



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED AND REVIEWED BY
Ngonidzashe Chirinda,
Mohammed VI Polytechnic University, Morocco

*CORRESPONDENCE

Stephen Whitfield
✉ s.whitfield@leeds.ac.uk

RECEIVED 13 July 2023

ACCEPTED 09 August 2023

PUBLISHED 25 August 2023

CITATION

Whitfield S, Hermans T, Naess LO, Sallu SM,
Sarku R, Smith R and Tauzie M (2023) Editorial:
Equity and trade-offs in agriculture and food
system transformation.
Front. Sustain. Food Syst. 7:1258372.
doi: 10.3389/fsufs.2023.1258372

COPYRIGHT

© 2023 Whitfield, Hermans, Naess, Sallu, Sarku,
Smith and Tauzie. This is an open-access article
distributed under the terms of the [Creative
Commons Attribution License \(CC BY\)](#). The use,
distribution or reproduction in other forums is
permitted, provided the original author(s) and
the copyright owner(s) are credited and that
the original publication in this journal is cited, in
accordance with accepted academic practice.
No use, distribution or reproduction is
permitted which does not comply with these
terms.

Editorial: Equity and trade-offs in agriculture and food system transformation

Stephen Whitfield^{1*}, Thirze Hermans², Lars Otto Naess³,
Susannah M. Sallu¹, Rebecca Sarku¹, Ruth Smith¹ and
Mapenzie Tauzie¹

¹Sustainability Research Institute, University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom, ²Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation, Wageningen University and Research, Wageningen, Netherlands, ³Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, United Kingdom

KEYWORDS

justice, food systems, transformation, UN Food Systems Summit, equity, inequality, legacies, agriculture

Editorial on the Research Topic

Equity and trade-offs in agriculture and food system transformation

The imperative for “transformation” in agriculture and food systems is highlighted in the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) and a growing number of global agendas, in response to multifaceted societal and environmental challenges. However, there is a danger that the apparent urgency of transformation is accepted at the expense of recognizing the potential for trade-offs and inequities to be experienced in the process, or as a result. In this Research Topic we begin from an acknowledgment that transformation can be, and has been historically, brought about through exclusionary processes and with inequitable outcomes.

This Research Topic critically interrogates the global transformation imperative in agriculture and food, and asks: how is agriculture and food system transformation being differently conceived of, and by whom; what does equitable and just agriculture and food systems transformation look like; and how can it be brought about?

Under the Research Topic we present six papers that in different ways engage with concepts (Dagli; Juskaite and Haug; Lala et al.; Sarku et al.) and case studies (Boillat et al.; Dagli; Lala et al.; Wang et al.) of food systems transformation and equity. By grounding and testing concepts of transformation and equity in the experiences of different contexts, the papers reveal problems with oversimplistic and binary ideas about potential food system change and the winners and losers associated with them.

Inequity can come about in multiple ways, and, as Juskaite and Haug demonstrate, is given varied meanings in different discourses of food systems change. Moreover, inequity can be embedded in the structures and knowledge politics that shape whose agendas and discourses are acknowledged, prioritized and privileged. In analyzing how justice and food system transformation is conceived and discussed in an international policy arena, Sarku et al. adopt a framework comprised of multiple lenses of justice, inclusive of distributive, historical, and representative justice. Boillat et al. further propose an additional justice lens, “contributive justice”, which, with regards to aspects such as labor and working conditions, helps to highlight that individuals are simultaneously active contributors to and recipients of the outcomes of transformative change and that this dualistic experience of transformation cannot necessarily be disentangled.

Across the case study-focused papers in this Research Topic there are a variety of conventional/“central” and alternative/“peripheral” pathways of agriculture and food system transformation that are described and juxtaposed. Lala et al. compare the aspirations for the future of rural communities in the Kilombero Valley in Tanzania, with the vision of

donors, private sector and national government for the modernization of the Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor of Tanzania. They argue that “the view of transformation presented by smallholders appears incompatible with national blueprint policies and plans”. Wang et al. evaluate whether priorities for landscape and biodiversity conservation in Wuyishan National Park in China are in conflict or can coexist with a future for traditional agricultural industries. And Boillat et al. compare the experiences of workers in alternative value chains in Senegal.

