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Working in Chains: African Informal Workers and Global Value Chains

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In the era of globalization, the concept of global value chains has put commodities, connections and capitalist markets at the centre of stories about value, obscuring the role of labour and livelihoods in value creation. Faced with concerns about rising unemployment and high levels of informality, global value chains are seen as the means of creating value in workers. This is especially true of poor informal labour in African countries, where poverty and informality have increasingly been attributed to a lack of connections with the global economy. Despite growth rates averaging 3-5% annually since 2004, poverty has remained stubbornly high, afflicting over 40% of the population across the continent, unemployment has risen to alarming levels, and burgeoning informal economies employ 85.8% of the labour force (African Economic Outlook 2017:5; African Economic Outlook 2018:xv; ILO 2018; WEF 2017). To make matters worse, the failure of growth to trickle down or provide jobs is confronting a demographic tsunami, with African populations growing at 2.5% annually -- twice the global average (Meagher 2016; World Bank 2014). This combination of 'jobless growth' and rapidly expanding populations poses a growing threat of mass poverty and political unrest (Azeng and Yogo 2013; Filmer and Fox 2014; McKinsey 2012; UNICEF 2017). A recent African Economic Outlook (2018:xv) report notes that 'In the face of rapidly growing populations and heightened risks of social unrest or discontent, jobless growth is the most serious concern for African policy makers'.

In the prevailing context of strong growth and mass unemployment, two broad narratives have emerged. The first, put forward by Ferguson (2015) and others suggests that African workers have become structurally irrelevant to the global economy (Barcheisi 20**; Ferguson and Li 2018). The combination of technological advance, trade liberalization, local deindustrialization and agricultural decline have turned African workers from value creators into economic liabilities. Instead of contributing to national growth, African's unemployed and under-employed masses pose a threat of mass poverty and political instability (Ferguson and Li 2018; Li 2017; Davies 2006; Standing 2010, 2015; UNICEF 2017). Employment generation initiatives are dismissed in favour of redistributive systems of social protection to support Africa's unemployable millions.

An alternative perspective emanating from global corporations and a growing number of development agencies emphasizes the functional relevance and dynamic potential of Africa's large young labour force and burgeoning informal economies (Ibrahim Foundation 2010, Garcia and Faures 2008, World Bank 2014; McKinsey 2016). Far from constituting a demographic disaster, the continent's expanding young population is viewed as a potential demographic dividend. According to the African Development Bank (2012:1), 'Demographic trends are thus likely to provide an opportunity to reduce poverty and yield a demographic dividend that will lead to economic success as it did in the Asian emerging markets'. Even in the face of the recent downturn in commodity prices, a recent McKinsey report (2016) still celebrates Africa's 'young population and growing labour force – a highly valuable asset in an ageing world', and argues for greater engagement with informal and unemployed masses as a source of workers and consumer markets for global capitalism.

Greater engagement in global value chains is seen as a central feature of the new way forward, connecting surplus African labour into the technological possibilities and expanding opportunities of the global economy. A McKinsey (2012: 53) report on Africa's economic prospects described global value chains as 'engines of job creation', while a recent African Economic Outlook (2017:81) report laments that 'the continent lags behind in global value chains integration, implying that Africa's job creation and income is not keeping up as the global economy expands and trade improves'. Commentators emphasize the need to look beyond including the poor simply as recipients of charity and social assistance, in order to engage them as producers, entrepreneurs and consumer – as agents rather than as victims of development. As de Haan and Thorat (2013:11) explain, 'Inclusive growth cannot be reached simply by the state redistributing the gains from economic growth… Policies for inclusion need to focus also on the conditions under which small entrepreneurs including in the informal and rural sectors generate their livelihoods, on redistribution of assets and other opportunities to participate in growth processes…'. The emphasis is on removing the barriers to connecting Africa's marginalized labour force into global value chains with a view to connecting them to the value creating opportunities of the global economy (OECD 2015; World Bank 2017).

