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Risk sharing or risk transfer? Proximity patterns for environmental justice in agri-food supply chains

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Abstract

Climate change, economic inequalities, shifting consumption patterns, and political disruptions are putting severe pressure on global food systems and threatening food security. In response, agri-food supply chain (AFSC) resilience has become an urgent research priority. In this study we investigate how companies strengthen AFSC resilience, with particular attention to dynamic resilience capacities—absorptive, adaptive, and transformative. To examine the relational underpinnings of resilience, the analytic proximity framework of Edelman et al. (2020) is operationalized across its four dimensions: organisational, social, cognitive, and institutional. We employ an exploratory design, combining online desk research with semi-structured interviews. The sample comprises 21 agri-food companies involved in importing, processing, or distributing cash crops, including cocoa, coffee, cotton, fruits, herbs, nuts, spices, and tea.

We identified multiple indicators that help to evaluate proximity within global AFSCs. Apart from this, two resilience strategies emerged, each with characteristic proximity patterns. First, especially large and very large companies diversify their supplier networks based on climate risk assessments. This strategy is marked by low proximity between actors and upstream risk transfer. High proximity is confined to the subdimensions organisational agreements and certifications. Second, many micro and small companies intensify supplier collaboration by implementing environmental and social practices at origin to strengthen smallholders. This approach is characterised by high proximity between actors as well as risk sharing and risk reduction at origin. Here, proximity is lower in the subdimensions organisational agreements and certifications.

Taken together, the findings offer initial insights into the nexus between companies and smallholders as well as resilience and proximity, highlighting proximity indicators and patterns that support adaptive and transformative capacities in the light of environmental justice issues. Further research is needed to include the supplier side and assess how these best practices can be adopted creating a level playing field and for decolonizing AFSCs. This need is amplified by recent political backlashes that have weakened regulatory requirements, increasing expectations that companies proactively foster AFSC resilience while simultaneously advancing sustainability and climate justice.

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