

International Journal of Agriculture Extension and Social Development

Volume 9; Issue 8; August 2026; Page No. 1232-1241

Received: 19-06-2026
Accepted: 23-07-2026

Indexed Journal
Peer Reviewed Journal

Global research trends in agricultural value chains: A bibliometric analysis

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26180723.2026.v9.i8p.4158>

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Abstract

The scientific findings are crucial to collaboration and economic development in agriculture. Agricultural value chains accommodate different stakeholders who play pivotal roles from input supply to final consumption; hence, the importance of findings in the area. This study examines the global research scenario, intellectual structure, and emerging trends in the agricultural value chain. The data were obtained from the Dimensions database. A sample of 2,127 peer-reviewed articles was gathered from 2010 to 2025. A bibliometric technique using the R tool was used for the analysis in the Biblioshiny package. The findings reveal that research in the domain experienced minor growth between 2010 and 2015, but increased steadily from 2016 and grew at a much higher rate following 2020 until reaching its zenith around 480 publications in 2025. A handful of journals, particularly Sustainability, Frontier in Sustainable Food Systems, Agriculture, Foods and Cogent Food & Agriculture, dominated publications. The productivity of the research was covered by authors from China, the United States, India and Europe, but researchers from developing regions are comparatively underrepresented. The major themes were food, sustainability, and systems, which formed the core themes of agricultural value chain research. Farmers, production and smallholders are well-developed themes, showcasing their central value. Research evolved from a focus on production and pest-related issues toward sustainable, technology-driven agri-food systems. The overall findings generally reveal the intellectual structure and evolution of agricultural value chain research, providing useful evidence for researchers, journal editors and policymakers.

Keywords: Agricultural value chains, sustainability, agriculture, scientific production, bibliometrics

Introduction

Across different countries on the global stage, agriculture remains the pillar of food security, jobs, and rural economic growth. Agricultural value chains are the series of actors and activities that involve the movement of a product from input suppliers and producers to processors, traders, and retailers, that served as a key vehicle for the study of value creation, value addition, as well as the distribution of value among these actors, by researchers and practitioners alike (Mishra *et al.*, 2024) ^[7]. The value chain approach emphasizes the interactions, dependencies, and power dynamics between smallholder farmers and domestic and international markets and how these affect returns to rural households, rather than considering farming as a stand-alone activity.

Over the last decade or so, there has been an increasing interest in agricultural value chain research, as a result of interaction of various factors. Participating in international agricultural trade through global value chains has gained more significance for developing countries, which led to scholars' continuous focus on the ways it can be improved and made more equitable (Białowas & Budzyńska, 2022) ^[2]. Research into the impediments for smallholder farmers in improving their position in such a lineage and gaining a higher proportion of value chain revenues has also increased (Karatepe & Scherrer, 2024) ^[5], as has research on inclusive innovation and multi-stakeholder collaboration to uphold the position of smallholders and other value chain actors in various agricultural contexts. (Horton *et al.*, 2023; Mishra *et*

al., 2024) ^[4, 7]. Other drivers have been the sustainability and climate agenda, food supply chain transformation after the Covid-19 crisis, and the fast pace at which digital tools are being used in agri-food systems.

Wang and Gu (2022) ^[12] conducted a bibliometric and visualization analysis of the value chain field, while Misra and Mention (2022) ^[8] reviewed the literature on open innovation in food value chains, and Malanski *et al* (2022) ^[6] also did a bibliometric review of the literature related to labor dynamics in agricultural value chains. More specifically, in the current study, Takawira & Mujuru (2024) ^[10] conducted a global mapping of agricultural value chain studies by using the Web of Science database, which gathered 600 documents published between 2005 and 2024. They found a marked increase in publications since 2016 with a continued greater level of research in Europe and North America. Concurrently, Susandi *et al.* (2025) ^[9] carried out a systematic review of literature published in the Scopus database that focused on smallholder participation and engagement in agricultural value chains. Mishra *et al.* (2024) ^[7] conducted a scoping review of how actors in agricultural value chains in developing countries are collaborating. All of these studies indicate a dynamic domain that is still only partially charted and not evenly developed. In this regard, the present study is conducted to analyze the growth, productivity, influence, and thematic structure of research on agricultural value chains using bibliometric analysis.

Methodology

The research design used in this study is a quantitative bibliometric design to measure the productivity and citation impact of authors, institutions, countries and journals, and to portray the conceptual structure of a research domain or field, such as keyword co-occurrence and thematic mapping. The bibliometric data were collected from the Dimensions database. Dimensions was chosen because it collects publications, citations, and other research outputs relevant to publications from a very large number of sources into a single, unified platform. Comparative evaluations have shown that Dimensions' publications and citations data is broadly comparable to that of Scopus (Visser *et al.*, 2021) ^[11]. A Boolean query was used to search the records that have been indexed in Dimensions, using the relevant search terms "agricultural value chain" OR "agri-food value chain" OR "food value chain" in the full data fields of records indexed in Dimensions. The search was peculiar to documents published from 2010 to 2025. Only articles in English from peer-reviewed journals were considered. The document type included was an article, excluding conference proceedings, book chapters, preprints, and editorials.

The results were also broken down by subject division to include only documents from the four categories that are most relevant to agricultural value chain research, namely: agricultural and biological sciences, business and management and economics, environmental sciences, and related social sciences. Following these avenue, 2,127

documents were selected for analysis. The final set of records was exported from Dimensions in a format suitable for the bibliometrix R package, and contained data on bibliographic fields such as author names, country, source titles, year of publication, keywords, and the number of citations.

The data were analyzed using the web-based graphical and tabular interface of the bibliometrix R package (Ab Rashid, 2023) ^[1]. Biblioshiny was chosen because it provides descriptive performance analysis and science mapping in a single, replicable application frame, and generates publication and citation trends, author, institution, country and source productivity rankings, keyword co-occurrence map, thematic maps, thematic evolution over time and collaboration networks without having to use different and multiple software packages.