In foregrounding the value-creating prospects of global connections, value chain enthusiasts gloss over the problematic effects of these connections. Africa's long experience at the bottom of global value chains has been that they serve not only as conduits of resources and opportunities, but often as siphons and whips (Meagher et al. 2016). The reality is that value chains do not just connect -- supply to demand, informal producers to global markets, peripheral populations to job opportunities -- they reconfigure. On the one hand, global value chains reframe what is valuable. They focus attention on the products and processes that can supply global needs, on the workers with the necessary skills, and on the institutions and intermediaries that mobilize the required local labour and resources. While value is created and expanded in these global connections, which offer vast new markets for local products and linkages to new skills and opportunities, alternative sources of value are also distorted and crowded out in the process. In removing obstacles to incorporation of labour into the chain, global value chains cannibalize existing systems and delegitimize alternative uses, marketing systems, and modes of organization that may play a role in local systems of value, ignoring the ways in which a given activity is embedded in wider social, political and value systems of marginalized people. Some have drawn attention to this blindspot in terms of the need to 'contextualize commodity chains' by examining the wider social and economic systems within which value chains touch down (Challies 2008; Goodman 2004; Daya 2014; Neilsen and Shonk 2014). But understanding the ways in which inclusion in global value chains affects vulnerable people requires a focus not only on the wider livelihood context of marginalized populations in the Global South, but on the ways in which value chains reshape the local context.

This paper will address the question of how global value chains reshape the value and regulatory environment of vulnerable rural labour in contemporary Africa. Do global connections improve the livelihoods of peripheral rural workers? How does incorporation into global value chains reshape the institutional systems regulating their economic and social life? Do these global connections alleviate the looming risks of poverty and social unrest? I will focus on two cases: South African farmworkers and Moroccan argan oil producers. Both of these represent marginalized rural actors who were expected to benefit from connection into global value chains. Understanding the effect of global connections on precarious rural workers must begin with a consideration of shifting debates about the value of informal labour and informal institutions in globalizing economies. This will be followed by an examination of the effect of global linkages on farmworkers in South African horticultural farms, and women producers of exotic oil in the argan forests of southwestern Morocco. I will highlight the mechanisms through which global linkages have reconfigured institutional systems in the creation of the value chain, realigning labour regimes, livelihoods and local commercial systems, as well as considering the social tensions created by the economic and organizational realignment needed to make global value chains work.

Rethinking the Value of Vulnerable Labour

Contemporary debates about the effect of GVCs on precarious workers focus on tensions between inclusion and adverse incorporation. Proponents highlight the advantages of global economic linkages for access to opportunities, identifying global value chains with links to skills, jobs, innovation and technology (WDR 2013; AEO 2014; McKinsey 2016; ILO 2017:11). Critics focus attention on the ways in which inclusion in global markets can increase rather than reduce the vulnerability of poor and powerless people. Phillips and Sakamoto (2012:288) point out that, 'contrary to orthodox assumptions that "inclusion" in global economic activity is the key to poverty reduction…, the terms of inclusion can instead create and perpetuate poverty for a large part of the world's labour force'. A growing research focus on 'adverse incorporation', meaning 'inclusion on worse terms', reveals that the central issue is not just the fact of inclusion in global markets, but the terms of inclusion (Meagher and Lindell 2013; Meagher et al 2016; du Toit 2004; du Toit 2009; Barrientos et al. 2013; Phillips 2011). However, du Toit (2009:19) cautions against turning 'adverse incorporation' into a 'blanket term' through a tendency to 'replace the teleology of 'inclusiveness' with an opposite equally suspect teleology of subjection and dependency'. Greater attention is needed to the specific mechanisms through which connections increase rather than reduce vulnerability for some, while potentially increasing it for others. Tracing the specific mechanisms of adverse incorporation requires a closer look at how the value of vulnerable labour has been conceptually transformed through shifts in the meaning of decent work within global value chains, and shifts in the mechanism of chain governance.

