

Prospects for a Just Transition Across Global Agrifood Chains: A Comparison of South American Soybean and Southeast Asian Palm Oil

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Abstract

Demands for food system transformation are growing, but this presents distinct challenges as the sector is highly globalized and marked by global agrifood chains linking countries producing agricultural commodities in the Global South with countries importing them in the Global North. To understand possibilities for and limitations of a sustainability transition across global agrifood chains, it is crucial to examine cross-scale dynamics and the interdependence of sustainability politics between the Global North and South. From our comparison of soybean production in South America and palm oil in Southeast Asia, we make two main observations. First, it is questionable to what extent the dominant trade-based approaches to sustainability foster transformative change. Further research should also look at other markets and forms of agricultural production beyond commodity chains. Second, the concerns of consumers in the Global North tend to get priority over socioenvironmental concerns in producing countries in the Global South, posing important obstacles for procedural justice.

Keywords: Sustainability transitions, agrifood governance, justice, soybean, palm oil, Southeast Asia, South America

While initially the literature on just transitions focused on the impacts of decarbonization on employment and energy, the agrifood sector is increasingly gaining attention, not least due to the growing realization that agricultural production is responsible for the transgression of several planetary boundaries (Gerten and Kummu 2021). Just transitions of food systems brings up some distinct challenges particularly in relation to North-South politics. The sector is marked by global agrifood chains linking countries producing agricultural commodities with countries importing such commodities with the involvement of multiple actors at various scales as well as a high concentration of corporate

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power (Clapp and Fuchs 2009) and unequal trade relations often dating back to colonial times as many countries producing agricultural commodities are located in the Global South while industrialized countries in the Global North are among the main importers. There is now an emerging research agenda on just transitions in food systems (Kaljonen et al. 2023), but this has barely addressed cross-scale dynamics and their interconnected impacts (Hebinck et al. 2021, 82).

There is no single definition of what exactly *sustainability transition*¹ means, but we base our analysis on three important elements from the literature. First, a sustainability transition involves major change and not just incremental changes or purely technical solutions (Köhler et al. 2019; Markard et al. 2012). Such fundamental changes relate to structural, functional, relational, and cognitive aspects and give rise to new patterns of interaction. Second, this change is purposefully generated and directed at a particular outcome, notably to address significant environmental problems, such as climate change or biodiversity loss. Third, there is also a focus on equity and the need to move not only toward more sustainable but also toward more equitable futures (Patterson et al. 2017, 2).

We focus on two of the world's most important agricultural commodities, notably soybean from South America and palm oil from Southeast Asia. Both palm oil and soybean are so-called flex crops, which means that they have multiple food and nonfood uses (Bastos Lima 2018; Borrás Saturnino et al. 2016). We have individually worked on the two regions for over a decade, conducting initial fieldwork in 2009–2010 with repeated further fieldwork since then. This Forum piece thus builds on our earlier publications, but for the first time, it brings together our research from two different regions and allows us to take a broader view going beyond individual case studies. Our analysis looks at broader trends over time since the mid-1990s, when both soybean and palm oil started to expand exponentially, propelled to a large extent by external demand. This expansion has had much-criticized environmental and social impacts, which has led to a number of initiatives to make their production more sustainable. Most recently, they have both been included under the EU's new regulation on deforestation-free products.

Important Similarities: The Dominance of Trade-Based Approaches

In both regions, the soybean and palm oil sectors are dominated by powerful and well-connected actors. In South America, important agribusiness actors have the support of state agencies. A closely integrated agribusiness sector operates seamlessly across national boundaries, perhaps most famously captured in the description of a “Soybean Republic” (Newell 2009; Siegel 2017, 80; Turzi

1. The terms *transition* and *transformation* are not clearly distinct and are often used interchangeably. We use the term *transition* but also build on literature on transformations.

