

BIBLIOMETRIC INFERENCES ON UNFAIR TRADE PRACTICES IN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

Raluca Andreea ION¹, Cristina Maria STERIE¹, Marian Valentin POPESCU²,
Adriana Elena (MARIN) SIMA³

¹Bucharest University of Economic Studies 6, Piata Romana, District 1, 010374, Bucharest, Romania, E-mails: raluca.ion@eam.ase.ro, cristina.sterie@eam.ase.ro

²Technical University of Civil Engineering of Bucharest, 24, Lacul Tei Blvd., 020396, Bucharest, Romania, E-mail: marian-valentin.popescu@utcb.ro

³University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Bucharest, Doctoral School Plant and Animal Resources Engineering and Management, Romania, E-mail: marin.adriana.elena81@gmail.com

Corresponding author: cristina.sterie@eam.ase.ro

Abstract

This paper presents the scientists' interest in studying the topic of unfair trade practices in agro-food chains, trying to answer the questions how important is this topic in academic writing and how it interferes with other terms? Exploring and understanding fairness-enabling practices in the agro-food chain is essential to create a sustainable and resilient agro-food system. The objectives of the research are to identify the main unfair trade practices that impacts the agents along the agro-food chain and the solutions given by scientists to solve inequity. In order to achieve these goals, a systematic literature review of papers covering the topic of unfair trade practices in agricultural sector has been conducted. The results show that there is an increased and relatively recent interest in studying unfair trade practices in the agro-food sector, with a noticeable growth in research since 2018. The main research connections of this topic include sustainability, emerging technologies to improve fairness in supply chains, the role of governance, agro-food policy and producers' organizations in mitigating unfair trade practices, the impact of different crisis on supply chains and trade practices. The results are relevant for rising awareness of how unfair trade practices impact the agents of agro-food chains and for finding solutions to avoid or reduce them.

Key words: unfair trade practices, equity, agriculture sector, agro-food chain, sustainable food chain, food waste

INTRODUCTION

Unfair trade practices (UTP) manifest themselves through a variety of behaviors that exploit power and information asymmetries between supply chain actors [3]. For example, imposing unfair contract terms, delaying payments, unilaterally changing contract terms, and imposing unjustified additional costs are just some of the tactics used by some supply chain actors to maximize their profits at the expense of weaker links [1]. These practices not only undermine the economic stability and viability of primary producers, but also create dysfunctions throughout the supply chain, ultimately affecting consumers and the economy as a whole [21, 23].

The phenomenon of unfair trade practices is not a new one, having been associated over time with business and economics, and is emerging

in technology, services and even the agricultural sector [26].

The concept of "unfair trade practices" has been identified and studied in various areas of business and economics over time. Initially, concerns about unfair practices were often associated with the field of competition and antitrust, dating back to the Sherman and Clayton Acts in the United States of America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries [23]. These laws were designed to regulate and limit forms of anti-competitive behavior, including unfair business practices [13, 24].

In the European Union, discussions on unfair trade practices started in 2009, accompanied by several communications on the subject. In 2013, there was a public consultation on the questions raised in an EU paper. In September 2016, a report was published calling on the Commission

and Member States to take immediate action to prevent unfair commercial practices [6].

The European Union developed Directive (EU) 2019/633 to address the issue of unfair business-to-business trading practices in the agricultural and food supply chain. This Directive was developed to address significant inequalities in the bargaining power of suppliers and buyers of agricultural and food products, which can lead to unfair trading practices [27].

At the national level, Romania transposed the provisions of Directive (EU) 2019/633 through the Law on Unfair Commercial Practices between Enterprises in the Agricultural and Food Supply Chain. This law establishes a list of prohibited unfair trade practices in relations between buyers and suppliers within this supply chain, by regulating payment terms, the powers and duties of the competition authority, designated to ensure the national application of the provisions of the directive, such as and the sanctions applicable to the perpetrator of the violation [8].

The agri-food chain is not just a series of steps through which food products pass, but a complex ecosystem with a profound impact on society [15]. It plays a key role in ensuring food security, serving as the backbone of many countries' economies and providing jobs from agricultural production to [12,7].

In addition, the agri-food chain is fertile ground for innovation and technology with the potential to revolutionize the way food is produced and consumed, but its importance does not stop there and by adopting sustainable practices, the agri-food chain has the potential to contribute to protecting the environment and reducing greenhouse gas emissions [10]. An efficient and well-managed agri-food chain is also essential for public health, ensuring access to safe and nutritious food [9]. In a global context, it also facilitates international trade, connecting different markets and crops, and in crisis situations, be it pandemics or natural disasters, a resilient agri-food chain can mitigate the impact and help recovery [18]. Therefore, the agri-food chain is much more than a simple distribution mechanism, it is a vital element influencing the economy, health and the environment [28].