Shifts in the Meaning of Decent Work

The term 'decent work' was initially coined by the ILO to refer to work that is paid and protected according to minimum legal and moral standards of economic security and social dignity for workers and their dependents. In its original formulation, 'decent work' was contrasted with 'informal work' which is shorn of legal and social protection (ILO 2002; ILO 2013). The global value chains of a wide number of international firms and brands have expressed a commitment to eradicating the use of informal labour. A cornucopia of codes and standards have been developed to ensure regular working hours, the payment of minimum wages, appropriate health and safety conditions (Kaplinsky and Morris 2018; Barrientos et al. 2003; Nadvi 2008). Occasional scandals revealing child labour in the value chains of major brandname products, or catastrophes such as the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh, redouble the efforts of corporations to eliminate or conceal traces of informality in their value chains (Phillips 2015; Ruthven 2009; Nadvi 2008; Anner et al. 2013).

However, a recent refocusing of attention on the issue of 'unfree labour' has created important shifts in perceptions of the role of informal work in global value chains. Noting the growing range of non-standard and worrying work arrangements in the context of relentless global economic competition, critics have argued that 'simple binaries' between decent and 'undecent' work obstruct the understanding of contemporary capitalist labour dynamics (Barrientos et al. 2013; Lerche 2011; Phillips and Sakamoto 2011). In addition to the rise of informal subcontracting and informal survival activities, the competitive pressures of global capitalism is giving rise to the phenomenon of modern slavery. Far from constituting a vestige of pre-capitalist practices, modern slavery has emerged in a range of capitalist export sectors, from the Thai shrimping industry to West African large scale cocoa production (Walk Free foundation 2016; Brass 2009). Current estimates indicate that there are 45.8 million people in slavery across the world, heavily concentrated in export industries (Walk Free Foundation 2016). This has triggered a call for decent work to be represented as a continuum of 'unfreedoms' with decent work at one end, various forms of informal activity in the middle, and forced, bonded and child labour at the other end (Phillips et al. 2015, Barrientos et al. 2013).

The reframing of decent work as the positive end of a continuum of 'unfreedoms' has destabilized the consensus about the nature of legitimate and illegitimate forms of work in globalizing market economies. Viewed from the perspective of a continuum, informal workers are being recast as free workers at the bottom of global value chains, waiting to be transported up the 'benign escalator' through connection to new skills, resources and opportunities (Humphrey and Schmitz 1993). Discourses of economic inclusion legitimate the integration of Africa's expanding informal labour force into global value chains with a view to increasing demand and income opportunities for the region's vast stores of under-employed labour (WDR 2013:76; Ranis and Gollin 2013:99-100; African Economic Outlook 2012). In the World Development Report on Jobs (2013:33-4), informal employment is celebrated as 'inclusive', 'transformational', and 'good jobs for development in less developed countries', while formal employment standards are denigrated as a source of job shortage, economic stagnation, and social exclusion. Only forced, bonded and child labour are framed as illegitimate forms of labour to be purged from global value chains. From this perspectives, the use of informal labour in the value chains of modern capitalist firms has been framed as legitimate as long as workers are free to enter or leave, glossing over the question of whether the work meets minimum standards of remuneration and social protection.

Shifts in the Mechanisms of Chain Governance

Benevolent images of formal-informal connections call for a closer examination of the mechanisms of chain governance in a context of routine linkages with informal workers. Narratives of inclusion must be underpinned by techniques of governance that incorporate informal labour into capitalist regulatory systems. In the African context, this draws attention to the problem of how formal sector capitalist firms can engage with diverse, hard-to-reach, unruly informal labour forces scattered across the continent. As Dolan and Roll (2013:141) contend, 'inclusive capitalism…raises new questions about the implications of making unusable Africa usable to capitalism'. How have previously 'unusable' African informal labour has been converted into a usable labour force for global capital? What kinds of linkages, modes of governance and ideological narratives are used to make this excluded surplus labour force governable?

