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Missing middle in agri-food transitions: The case of safe food supplying in Vietnam

QUOC NGUYEN-MINH¹, PETER OOSTERVEER¹, INGE BROUWER², RICARDO HERNANDEZ³, MAJA
A. SLINGERLAND⁴

¹Wageningen University and Research, Environmental Policy Group, The Netherlands

²Wageningen University and Research, Human Nutrition & Health, The Netherlands

³The Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, Vietnam

⁴Wageningen University and Research, Plant Production Systems, The Netherlands

Abstract

In agri-food systems, the Missing Middle can be understood as the disconnect between food production, distribution, and consumption, or between global agendas and local practices that hinder the progress towards achieving sustainability goals. This is manifest in many low and middle-income countries (LMICs) when the national policies of promoting food safety and modernisation can have potential misalignments with local implementation practices. The study explored the case of fresh vegetables and pork in Vietnam to illustrate the concept. The two commodity chains have essential roles in ensuring nutritional security and smallholder income, but both are grappling with persistent food safety issues. We adopted the social practice theory (SPT) and transition theory to zoom in and zoom out on the dynamics within different components of food systems and the interactions between those dynamics. The research is based on a scoping review of relevant documents and semi-structured interviews with agri-food actors along the supply chains. The results show how both supply chains are transitioning in seemingly different pathways to achieve the shared goal of improving food safety. For vegetables, small-scale producers remain the dominant actors, but their practices are shifting towards using more biopesticides and traditional eco-friendly approaches for crop protection and soil cultivation. Meanwhile, pork smallholders are upscaling their facilities and practices to enhance biosecurity, under strong competitive pressures from the rapidly growing large-scale and modern pork production. Hence, the two supply chains are struggling with different challenges, from labour shortage and the reduction of farmland for vegetables to high input prices, smallholder inclusiveness, and growing threats of disease outbreaks for pork. But we identified a shared ‘Missing Middle’ in both cases: the fragmentation within food supply networks, leading to difficulties to upscale safe and sustainable solutions and the erosion of consumer trust. This requires a more system-based approach to bridge the production-consumption disconnect in two cases, along with specific interventions to address different lock-ins and promote good practices along each supply chain.

Keywords: Agri-food transitions, food safety, food systems, missing middle, pork, vegetables