Within these case studies we can find examples of how current pathways of change have a historical legacy and path dependency. For example, Lala et al. critically engage with their findings in the context of colonial legacies of large-scale plantations in Tanzania. Wang et al. describe causal and self-reinforcing loops in the ongoing industrialization of tea production in the northwest of China’s Fujian Province. But these historical pathways can also be disrupted and punctuated by moments of change. Dagli, for example, outlines how a flash flood event and subsequent ban on logging in Infatana Municipality in the Philippines in 2004 ultimately shifted rural livelihoods and agricultural land uses.

Despite the historical dependency of many conventional pathways of change in agriculture and food systems, and the fact that these pathways often squeeze out space for more traditional practice and rights to land, Sarku et al. argue that issues of historical justice are not given enough attention in international discourse. Their analysis of the UNFCCC Koronivia Joint Work on Agriculture exposes a particular absence of critical discussion of historical justice, but also of justice from all perspectives, in dialogues around agricultural transformation, which prioritize much more highly the scaling up of climate smart agricultural technologies and practices.

Following Wang et al., and to some extent Lala et al., we might typically think about the dominant or conventional pathway of transformation in agriculture as being one of industrialization and commercialization. The obvious “peripheral” (to borrow a term from Dagli) or counter pathway in such cases is one of preserving or promoting smaller and less intensive agriculture. Wang et al. think about the practices of traditional tea gardens and Boillat et al. consider organic and community supported value chains as counter to the more conventional commercial industries. However, peripheral pathways may also be multifaceted constructs that do not sit squarely in opposition. For example, the aspirations of smallholder farming communities documented by Lala et al. place emphasis on land tenure, agricultural expansion and increased irrigation, which in many ways resonate with notions of agricultural modernization, even if they are simultaneously resistant to the corporate takeover of agriculture in the region.

It is important not to pre-suppose that peripheral pathways are in themselves “more equitable”. As Boillat et al. show, it is possible to find significant elite capture within community supported agricultural systems as well as high standards and levels of job satisfaction for those working in more conventional industries.

Wang et al. consider whether alternative pathways can coexist or if they sit in conflict with each other and Dagli further suggests that the “entanglement” between alternative pathways of agricultural change means that it may be an oversimplification anyway to see these as independent and in opposition to each other.

Nevertheless, the compatibility (Wang et al.), trade-offs (Juskaite and Haug) and entanglements (Dagli) between these pathways are important for understanding how much space there is for plurality; for different actors to envision and pursue different futures and pathways of agricultural change, both in local contexts, such as the Kilombero Valley, and in international political forums, such as the Koronivia Joint Work on Agriculture. The extent to which space is closed down or opened up for plural pathways could be one way of thinking about what equitable transformation means across these different scales and contexts (Juskaite and Haug).

Collectively the papers in this Research Topic contribute conceptual and empirical insights on agriculture and food systems transformations and why an equity and justice lens is crucial to improve processes and outcomes. The papers support an overall argument about the need to critically consider agricultural and food systems transformation through multiple lenses of justice and to create space and advocate for plurality and multiple voices in transformation. As the global imperative for food system transformation becomes ever stronger, so too does the importance of this argument for attention to be paid to equity and justice.

Author contributions

SW: Conceptualization, Writing—original draft. TH: Conceptualization, Writing—review and editing. LN: Conceptualization, Writing—review and editing. SS: Conceptualization, Writing—review and editing. RSa: Conceptualization, Writing—review and editing. RSm: Conceptualization, Writing—review and editing. MT: Conceptualization, Writing—review and editing.

Funding

This work was supported by the UK Universities Climate Network’s COP26 Fellowship Programme and by a grant from the UK Research and Innovation’s Global Challenges Research Fund (EP/T02397X/1).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

The author(s) declared that they were an editorial board member of Frontiers, at the time of submission. This had no impact on the peer review process and the final decision.

Publisher’s note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.