Considerable research over the past 15 years has detailed how deregulation, outsourcing, and competitive pressures within global value chains have contributed to the expansion of informal labour by shifting costs and risks down the chain, creating nodes of poverty and informality within global chains (Nadvi 2004; Chen 2007; Jutting et al. 2008; Ruthven 2010). More recently, this view from above of labour informalization within value chains has been complemented by a view from below, that examines how global firms engage with disperate and often unruly pools of informal labour (Tsing 2015; Dolan and Roll 2013; Meagher et al. 2016; Barrientos 2008). Concerned to address the blindspot created by analysing these processes from above, Bolt (2016:573) 'cautions against extrapolations from macro- to micro-level analysis, and against the postulation of far-reaching logics of neoliberalism or transformation. It is imperative to investigate how norms that develop in global supply chains intersect with those that govern networks of workers, and understand how key actors mediate between them.' The view of informal economic inclusion from below considers how market liberalization and corporate management techniques actually connect with the norms and networks and power structures of marginalized groups.

New pressures for cost-cutting and outsourcing, combined with the imperative of 'inclusive markets' and 'bottom of the pyramid' (BoP) initiatives require more than just competitive pressures and deregulation to engage effectively with peripheral suppliers and hard to reach markets in developing countries. Anna Tsing (2009b:349) has highlighted the drive of contemporary capitalism to engage with a wide variety of 'non-standard economic and ecological niches', not only to tap into sources of cheap labour, but to activate a range of local skills, values and authority structures for capitalist profit. Far from rationalizing peripheral labour across the world through incorporation into global value chains, Tsing argues that global capitalism is increasingly occupied with revitalizing and tapping cultural and social diversity, previously viewed as non-economic. In the process, the diverse values, skills, and networks embedded in social differences of gender, ethnicity, religion, region and nationality can be mobilized in the service of the corporation. In 21st century capitalism, she explains 'Supply chains depend on those very factors banished from the economic; this is what makes them profitable…' (Tsing 2009a:158).

This turns on its head Timothy Mitchell's understanding of the 'economy' as framing out the social and cultural elements of local livelihoods. Instead, we are confronted with global value chains that 'frame in' indigenous, informal and peripheral workers and practices that are deemed useful to cutting costs and reaching new markets. Far from ignoring the wider social context in which value chains operate as some commentators have argued (Neilsen and Shonk 2014; Challies 2008; Daya 2014), global value chains are increasingly engaging with the 'regulatory role of the social', with a view to harnessing it to the goals of capitalist profit. As Tsing (2009a:151) points out:

> The exclusions and hierarchies that discipline the workforces emerge as much from outside the chains as from internal governance standard. No firm has to personally invent patriarchy, colonialism, war, racism, or imprisonment, yet each of these is privileged in supply chain labour mobilization…'

Some commentators view these processes of engagement between global value chains and peripheral livelihoods as benevolent, spontaneous, unintentional, even 'surprising' (Humphrey and Schmitz 2993; Tsing 2015:63). Maxim Bolt (2016:566) describes the articulation of ethnic hierarchies with the cost-cutting objectives of agrarian export capitalism in South Africa as 'accidental neoliberalism'. While these linkages may originally have emerged spontaneously, the growing emphasis in development thinking on 'hybrid governance', 'second best institutions', and 'bricolage', emphasize a more deliberate engagement with informal labour and institutions to fill gaps in market infrastructure in the context of weak or failing states (Grindle 2016:4) (Grindle 2008; Raeymaekers, Menkhaus and Vlassenroot 2008; Rodrik 2008)(Hart and London; Tsing; Cleaver 2012). As Dixit (2004:4) argues, 'governmental provision of legal institutions is not strictly necessary for achieving reasonably good outcomes from markets…it is not always necessary to create replicas of Western-style state legal institutions from scratch; it may be possible to work with such alternative institutions as are available, and build on them'. Notions of the economy as a rationalizing process that replaces informal economic arrangements has given way to a hybridizing impulse centred on the splicing together of formal and informal forms of economic organization for purposes of capitalist penetration.

