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Fair trade and its role in sustainable development of agri-food system: A systematic literature review

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Abstract

The 'fair trade' movement aims to promote equitable trade relations between developed and developing countries. By guaranteeing producers a fair price, it seeks to improve the livelihoods of farmers and workers in marginalised regions. This review critically explores Fairtrade certification's impact on the economic, social and environmental sustainability of agri-food systems using PRISMA methodology and SWOT analysis. Key themes emerging from the reviewed papers include sustainable consumption, social equity and women empowerment, and governance in alternative food networks. Most sources focus on consumer behaviour and Fairtrade, concluding that consumer-driven strategies are crucial for systemic change and long-term success. Fairtrade still faces obstacles, including market competition with other certification schemes and the uneven distribution of

Keywords

- Fairtrade certification
- food trade
- sustainability
- agriculture
- minimum prices
- consumption
- food governance
- social equity
- global value chains
- PRISMA

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benefits between producers and supply chain actors. The final retail price is significantly affected by the value added by retailers, contrary to the Fairtrade mission, which can undermine confidence in the system.

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Introduction

The World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO) is the global community and verifier of social enterprises that practise 'fair trade'. It has been promoting fair trading principles and practices within a global network of social enterprises since 1989. Fair trade initiatives have steadily grown since the 1990s. In 1997, Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International E.V. (FLO), or Fairtrade International, was founded to coordinate national fair trade certification initiatives (Naylor, 2014). This non-profit organisation has set private standards relating to labour, cooperative organisation, and the governance of the Fairtrade benefits, including financial advantages to farmers and workers from developing countries. In 2004, FLO was divided into two independent organisations, i.e. Fairtrade International and FLOCERT (Flocert GmbH). FLOCERT, which is an independent body, checks that producers and traders follow Fairtrade rules and use Fairtrade benefits for their own growth. Fairtrade International has shifted its focus from certifying Fairtrade organisations to directly certifying individual products through a recognizable certification mark (Naylor, 2014). This change broadened market access, allowing a wider range of actors, including non-Fairtrade organisations and transnational corporations, to sell fairly traded products, provided they were certified and displayed the now-common trademark. Simultaneously, FLO rebranded the term "fair trade" into the single word "Fairtrade" (with a capital "F"), establishing it as a distinct, proprietary label that exclusively designates products, brands, and organisations certified by the Fairtrade International system and identified by its blue and green mark. In contrast, "fair trade" or "fairly traded" (two words) remain broad, unregulated terms for ethical trade practices or related products. Unlike protected labels such as "organic", its use is unrestricted, meaning many products marketed this way often lack independent, third-party verification or affiliation with recognized networks like Fairtrade International or WFTO (Chow, 2017; Fairtrade International, n.d.).

In 2002, Fairtrade International introduced a global certification label. Recognised in over 50 countries, this label certifies farmers, traders, and businesses worldwide that meet their specific social, environmental, and economic requirements (FAO, 2017). It relates to products like bananas, coffee, sugar, cocoa, cotton, and tea produced in developing countries and mainly exported. Fairtrade certification aims to support exchange of goods in a way that ensures producers, particularly smallholders, receive a fair price and a stable living, guaranteeing a minimum price and a premium on product sales for producers (Dragusanu & Nunn, 2020; Sterie & Ion, 2022). One of the primary goals of the Fairtrade standard is to enhance the economic and social well-being of small-scale producers by ensuring a minimum price and providing an extra premium to support community development (Knößlsdorfer et al., 2021).

Fairtrade certification contributes to the creation of ethical standards and fairness in trade and value chains, and more sustainable agri-food system worldwide (Horodecka & Śliwińska, 2019; Nicholls, 2010; Nuseva et al., 2014; Raynolds, 2000). Fair trading in agri-food products is essential for ensuring fair farmer compensation, fair consumer pricing, economic equity, sustainable farming, responsible resource management, and the development of a resilient food system that provides affordable, nutritious and safe food for all (El Bilali et al., 2021; Onyeaka et al., 2024). Consumers choosing such products support fair wages, sustainable agricultural practices, and community development in developing countries (Lubowiecki-Vikuk et al., 2021).

In the 21st century, sustainable development has become a widely recognized objective for global society. The concept gained significant traction with the publication of *Our common future* in 1987, a landmark report that firmly integrated sustainable development into international development discourse (Hajian & Jangchi Kashani, 2021). The Brundtland Commission (or the World Commission on Environment and Development), which was established in 1983 by Gro Harlem Brundtland, Prime Minister of Norway, at the invitation of the then United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations" (Heidrich, 2022; Mondini, 2019). The concept of sustainability encompasses economic, social, and environmental aspects (Purvis et al., 2019), protecting biodiversity and promoting long-term decisions that ensure the principles are upheld (Ozili, 2019; Rudevska et al., 2022). The UN General Assembly adopted the Agenda 2030 in 2015, which integrates the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into the three pillars of sustainability to drive achievement of the goals (Dalampira & Nastis 2020; UN, 2018). SDG 12 focuses on promoting responsible production and consumption patterns, while developed countries are expected to lead the sustainable transformation, taking into consideration the development and capabilities of developing countries. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first review based on a thorough analysis of the link between the

'fair trade' movement and the sustainability of global and local agri-food systems. The focus of our study is the Fairtrade certification scheme.

Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) states that

> Agrifood systems have the power to sustain life on Earth. They tie together the people, activities, investments, and choices involved in producing and delivering food and agricultural goods. Agrifood systems include everything from how food is grown, harvested, processed, packaged, transported, distributed, traded, bought, prepared, eaten, and eventually disposed of. They also include non-food agricultural products such as forestry, feedstock, biomass for biofuels, and fibers. (…)
>
> Agrifood systems are full of untapped potential, where solutions already exist waiting to be scaled and connected. Transformation is about supporting and amplifying the possibilities that already lie within—to create a future of hope, collaboration, and lasting change. (FAO, 2025)

The global agri-food system is a complex network linking farmers, manufacturers, distributors, retailers, and consumers, with profound effects on economies, public health, and national security, yet it paradoxically results in food oversupply and waste in affluent nations, while poorer nations face scarcity and malnutrition (Bajzelj et al., 2020; Onyeaka et al., 2024). A number of factors are hindering the achievement of social justice, decent lives and sustainability in local agri-food systems. These include unequal power dynamics in global trade, unsustainable pricing, deforestation, land degradation, biodiversity loss, water stress and pandemics. Climate change, however, is one of the most significant factors (Development International e.V., 2022). Thus, increased attention to fairness in agri-food supply chains is driven by a combination of social, economic and environmental factors. As awareness grows and policy changes are implemented, it is likely that this issue will continue to be an important focus for researchers, policymakers and industry stakeholders in the years to come (Del Prete et al., 2024). The aim of this paper is to critically explore the impact of Fairtrade certification on economic, social and environmental sustainability of agri-food systems by applying the PRISMA methodology and Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) analysis.

The paper is structured as follows: the Introduction provides a rationale for further studies; Section 1 includes an initial literature review with an overview of how the 'fair trade' system operates. It also presents the research questions; Section 2 outlines the methodological approach. Section 3 contains research findings, Subsection 3.1 presents the results of the bibliometric analysis, Subsection 3.2 includes qualitative analysis of the evidence which has been synthesised and critiqued, Subsection 3.3 shows the results of a SWOT

analysis related to Fairtrade certification's role in the sustainable development of the agri-food system. Last Section is the Conclusions, where the authors present their final remarks and suggest several directions for future research.

1. Literature review

The broad 'fair trade' movement consists of two complementary approaches: one centered on mission-driven organisations and the other on certified products. WFTO promotes a holistic model grounded in its ten principles of fair trade (see Table 1), prioritising people and the planet through goals such as fair pricing, safe labour conditions, environmental sustainability, and community development (Sharma, 2024). The WFTO Guarantee System verifies entire organisations through independent audits and peer reviews, awarding the WFTO Mark to enterprises that embed the principles of fair trade across their operations. The Fairtrade certification label, governed by Fairtrade International and monitored by FLOCERT, is applied to specific products that meet established social, economic, and environmental standards. Both mechanisms enhance consumer choice by providing credible assurance and making such goods more visible and accessible in mainstream retail channels (Beardon, 2020). Since 1998, an informal association of the four main fair trade networks has been operating as FINE. These are: FLO, International Fair

Table 1. The ten principles of 'fair trade'

No	Principle
1	Creating opportunities for economically disadvantaged producers
2	Transparency and accountability
3	Fair trading practices
4	Payment of a fair price
5	Ensuring no child labour and forced labour
6	Commitment to non discrimination, gender equity and women's economic empowerment and freedom of association
7	Ensuring good working conditions
8	Providing capacity building
9	Promoting Fair Trade
10	Respect for the environment

Source: based on (WFTO Europe, 2016).

Trade Association (now WFTO), Network of European Worldshops (NEWS!) and European Fair Trade Association (EFTA) (Wielechowski & Roman, 2012).

Various stakeholders, including producers, importers, marketers, certifiers, and the Worldshops' network promote fair trading through retail stores and via education. The core objective of the movement is to ensure that producers from less economically developed countries receive a just and equitable price for their goods, e.g., via the implementation of the minimum prices and price premiums (Dammert & Mohan, 2015; Fiedoruk, 2021). In this way, producers are empowered to improve their livelihoods and protect the environment. This approach fosters long-term sustainability by reducing poverty, enhancing social equity, and safeguarding natural resources (Dangol & Chitrakar, 2021), but higher prices in certified markets are not always sufficient to raise household incomes and living standards (Knößlsdorfer et al., 2021).

In the late 1990s, several independent 'fair trade' certification organisations emerged to form the FLO, consolidating into one entity known as Fairtrade International. Its core mission is to foster sustainable development by upholding fair trading standards and safeguarding the rights of marginalised farmers and workers, especially in the Global South (Dammert & Mohan, 2015; Raynolds, 2017). Fairtrade certification for producers requires a comprehensive system that integrates respect for labour standards, sustainable farming practices, effective governance, and the empowerment of producers through democratic participation (Raynolds, 2018). This movement has significantly grown over the past three decades, evolving from its origins in the mid-20th century, focused on selling handicrafts to support marginalised artisans to now encompassing a broader range of products and more comprehensive approach (Ribeiro-Duthie et al., 2020). Fairtrade International certifies a diverse range of products (over 300), promoting fair trading principles across a multitude of agricultural and industrial sectors (Fairtrades International, 2022; Zysk, 2020). Fairtrade certifications are granted to farmer cooperatives and commercial plantations (Fiedoruk, 2021) operating along a supply chain that connects producers with consumers (see Figure 1). Producers sell their goods to exporters/importers, who then transport them to manufacturers. Manufacturers process the goods and sell them to brands and retailers, who ultimately sell them to consumers (Zhang et al., 2020). The Fairtrade programme decreases the intermediaries' market power and consequently, it increases farmers' added value in the agri-food chain (Podhorsky, 2015). Throughout the supply chain, FLOCERT ensures that Fairtrade standards are being met by verifying that producers receive fair prices, working conditions are safe, gender equality is ensured, accountability and transparency practices are operating, and environmental protection measures are implemented (Beardon, 2020; Fiedoruk, 2021; Liu, 2021).

