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Exploring the Practice of Inclusion: Experiences and Lessons

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Inclusion is a concept that has gained attention in the literature that is dealing with poverty reduction amongst marginalized agricultural producers in value chains (e.g. German et al., 2020; Gupta et al., 2015; Ros-Tonen et al., 2019). Inclusion in the contexts of value chains implies that all involved stakeholders can equally participate in the exchange process, especially those marginalized and who depend on subsistence farming (Bryden et al., 2017). Inclusion can be implemented in terms of a focus on *outcomes* (e.g., pay higher prices) or *processes* (e.g., the provision of a seat at the decision-making table) (Chamberlain & Anseeuw, 2018; Heeks et al., 2014; Bryden et al., 2017). Various studies have already pointed out how inclusion can or cannot contribute to better rural development (e.g. German et al., 2020). In studying inclusion, not only isolated experiences of farmers but also the roles and experiences of others in the value chain are relevant. These are typically organizations or institutions present between those higher up in value chains (marginalized farmers) and those at the lower end of the value chains (consumers), like processors, traders and brand owners and may have a pivotal role in both the outcomes and processes of inclusion (see also Robaey et al., 2022).

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The application of the concept of inclusion may have different implications at different segments in the value chain in terms of impact, economic justice, management of uncertainties and improve social development (Robaey et al., 2022). First, inclusion is considered an important prerequisite for poverty alleviation among – especially small-scale farmers (‘smallholders’) at the beginning of value chains. By improving smallholders’ revenues and giving them a say in decision-making not only their livelihood, but also their empowerment and agency are improved (Asveld et al., 2023; Ros-Tonen et al., 2019). Second, implementing the concept of inclusion can be considered a moral imperative within the value chain, especially for Western firms doing business in non-Western countries: Western firms have an obligation to avoid doing harm while carefully implementing practices for doing good (De Gelder & Asveld, 2024). Underpaying farmers or burdening them with all major risks, for example, can be regarded morally wrong given their unequal position in value chains. Third, at the practical level, inclusion of smallholders may have beneficial effects when uncertainties are managed better, which can be beneficial for farmers (e.g., stability of income). For businesses, in turn, involving smallholders may enhance both the quality and stability of the provision of crops. Fourth, inclusion at the lower end of value chains (i.e. end-consumers) may imply that firms are able to extend their customer base. Otherwise marginalized consumers can now also participate in consumption practices which improve their social development. When implementing the right inclusive structures and practices, goals of economic justice, enhancing autonomy for vulnerable actors, managing uncertainties and creating beneficial social and environmental impacts can be achieved (Robaey et al., 2022).

It remains an open question as to whether and how inclusion is a holy grail for achieving the goals of inclusion successfully in value chains. So far studies have focused on various aspects of inclusion in development and inclusive value chains, as well as on the role of and how to perform an inclusive business (Ros-Tonen et al., 2019; Chamberlain & Anseeuw, 2018; German et al., 2020). One of the most prevalent arguments raised against inclusion is that inclusion may predominantly be serving the interests of those implementing inclusion, rather than truly promoting the interests of those marginalized. Inclusion is then regarded as an instrument to serve powerful businesses or stakeholders in the value chain (Peters, 2013; Gray & Kevane, 2001). Apart from the question of whether implementing practices of inclusion is effective, this Special Issue provides insights into what practices of inclusion have been applied at the different levels of the value chains (e.g. institutions, organizations), and what the outcomes – the goals – manifest about applying the concept of inclusion at different levels.¹

The objective of realizing this Special Issue is to bring together scholars working at the concept of inclusion and bring experiences on working with inclusion to the fore, and align them with some of the findings from our research project on inclusive biobased value chains (IBIS). Particularly, in this SI, we identify similar practices of

¹ These ideas resonate with other literature such as Responsible Innovation, where it has been argued that the inclusion of a broad range of stakeholders brings forth more successful innovation whose benefits and burdens are more equally shared (Balkema & Pols, 2015; Stilgoe et al., 2013). Within the literature on Political Corporate Responsibility it has been argued that inclusion of stakeholders at the beginning of value chains in business strategies is a moral imperative (Scherer et al., 2016).