The analysis was conducted to identify the number of publications and citations recorded respectively on an annual basis, provide a growth curve for the field, as well as identify authors, institutions, countries and journals with the highest number of publications and citations. It also analyzed keyword co-occurrence analysis for dominant science themes and their interlinkages, thematic mapping for theme density and uniformity within the field and collaboration network analysis for institutional and country co-authorship patterns. These procedures enabled a complete data-based description of the quantity, intensity, and concepts of research on agriculture value chains from 2010 to 2025 at global level.

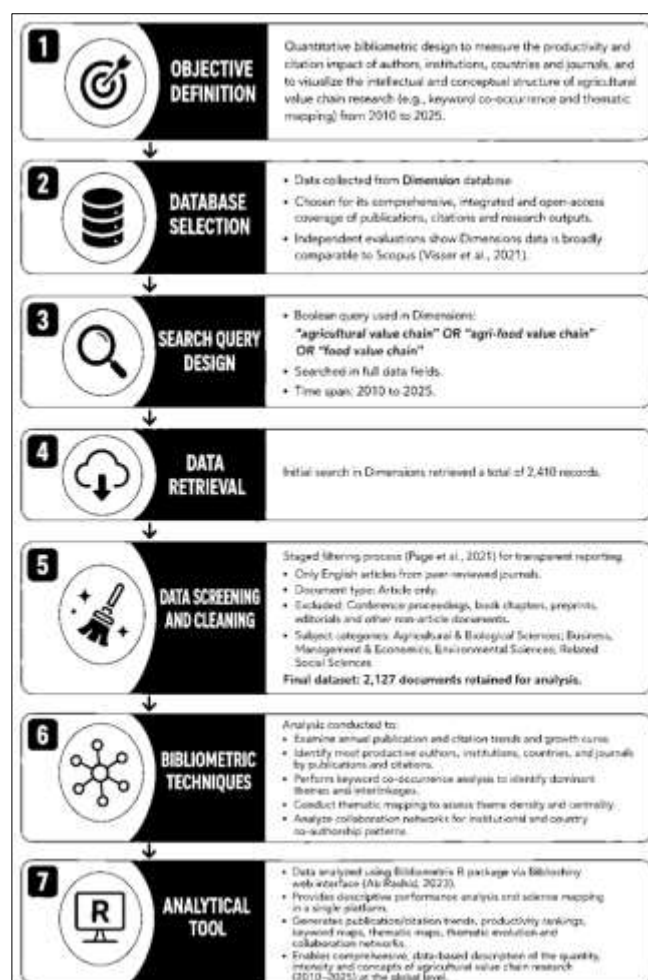


Fig 1: Research Methodology and Data Analysis Framework

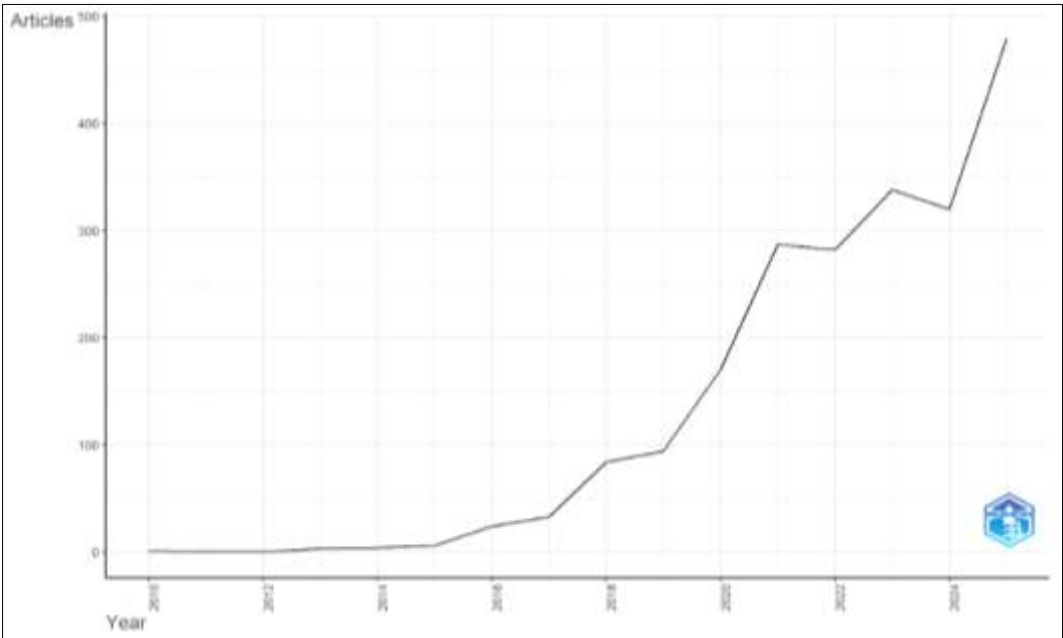


Fig 2: Annual Scientific Production

Results and Discussion

This analysis shows agricultural value chain research scientific productions yearly between 2010 and 2025. The articles were also published at a much higher rate over the period of the study, showcasing the increased interest of scholars in the field. The quantum of publications did not change significantly between 2010 and 2015, suggesting agricultural value chain research was still in its maturing stage. The number of research publications has grown steadily since 2016, and this growth is more pronounced

following 2020. In 2020, there were about 170 publications and in 2021, nearly 290 publications, with a decent decrease in 2022. This decline, however, proved to be temporary as the production of publications bounced back in 2023, followed by a slight decrease in 2024. In 2025, about 480 publications were generated, the highest amount of scientific production. The continuous expansion of the number of publications symbolizes the growth and worldwide relevance of agricultural value chain research.