Fairtrade International partners with 25 certified Fairtrade organisations, dedicated to improving the lives of farmers and workers across the globe

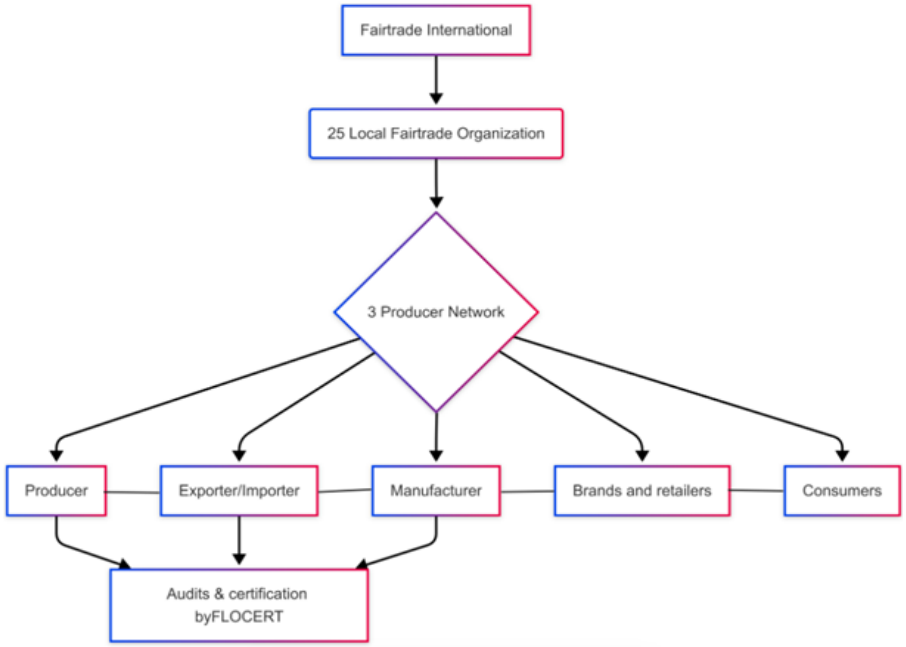

Figure 1. The structural framework of the Fairtrade system

Source: based on (Fairtrade International, 2023).

(Fairtrade International, 2023). As of 2023, the 'fair trade' movement empowered over 1900 producer organisations across 68 countries through its three regional producer networks (Fairtrade Africa, Network of Asia and Pacific Producers, and Network for Latin America and the Caribbean) (Figure 1). The movement delivers vital training to producers via its main networks on Fairtrade Standards, gender and child rights, sustainable agriculture, and teaching a variety of skills (Fairtrade International, 2023; Fiedoruk, 2021). In 2023, Fairtrade supported 2 million farmers and workers across the globe. This includes 1.4 million in Africa (71%), 340,000 in Latin America and the Caribbean (16%), and 260,000 in Asia and the Pacific (13%). As of 2022, a total of 1,910 producer organisations had been granted Fairtrade certification. This included 1,563 small-scale producer organisations, some of which were certified for contract production, and 347 larger farms known as hired labour organisations (Fairtrade International, 2023). Simultaneously, Fairtrade allows developed countries to source ethical products, expanding their product range and aligning with sustainable business models, particularly by supporting small-scale producers in developing economies (Aksoy & Ozsonmez, 2019; Simeoni et al., 2019). This demonstrates that ethical and sustainable practices can thrive alongside commercial success, proving that businesses can operate responsibly and contribute positively to sustainable development (Ribeiro-Duthie, 2019).

The Fairtrade system should support SDG 12 by fostering equitable economic development, promoting environmental sustainability, and ensuring social responsibility in global trade (Sharma, 2024). However, some studies have shown that the economic value generated is primarily realised by retailers, as in the case of fair trade cocoa value chains (Pieńkowski & Skýpalová, 2024). For instance, enterprises which are verified by the WFTO might be motivated to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle (in line with SDG 12), although this is not assured. With the above considerations in mind, our three research questions are as follows:

1. What are the key themes addressed in the screened papers regarding the relationship between fair trade and sustainability?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Fairtrade certification in the context of sustainable development of the agri-food system?
3. What are the opportunities and threats associated with the role of Fairtrade certification in sustainable development of the agri-food system?

2. Methodology

This paper employs a systematic literature review of Scopus-indexed academic articles, books, book chapters and conference proceedings published between 2015 and 2024. We chose Scopus since it is a comprehensive database of high-quality academic research. Our research adopted the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, a well-established framework for conducting systematic reviews and meta-analyses, which encompasses identification, screening, eligibility assessment, inclusion and data extraction. In the process for conducting and reporting systematic reviews, the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses, see Page et al., 2021; Shaheen et al., 2023) framework enhances the quality and clarity of systematic review reporting with regard to transparency, completeness and accuracy of reporting (Blekking et al., 2024; Page et al., 2021; Poczta-Wajda & Sapa, 2021; Rethlefsen & Page, 2022). By adhering to the PRISMA method, we ensured a thorough and transparent approach to our literature review. This allowed us to conduct both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the selected studies.

We started our research by using Scopus to identify articles about “fair trade” and “sustainability”. This initial search helped identify keywords to refine the database search. We conducted 20 rounds of searches on Scopus, adjusting keywords and filters each time to narrow down the results. Keywords were combined into the following search string: “fair*trade” AND “sustainab*” AND “*food” to identify relevant literature published between 2015 and 2024. We searched within “Article title, Abstract, Keywords” category.