2011). Similarly, in Southeast Asia, there is a deep intertwining of business actors and administrative elites in patronage networks (Nesadurai 2018), where political support is exchanged for economic favors, enabling powerful corporate actors and government-linked companies to leverage regulations, force, and market forces to secure land for large-scale plantations (Ramasamy et al. 2005, 81–104). While smallholders manage 40 percent of regional plantations—Malaysia’s landless peasants gain livelihoods through government-led land redistribution, while Indonesia’s “nucleus-plasma” system links smallholders to state-owned plantations (Mccarthy and Cramb 2009)—the dualism of unproductive farmers and efficient plantations is often used to justify further commercial expansion (Li 2023). Governments in the region reinforce this dominance by framing palm oil as a driver of development, prosperity, and modernity, often invoking their “right” to exploit natural resources (Varkkey and O’Reilly 2019). However, the reliance on export markets has also made the sector vulnerable to global scrutiny as Western-based civil society movements highlighted links between palm oil and deforestation, biodiversity loss, and labor abuses, leading to consumer boycotts and reputational damage (Fair 2021). This pressure prompted governments and businesses to adopt sustainability initiatives, such as Malaysia’s promotion of palm oil as “sustainable since 1917” in key markets like the UK and producers emphasizing the crop’s efficiency to argue against alternatives that could require more land (Varkkey 2016). The Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), a key private governance mechanism, emerged to address these concerns, but its structure reflects a power imbalance, with Northern members prioritizing issues like deforestation over local problems like transboundary haze and land displacement (Higgins and Richards 2019). These dynamics underscore how trade-based approaches shape production, sustainability efforts, and responses to global market pressures (Varkkey 2021), often sidelining local concerns in favor of export-oriented strategies.

In South America, governments on both sides of the political spectrum have defended the large-scale production of soybean through discourses framed around economic growth and development, while also stressing the abundance of natural resources in the region (Elgert 2016; Siegel 2016, 508). Although other approaches exist, those actors who seek to change the dominant soybean model, for example, by focusing on other crops, diversifying more, producing for domestic consumption, or smaller-scale subsistence farming, are frequently sidelined, and they generally have fewer political and economic resources than agribusiness networks (Deciancio and Siegel 2023; Giraud and Grugel 2022; Maluf et al. 2022). Despite their links to social movements, the left-wing governments that were in power in much of the region in the 2000s maintained strong support to agribusiness while redirecting some resources to smaller-scale producers, albeit without redistributive agrarian reform (Vergara-Camus and Kay 2017). Renewed efforts for regional integration during this period also prioritized resource exports and the demands of regional agribusiness networks

over civil society concerns (Siegel 2017, 2021). Nevertheless, in South America too, consumer concerns in soy-importing industrialized countries were sparked by alarming international headlines about the social and environmental impacts of soybean production and the association with Amazon deforestation, and the food-versus-fuel debate. This also led to certification schemes, the most demanding of which is the Roundtable on Responsible Soy (RTRS) (Staricco and Buraschi 2022, 189), created in 2006 with first certifications in Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay five years later. Like the RSPO, the “roundtable” format is meant to bring together different stakeholders who collectively develop and implement global standards (Schilling-Vacaflor et al. 2021). However, the RTRS does not address underlying structural inequalities and the significant disparities in power and wealth between agribusiness companies and small-scale farmers that make an inclusive dialogue impossible. A study on Brazil demonstrated that the auditing practices did not effectively safeguard the rights and access of local communities to land and water (Schilling-Vacaflor et al. 2021). In Paraguay, the existence of the RTRS served to underpin a general framing and discourse defending “responsible” soy production, although in fact only a very small proportion was certified through the RTRS (Elgert 2016). In addition, the overall effectiveness of soy certification in South America is questionable. One of the first empirical assessments of the EU RED in a producing country, a study examining the Argentinean biodiesel value chain under EU RED, uncovered important limitations. It showed that the social impacts of the scheme are largely irrelevant in Argentina and that the positive environmental impacts are limited. In particular, the scheme led to a strategic selection of sources but did not foster any emissions savings of the sector as a whole, and while biodiversity targets were met, these were not very challenging in the Argentinean context (Staricco and Buraschi 2022).

Key Differences: More Ownership and Less Contestation of Southeast Asian Palm Oil?