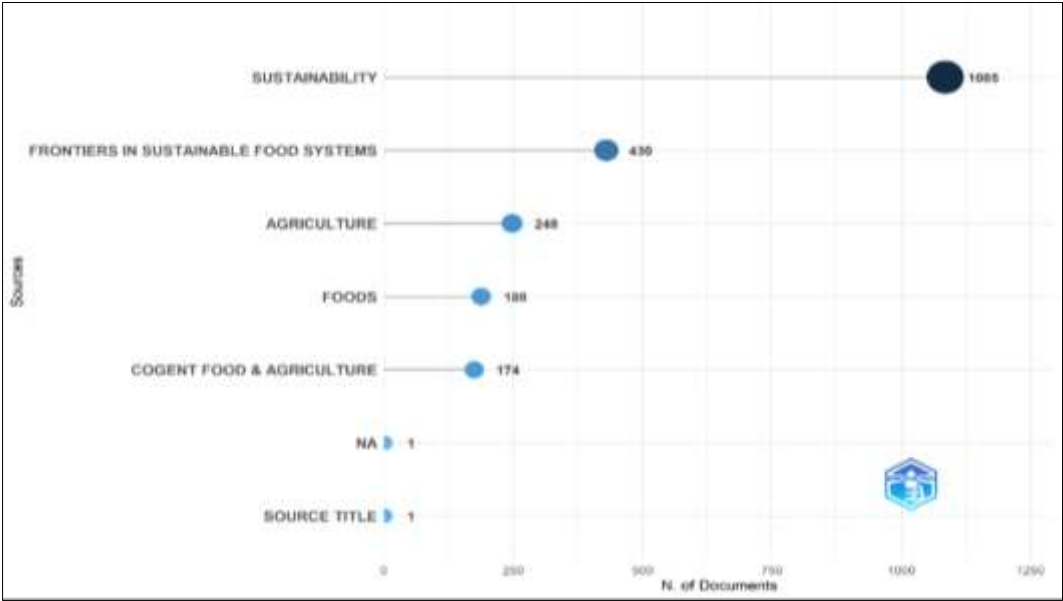


Fig 3: Most Relevant Sources

This analysis shows the top sources of publications on agricultural value chains for the study period. Sustainability was the most productive journal with 1,085 publications, then Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems with 430, Agriculture 248, Foods 188, and Cogent Food & Agriculture 174.

Sustainability is highlighted, indicating the increasing integration of agricultural value chain research with the wider sustainability theme, including environmental, economic, and social themes.

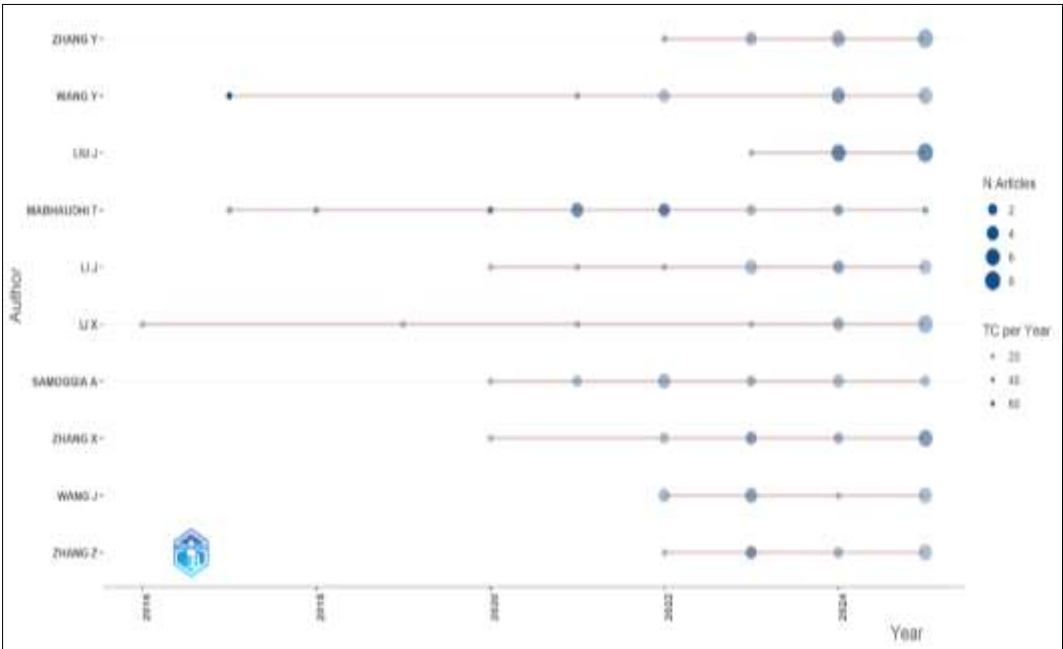


Fig 4: Authors' Production over Time

Authors production over time analysis shows that the five top contributors published at a relative rate from year to year, such as Wang Y, Zhang Y, Liu J, Li X, and Zhang X, who continued to engage with the field of agricultural value chain research. Wang Y had the longest publication span from 2017 to 2025, while Mabhaudhi T also had a consistent publication pattern during this time, indicating long-term research

commitment. The trend of increased annual scientific output that is seen in general is reflected in the number of larger bubbles seen in the period 2023–2025, where several leading authors are seen to have increased their publication volumes. The trend indicates that there has been sustainable research by established scholars and improved collaboration among scholars in the literature.