The search strategy produced 284 relevant records overall (see Figure 2). To ensure a focused and comprehensive review, we established inclusion and exclusion criteria. To improve consistency and accessibility, peer-reviewed articles, books, book chapters, and conference proceedings written in English representing specific subject areas (social sciences, business management and accounting, economics, econometrics and finance, agricultural and biological sciences, environmental sciences) and published between 2015 and 2024 were selected. We first established inclusion and exclusion criteria (date of publication, language, subject area) excluding 169 records. We then screened titles, abstracts and keywords to identify potentially relevant studies (Reason 1) excluding another 77 sources based of relevance.

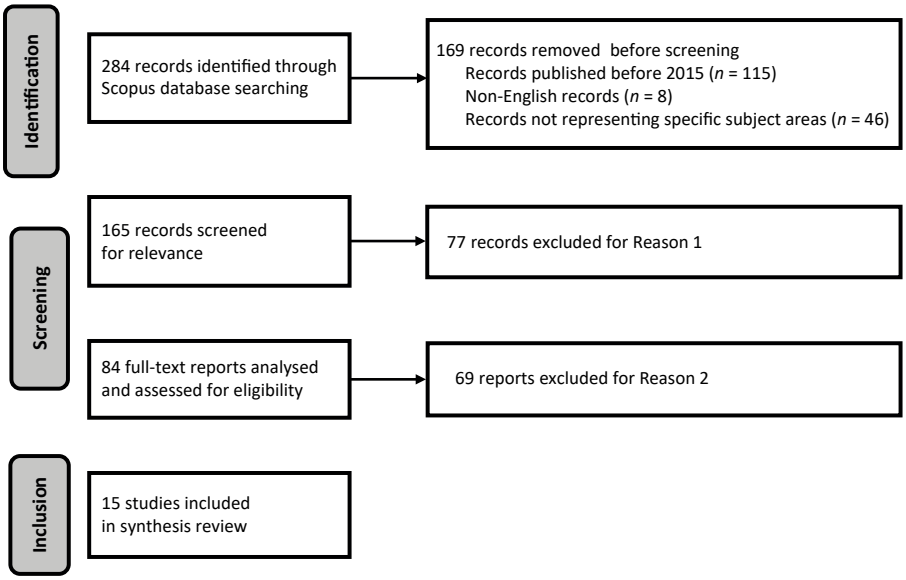

Figure 2. PRISMA flow diagram modified for authors' research

Source: based on (Page et al., 2021).

84 full-text reports were assessed with regard to the focus on 'fair trade' (Reason 2); 69 reports were then excluded. Subsequently, a full-text review was conducted on the remaining 15 studies. This stage involved extracting key information such as author, year, title, journal, findings, and conclusions. The selected studies were then subjected to an in-depth analysis using the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) framework.

The strategy employed was slightly different to the approach suggested by the PRISMA 2020 Statement because it contained two parts: (1) bibliometric analysis and content analysis of publications related to sustainability and 'fair

trade', (2) qualitative analysis of studies focused on 'fair trade', and Fairtrade certification, in particular. This systematic approach helped us to identify the most relevant and high-quality evidence to address our research questions.

3. Research findings

This section of the paper presents quantitative and qualitative analysis of the evidence, which has been synthesised and critiqued.

3.1. Bibliometric analysis

The bibliometric analysis (n = 84 from 2015 to 2024) involved a diverse range of document types, including peer-reviewed articles (65%), book chapters (22%), and reviews (7%), among other sources. Subject areas included Social Sciences (n = 32), Business, Management, and Accounting (n = 28), and Environmental Science (n = 24). The timeframe reflected changing interest in sustainable and ethical production and consumption, with a decreased number of publications in 2023 and 2024 compared to the number of works published over the period 2018–2022 (Figure 3). Funding sources for this research included the European Commission and the British Academy of Management. Geographically, the contributions originated from institutions located in coun-

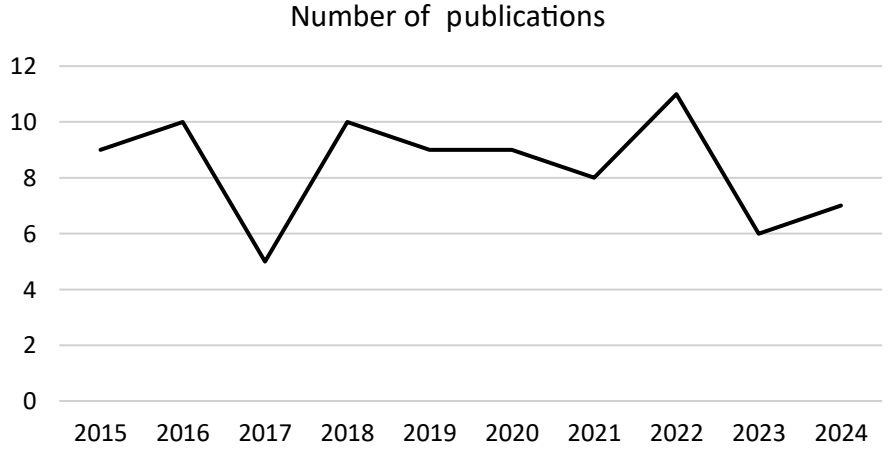

Figure 3. Publications regarding sustainability and fair trade over the period 2015–2024 (n = 84)

Source: own elaboration.

tries including Germany, Italy, the United States, and France, highlighting the international collaboration and global interest in these themes.

