
Symposium

“The role of value chain development in agri-food systems transformation”

September 22-23, 2025 | Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Current agri-food systems (AFS) are contributors to global crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and malnutrition. Furthermore, they are sources of increasing social conflict over natural resource use. Simultaneously, these systems are highly vulnerable to global warming, armed conflicts, and water scarcity. Thus, AFS must undergo profound transformation to effectively address hunger and malnutrition and to ensure the wellbeing of global ecosystems. However, this overdue paradigm shift remains contested. Divergent narratives compete over the most appropriate pathways for change, and powerful vested interests at times counter transformation efforts.

Over the past three decades, value chain approaches and value chain development (VCD) have become central frameworks for a large community of practitioners aiming to improve the socio-economic conditions of value chain stakeholders, particularly smallholder farmers in rural areas. Despite widespread adoption, VCD projects have repeatedly yielded mixed evaluation results. Apart from the many successes, some projects have failed to achieve the intended outcomes, have negatively impacted social and ecological contexts, or have been criticized for lacking practical relevance and scalability. Although recent AFS transformation frameworks commonly place value chains at their core, the role of VCD in AFS transformation remains unclear.

Objectives

The primary objective of the symposium is to foster structured dialogue and collaboration between researchers and value chain practitioners. The event aims to produce insights on the evolving roles of VCD actors from academia, practice and policy making, in order to discuss their instruments, best practice experience and methods that can inform and shape the next generation of value chain policies and programs conducive to AFS transformation.

Participants

The symposium will take place at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (main building) over the course of two consecutive days, and will convene approximately 40 invited international experts representing:

- United Nations organizations
- International research institutes
- Academic institutions
- Development policy and practice communities

In addition, a broader audience will participate virtually, accessing the symposium's presentations online.

Symposium results

The symposium will produce several tangible outputs:

- Proceedings: The proceedings of the symposium, summarizing presentations and workshops, will be made publicly available;
- Policy Brief: A briefing paper capturing the main insights guiding the design and implementation of future value chain policies and tools;
- Scientific paper: Depending on symposium results and participant engagement, a scientific publication may be an additional outcome.

Program elements and procedures

The symposium is inspired by three (3) thematic keynotes and structured around six (6) design principles that are debated in the literature and considered important for the value chain approach to contribute to AFS transformation: The actual relevance of and experience with these six principles – (1) system thinking, (2) linking agroecology, landscape, and nutrition with economic perspectives, (3) strong sustainability and planetary boundaries, (4) focus on impact, (5) working with and through change agents, and (6) transformative action and related concepts – will be discussed in moderated interactive workshops among participants. In each of the six (6) workshops, organized in three (3) parallel sessions, a designated participant will give a thought-provoking 10-minute-input.

Each workshop session is introduced by a brief input-note characterizing the design principle in question. Those participants giving input shall provide the necessary overviews and/or provoking “food for thought” on which the following deliberating workshops can build upon. The discussion will be professionally moderated. Additionally, session summary sheets will be protocolled by observers. Fishbowl and other formats will promote interaction. External participants can follow the presentations online. Questions and contributions from external participants will be fed into the workshop in summarized form by a moderator.

Main results and debates of the workshops will be visualized in a dynamically growing pin board exhibition in the aula of the venue and presented before the plenum of participants. The last working sessions of the symposium consist of plenary sessions dedicated to the attempt to describe the next generation of value chain development programs, in particular (1) The (changing) roles of value chain actors and

activities (2) principles for future value chain program design. Prior to closing the event we will participatorily attempt to formulate some preliminary concluding remarks concerning symposium results.