Table 1 Practices in value chains relevant to means and goals of inclusion

Practices identified	Value Chain Segment	Stakeholders impacted	Category of means	Category of goals
Crop choice	Conversion	Farmers, agricultural workers	Design	Autonomy, Economic justice, considering impacts, and managing uncertainties
Learning practices	Biomass supply	Farmers, agricultural workers, companies (incl. Engineers and designers)	Institutional arrangements	Managing uncertainties
Biorefinery design	Conversion	Farmers, agricultural workers, companies (incl. Engineers and designers)	Design	Economic justice, social development, autonomy, considering of impacts, and managing uncertainties
Contracts	Conversion	Farmers, agricultural workers, companies (incl. Engineers and designers)	Institutional arrangements	Autonomy, Economic justice
Communication	Biomass supply, logistics, conversion	Farmers, agricultural workers, companies (incl. Engineers and designers)	Institutional arrangements	Autonomy, managing uncertainties
Certificates	Biomass supply, logistics, conversion, end product	Depending on the certification scheme, more or less actors are impacted by certification.	Institutional arrangements	Economic justice, social development, autonomy, considering of impacts, and managing uncertainties

Source: Robaey et al., 2022

inclusion as we did in the IBIS-project where we studied four different cases in the biobased economy (see Robaey et al., 2022; Asveld et al., 2023, De Gelder & Asveld, 2024). Table 1 below summarizes prevalent practices for inclusion in these cases as well as the involved value chain segment, impacted stakeholders, and both the means and goals of inclusion in the value chains of the considered bioeconomy. Each paper approaches the issue of practices of inclusion in a particular way, highlighting one or more aspects of inclusion. Together, these papers show how inclusion practices can or cannot successfully be implemented, and how these practices are dynamic processes prone to factors that can be context-dependent (e.g., frugality).

The papers in this issue underscore the relevance of several of these practices by forwarding experiences of inclusion practices in various contexts. From these cases, we distinguish the importance of tailor-made contracts, the need for dynamic learning practices and the pivotal role of communication in practices of inclusion. The role of crop choice, certificates and biorefinery design are not addressed in the papers in this SI, since these are more prevalent in biobased value chains. This SI focused on food value chains in which these aspects were not relevant.

In the paper *Are Collective Trading Organisations Necessarily Inclusive of Smallholder Farmers? A Comparative Analysis of Farmer-led Auctions in the Javanese Chillli Market* inclusion is considered in a setting where smallholders are also active within a joint organization and participate in farmer-run auctions. In other words,

the auction as a trading mechanism in the value chain is made ‘inclusive’. By comparing a family-run business set up and a cooperative ownership auction, they find that inclusion is “highly depending on context-dependent factors such as daily business. There is a tradeoff to be made between inclusion, decision-making and performance”. Applying inclusion in practice creates additional costs for companies and farmers in terms of time and money. The authors discover two main conditions to make smallholders more inclusive in the auction structure: security of direct payments and adequate handling of the risk of delayed payments. In doing so, they identify contracts as a practice of inclusion. Co-operative structures may – in contrast to what has typically been suggested in the literature - not always be able to guarantee such inclusive outcomes where private structures can do. The prevalent risks for the involved farmers in paying and selling in market structures need to be studied before introducing organizational structures that do no justice to the risk-taking in smallholders’ daily business operations. This finding derived from auctions underscores the need for tailor made contracts that take into account local conditions and existing exchange patterns in practices of inclusion.

The paper *Justice and Inclusiveness: The Reconfiguration of Global-Local Relationships in Sustainability Initiatives in Ghana’s Cocoa Sector* research inclusion within the Ghanaian cocoa sector, focusing on smallholders. The authors argue that procedural justice principles of interdependence and refutability as well as distributive justice principles of need and equity are necessary for the establishment of ownership, voice, risk and reward. They find, based on an analysis of five initiatives involved in sustainability, that inclusion should be regarded a dynamic process rather than a predefined ethical standpoint. The cases show how inclusion is in fact an outcome of a dynamic process in which interactions between state regulations and farmers’ agency rework the concept and practice of inclusion (e.g. the learning practices as part of the means institutional arrangements). Moreover, these interactions show how inclusion regards a continuous mutual dependency between the involved market parties and is therefore highly context dependent.

