de-politicized and how technologies create new dependencies, vulnerabilities, and inequities [36•• ,45•]. The alternative, postcolonial 'grassroots innovations' perspective, for example, proposes socially, culturally appropriate and sustainable solutions based on social justice, cooperation, community empowerment, democracy, and sustainability principles [46•] (p. 24–25). Reality is however more complex and hybrid [46•]. Occupying a middle ground, we prefer the term 'inclusive innovations' or 'innovations from below', conceived as farmers' simple and low-cost responses to day-to-day problems and opportunities [49] (see section 'Synthesis'). These can be either local adaptations of 'top–down' interventions or a form of resistance against those [50].

Inclusive value chains

Inclusive VC development has been defined as a 'positive or desirable change in a VC to extend or improve productive operations and generate social benefits (. . .) and other development goals' [51] (p. 1). Inclusive VCs typically target smallholder farmers as a large subset of the rural poor, characterized by different degrees of marginalization and destitution, and constrained access to technologies, assets, capital markets, education, training, and input and output markets [1,21]. Inclusive VC literature proposes several strategies towards inclusive VC participation, which reveal different inclusiveness dimensions.

The first strategy embarks on partnerships between lead firms and producers, with the former playing a supporting role in improving producers' access to markets, knowledge and technologies [51]. This is often combined with upgrading through standards for improved quality and sustainability of production [4]. This two-legged strategy emphasizes the importance of multi-stakeholder coordination and collaboration, both vertically (between VC actors) and horizontally (within the landscape where VCs are embedded) [1,9]. Intermediaries such as NGOs often play a major role in such partnerships [21,52].

A second approach is social upgrading: the improvement in producers' rights and working conditions [22]. This added a focus on labour and particularly labour agency in the discussion on inclusive VCs. Labour agency comprises workers' proactive activities in contesting – challenging, resisting and reworking – their labour conditions [22]. This is needed to withstand businesses' attempts to reduce labour costs, which coupled with weak national and regulatory environments, leads to increasing vulnerability of labourers [22,53,54].

The third strategy focuses on smallholders' empowerment. This strategy recognizes that power relations shape farmers' upgrading opportunities, the distribution of added value, and income rewards [16•]; may aggravate local inequalities and non-participation in chains [24,55•]; and/or lock smallholders into dependent relations that give lead firms more control over their supply [16•]. Such power imbalances are present in vertical chain governance relationships, and in the local institutional, organizational, and political contexts in which VCs operate [55•]. Inclusive VCs from an empowerment perspective strengthen farmers' autonomy, capacity and agency *vis-à-vis* companies, NGOs and donors [9,56] and recognize farmers' experiences and decisions [16•,22]. Moreover, inclusive VC literature acknowledges that inclusion may occur on adverse terms, causing 'the included' to be worse off than before. This calls for enabling and protective policies [9,19,57]. Drivers behind this strategy are donor agencies and NGOs [16•] and, to a lesser extent, farmers' collective action [22].

A fourth approach situates VC participation in a broader livelihoods perspective, recognizing farmers' (need for) on- and off-farm diversification of livelihood activities [55•]. The meta-narrative of upgrading and participation in VCs, which considers producers as small-sized and medium-sized enterprises [1], may fail to respond to farmers' livelihood choices and ignore their vulnerability context [56]. Smallholder farmers must constantly weigh the benefits of increased specialization required for VC participation against those of spreading risks by pursuing mixed livelihood activities [28,53]. They may be exposed to greater production and market risks if diversification and dependency relationships are not addressed [58]. Hence the call to NGOs, aid organizations and other actors advocating smallholders' integration in value chains to adopt a multi-chain or portfolio livelihoods approach [59]. Farmers themselves often strategically engage in multiple markets, as documented for oil-palm farmers in Ghana [60].

Finally, inclusive VCs recognize gendered asset ownership and opportunities, and the need to address the bottlenecks to women's equal participation and benefit sharing in VCs. Gender sensitive VC literature focuses on enabling policies that level the playing field by reforming laws, policies and gender norms and relations that constrain women's access to land, credit, other assets and an equal position in labour codes [5,25,30]. Gender sensitivity also implies decision-making power for women, for instance by assigning them strategic roles in VC governance [30] and intra-household bargaining [2].