Symposium details at a glance

<i>Location</i>	<i>Senatssaal (1st floor)</i> <i>Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin</i> <i>Unter den Linden 6</i> <i>10099 Berlin</i>
<i>Registration</i>	https://3vneonix.forms.app/registration-berlin-symposium-the-role-of-value-chain-developmentfor-food-systems-transformation
<i>Inquiries</i>	sle@agrar.hu-berlin.de
<i>Language</i>	<i>English and German</i>



Program

1st Day: 08:00 am – 12:00 pm & 01:30 pm – 06:00 pm

08:00 am: Coffee & check-in (30')

08:30 am Welcome & introduction (30')

Celia Schmidt, Markus Hanisch (HU SLE) & Andreas Springer-Heinze (IVLA e.V.)

Objectives, motivation and guiding threads of the symposium

Keynote session 1 (45')

09:00 am Keynote presentation 1 (30')

David Neven (FAO)

The debate on the role of VCD for AFS transformation

09:30 am Questions & comments from the plenary (15')

09:45 am: Coffee break (30')

Parallel sessions 1 & 2 (105')

10:15 am Session 1: System thinking Room A Input by Maryam Rezaei (ODI) (10') Ways to handle and visualize the system nature of AFS: A value chain development perspective	Session 2: Linking agroecology, food security & nutrition with economic perspectives Room B Input Benjamin Davies (WHH) (10') How to accommodate the different perspectives in sustainable VCD/FST?
10:30 am Discussion & exchange of concepts & ideas	Discussion & exchange of concepts & ideas
11:45 am Wrapping up results	Wrapping up results

12:00 pm – 01:30 pm: Lunch Break (90')

Keynote session 2 (45')

01:30 pm Keynote presentation 2 (30')

Dietmar Stoian (ICRAF)

20 years of sustainable value chain development (SVCD): What have we learnt (or not)?

02:00 pm Questions & comments from the plenary (15')

Parallel sessions 3 & 4 (105')

02:15 pm	Session 3: Resilient food systems that keep planetary boundaries	Session 4: Staying focused on impact
	Room A	Room B
	Input by Niklas Kitzmann (PIK) (10')	Input by Ruerd Ruben (WUR Wageningen) (10')
	The concept of planetary boundaries	Staying focused on impact of VC interventions
02:30 pm	Discussion & exchange of concepts & ideas	Discussion & exchange of concepts & ideas
03:45 pm	Wrapping up results	Wrapping up results

04:00 pm: Coffee break (30')

04:30 pm **Wrapping up Day 1 (45')**

Plenum: Results pin board exhibition

06:00 pm: Evening reception & buffet – venue: Empore Senatssaal



2nd Day: 09:00 am – 12:30 pm & 01:45 pm – 05:00 pm

09:00 am: Welcome to the second day

09:00 am Introduction to Day 2 (30')

Markus Hanisch (HU SLE) & Andreas Springer-Heinze (IVLA e.V.)

Keynote session 3 (45')

09:30 am Keynote presentation 3 (30')

Neila Dridi, Consultant in value chains and entrepreneurship, Tunisia

Effective transformation practices

10:00 am Questions & comments from the plenary (15')

10:15 am: Coffee break (30')

Parallel sessions 5 & 6 (105')

10:45 am Session 5: Working with and through change agents Room A Input by GB Banjara (Agritererra Uganda) (10') Seeking and supporting change agents	Session 6: The meaning of transformative action Room B Input by Kossi Apedo (GIZ Togo) (10') What makes action transformative?
11:00 am Discussion & exchange of concepts & ideas	Discussion & exchange of concepts & ideas
12:15 pm Wrapping up results	Wrapping up results

12:30 pm – 01:30 pm: Lunch Break

Plenary session

01:30 pm Transformative value chains - the next generation

Input by Jos Bijman (WUR Wageningen) (15')

On changing roles of actors, methods & requirements

Plenary workshop 1 (60')

01:45 pm The (changing) roles of VC actors and activities

02:45 pm: Coffee break (30')

Plenary workshop 2 (75')

03:15 pm Principles for future value chain programs designed

Closing of the event (30')

04:30 pm Formulating outcomes: The future role of VCD in AFS transformation
Synthesis exhibition – formulating preliminary theses & conclusions

05:00 pm End of the event