Key contributing journals include the British Food Journal (6 articles), where consumer studies were the primary focus, especially pricing strategies for Fairtrade products and an article regarding virtual water flows and water savings or losses deriving from fair trading of bananas, cocoa and coffee. Ecological Economics (7 articles) included work exploring consumer behaviour and articles examining sustainability performance of smallholder farms, competitiveness of Fairtrade products and relationship between soil quality and food security (Supplementary file 1). The top 10 most cited works are included in Table 3. Van Loo et al. (2015) explored the importance consumers attached to sustainability labels on coffee and investigated willingness-to-pay for such coffee. Timmermann and Félix (2015) investigated the specific capabilities and forms of social relationships that were consistently fostered and strengthened by agroecological agricultural practices. Tayleur et al. (2017) explored the potential contribution of voluntary sustainability standards to biodiversity conservation and other aspects of agricultural sustainability (see Table 2). Other highly cited works explored consumer preferences for sustainability certified food products, but also conditions and the results of the operation of small-scale entities, social and environmental benefits of 'fair trade' systems, governance mechanisms and value co-creation (Table 2).

To understand the relationships and evolving trends within this research area, we analysed how frequently keywords appeared together. This analysis, focusing on keywords used at least twice, reveals connections between terms, highlights emerging topics, and points to potential new avenues for research. The most frequently used keywords (Figure 4) are represented by larger nodes, and their closeness indicates the strength of their association. The most discussed terms were fair trade and sustainability (driven by our search terms), but also sustainable development, food, consumer behaviour, certification and sustainable agriculture. Three main clusters emerged. The first, in blue, covers *sustainable consumption* and consumer preferences for food produced in using sustainable practices (Sama et al., 2018; Sepúlveda et al., 2016; Van Loo et al., 2015), consumers' attitudes, motivation, purchase intention and willingness to pay for sustainable (including Fairtrade) products (Berki-Kiss & Menrad, 2022; Del Giudice et al., 2016; Dhaoui et al., 2020; Monier-Dilhan & Bergès, 2016). The second cluster, in green, is *sustainable performance* of coffee production (Miglietta et al., 2022; Ssebunya et al., 2019; Winter et al., 2020) and consumer preferences for cues representing *sustainable performance* (Sepúlveda, 2016; Van Loo et al., 2015), product certification (Borland & Bailey, 2019; Damasco et al., 2022; Duggan & Kochen, 2016; Mook & Overdevest, 2021; Omoto & Scott, 2016; Ssebunya et al., 2019; Winter et al., 2020), and food security (Anderson, 2015; Bacon, 2015; Cavanna, 2016; Sartori et al., 2024). Papers in the third cluster, in red, connect to *sustaina-*

Table 2. Top 10 most cited articles in Scopus

Title of the article	Authors list	Journal name	Headline themes	Number of citations
Sustainability labels on coffee: Consumer preferences, willingness-to-pay and visual attention to attributes	Van Loo et al. (2015)	*Ecological Economics*	sustainable consumption	260
Agroecology as a vehicle for contributive justice	Timmermann & Félix (2015)	*Agriculture and Human Values*	sustainable development	112
Global coverage of agricultural sustainability standards, and their role in conserving biodiversity	Tayleur et al. (2017)	*Conservation Letters*	sustainable performance	79
Small in scale but big in potential: opportunities and challenges for fisheries certification of Indonesian small-scale tuna fisheries	Duggan & Kochen (2016)	*Marine Policy*	sustainability performance	67
An integrated conceptual framework for the study of agricultural cooperatives: from repolitisation to cooperative sustainability	Ajates (2020)	*Journal of Rural Studies*	sustainable practices	67
Sustainability performance of certified and non-certified smallholder coffee farms in uganda	Ssebunya et al. (2019)	*Ecological Economics*	sustainability performance	55
Exploring local and organic food consumption in a holistic sustainability view	Scalvedi & Saba (2018)	*British Food Journal*	sustainable consumption	53
Consumers' preference for the origin and quality attributes associated with production of specialty coffees: results from a cross-cultural study	Sepúlveda et al. (2016)	*Food Research International*	sustainable consumption	51
Consumer preferences for foodstuffs produced in a socio-environmentally responsible manner: a threat to fair trade producers?	Sama et al. (2018)	*Ecological Economics*	sustainable consumption	46
Sustainability through food and conversation: the role of an entrepreneurial restaurateur in fostering engagement with sustainable development issues	Moskwa et al. (2015)	*Journal of Sustainable Tourism*	sustainable consumption	43

Source: own elaboration.

ble practices, e.g., sustainable agriculture (Ajates, 2020; Tayleur et al., 2017), organic production (Lee & Bateman, 2021; Mook & Overdevest, 2021) and sustainable development.

The application of overlay visualisation facilitated a longitudinal examination of keywords, thereby enabling the cartographic representation of the-

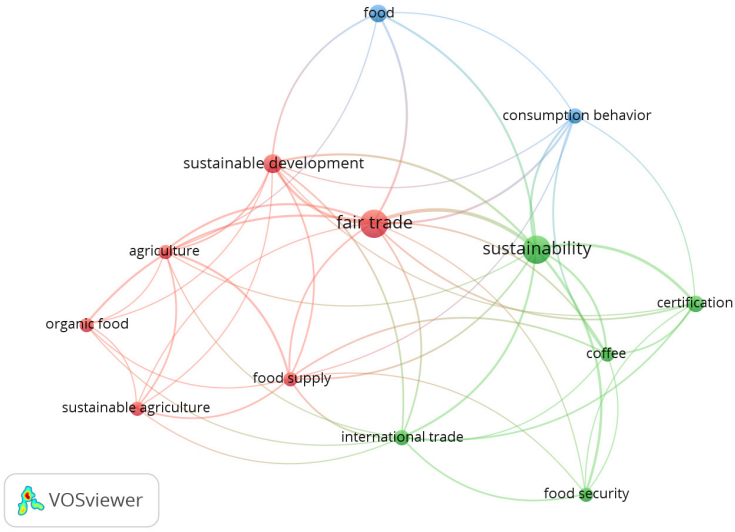

Figure 4. Keyword co-occurrence analysis

Source: own elaboration.

