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Linking Communities of Practice with Value Chain Development in Smallholder Farming Systems

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Summary. — Value chains are an increasingly popular approach to understanding complex policy challenges in agricultural development. However, value chain research and development has often been too narrowly focused on the structural elements of production, resulting in lack of adaptive capacity. Drawing on the concept of communities of practice, this paper seeks to operationalize an understanding of how the social relations that underpin smallholder-related value chains can be better supported to enhance resilience. Case studies from the Caribbean are then used to illustrate how a community of practice approach to value chain development might facilitate the formation of social capital.

Keywords — Small island developing states, Community-based development, Rural development, Food security, Food policy, CARICOM

1. INTRODUCTION

From systems to networks to chains to clusters, a variety of concepts are being used to assist with understanding the complex sets of relationships, influences, and interactions that shape social and ecological outcomes at different scales. Within international agriculture and food systems research, value chain analysis has become widely used for understanding how actors insert themselves into economic processes and the implications of this for rural development (Humphrey & Schmitz, 2001; Kaplinsky, 2001; Stringer & Le Heron, 2008). However, value chain analysis has been critiqued for focusing too much on the structural elements of production, with only the latest generation of value chain research starting to examine more closely the social, cultural, and symbolic relations that underpin value chain initiatives (Gibbon & Ponte, 2005; Riisgaard et al., 2010).

In this paper we address the question of how social relations in value chains may be better understood and operationalized by drawing on the concept of "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991). While this literature has not yet been picked up in value chain research and development, we argue it is particularly helpful for understanding the core challenges of collaboration, trust, and learning among actors, particularly in developing area contexts (Pietrobelli & Rabellotti, 2011). As the need to consider resilience in food-related value chains becomes more pressing due to economic and environmental change (Elms & Low, 2013), there is a need for integrated approaches and tools that engage local stakeholders in enhancing value chain performance (Bammann, 2007; Bernet, Devaux, Ortiz, & Thiele, 2005; Luthe, Wyss, & Schuckert, 2012; Ponomarov & Holcomb, 2009). We draw on a case study of food security in the Caribbean to illustrate how a community of practice approach (COP) to developing agriculture and food value chains could assist stakeholders in identifying more resilient policies and practices to better support adaptation and innovation.

2. BACKGROUND

(a) *Value chain analysis*

Most simply, a value chain is the range of activities required to bring a product or service from production through to final consumption (Kaplinsky, 2000). The value chain has become a useful analytical tool for understanding the relationships among actors in a chain and considering the potential implications for development (Humphrey & Schmitz, 2002), particularly in international food and agriculture development contexts (Graef, 2014; Kaplinsky & Morris, 2001; Stringer & Le Heron, 2008). The overall aim of value chain analysis is to identify ways to improve the performance of a chain such that all actors are placed in a better position (Bammann, 2007; Riisgaard et al., 2010). The position of actors in a chain may be improved through increased rewards and/or minimized exposure to risk, both economically and in terms of outcomes such as poverty, gender, labor, and the environment (Riisgaard et al., 2010).

According to Gereffi (1994), value chains consist of three main components: input–output, geography, and governance. The governance dimension has received the most attention in value chain analysis because it brings to the foreground questions about the forces that both enable and limit what actors in the chain can do (Sturgeon, 2008). As Giuliani, Pietrobelli, and Rabellotti (2005) state, "[a]t any point in the

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chain, some degree of governance or coordination is required in order to take decisions" (p. 551). These decisions could include what should be done, how to do it, or how much or when something should be produced in both market and non-market contexts (Giuliani et al., 2005). Many theories have emerged for explaining governance in value chains, to the extent that Gibbon, Bair, and Ponte (2008) suggested that value chain analysis might best be understood as a methodology that can be "mobilized within various theoretical perspectives" (p. 315).

However, there are shortcomings in many of the existing approaches to understanding governance in value chains. One of the main critiques of value chain analysis has been that it is inadequate at capturing the complexity of social relationships across the length of the value chain (Bair, 2009). Bair (2009) argued that value chain analysis has been best at looking at the relationships between particular links in the chain (for example, between a buyer and supplier), but less successful at understanding linkages, including different types of governance or forms of coordination, across the entire chain. Bair's argument reflects a broader criticism of most value chain research in focusing too much on the structural and economic elements of production and not enough on the social, symbolic, and cultural relations among actors (Gibbon & Ponte, 2005). In the area of agriculture and food value chains specifically, Graef (2014) similarly argued that governance approaches need to better consider all the components of a value chain and take into account the particular social and institutional settings in which the chain is operating. Others have echoed this criticism in a call for greater attention to the "horizontal" factors, including the historical, institutional, and social contexts, in which value chains are embedded (Riisgaard et al., 2010).