While initiatives for more sustainable production practices in both South America for soybean and Southeast Asia for palm oil have followed similar trade-based trajectories, it seems that there has been more acceptance and domestic ownership of such initiatives in Southeast Asia and more contestation in South America. In Southeast Asia, palm oil production enjoys a relatively widespread domestic buy-in. The RSPO is viewed more as a “homegrown” effort in Malaysia and Indonesia, where governments, producers, and local civil society collaborate to balance international market demands with national interests (Varkkey and al Banna Choiruzzad 2024). By 2019, 20 percent of Malaysia’s and 14.5 percent of Indonesia’s plantation areas were RSPO certified (Statista 2020a, 2020b), reflecting the start of substantial institutional integration. There remains uneven investment in public services and infrastructure in smallholder enclaves (Tyson et al. 2018); however, smallholders see the benefits of absolute

poverty reduction, employment opportunities, and social mobility (Oliphant and Simon 2022). While smallholder groups, including those affiliated with La Via Campesina, had spoken out against the RSPO in its early years, the RSPO's membership now consists of groups like Indonesia's Kumpulan Serikat Petani Kelapa Sawit (Oil Palm Farmers Union Group) and Malaysia's Koperasi Pekebun Kecil dan Sederhana Sawit Lestari Sabah (Sabah Sustainable Palm Oil Smallholders Cooperative). This has been encouraged by dedicated programs designed by the RSPO to support smallholder inclusivity (Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil 2025). Palm oil is furthermore often celebrated as an engine of rural development, lifting thousands from poverty and fostering social mobility (Oliphant and Simon 2022). Governments have even localized sustainability standards—for example, Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil and Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil—to align with domestic priorities (Higgins and Richards 2019). This sector thrives on symbiotic ties between elites, policy-makers, and communities, where economic benefits often outweigh environmental concerns, as seen in public tolerance of trade-offs like haze (De Pretto et al. 2015).

Similar to palm oil producers embracing the RSPO, the main motivation for soybean producers to adopt the RTRS was to secure market access. However, the RTRS faced many difficulties from the onset, and many stakeholders chose not to become involved. Some international NGOs focusing on environmental issues, such as the World Wildlife Fund, have participated in the RTRS. However, other large civil society organizations with significant influence in the Southern Cone region, such as Via Campesina, have boycotted the RTRS and organized countercampaigns to highlight their rejection of large-scale monoculture soybean production and distrust of multinationals and agribusiness (Schilling-Vacaflor et al. 2021; Schouten et al. 2012). At the same time, the RTRS scheme has had difficulties taking off, as agricultural producers found that it did not generate sufficient economic benefits to justify the additional work to meet the RTRS criteria (Staricco and Buraschi 2022, 192). According to civil society reports, in 2019, the RTRS certified barely 1 percent of all soy (Solidaridad 2020). Consequently, even though the RTRS is one of the most demanding schemes for soybean certification, many local communities and grassroots organizations are hesitant to participate in the RTRS processes because they view this as a way to legitimize an agricultural model that they reject and that does not protect some of their most important rights (Schilling-Vacaflor et al. 2021). This comparison of two major agrifood chains starting from the production in different regions of the Global South leads us to two broader reflections on the politics of global just transitions.

The Limits of Transformation with Trade-Based Approaches

Our observations from the two cases raise important questions about the transformative potential of trade-based approaches. A sustainability transition

implies major changes to address key sustainability challenges and to stay within planetary boundaries. In both cases, economic and political elites have sought to avoid making any fundamental changes to the dominant export-oriented model of agricultural production. Initiatives for sustainability are driven largely by the goal to secure and maintain access to export markets. This means that there have been incremental alterations rather than major changes. This confirms findings of other studies. As a review of the major sustainability certification initiatives in primary production has shown, the reliance on private governance and certification generally has had only limited success (Dietz et al. 2022). Generally, then, although the trade interdependencies mean that there is increasingly a push toward more sustainable production of both soybean and palm oil as a result of consumer pressure in industrialized countries, the continued focus on predominantly using the established trade-based approach to sustainability is unlikely to be sufficient to generate a transition to sustainability in the agrifood sector.

While it is important to examine how global agrifood chains can be steered toward a just sustainability transition, this should therefore not be the only question. It is equally important to consider to what extent and in which circumstances other forms of agricultural production and other markets may constitute more desirable alternatives. This requires questioning the norm that trade liberalization should be the central and most suitable tool for sustainability in the food sector, which has become dominant over the last decades to the detriment of other approaches, such as agroecology and more local markets and forms of distribution (Clapp 2017). Examining more systematically how to integrate sufficiency into trade agendas is another possibility that deserves more attention (Roux et al. 2025). Yet, such questions of more fundamental transformation are often overlooked in debates on the governance of the complex cross-scale dynamics of current food systems (Newig et al. 2020).