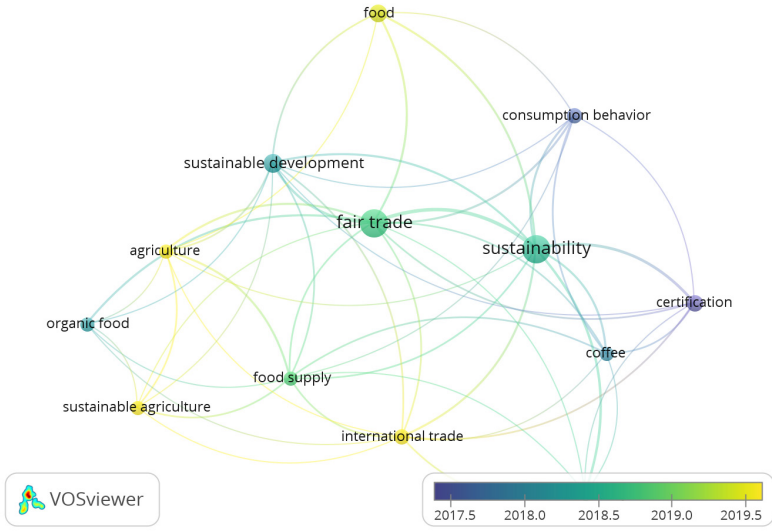

Figure 5. Keyword co-occurrence overlay visualisation

Source: own elaboration.

matic evolution within the scientific knowledge domain. This analytical approach allows for the identification of emerging trends and the forecast of new research trajectories. The topic "international trade", integrated with sustainable agriculture, fair trade, certification, coffee, food supply and food security, is interesting (Figure 5).

3.2. Content analysis

The literature derived from the systematic review was read and thematically analysed, which led to the emergence of nine major themes. These are:

1. **Sustainable consumption—consumer attitudes:** attitudes and behaviour towards sustainable agri-food products (including fairly traded products).
2. **Sustainable consumption—marketing strategies:** price strategies for fairly traded food products, the role of information and communication in food networks.
3. **Sustainable practices—social issues:** social movements and activism, social equity and women empowerment; responsibilising fair trade practices; reconceptualization of farm work.
4. **Sustainable practices—governance aspects:** public and/or private governance in alternative food networks that contribute to building sustainable agri-food systems.
5. **Sustainable practices—environmental sustainability:** sustainability certification and environmental sustainability; fair trade and land use, biodiversity, and water management; agricultural resilience; agroecology transition.
6. **Sustainable practices—new technologies and innovation:** digital technologies for sustainability; blockchain.
7. **Sustainability performance:** sustainability of certified agri-food production systems and alternative food networks; sustainable global food market.
8. **Sustainable development—adding value:** sustainable distribution of added value and value co-creation.
9. **Sustainable development—food security:** fair trade for food sovereignty and food security (see Table 2 and Appendix).

Among the key themes addressed in the screened papers, sustainable consumption is central, with studies investigating the drivers of sustainable purchasing decisions (Berki-Kiss & Menrad, 2022; Fernández-Ferrín et al., 2024) and exploring how demographic factors influence ethical consumer choices (Hrubá & Sadílek, 2021). Social issues related to fairly traded products and other sustainable food systems are examined in several works, such as social equity, gender equality and women empowerment (Doherty, 2018; Omoto & Scott, 2016; Thomas & Appasamy, 2021). The effectiveness of public and/or

private governance mechanisms in alternative food networks (Ajates, 2020; Anderson, 2015; Borland & Bailey, 2019; Constance et al., 2018; D'Amico, 2016; Mook & Overdevest, 2021; Partzsch et al., 2022; Shand, 2016; Silva et al., 2021; Sureau et al., 2019); agroecology and food sovereignty and justice in food systems (Timmermann & Félix, 2015). Emerging research areas include the application of digital innovations, such as blockchain technology, to enhance agricultural sustainability (Ordóñez et al., 2023).

The analysis reveals a strong academic focus on the intersection of fair trade, sustainability, and transitioning food systems particularly consumer behaviour and sustainability practices, reflecting the evolving priorities of consumers, businesses, and policymakers. These trends align with broader shifts towards transparency, ethical consumption, and systemic changes needed to support sustainable development of the global and local agri-food sectors (Jia et al., 2023; Kent et al., 2022).

This section has answered research question one, highlighting the key themes addressed in the sources examined regarding the relationship between fairly traded products and sustainability.

3.3. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities of and threats associated with Fairtrade certification in the context of sustainable development: A synthesis review

3.3.1. Strengths of Fairtrade certification in the context of sustainable development

The literature analysed in this section focuses on the fifteen specific resources (Figure 2). Studies provide robust evidence of the positive impact of Fairtrade certification and consumer preferences, demonstrating its viability as a sustainable business model (Berki-Kiss & Menrad, 2022; Winter et al., 2020). Emotional and economic factors drive this preference (Fernández-Ferrín et al., 2024; van Loo et al., 2015), the latter demonstrating that consumers who dedicate more time to focusing on sustainability features tend to place a higher value on them. Fairtrade certification has the potential to empower marginalised groups and capacity for social reform (Bacon, 2015; Doherty, 2018) and environmental sustainability. Damasco et al. (2022) emphasise the environmental benefits, such as conserving Amazonian flora through agroforestry certification, which can help communities adapt to environmental challenges.