The pragmatic reframing of market development has been accompanied by a renewed interest by international development and corporate actors in the legibility of informal institutions (Lund 2006; Hart and London 2005; Dolan and Roll 2013). In contrast to James Scott's notions of legibility as a process of rationalizing and standardizing informal forms of organization to convert them into rationalized formal arrangements, inclusive capitalism seeks to map, catalogue and classify informal arrangements themselves with a view to using them rather than transforming them. The objective here is not to formalize, but to incorporate useful informal arrangements into new hybrid economic ecosystems geared to extending market penetration and reducing transaction costs. In the business management literature on BoP markets, this is referred to as developing 'native capability' – the ability to understand and selectively engage with local ways of doing things. As Hart and London (2005:33) explain, 'In the informal sectors, relationships are grounded in social – not legal – contracts…Successfully operating in this space requires a capability to understand and appreciate the benefits of the existing social infrastructure, not complain about its lack of Western-style institutions'.

In the process, informal and peripheral forms of economic organization are reduced to a 'latent commons' – a pool of informal workers, practices and institutions available for selective incorporation into global production systems and value chains (Tsing 2015). The process by which global actors tap into previously marginalized and denigrated economic niches to mobilize labour, skills and commodities more cheaply is referred to by Anna Tsing (2015:63) as 'salvage accumulation', which she views as central to the profit-making logic of contemporary supply chain capitalism. The exercise of 'salvaging', of splicing informal practices into global value chains, complicates the imaginary of smooth, disintermediated global connections integrating marginalized workers into global systems of opportunity. A closer look reveals that global connections are structured by a range of intermediaries and brokers that bridge the discordant labour arrangements and regulatory frameworks of formal and informal organizational systems (James 2011). Proponents of BoP initiatives have emphasised the need for 'honest brokers' such as NGOs and social enterprises to mediate the gap between formal corporate institutions and the varied and often informal local arrangements at the bottom of the economic pyramid with which they seek to connect. Indeed, BoP initiatives and inclusive market arrangements in developing countries are generating a profusion of 'unconventional partners', including NGOs, social enterprises, labour brokers, chiefly authorities, and graduate SMEs (small and micro-enterprises) that mediate the gap between formal corporate institutions and the networks of hawkers, craft producers, small farmers, and casual labour encountered on the ground in African countries. Intermediaries within global value chains play a central role in structuring, bypassing and reshaping governance arrangements, often in ways that camouflage their interface with global capitalism behind a veil of inclusion and poverty alleviation.

Key to the value of intermediaries is their ability to use local norms and networks to mobilize marginalized workers and local practices around the economic priorities of capitalist lead firms. Intermediaries such as NGOs, social enterprises or local authorities enable value created in non-capitalist systems to be translated into capitalist assets for accumulation, whether by cutting costs, disciplining labour or accessing scarce resources. The work of intermediaries in mobilizing peripheral values and skills and transforming them into capital for global firms is referred to by Tsing (2015) as 'translation', while others frame the translation work of intermediaries as 'techniques of governance' used to discipline and restructure informal systems around the needs of global firms (Mair et al. 2012, Dolan and Rajak 2016; Elyachar 2012). Taylor details how acts of translation reshape rather than merely decipher local institutions, turning collective work organization into cooperatives, forest use rights into property rights, and livelihoods into work regimes. As he explains 'Brokers accompany these templates along the way and help diversity translation chains', creating ‘nodes of power’ along the chain (Taylor 2016:405). In the process, intermediaries do not just connect or splice together diverse regulatory systems, they effect a strategic realignment of local values and practices to bring them under the control of capitalist lead firms, while often dispossessing local actors of the value of their own social capital (Turner 2016:405; Elyachar 2012; Meagher 2015; Meagher et al 2016).