Inclusive development

Inclusive development emerged as a response to growth- and market-based development strategies such as inclusive growth and inclusive business. The concept already had a strong normative focus on social and gender equity and empowerment of the poor when the Asian Development Bank (ADB) launched the concept in the early 2000s [61]. Building on this normativity and focus on marginalized people, two comprehensive conceptualizations of inclusive development appeared in 2015 [62••,63••]. Both reveal three dimensions of inclusiveness: wellbeing, empowerment, and environmental sustainability. A relational dimension was added later [63••,64–66].

Well-being is a multi-dimensional concept comprising material, relational and cognitive-subjective wellbeing [67]. This refers respectively to people's individual assets and living conditions; how their personal well-being relates to collective well-being in terms of synergies and trade-offs; and how they subjectively experience and evaluate their well-being [62••,63••,67]. Empowerment encompasses choice (the capacity of poor and marginalized people to take control of their own life and future) and voice (the capacity to be heard and participate in policy- and decision-making) [62••,63••,64,68]. This dimension is strongly informed by rights-based approaches [62••,65,69] and Chambers' seminal work that foregrounds farmers in development [70••]. Lastly, inclusive development explicitly takes environmental concerns into account [63••,64]. It

Table 1

Dimensions of inclusive value chain integration as operationalized in the three bodies of literature (P = process; O = outcome)

Dimension	Inclusive business	Inclusive value chains	Inclusive development
Economic			
1. Double or triple bottom-line	Combines profitability targets and economic growth with social and environmental goals (*P*).		Rejects focus on economic growth
Social			
2. Concern for wellbeing	Serving the bottom-of-the-pyramid by delivering societal or developmental benefits; include the BoP as entrepreneurs or suppliers (*P*).	Higher incomes (*O*) through market integration and upgrading (applying quality and sustainability standards (*P*).	Multidimensional wellbeing (material, relational and cognitive-subjective) for poor and marginalized people (*O*).
3. Inclusive learning and innovation	Frugal innovations (affordable, simple, and resource-efficient products and services with high use value) (*O*)	Knowledge co-creation based on recognition of local knowledge, best practices, innovations 'from below' and continual leaning through participatory monitoring and evaluation (*P*).	
4. Alignment with smallholders' realities	Acknowledge survival entrepreneurs and multiple markets (*P*).	Sensitive to diversity among farmers in terms of opportunities, constraints and vulnerabilities; alignment with smallholders' aspirations; accommodating heterogeneity in terms of gender, age, landownership, ethnic/cultural background and household composition (*P*).	
Relational			
5. Empowerment	Improving the human rights and dignity of those at the BoP (*O*),	Strengthening farmers' autonomy, capacity and agency *vis-à-vis* companies, NGOs and donors, though social upgrading (improved rights and working conditions through VC engagement) and labour agency (*P*).	Attention to local political economy and constraining structures; enhance the capacity of the poor and marginalized to exert choice (take control over their own life) and voice (demand equitable rights and fair conditions of VC engagement) (*P*).
		Tackling inequalities and power differences (P)	
6. Gender equity and responsiveness	Promotes gender aware women's entrepreneurship by recognizing gendered risks and uncertainties in the BoP community and business environment (gender accommodating) (*P*).	Addresses gendered bottlenecks to and opportunities for participation and benefits by reforming policies and institutions that constrain women ('levelling the playing field') (gender sensitive) (*P*).	Sensitive to gender and its intersectionality with age, race, ethnicity, religion, and location and actively challenging the underlying gender norms, institutional constraints and power imbalances (gender transformative) (*P*).
Environmental			
7. Environmental sustainability	Promotes resource efficiency through frugal innovations (see above) (*P*).	Upgrading through voluntary certification (*P*).	Commitment to environmental inclusiveness by avoiding adverse environmental effects; questioning the commitment to growth (*P*).
Cross-cutting			
8. Enabling environment	Government and networks create an enabling environment for inclusive businesses and producers in the global South (*P*).	Political will, local civil society and producer organizations are essential for creating inclusive VCs (*P*).	Governments actively protect people's rights and pursue redistributive policies; multilevel governance addresses interconnected global-to-local challenges (*P*).

problematizes the trade-offs between economic growth and well-being or environmental sustainability – hence focuses primarily on social and environmental sustainability [63••,64]. As such, inclusive development is a counter proposal to the inclusive growth concept [71,72] which prioritizes growth.