3.3.2. Weaknesses of Fairtrade certification with respect to sustainability

There are significant economic trade-offs associated with Fairtrade certification (Marconi et al., 2017). For example, the higher prices associated with Fairtrade-certified products can create challenges for both producers and consumers. Economic constraints, such as price sensitivity among consumers, can pose a significant barrier to the widespread adoption of Fairtrade products, limiting its overall impact and reach. Fairtrade certification plays a crucial role in ensuring compliance with standards, but it may have limitations (Mook & Overdevest, 2021). Over-reliance on quantifiable certification metrics can lead to an incomplete picture of the impact of Fairtrade standards if impacts are hard to quantify.

The analysed studies have some limitations. Much of the existing research on Fairtrade, such as the work of Ssebunya et al. (2019), focuses on a specific country. While these studies provide valuable insights into local contexts, they may not fully capture the diverse realities of Fairtrade certification across different countries and cultures. Nevertheless, Ssebunya et al. (2019) show that production systems of smallholder coffee farms in Uganda may have a greater impact on sustainability performance than certification alone.

3.3.3. Opportunities for Fairtrade certification in its role in sustainable development

Growing global awareness of ethical consumption presents a significant opportunity for expanding the market for Fairtrade-certified products. Consumers are increasingly concerned about the social and environmental impacts of their purchasing decisions (Van Loo et al., 2015). Likewise, Zecca and Rastorgueva (2019) underline the opportunity to integrate developing countries into global food markets through Fairtrade certification. However, potential consumers need to be better informed about ethical issues related to Fairtrade certification, and the availability of certified products must be improved.

The integration of digital technologies, particularly blockchain, holds immense potential for enhancing the transparency and traceability of Fairtrade supply chains (Lafargue et al., 2022), when ensuring that ethical and sustainable practices are upheld throughout the supply chain. This increased transparency can build trust between consumers and producers, further strengthening the market for Fairtrade goods.

Agroecology also offers a promising pathway towards sustainable and resilient food systems where agroecological practices such as agroforestry, crop

rotation and integrated pest management can enhance biodiversity, improve soil health, and increase the resilience of farming systems to climate change (Padró & Tello, 2022). Their study highlights the need for a balanced approach that considers both the benefits of trade and the importance of local self-sufficiency and ecological integrity, suggesting a need for Fairtrade practices that prioritize local and regional food systems while allowing for limited, carefully managed trade to address specific socio-economic needs.

3.3.4. Threats of Fairtrade certification in promoting sustainability

The proliferation of competing certification schemes poses a significant threat to the brand value of Fairtrade certification (Mook & Overdevest, 2021). A crowded market with numerous labels can confuse consumers and dilute the unique selling proposition of Fairtrade. This oversaturation can weaken the impact of individual certifications and make it harder for consumers to identify truly ethical and sustainable products.

Disparities can arise between certified and non-certified producers within Fairtrade communities, with uneven distribution of benefits leading to resentment and social tensions, undermining the very principles of fairness and equity that Fairtrade aims to uphold (Ssebunya et al., 2019). Addressing these inequalities is crucial for ensuring the long-term sustainability and social impact of Fairtrade certification initiatives. External shocks like pandemics, geopolitical conflict or climate change events can significantly disrupt Fairtrade-certified supply chains, as can ecological vulnerabilities (Damasco et al., 2022), because deforestation, habitat destruction, or changing climate conditions can alter the ecosystem, posing significant challenges to the resilience and sustainability of Fairtrade certification initiatives, if proactive adaptation and risk mitigation strategies are not embedded within the processes.

Conclusions

There is growing interest in exploring consumer purchase decisions regarding Fairtrade-certified products, as this underpins the long-term success of Fairtrade certification and systemic change in the agri-food sector (Kent et al., 2022; Shamma & Hassan, 2013). Willingness to pay (WTP) is driven by both societal and self-interest values (Quach et al., 2025; Yamoah et al., 2016). Both altruistic and egoistic values shape consumer self-identity, which positively influences WTP for Fairtrade products (Quach et al., 2025) and the way com-

panies operate (Kowalska et al., 2021; Spielmann, 2021). Providing consumers with extensive information on the production and distribution of Fairtrade food constitutes a precondition for the success of the system (Ssebunya et al., 2019), but multiple initiatives can cause confusion for consumers. The certification programmes such as Fairtrade need to be underpinned by effective mechanisms for assuring sustainable performance and sustainable development. However, there are both weaknesses within and threats to the dissemination of Fairtrade practices. While the review highlights significant achievements such as promoting ethical practices and improving the livelihoods of producers, it also brings to light the challenges that remain associated with the 'fair trade' movement. Issues like pricing and the uneven distribution of benefits within producer communities pose barriers to the building of a fair and sustainable global trading system. Yet the potential benefits are clear, including improving the quality of soil, biodiversity, and water management. Reinforcing both public and private governance mechanisms for fairly traded products could affect both supply and demand positively.

The focus of the literature explored is mainly consumer studies, in particular, raising awareness about Fairtrade certification and promoting it among potential buyers. However, this emphasis on consumer behaviour also reveals a gap in the research, namely, a lack of in-depth exploration of how 'fair trade' principles can be more effectively integrated into global food supply chains to create long-term, systemic change and how to create greater transparency in demonstrating sustainable performance. Four specific themes have emerged in this work when considering sustainable development and fair trade: sustainable development itself, sustainable practices, sustainable performance, and sustainable consumption. The interplay between these themes is important, worthy of more study, and product- and context-specific.