Considering the effects of unfair practices on agro-food system, this research has the objective of investigating the specialists and academics' interest in studying this issue and their main conclusions. The paper starts from the hypothesis that unfair practices not only disturb the economic activities along the food chain, but also have ethical implications. In pursuing this goal, bibliometric analysis and detailed literature review are used, as described below.

The paper is structured as follows: after the introduction, the methodology for studying the literature is described. The results are then presented and discussed, in the last part. Finally, conclusions are drawn, underlining the significance and the impact of unfair trade practices upon agro-food system's actors.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to identify how researchers in the field have contributed to the topic of "unfair trade practices in agri-food", a systematic review of papers covering this area was conducted. Therefore, this was achievable by going through the reporting checklist of Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses [20].

To achieve this aim, a comprehensive search was performed among 138 scientific articles in the SCOPUS and Web of Science Core Collection databases that addressed the topic of unfair trade practices in the agri-food sector, without imposing restrictions on publication date or language used. Thus, essential information such as abstract, keywords, journal name, year of publication, number of citations were exported to a spreadsheet. In order to search the articles in all fields of the two mentioned databases were: *Unfair AND practices AND in AND the AND agri-food AND sector*.

The next step consisted in analyzing the titles and abstracts that were downloaded, verifying the eligibility of the articles in relation to the established topic, and eliminating those that did not meet the analysis criteria. For this purpose, 89 articles out of the total of 136 were eliminated in the first phase, and after the initial analysis, after a more detailed selection, 6 more

articles were eliminated, so that in the end the study aimed to address 41 scientific articles (Figure 1).

Further, the results of the bibliometric analysis carried out for the keywords “Unfair practices in the agriculture sector” are mentioned. For the

bibliometric analysis, 5,300 articles published between 1928 and 2023 were analyzed. The topic of unfair trade practices has been debated since 1928, when the first scientific work on the subject appeared in the Purpose database.

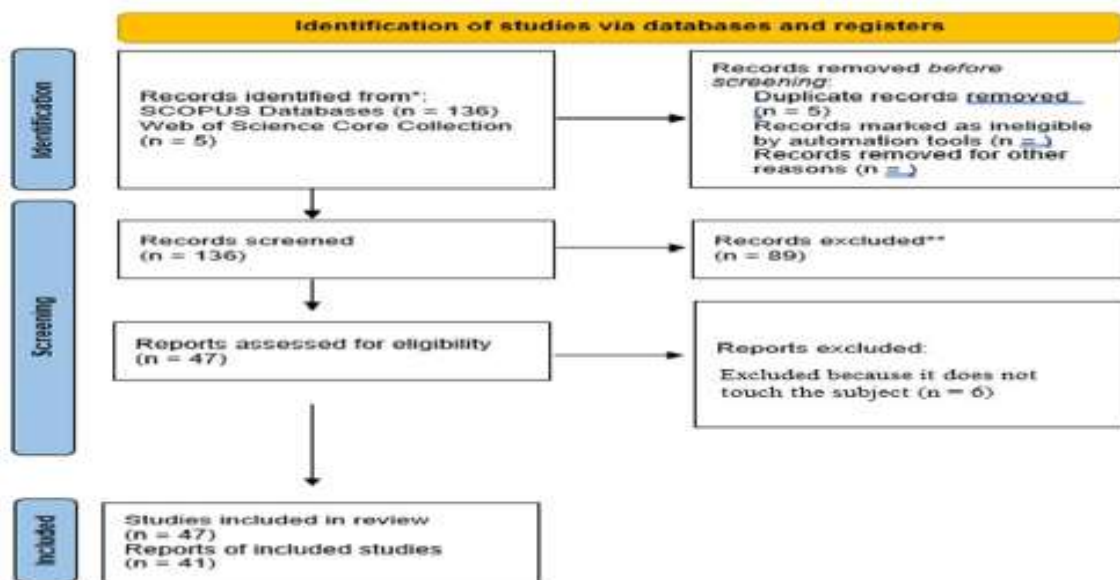


Fig. 1. PRISMA 2020 flow chart for the current agri-food UCP study
 Source: PRISMA flow diagram, processing after (Moher et al., 2010) [20].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

On the analyzed topic, between 1998 and 2023, 289 scientific papers have been produced and are included in the Scopus database.