Incorporation of informal and marginalized workers into global value chains depends on ideological as well as institutional processes. In addition to the work of intermediaries integrating peripheral workers and institutions into value chains, the engagement of global value chains with peripheral labour requires the mobilization of ‘legitimating narratives’ to sanction the generation of profit from precarious workers (Turner 2016). Overarching narratives of ‘poverty alleviation’, ‘gender empowerment’, ‘environmental sustainability’, or ‘indigenous artisanal cultures’ reframe connections in terms of values of assistance, charity, inclusion and conservation. This is accompanied by a process of what Tsing (2009a:151) refers to as ‘resignifying work’. As Tsing and others have pointed out, work at the bottom of global value chains is recoded in terms of non-work activities such as ‘entrepreneurship’, ‘cooperatives’, or ‘artisanal production’ in which workers are not viewed as engaging in a relationship between capital and labour (Dolan and Rajak 2016; Turner 2016). Both informal workers and external observers may not see what they are doing as work, nor view their activities as falling within the responsibility of capital or as being subject to the legal regulations governing labour. Their incorporation in the value chain is based on different narratives of value, in which the value that they create as workers disappears behind the growth-enhancing or philanthropic value of global recognition and inclusion in the global economy. But, as studies have shown, translation processes are not always smooth, and can give rise to cracks in legitimating narratives as tensions flare up in the face of unsustainable livelihood pressures and conflicts with local values (Turner 2016; Elyachar 2012; Meagher 2015).

Precarious Agrarian Workers and Global Value Chains in South Africa and Morocco.

With a view to exploring how global value chains shape the livelihoods of poor rural workers in contemporary Africa, I will examine two cases in which connection into the global economy promised improvements in precarious livelihoods, but delivered very different outcomes for the majority of workers. The objective is not to argue that global value chains are always exploitative, but to illuminate some of the processes through which connections that offer conduits of value and opportunity to the poor may actually operate as siphons and whips that extract labour and value from precarious workers. The South African case focuses on how the integration of the South African fruit industry into global value chains affected the livelihoods of farmworkers in the export sector. A second case considers the effects of connecting poor Moroccan women engaged in the production of argan oil into the value chains of global cosmetics firms. In both cases, I will consider the nature of the connection between global firms and precarious workers, the new actors and arrangements used to articulate these connections, the ideological narratives through which connections were legitimated, and the cracks that have emerged in the face of livelihood and social tensions.

South African Farmworkers and Global Connections

With the end of the racist Apartheid regime in 1994, South Africa faced the twin challenge of re-engagement in the global economy and addressing problems of high unemployment, which currently stands at nearly 30%, and in rural areas is thought to exceed 50% (Clark 2018). At first glance, connecting unemployed workers into global value chains looks like an ideal solution to both the problem of unemployment and the thirst for global re-engagement. In export agriculture, a narrative of global inclusion encompassed the dual ideals of liberation and labour rights, promising to integrate black farmers and farmworkers into deracialized linkages with the global economy. As Andries Du Toit (2009:5) points out, this view 'secured broad assent because it was enfolded in a compelling and widely supported ideological metanarrative about the relationship between racism, tradition, modernity, progress and South Africa's integration into a global economic and social community.' As such, it engaged with the aspiration of the majority of South Africans to rejoin the modern global order from which they had been excluded by Apartheid.

In the context of agriculture, realising this globalizing vision involved a battery of reforms to liberalize agricultural markets that had previously been biased in support of white commercial farmers, and to extend labour legislation to offer greater protection of agricultural workers (Visser 2016:19; Bolt 2016; Webb 2017; Du Toit 2009). This involved the phasing out of marketing boards, and the removal of tariffs and subsidies to white farmers from 1996. In this context, market liberalization was seen to level the playing field by reducing disproportionate state support for white farmers. By 2003, labour rights were also extended to black farm workers through the setting of a minimum wage and minimum working hours for farmworkers, following on the provision of greater tenure security to on-farm workers through an Act passed in 1997. These reforms promised to free workers from serf-like conditions of tied housing and in-kind payments which trapped farmworkers in oppressive cliental relations with white farmers.