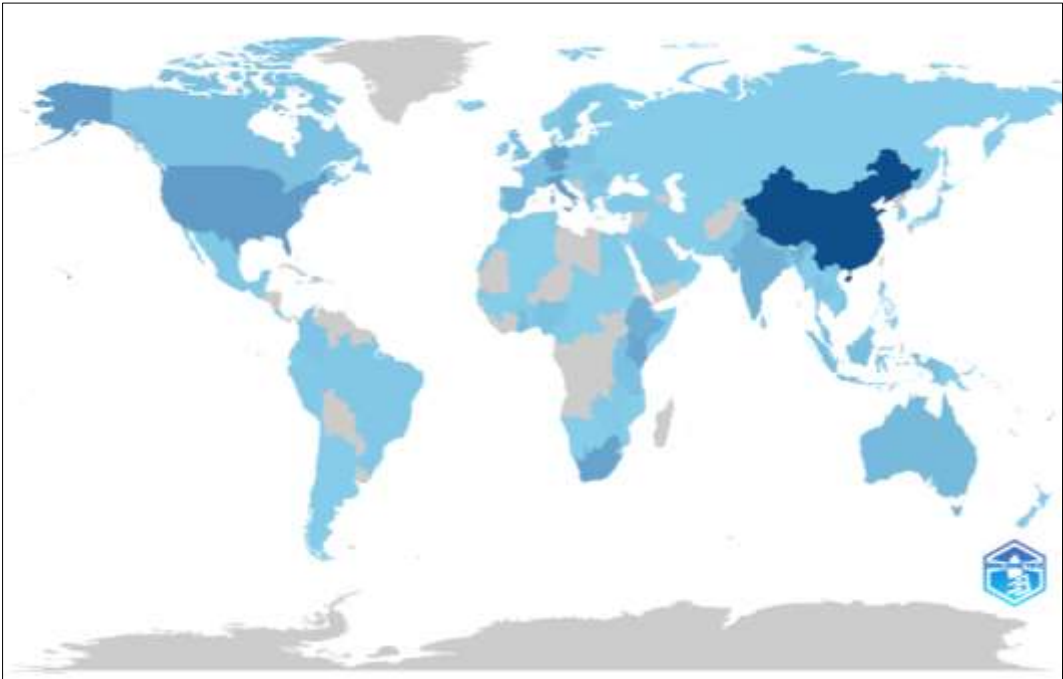


Fig 5: Country Scientific Production

Country scientific production analysis provides an insightful overview of the world distribution of scientific publications relevant to agricultural value chain research for the period from 2010 to 2025. The results indicate a wide geographical participation, but with a various research productivity, depending on the extent of the color scale. The most

productive countries were China, the USA, India and a number of European countries, which all largely contributed to the research production. Medium levels of publications were seen in various parts of South America, Africa and the Southeast Asian region, while few publications were noted in many developing countries.

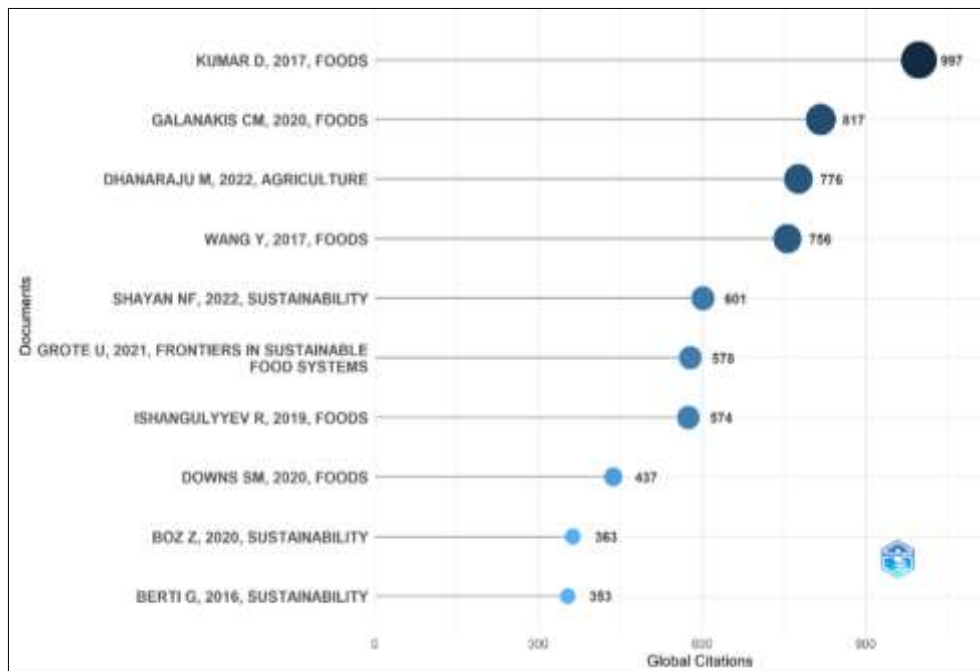


Fig 6: Most Global Cited Documents

Global citations indicate the impact a publication on the future research of the wider scientific literature. Kumar D. was the most cited document. (2017) with 997 citations globally, Galanakis C.M. (2020) 817 citations globally. The next most cited articles are made by Dhanaraju M. (2020) 817 citations globally, (2017) 997 citations globally, Galanakis C.M. (2022) 776 citations, and Wang Y. (2017) 756 citations. A large number of other published works have a significant impact, such as those by Shayan N.F. (2022), Grote U. (2021), Ishangulyyev R. (2019), Downs S.M. (2020), Boz Z. (2020), and Berti G. Each received over 350 citations in the

world, in 2016. The studies reviewed have had a significant impact on the thinking of the discipline, as proved by their high number of citations, which have contributed to the development of theoretical frameworks, methodologies and the empirical knowledge base of the discipline through their various aspects. Notably, lots of these articles, deemed highly cited, were published in journals such as Foods, Sustainability, Agriculture and Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems. This corroborates the previous analysis of the most relevant sources, highlighting the main importance of these journals in disseminating high impact researches.