In terms of paper dynamics, the maximum number of papers drafted was in 2021 with 32 papers, decreasing in the following years to reach 19 papers in 2023 (Figure 2).

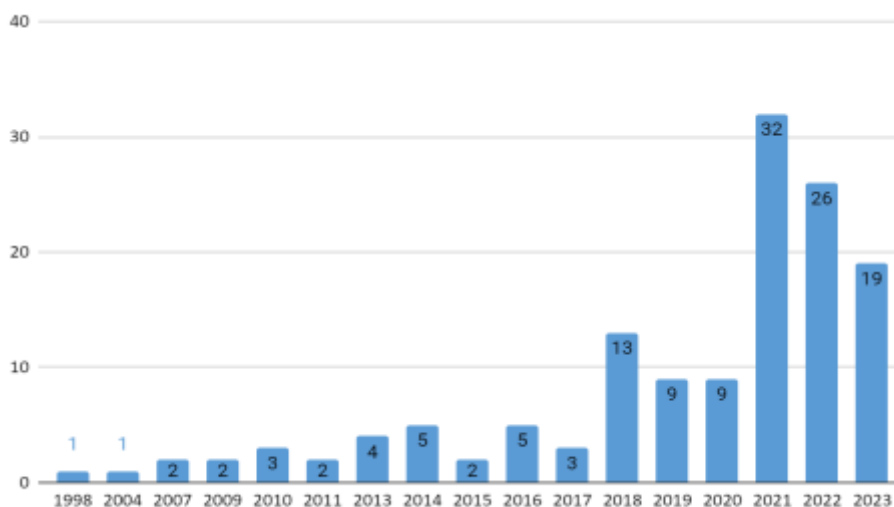


Fig. 2. Dynamics of the number of papers on the subject of "Unfair practices in the agriculture sector"
 Source: Scopus data processing, Accessed on 10.09.2023 [25].

On the topic of unfair trade practices in agri-food, according to the Scopus database, articles were included in categories such as: social

sciences (79 papers), economics (40 papers), business (37 papers), environmental science (35 papers), etc. (Figure 3).

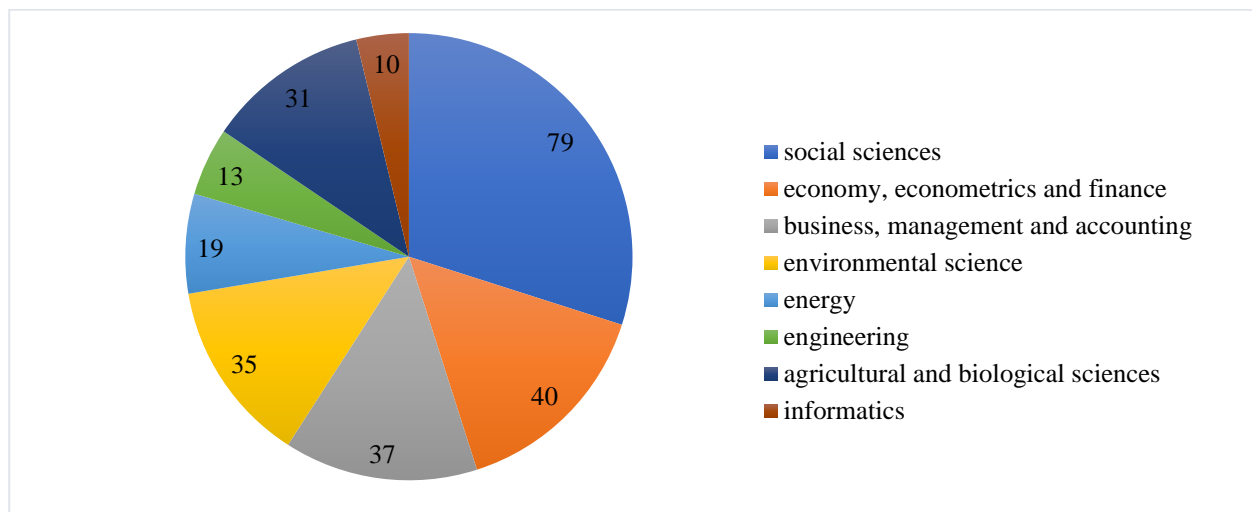


Fig. 3. Number of papers on the subject of "Unfair practices in the agriculture sector"
 Source: Scopus data processing, Accessed on 10.09.2023 [25].

The keywords interconnected with the analyzed topic have been grouped into 3 clusters. The first cluster, focused on sustainability, includes keywords such as sustainability, food supply, agriculture, supply chain, sustainable development, agribusiness, showing that researchers are preoccupied by the topic of unfair trade practices in relation to sustainable development, through its social dimension, including ethics.