Increasingly, social interactions among actors have been identified as important to successfully functioning value chains. For example, Schmitz (1999) suggested that the ability of actors to innovate in order to capture greater value relies on "consciously pursued joint action" (p.469). Others have demonstrated that trust among actors is a "strategic asset" that can increase performance of a value chain (Vieira & Traill, 2008, p.464). Further, a growing body of research suggests that organizations that are able to successfully transfer knowledge are more productive than those that are not (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Saliola & Zanfei, 2009). Several researchers have stressed the need to support collaboration, trust and learning among actors in value chain research and development, utilizing participatory approaches that seek to engage local stakeholders and offer opportunities for strategic learning and innovation (Bammann, 2007; Bernet et al., 2005; Graef, 2014; Proctor & Lucchesi, 2011; Ribiero & Zwirner, 2010; USAID, 2009).

While the importance of social interactions and engaging stakeholders in value chain development is becoming increasingly recognized in the literature, the question of how to effectively develop social relations among actors in value chains remains conceptually under-developed (Ribiero & Zwirner, 2010). While some value chain analyses have separately addressed issues of collaboration, trust, or learning, few have dealt with them collectively, or examined how these interactions play out across the entire chain. Recognizing this knowledge gap, we draw on the concept of communities of practice to help operationalize an understanding of social interactions within value chains and how they might be developed.

(b) *Communities of practice: Operationalizing an understanding of social relations in value chains*

(i) *Defining communities of practice*

Communities of practice are "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, 2006). The term was originally coined by educational theorist, Etienne Wenger, and anthropologist, Jean Lave, as an approach to learning that focused on people and the social relationships and structures that allow them to learn together (Wenger, 2006). According to Wenger (2006) communities of practice have three defining characteristics: the domain, the community, and the practice. The domain is the common interest that links the community; the community is the joint activities in which members engage; and the practice refers to the shared stories, tools, and resources from which the group can draw.

Communities of practice are not synonymous with project teams or working groups (Hearn & White, 2009; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Rather, unlike these groups, communities of practice are self-selecting, voluntary, and have more fluid goals based around shared interests, practices, and learning rather than solely management objectives (Hearn, 2009; Lesser & Storck, 2001). Lesser and Prusak (1999) further broke down an understanding of community and practice, explaining that the word "community" indicates that communities of practice are not limited by boundaries imposed by geography, sector, or function but defined by common tasks and work interests. The term "practice" refers to "knowledge in action," or the "dynamic process through which individuals learn how to do their jobs by actually performing tasks" (Lesser & Prusak, 1999). In this way, communities of practice are essentially informal and self-organizing (Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

More recently, Wenger-Trayner, Fenton-O'Creevy, Hutchinson, Kubiak, and Wenger-Trayner (2015) suggested that different communities of practice may also come together to form larger "landscapes of practice" (p. 13), which have the potential to serve as loci for social learning and innovation (Wenger-Trayner, Fenton-O'Creevy, Hutchinson, Kubiak, & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

We believe there are strong synergies between understanding and developing communities of practice, and understanding and developing governance approaches for value chains that better attend to social relationships. First, as communities of practice are not limited by traditional boundaries, so value chains bring together actors across sectors and spatial scales. Second, a view of 'knowledge in action' in communities of practice supports a consideration of the dynamic interactions among actors in value chains (Bair, 2009; Gibbon & Ponte, 2005). Lastly, taking the perspective of landscape of practice provides insights as to how different communities of practice come together in a value chain.

(ii) *Supporting innovation, adaptation, and resilience among value chain actors through communities of practice*

The communities of practice literature, with its focus on how people work and learn together, offers important insights for supporting innovation, adaptation, and resilience in value chains. Here, resilience can be understood as the capacity of a system "to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks" (Walker, Holling, Carpenter, & Kinzig, 2004). While the concept of resilience was commonly used in the study of ecological systems, it has