The paper *An assessment of ‘Inclusive’ Business Models: Vehicles for Development, or Neo-Colonial Practices?* focuses on inclusion in marginalized communities in both Ghana and Kenya, aiming at the impact of inclusive business models. Typically, assessing the impact of inclusion is done for short-term projects. Based on an analysis of two companies, the author stresses that both companies facilitated a process in which, in the longer term, livelihoods of smallholders and communities are negatively impacted by inclusive business models. For example, diets became less diverse (Ghana), and water scarcity increased (Kenya). Inclusion requires actively engaged farmers, implies higher risk and needs public support. In order to have positive impact as an inclusive business, social and economic situations of farmer communities need to be mapped much better as well as their overall context and opportunities (e.g. alternative job opportunities). Overall, inclusion can hardly overcome structural causes of poverty. Institutional arrangements are key to achieve durable and meaningful inclusion (Robaey et al., 2022; Postal et al., 2020).

The paper *Connecting the Concepts of Frugality and Inclusion to Appraise Business Practices in Systems of Food Provisioning: A Kenyan Case Study* showcases how inclusion is a dynamic process highly influenced by principles of frugality. The

authors do so considering how frugality affects principles of inclusion in a Small-Medium Enterprise (SME) in Kenya which functions as a linchpin between farmers and aggregators on the one hand and a factory on the other hand. Inclusion is regarded in this part of the value chain (essentially the middle) as “an emergent outcome of everyday practices under conditions of scarcity” of both smallholder food producers and low-income consumers. Outcomes of applying principles of inclusion are highly time-sensitive and are flexible dependent on the issues that are at hand at that moment, particularly scarcity. Before implementing external, shorter organizational structures, these conditions including the context should be mapped to provide for a tailor-made system to collaborate. Such contextual structures may benefit from organizations and SMEs in the middle that are able to manage the relationships between and practices of various market actors (i.e. producers, aggregators) in value chains. Such arrangements stimulate collaborative learning practices which are essential to inclusion (Robaey et al., 2022; De Gelder & Asveld, 2024).

The paper *Strategies for Increasing Participation of Diverse Consumers in a Community Seafood Program* takes a different and an understudied perspective within the literature on inclusion in agricultural value chains: the perspective of marginalized consumers. For these consumers, food access can be problematic. In a case study, the authors study seven community-supported fishery programs that implement inclusion practices (e.g. the means). The programs were focused on for example discounting prices, allowing for various payment methods, using more varied persons in communication and recruitment as well as locations. The paper suggests that the strategies deployed at the institutional level were successful for including a more diverse group of consumers, suggesting ways how marginalized consumers can be involved in such community-supported programs. Synergies emerged between payment and communication methods, underscoring the other papers’ findings about inclusion practices regarding tailor made contracts and communication channels. The findings of the paper suggest that forms of inclusion at the consumer side can be successfully applied to improve food access among marginalized consumers by using the right institutional arrangements.

The papers in this SI show that by focusing on the implementation of inclusion as a set of rules or ethical principles (such as Heeks et al., 2013 for example), a range of factors should be taken into account when implementing inclusion practices. Inclusion practices in businesses and value chains will not automatically lead to a beneficial outcome for the marginalized. Applying principles of inclusion to the benefit of the marginalized requires a good contextual understanding, as well as research and assessment methods that focus on the longer run (Magnus, this issue). Next, when trying to improve the *outcomes* for farmers by making value chains shorter, the roles of SMEs should be understood and not be underestimated given the opportunities and experience they have with the frugal circumstances of many market parties (Vellema et al., this issue). Also, the operational set up of external organizations should be well-thought through given that private organizations may sometimes better be able to manage and/or offer lower risks for smallholders (Untari & Vellema, this issue). Finally, at the other end of the value chains, Young et al. (this issue) show that tactical (what is done) and structural approaches (what the location is) work in synergy, to be helpful in recruiting very diverse, formerly marginalized groups of customers.

This shows how important and useful it is to also apply inclusion at the end of value chains, e.g., deploy strategies to also include marginalized consumers.

This way, this Special Issue has brought together scholars working at the concept of inclusion and highlights experiences on working with inclusion to the fore. In this introduction we have highlighted how practices of inclusions at different levels of means can or cannot lead to positive outcomes (goals) for the marginalized (e.g. Robaey et al., 2022). Institutional arrangements on learning practices (for example collaborative learning) as well as the right type of communication and dedicated contracts with smallholders have been forwarded in the papers as factors that could lead to achieve the goals of inclusion (economic justice, autonomy, less uncertainty and social development). The SI thus facilitates discussion and offers space for further research on the how means and goals of inclusion can be aligned better to obtain goals for smallholder welfare under different circumstances at a variety of nodes in value chains.

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