Recent inclusive development literature distinguishes between social, environmental, and relational inclusiveness [64–66]. Social inclusiveness comprises well-being for and empowerment of the poorest and most marginalized. This includes sensitivity to gender and intersectionality of gender with other social categories such as age, race, ethnicity, religion, and location [62••,68••]; a gender transformative approach towards the underlying gendered institutions and norms [73]; equitable allocation of resources, rights, responsibilities and risks; and inclusive learning and 'innovation-from-below' [49], taking account of people's knowledge, experience, aspirations, and priorities [64,66]. Environmental inclusiveness is about promoting environmental sustainability and resilience by preventing and addressing ecological effects and valuing ecosystem services [74,75]; equitable access to environmental resources, rights, responsibilities, and risks [64,66]; and inclusive innovations efficient in resource use [36••,76]. Relational inclusiveness looks at the underlying mechanisms that perpetuate concentration of power, inequality and environmental degradation and at how downward accountability can be improved [64,66]. In a VC context this refers, for instance, to power imbalances that enable elite capture of VC benefits; institutions that prevent women and youth to access land and assets; or insecure tenure relations that facilitate land grabbing. This calls for governments that actively protect people's rights and pursue redistributive policies [63••,65].

Synthesis

Table 1 makes explicit how the three bodies of literature unpack inclusiveness in VC contexts and how VC collaborations can be made more inclusive of smallholders, gender, and the environment. It reveals that there is no blueprint for inclusive value chain participation and that achieving inclusiveness is not a matter of ticking the boxes. Instead, the table shows the contrasting dimensions of inclusiveness, which can help policymakers and practitioners to make policy choices explicit. As such the table can be seen as a sensitizing framework that helps enrich policy debates and add nuance and depth to our thinking about inclusiveness of smallholder participation in value chains. For researchers the table provides a basis for the operationalization of the concept, enabling to add analytical rigour to inclusiveness in specific VC contexts and to assess opportunities and constraints. Moreover, the table shows that inclusiveness is seldom framed as an outcome (O), but mostly as a process (P) [49].

The table discloses fundamental differences in how the three debates frame these processes, showing the importance of underlying discourses and their respective commitments to a growth-based market economy and societal change [77]. Both inclusive business and inclusive VC literature are situated in sustainability discourses that adhere to economic growth. They acknowledge that both farmers and companies engage in VCs for economic reasons (increasing productivity, acquiring an income, or making and sustaining profit). Inclusive business literature primarily conceives inclusiveness as being instrumental to achieving business goals (including those related to sustainability) – embarking on innovations and functional partnerships. Inclusive VC literature (largely influenced by practitioners) more explicitly problematizes inequalities and power imbalances, aiming to address those through inclusive processes such as social upgrading and empowerment. Inclusive development theory, with its strong footing in social sciences and international development studies, rejects the growth-based neoliberal paradigm and proposes a transformative agenda that focuses on social, relational, and environmental outcomes. Like inclusive VC literature, it takes a normative stand, but more explicitly addresses the underlying norms, institutions and discourses that produce marginalization.

This review has demonstrated that VC participation may involve adverse incorporation and exclusion and is therefore not inclusive for all farmers. It provided a more nuanced insight into the multiple pathways towards greater inclusiveness, recognizing the heterogeneity of value chains, the actors and networks involved in them, and the discourses that underlie different framings of inclusiveness. It revealed that inclusiveness is not a state of being, but mainly a process. A farmer-centered approach that recognizes smallholders' differentiated and gendered realities, as well as their knowledge, innovation capacity and agency, is key to making this process more inclusive.

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