Fig 7: Word Cloud of the Most Relevant Title Words

The word cloud analysis demonstrates that the number of relevant title words is very limited. It is filtered based on title in the analysis. It further showcases the most frequently used keywords in the research, and their relative frequencies, to reveal the predominant themes and emerging trends in the

field. The most prominent keyword was “Food”, suggesting that research is mainly focused on food systems, food production, food security and related sustainability concerns. The emphasis on sustainability further highlights the growing embedding of sustainability concepts in the research into the

agricultural value chain, focusing on the protection of the environment, utilization of resources and resilience to climate change. Other common terms such as agricultural, chain, systems, development and sustainability, are indicative of the multi-disciplinary nature of the field, and its emphasis on agricultural production systems, value chain management, and rural development.

Similarly, the frequent use of the term "farmers," "production," "supply," and "security" has ensured that agriculture productivity and food supply strengthening, farmers' livelihoods and food security remain current domains of interest in academic research. The literature is well supported by a significant quantity of empirical and evidence-based research, as backed by the prominence of the

words "analysis," "review," "study," and "evidence." Geographical keywords such as 'China', 'Africa' and 'rural' additionally indicate key research contexts, highlighting the relevant background of research in China and the increasing research focus on the challenge of agricultural development and food security in Africa. The use of emerging terms such as "digital," "innovation," "assessment," "resilience," "smallholder" and "COVID-19" suggests digitalization, technological innovations, resilience of agri-food systems, smallholder farming and impacts of global disruptions on agricultural value chains. Together, these trends suggest that the field is moving from traditional production and marketing concerns into a more integrated, sustainability-focused and technology-enabled area of research.

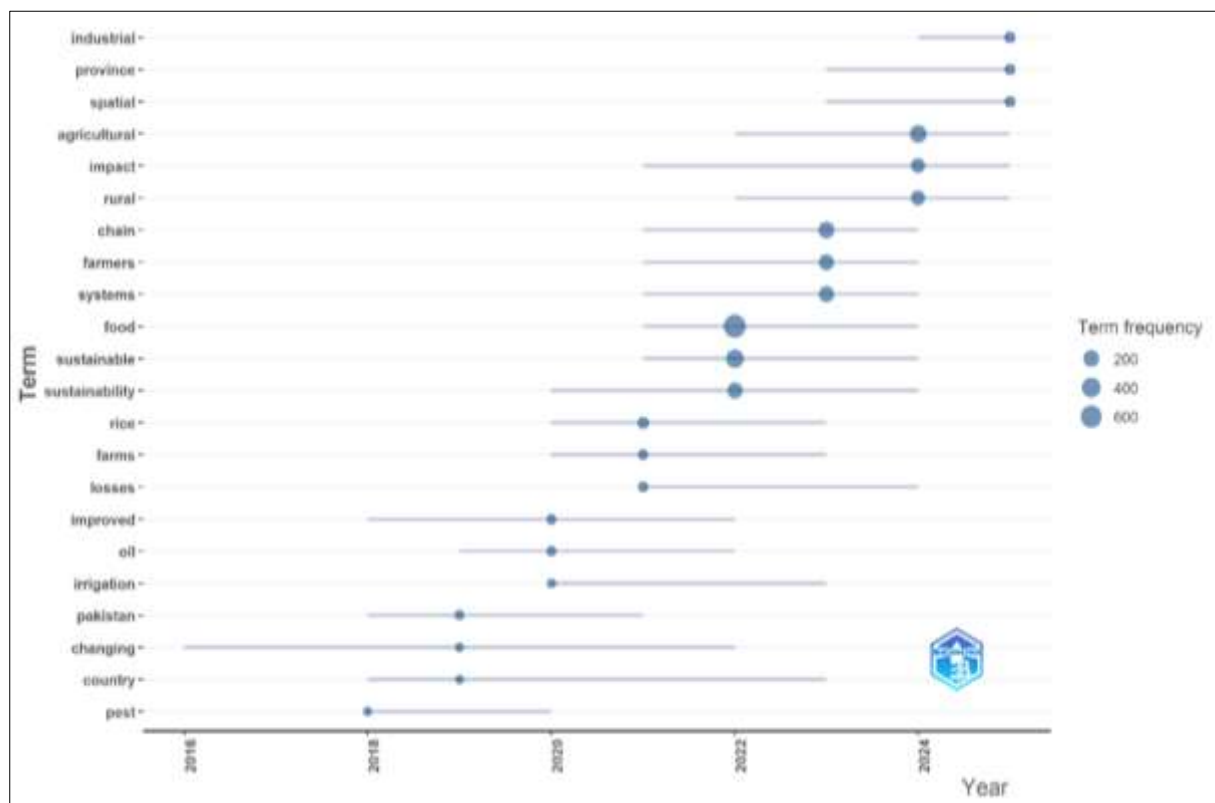


Fig 8: Trends Topics

The figure 8 shows the time trends of the research themes of agricultural value chains from 2016 to 2025. The results show a clear change of research focus over the years. In the early period 2016-2019, the words changing, country, pest, irrigation, oil, and improved were predominant in the literature, suggesting a focus on agricultural production, pest management, irrigation, and country-specific agricultural issues. The term "farms" appeared in the research texts more often in the period between 2020 and 2022, along with other terms such as rice, losses, food security, food, sustainability, and sustainable. This suggests that scholars became more interested in agricultural productivity, reducing post-harvest losses, food security, and sustainable agriculture during this period. In particular, the frequency of the term "food" was the highest of all the terms, suggesting its importance in the

changing research domain. Also from 2023, keywords like "systems," "farmers," "chain," "rural," "impact," and "agricultural" point to a move towards integrated agri-food systems, agricultural value chains, rural development and impacts on socio-economic aspects. The rise in the importance of 'agricultural' also symbolizes that the scope of research is also expanding beyond the farm-level production. The most recent period (2024–2025) added spatial, province, and industrial themes, which indicate increasing attention on the spatial aspects of development, the regional dimension, and the industrial aspects of agriculture. These topics are still not as common but indicate the use of more sophisticated analysis and policy lenses. The trend topics analysis therefore uncovers a gradual shift from production-oriented research to sustainability, integrated value chains and agri-food systems.