Yet, as Du Toit (2001, 2009) and others have detailed, the intersection of market liberalization and labour protection had a contradictory effect on black farmworkers. As market liberalization and integration into export value chains squeezed commercial margins of fruit farmers, they responded by cutting labour costs in the struggle to survive the new pressures of deregulation and compliance with corporate codes and standards. While fruit exports increased with integration in global value chains, the number of people employed in agriculture nearly halved between 1988-2012 (Webb 2017:52). Far from reversing the oppressive agrarian labour relations experienced under Apartheid, integration into global value chains set in motion new competitive dynamics of casualization, outsourcing and externalization of labour in an effort to reduce labour costs (Visser 2016:23, Webb 2017:52). While demand for skilled workers increased on some farms, unskilled workers found themselves replaced by mechanization or rendered more precarious by casualization and outsourcing (Webb 2016: 52). Citing the FARE report, Webb (2017:51) notes that the proportion of seasonal to permanent workers in the Western Cape has increased, standing at about 80% seasonal to 20% permanent by 2013 (See also Visser and Ferrer 2015; Barrientos and Visser 2012). As Visser (2016:41) explained 'when farmworkers' conditions today are compared to those in 1976, farmworkers do not seem to be significantly better off – in fact, they may be worse off'.

Labour brokers and on-farm intermediaries played a central role in translating global connections and squeezed margins into intensified precarity rather than improved livelihoods for the majority of farmworkers. Barrientos (2008), Visser (2016), Webb (2017) and others all emphasize the central role of labour brokers in helping farmers to circumvent protective labour legislation despite political pressure from within and the intensification of codes and standards from the global sphere. Theron (2005) and Forrest (2015) highlight the role of labour brokers in perpetuating the oppressive and particularistic institutional vestiges of South Africa's migrant labour system. These new forms of temporary labour supply emerged in the 1980s just as migrant recruitment agencies were being closed down in the South African homelands, drawing on many of the same networks and institutional practices. Webb (2017:50) argues that the increased use of labour brokers in agricultural employment undermined efforts to eliminate paternalism in agrarian labour relations, and introduced 'new forms of precarity' in farmworker livelihoods by increasing instability of employment while driving down living and working conditions.

Labour brokers are used to recruit and manage temporary or seasonal labour, creating a 'triangular relationship' that allows farmers to deflect responsibility over pay and conditions (Theron 2005). In most cases, labour brokers supplying South African fruit farms provided workers living in nearby settlements, which could have been sourced directly by farmers if not for the desire to evade the costs of direct employment. In South Africa, labour brokers range from large temporary employment agencies to local ex-farmworkers with a pickup truck to semi-criminal elements preying on vulnerable workers (Visser 2016; Du Toit 2004; Webb 2017). While some local brokers are play a supportive role in assisting farmworkers with finding work, extending small loans, and providing transport to jobs, they often also fail to pay the minimum wage and do not provide statutory benefits owing to intense competition for contracts, loopholes of temporary work status, and greed (Visser 2016:26; Du Toit 2004). Despite endemic under-reporting owing to the controversial nature of labour brokers, Visser (2016:27) found that one-third to one half of farmers in farms surveyed in the Western Cape used them, while Webb (2017) argues that 50% of farmers in the Western Cape use labour brokers.

The shift toward a more casualized off-farm labour force has failed to liberate workers from exploitative labour conditions, while depriving them of limited benefits of on-farm housing. While on-farm housing involved little more than 'bare cells' which workers had to provide with basic home touches, off-farm living conditions in racially segregated shantytowns were described as 'dismal' (Visser 2016:29; Du Toit 2004; Bolt 2016:563). Permanent and on-farm workers did not always fare much better, owing to the reproduction of cliental labour practices at the level of the farming compound. Bolt's (2016:562, 2015) study of on-farm workers near the Zimbabwe border found that ethnic and racial hierarchies persisted through the intermediation of senior black employees. While the colour-blind approach to labour regulation and corporate management repertoires adopted by white farmers absolved them of on-farm responsibilities for workers' welfare, Bolt notes that the 'extraction of value by employers in liberalised markets often relies on – or even encourages the resurgence of – older forms of exchange and dependency' as senior employees used ethnic institutions and authority structures to manage workers after hours and outside the limits of labour regulation. According to Bolt (2016:566), measures to rationalize labour address an off-farm audience of officials, corporate actors and international auditors, while paternalist 'hierarchies among workers are left unaltered, or even reinforced'. Similarly, Bolt (2015), Barrientos (2008) and others highlight the ineffectual role of corporate codes, owing to the use of permissive and ineffective intermediaries to implement them, and the activities of labour brokers in circumventing them (Visser 2016; Barrientos and Kritzinger 2004). Barrientos describes labour brokers as the 'Achilles heel' of global codes and standards owing to their ability to circumvent labour protection provisions.