The second cluster, focused on equity, includes keywords such as fairness, supply chain management, dairy production, market power, literature review. It reveals the researchers' interest in fairness and equity along the food chain, emphasizing, in some papers, the unequal spread of power within agro-food system and in accessing markets.

The third cluster includes human rights and food industry and is less represented.

For the keywords used by year, from the fifth month of 2019 to the fifth month of 2020, researchers were concerned in studying human rights, agriculture, sustainable development, sustainability, up-to-date agriculture, food supply. Later on, starting from the sixth month of 2020 to the beginning of 2021, the main topics were on: supply chain management, agribusiness, supply chain, food industry, fairness. Countries such as the United States of America together with the United Kingdom,

Italy and Germany are particularly interested in the topic.

The studies reported in data bases on the topic of unfair trade practices in agriculture have been ranked according to the number of citations. The results of the most cited articles are discussed below.

The majority of the studies on the topic of unfair trade practices concern about the negative effects of *power asymmetries* in agri-food supply chains [14]. Moreover, unfair trade practices have been associated with *food loss and waste*, impacts on the farm and farming communities, and negative effects on social and economic sustainability [11]. In particular, studies have highlighted that agri-food supply chains are susceptible to unfair trade practices that can damage trust and fairness among agricultural producers [2].

Some studies have highlighted the potential of emerging technologies such as *block chain* technology and digital applications in improving transparency and fair practices in supply chains [28, 17]. Thus, block chain technology can contribute to a more equitable distribution of value in supply chains by increasing transparency and more effectively tracking transactions and product provenance [26].

Some studies have examined the role of value chains in the development of *agri-food policy*

and in the regulation of unfair trade practices. It has also been noted that agri-food policy can play a significant role in promoting equity in supply chains by addressing challenges related to bargaining power and asymmetry in trade relations [9].

The COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to this, exposing the fragilities and asymmetries in these chains and underlining the need to tackle unfair practices more effectively to ensure their resilience and sustainability [2]. At the same time, studies from various geographical and socio-economic contexts have highlighted how unfair commercial practices can vary according to local conditions and market characteristics [16].

Various studies have highlighted that *producers' organizations* can strengthen the bargaining power of farmers and help promote fairer practices in supply chains [4]. Producers' organizations membership reduces the likelihood of farmers reporting unfair trade practices, the estimated impact of producers' organizations membership is found to be largest for smaller farms [5].

Not least, *sustainability* is studied in connection to unfair commercial practices, many studies describing how sustainable are particular food chains, including from the ethical point of view. It was observed that the upstream levels of food chain include many unethical elements, from unfair trading practices to ethical treatment to farmers, from lack of transparency through technology and innovation to ensuring fair remuneration. The solution is to improve the position of farmers in the chain [22]. The authors have considered the following five upstream focused business applications to warrant fairness practices: blockchain, cooperatives, interbranch organizations, business applications for small-scale farmers, and Fairtrade. Moreover, for sustainable and resilient food systems, the governance is essential [19].

CONCLUSIONS

Fairness in the agro-food systems is an increasingly important issue, as shows the results of the bibliometric analysis and the literature review. The topic increased in

relevance since the sustainable development goals brought into discussions equity and fairness.

There is an increased and relatively recent interest in the study of unfair trade practices in the agri-food sector, with a noticeable growth in research since 2018. The topic is approached from various academic perspectives, indicating its importance and complexity, as well as the need for interdisciplinary collaboration to fully understand the impact and implications of these trade practices.

The main research directions connected to unfair trade practices are:

-Sustainability effects of UTPs: focuses on identifying and assessing the impact of UTPs on sustainability issues, including food loss and waste, the economy of farmers and farming communities, and social and economic sustainability effects in the agro-food industry.

-Emerging technologies to improve fairness in supply chains: refers to the role of emerging technologies, such as block chain technology and digital applications, in improving transparency, fair distribution of value and preventing unfair trade practices in agro-food supply chains.

-The role of governance, agro-food policy and producers' organizations in mitigating unfair trade practices: addresses the impact of agro-food policy and the role of producers' organizations in mitigating unfair trade practices. It also underlines the importance of cooperation and collective initiatives to promote fair practices in supply chains.

-The impact of different crisis on supply chains and trade practices: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on agro-food supply chains, including on unfair trade practices and the need to adapt to new socio-economic contexts.

Ensuring fair and ethical practices in the agro-food chain is essential for sustainable and resilient agro-food systems. Future research may focus on finding solutions in mitigating unfair trade practices in agro-food chains.

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