Looking ahead, future research could focus on innovative strategies for integrating 'fair trade' principles into global food supply chains. This includes exploring frameworks that balance ethical practices with market realities, ensuring that the benefits of certification are delivered to all stakeholders. Such efforts will be essential for building a more equitable and sustainable global trading system, ultimately contributing to both academic understanding and practical progress in this field. Other directions for future research which have arisen from the literature review include: (1) exploring the possible ways to develop frameworks that integrate ethical sourcing practices with commercial viability, thus enabling the adoption of 'fair trade' practices to scale up without compromising core values; (2) an empirical investigation into the long-term impacts of Fairtrade certification on producers, especially in underrepresented regions; (3) assessment of consumer values, attitudes and behaviour regarding Fairtrade certification initiatives; and (4) policy evaluation, focusing on how institutional support can enhance Fairtrade certification adoption and effectiveness.

Appendix

Distribution of papers by place of publication and major themes (*n* = 84)

Source title	Number of publications	Sustainable consumption	Social issues	Governance aspects	Sustainability performance	Environmental sustainability	Adding value	New technologies and innovation	Marketing strategies	Food security
		Number of works in each theme								
Peer reviewed journals										
Ecological Economics	7	5				1		1		
British Food Journal	6	4				1			1	
Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems	4	1			2			1		
Agriculture and Human Values	4	1	2	1						
Marine Policy	4		1	1	1		1			
Agribusiness	2	1							1	
Journal of Rural Studies	2		1	1						
Third World Quarterly	2		1							1
Annual Review of Food Science and Technology	1	1								
Anthropology in Action	1			1						
Asia Pacific Viewpoint	1		1							

Source title	Number of publications	Sustainable consumption	Social issues	Governance aspects	Sustainability performance	Environmental sustainability	Adding value	New technologies and innovation	Marketing strategies	Food security
		Number of works in each theme								
Beverages	1						1			
Business Strategy and the Environment	1			1						
Cleaner and Circular Bioeconomy	1	1								
Conservation Letters	1					1				
Contemporary Issues in Entrepreneurship Research	1				1					
Data in Brief	1			1						
Discourse, Context and Media	1		1							
European Planning Studies	1							1		
Food Research International	1	1								
Food Science and Technology	1					1				
Agricultural and Resource Economics Review	1	1								
International Journal of Logistics Management	1			1						
International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education	1	1								
International Journal of Wine Business Research	1	1								

Source title	Number of publications	Sustainable consumption	Social issues	Governance aspects	Sustainability performance	Environmental sustainability	Adding value	New technologies and innovation	Marketing strategies	Food security
		Number of works in each theme								
International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing	1	1								
Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development	1				1					
Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences	1			1						
Journal of Food Products Marketing	1	1								
Journal of International Food and Agribusiness Marketing	1	1								
Journal of Marketing Management	1							1		
Agroforestry Systems	1					1				
Journal of Sustainable Tourism	1						1			
Land	1					1				
Plants	1					1				
Resources	1			1						
Revista Brasileira de Zootecnia	1				1					
Revista de Gestão Social e Ambiental	1					1				

Source title	Number of publications	Sustainable consumption	Social issues	Governance aspects	Sustainability performance	Environmental sustainability	Adding value	New technologies and innovation	Marketing strategies	Food security
		Number of works in each theme								
Rivista Internazionale di Scienze Sociali	1		1							
Supply Chain Management	1				1					
Tourism Planning and Development	1						1			
Books										
Asia's social entrepreneurs: Do well, do good... Do sustainably	1		1							
Innovation management and corporate social responsibility	1						1			
Contested sustainability discourses in the agri-food system	1			1						
Demand, complexity, and long-run economic evolution. Economic complexity and evolution	1	1								
East Asian ethical life and socio-economic transformation in the twenty-first century: The ethical sources of the entrepreneurial renewal of companies and communities	1		1							
Entrepreneurship and the sustainable development goals	1		1							

Source title	Number of publications	Sustainable consumption	Social issues	Governance aspects	Sustainability performance	Environmental sustainability	Adding value	New technologies and innovation	Marketing strategies	Food security
		Number of works in each theme								
Environmental impacts of transnational corporations in the global south (Research in Political Economy, vol. 33)	1			1						
Generation Z marketing and management in tourism and hospitality: The future of the industry	1	1								
International encyclopedia of human geography (2nd ed.)	1		1							
International encyclopedia of the social & behavioral sciences (2nd ed.)	1		1							
Social innovation in Latin America: Maintaining and restoring social and natural capital	1		1							
Sustainable development and communication in global food networks: Lessons from India	1								1	
The governance of sustainable rural renewal: A comparative global perspective	1			1						
The Oxford handbook of political consumerism	1	1								
The sustainable marketing concept in European SMEs: Insights from the food and drink industry	1								1	

Source title	Number of publications	Sustainable consumption	Social issues	Governance aspects	Sustainability performance	Environmental sustainability	Adding value	New technologies and innovation	Marketing strategies	Food security
		Number of works in each theme								
The world guide to sustainable enterprise, vol. 4: The Americas	1				1					
Conference proceedings										
Developments in Marketing Science: Proceedings of the Academy of Marketing Science	3	2					1			
Proceedings of the 33rd International Business Information Management Association Conference, IBIMA 2019: Education Excellence and Innovation Management through Vision 2020	1				1					
Total	84	26	14	12	9	8	6	4	4	1

Source: own elaboration.

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