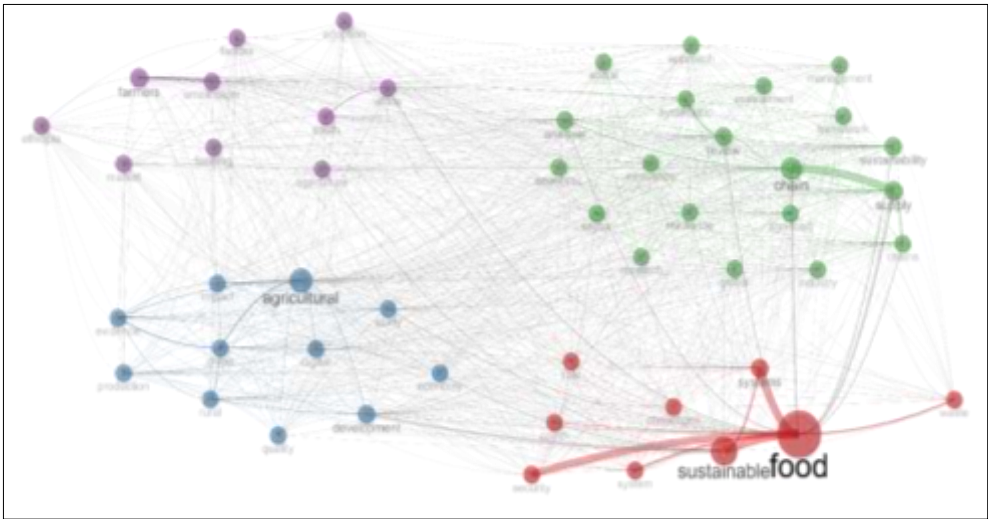


Fig 9: Keywords Co-occurrence Network

Keywords co-occurrence network analysis shows the conceptual structure of agricultural value chain research. The size of the nodes is proportional to the frequency of the keywords, the strength of the links between the nodes shows the degree of co-occurrence, and the color of the nodes portrays thematic clusters. The network indicates a very interconnected knowledge structure that can be classified into four large thematic clusters, which is characteristic of the multidisciplinary nature of the field. The food, sustainable, development, innovation, analysis, economic, and chain form the biggest cluster in the network, the green one. This showcases the current focus of research on sustainable food systems, the development of agricultural value chains, innovation and measures for improving the productivity and food security of economic systems. The red cluster is for the climate change, food security, climate related challenges, resilience and related issues. The

close linkage between the terms has been accompanied by an expanded focus by researchers in these areas on determining how environmental and socioeconomic pressures impact agricultural systems and how to develop resilient strategies to enhance food security. The blue cluster has a formidable focus on agriculture, production, farmers and systems, with emphasis on agricultural productivity and farming systems, and also on farm management. The themes attained under the purple cluster focus on the governance and capacity building aspects of the agricultural value chains in terms of management, training, policy and institutional support, with a particular focus on rural development. Hence, the very strong and tight links between the four clusters reflect the high degree of integration of agricultural value chain research, where production systems, sustainability, food security, innovation and rural development are strongly interconnected.

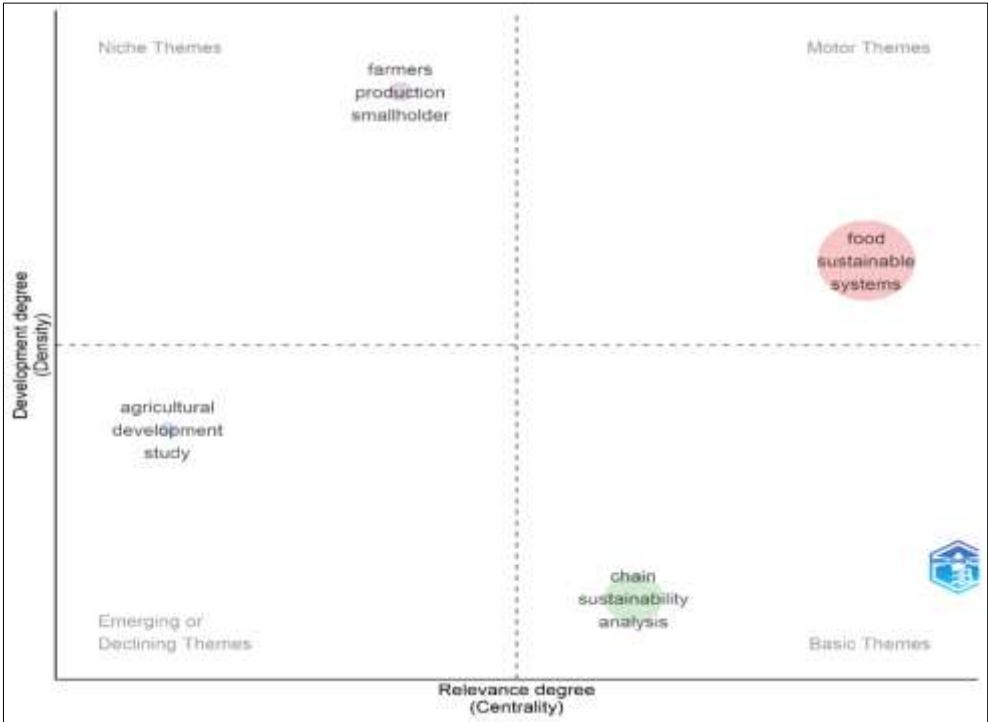


Fig 10: Thematic Map

The thematic map is displayed in this analysis and classifies research themes based on their centrality or relevance to the whole field, and density. These dimensions have been used to classify the literature into four quadrants: Motor themes, Niche themes, Basic themes, and Emerging or Declining themes, suggesting the conceptual structure and maturity of agricultural value chain research. The Motor Themes (upper-right quadrant) include food, sustainability, and systems. The high centrality and high density of these themes suggest that they are well-informed and are also central to the research field. Their size of nodes also symbolizes their high frequency which ascertains sustainable food systems as the main focus of current research on the field. The Niche Themes are farmers, production, and smallholders (upper left quadrant). These themes are well developed and

yet are relatively marginal, so they are still considered as other specialized domains of research with limited interaction with the general research scene. These show the occurrence of developed, but discipline-specific knowledge about smallholder agricultural production. The Basic Themes (lower-right quadrant) are chain, sustainability and analysis. They are conceptually basic, but they are also very abstract and dense, suggesting that they represent core ideas that underlie the field, but don't have the same level of conceptualization as the motor themes. In general, the thematic map indicates that research on value chains in agriculture is shifting to more sustainable and food system-focused research areas, and concepts are changing to more specific and analytically advanced research areas.