A Reflection on Justice

Finally, our comparison also brings up some interesting observations in relation to justice. Drawing on the extensive literature on justice more generally, the growing literature on just food system transitions conceptualizes justice as multidimensional, with three dimensions mentioned most frequently. Distributive justice relates here to a fair distribution of costs and benefits, such as negative environmental or social impacts of the food system or employment (de Bruin et al. 2024, 347). Procedural justice relates to fair decision-making processes in food systems and in the governance of transitions, and recognition justice to the recognition of different knowledges and visions of eating and food production (de Bruin et al. 2024, 345; Kaljonen et al. 2023, 3; Tribaldos and Kortetmäki 2022, 252). In addition, some studies note other dimensions, such as restorative justice, which relates to the need to address past damages and historical

injustices (Tschersich and Kok 2022, 360), or cosmopolitan justice, which aims at global fairness and transition impacts beyond national boundaries (Tribaldos and Kortetmäki 2022, 250). While more detailed studies are needed to develop more substantive conclusions, our first comparison of the two crops and regions indicates that it is crucial to look at the interactions between domestic politics and the international political economy to examine the prospects for just transitions across global agrifood chains. We outline a few observations here as starting points for further research.

At first sight, it seems that there is less contestation of Southeast Asian palm oil compared to South American soybean, which may indicate differences in relation to distributive justice, with a somewhat fairer distribution of costs and benefits in the case of palm oil. Palm oil remains a labor-intensive crop, making it more favorable for the integration of smallholders than the large-scale soybean plantations. But the roles of the state and domestic politics also differ in the two regions. The more vocalized contestation of soybean in South America reflects the long-standing criticism of extractivist development strategies based on the export of commodities with relatively little value added in the region and significant socioenvironmental impacts. Resistance to extractivist projects has strained state–society relations under different governments over the last decades, and some civil society organizations and researchers have formulated strong and visible critiques with a different vision of sustainability and development (Gudynas 2010; Siegel 2016; Svampa 2012). In contrast, Southeast Asian countries adopted the developmental state strategy whereby authoritarian-style, highly interventionist governments direct and promote economic development and growth through strategic policies and planning. Southeast Asian states have played a stronger role in both development and agrarian reform, with more redistributive impacts compared to Latin America (Kay 2002). Through a combination of charismatic leaders (e.g., Mahathir from Malaysia and Sukarno from Indonesia), nationalistic framing (the “right” to develop using natural resources, discussed earlier), jurisdictional suppression of dissent, and proven results that trickled down effectively through most of society (Vu 2007), the developmental states of Southeast Asia were largely free to continue with extractivist models with minimal protest. Domestic politics and the role of the state thus affect public perceptions as well as the distribution of the benefits and burdens of agricultural commodity production in important ways, with implications for distributive justice.

Yet, all processes of domestic politics also happen in the context of the international political economy. In fact, the two crops and regions are closely linked by market dynamics and in particular by their conception as flex crops, whether this is real, speculative, or imagined. An important factor in the expansion of the two crops was thus the notion that they can be flexibly interchanged, so that gaps in supply can be filled by other flex crops. Although flex crops are not per se problematic in social or environmental terms, they have been

associated with important dynamics of financialization and powerful agribusiness companies (Borras Saturnino et al. 2016). How exactly this affects efforts for the transformation of food systems and agrifood chains remains a crucial avenue for further research.

This is particularly important in relation to procedural justice, which has received insufficient attention in the literature on just transitions in food systems so far (de Bruin et al. 2024, 348, 358; Kaljonen et al. 2023, 2). It is striking that in both cases, because of the focus on securing market access, consumer demands in industrialized countries receive more attention than domestic socioenvironmental concerns that are important to citizens in the two regions. This reflects findings of other studies. In debates on energy transitions, for example, Northern justice concerns tend to predominate, while justice demands from the Global South are often overlooked or recognized only in passing (Prause and Dietz 2022). In terms of decision-making processes, there is also a bias. An important element of meaningful participation is equality among different actors in the processes of decision-making (Fuchs et al. 2011, 339). Yet, our cases indicate that with the focus on trade-based approaches and multistakeholder initiatives, the lines of accountability are more likely to flow to consumers and governments in the Global North than to governments or citizens of producing countries in the Global South, even to the extent that this is mediated by domestic politics and the role of the state. In relation to procedural justice, cross-scale dynamics are therefore a central factor that deserves more attention in further research.

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