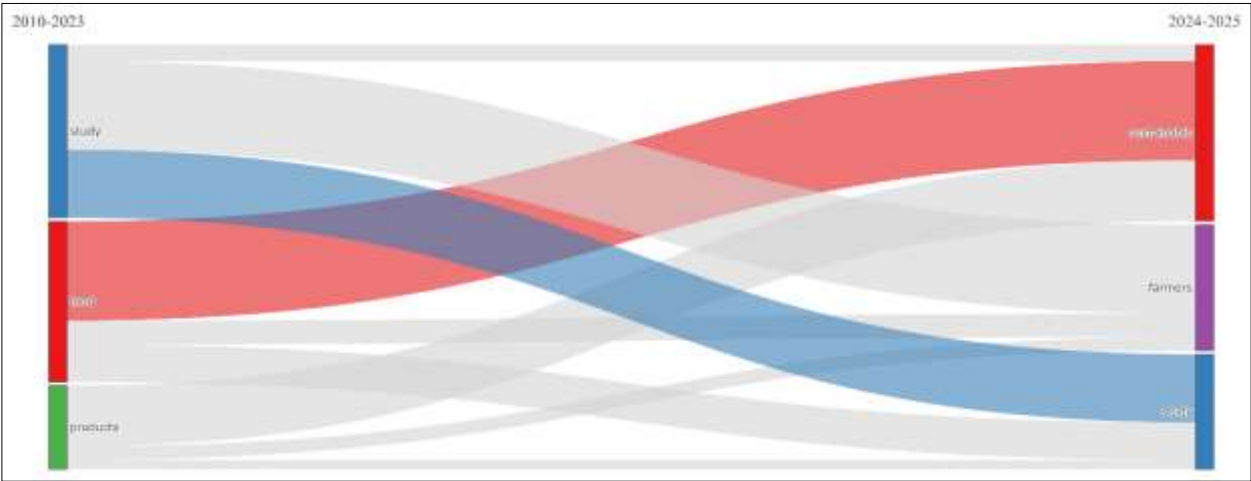


Fig 11: Thematic Evolution

The dominant themes have been mapped over the time period 2010-2023 and 2024-2025 (see Figure 11). The connecting bands denote thematic continuity; wider bands denote more evidence of the themes being more connected. The main themes of the literature during 2010-2023 were study, food, and products. The prominence of study reflects the exploratory character of the early literature, while food was a

dominant research stream, focusing on food systems and food-related agricultural issues. Products were not really mentioned separately, but were still a research focus. During 2024-2025, the thematic structure took a different direction: sustainable, farmers, and study. In this period, the fact that sustainable is now a popular theme suggests an increasing focus on sustainability in agricultural value chain research.

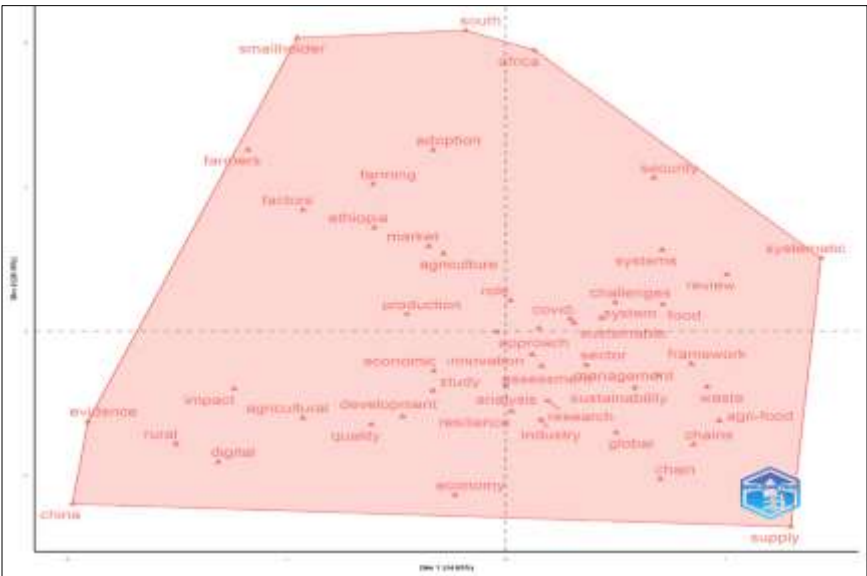


Fig 12: Factorial Analysis

The high food dependence on sustainable showcases increased food systems research that addresses sustainability, reflecting growing global interest in sustainable agriculture, the environment, and food security. There is also a dramatic shift from study to farmers, suggesting that the focus on broad exploratory research has shifted to more farmer-centered studies involving livelihoods, production systems, technology uptake and rural development. Therefore, the thematic development indicates the gradual refinement of the research field, where early themes develop into more specific ones and more sustainable research themes, without them being abandoned.

This figure indicates multiple correspondence analysis that clusters words that are similar in their co-occurrence. From this map, it can be seen that there are a number of interwoven themes in conceptually organizing agricultural value chain research. The words sustainable, food, systems, chain, and management are central terms that suggest that the core themes of the literature are related to sustainability, food systems and chain management. Other clusters focus on farmer-centric and regional themes such as 'smallholder', 'farmers', 'adoption', 'agriculture', 'Ethiopia', and 'Africa', portraying a shift in focus to technology adoption and agricultural development in developing regions. Other concepts such as innovation, resilience, assessment, development and digital underline emerging research directions regarding value chain resilience, digital transformation and sustainable agricultural development. The conceptual structure illustrates the multidisciplinary aspects of agricultural value chain research and the growing focus on sustainability, food security, innovation and farmers' development.

Discussion

According to the results, there is a significant increase in the quantum of agricultural value chain publications from 2010 to 2025 and even greater after 2020. This is a worldwide trend towards greater awareness of food security, sustainability, climate change, digital agriculture and resilient food systems. This is compatible with Takawira and Mujuru (2024)^[10] who noted a significant hike in agricultural value chain studies from 2016 onwards using 600 Web of Science documents. It also aligns with Wang and Gu (2022)^[12] and Malanski *et al.* (2022)^[6] who called value chains an emerging field of research with a multidisciplinary character.

The performance analysis shows that the majority of the publications are found in limited journals such as Sustainability, Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems, Agriculture, Foods and Cogent Food & Agriculture. It is an interdisciplinary domain of concentration, which includes agricultural economics, sustainability, food systems, environmental management and rural development. Misra and Mention (2022)^[8] also drew attention to interdisciplinary approaches in the context of open innovation in food value chains, while Mishra *et al.* (2024)^[7] discussed how to engage stakeholders or actors in agricultural value chains.

Another important feature of the research productivity was that China, the United States, India and other European countries were the top contributors. This is similar to the pattern that Takawira and Mujuru (2024)^[10] found to be high in Europe and North America. This relative lack of contribution from Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America

suggests a geographic imbalance and a need for higher research capacity and collaboration in other areas. Such is the case of the results found by Susandi *et al.* (2025)^[9], which showed that there still research gaps related to the participation of smallholders in agricultural value chains.

The science mapping results showcase this evolution in the intellectual structure of the field. More concern is now being given to sustainability, digital innovation, climate change, resilience, food security and integrated agri-food systems, while earlier studies highlighted production-related aspects like pest management and irrigation. Farmers, smallholders, governance and rural development issues continue to be relevant, showing ongoing focus on farmer participation and livelihoods. Continuous integration of technological, environmental and socio-economic dimensions is also found from the thematic evolution and factorial analyses.

Agricultural value chain research has been a progressing and developing multidisciplinary field in a short time. In the present study, the impact, proliferation, growth, and evolution of this document in terms of themes are interlinked and assessed by chronologically considering the document from 2010 to 2025 from the perspective of geography. The results reveal the rising importance of agricultural value chains globally and the need for more research interest and international cooperation in less studied areas.

Conclusion

Based on a bibliometric analysis of 2,127 peer-reviewed journal articles published in Dimensions between 2010 and 2025, this study analyzed the evolution, productivity and intellectual structure of agricultural value chain research. The study offers an overall mark of the field's evolution, pointing key research themes, and listing new research trends through the use of both performance analysis and science mapping techniques.

The results indicate that agricultural value chain research has significantly rise during the study period, especially after 2020, when the number of publications jumped significantly, with the highest number of documents recorded in 2025. This is the result of a worldwide trend towards sustainable food systems, food supply chain transformation, and the use of digital technologies in farming. Research production is concentrated on a few top-tier journals, further highlighting the link between agricultural value chain research and sustainability and food systems. In the same way, the distribution of scientific output is tilted, with a few countries, especially China, the United State, India and some European countries, accounting for the majority of output, and many developing countries being poorly represented despite their key contributions to global agricultural value chains.

Science mapping analyses show that there is a basic conceptual backbone of food, sustainability and systems in the field. Themes like smallholder participation, resilience, rural development, governance, and digitalization showcase rising diversity of themes and maturity of concepts. A trend analysis also reveals a growing emphasis on more comprehensive research on integrated agri-food systems, sustainability and the spatial and industrial aspects of agricultural development, in addition to the more production and pest management-oriented research, activities that dominated early years.

Despite major improvements made, the geographical

distribution of research is still uneven and skewed. More focus on underrepresented areas, especially Africa, Southeast Asia and South America, would increase the global evidence base and help to develop agricultural value chains in a more inclusive manner. Finally, increased coverage in a variety of journals would help to increase the reach and impact of future work.

The limitations of this study are that it has utilized only one bibliographic database and only English language, peer reviewed, journal articles. Future research could benefit from using a combination of databases, in-depth analysis of collaboration networks, and the inclusion of bibliometric analysis with systematic content analysis to gain deeper insights into new and emerging topics, like digitalization, climate resilience, inclusive agricultural value chain development, in different regional scenario.

Policy Recommendations

There is a need for significantly higher quantum of research and efforts on underrepresented areas such as Africa, South America and Southeast Asia, where the livelihoods and food security of smallholders are greatly dependent on agricultural value chains, and where research production is comparatively low. There is also a need for additional financing for research, institutional support and specific value chain studies in these regions to close identified gaps in the knowledge. Meanwhile, research scholars need to be supported to publish their papers in various journals, thereby diffusing the knowledge in a limited number of dominant journals in the field and the region to gain wider impact. Collaborative research networks, funding opportunities, and capacity building to strengthen collaboration between leading research countries and institutions, namely China, the USA and Europe, and developing countries is also encouraged. There is a need to focus more on new topics like digitalization, traceability technologies, climate-resilience, smallholder inclusion and spatial and industrial dimensions of agricultural value chains in future research. Finally, the selected motor and niche themes can serve as important inputs for the design of interventions aimed at strengthening smallholder capacity, increasing food system and value chain participation, and building the resilience of food systems in vulnerable and food-insecure areas for policymakers.

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