Linked into global markets in ways that bypass legal protection and perpetuate racial and particularistic exploitation, the bulk of this casualized rural labour force has gained little from inclusion in global value chains. Indeed, global linkages have tended to further marginalize and fragment the labour force through competition among labour brokers, the persistence of paternalistic relations, and struggles by well-placed skilled and permanent workers to protect their limited access to the benefits of globalization (Kaplinsky and Morriss 2018; Webb 2017). On as well as off-farm, this increasingly fragmented labour force has proven difficult to unionize, further limiting their ability to claim rights as citizens rather than as clients or co-ethnics. Far from stemming the risk of social unrest by linking workers into the global economy, global value chains have heightened xenophobic tensions, leading to periodic attacks and riots as precarious farmworkers turn against Zimbabwean migrants perceived to be taking their jobs (Visser 2016:29; Webb 2017:53).

Moroccan Women and Global Argan Oil Value Chains

The integration of Moroccan argan oil producers into global value chains represents a very different mechanism for integrating precarious workers into global value chains, with very different effects. Instead of perpetuating oppressive paternalist modes of labour regulation in order to cut cost, the creation of an economically viable argan oil value chain fostered the restructuring of traditional forms of organization and property rights among the marginalized Amazigh (Berber) ethnic group. Agran oil is extracted from the kernel of the argan tree, which grows only in the forests of southwestern Morocco, where the oil has been produced and used by Amazigh communities as a cooking and beauty product for centuries. Extraction of argan oil is a highly labour intensive activity traditionally carried out by women, while access to argan fruits is governed by customary usufruct rights which may be held by families or be open to all community members on common property (le Polain de Waroux and Lambin 2013:590). Emerging onto global markets from the 1990s, argan oil has become a highly valued hair, beauty and health product, which has rocketed it into the position of the world's most expensive oil, reaching over $400 per litre in 2014 (ICARDA 2014). International demand for argan oil has boomed. Exports have expanded from 1 ton in 1996 to 1387 tons in 2016, positively affecting Morocco's balance of payments, and the local price of argan oil has increased 12-fold in the past 20 years, offering potentially significant benefits to marginalized rural women producers (Charrouff et al. 2009:2).

International cosmetics firms and the German development agency (GTZ) took an interest in argan oil in the 1990s, presenting it as a 'triple win' for conservation, rural development and economic growth (le Polain de Waroux and Lambin 2013:59). As indicated by Prof. Charrouff (2009:4), a key player in the promotion of argan oil exports, the creation of the argan oil value chain was not a simple process of connection, but involved working to change perspectives and behaviour of all participants using scientific, economic and psychological knowledge. Various aspects of the production process had to be modified, and new actors brought into the chain, including NGOs, international and domestic development agencies, and argan oil cooperatives, each tasked with the coordination, translation and realignment of governance processes to create a workable value chain (Lybbert et al. 2011:13963; le Polain de Waroux and Lambin 2013; ICRADA 2014). Narratives of gender empowerment, preservation of artisanal ethnic production, and ecological sustainability were used to mobilize new and old actors around the restructuring of argan oil production and marketing systems, as well as to legitimate the integration of precarious women workers into the global cosmetics industry (Moroccan World News 2011; le Polain de Waroux and Lambin 2013; ICRADA 2014).

The integration of women into a global value chain for argan oil was a response to the technicalities of argan oil production. Argan oil production requires the cracking of the hard shell of the argan nut, and the roasting and grinding of kernels which must then be kneaded to extract the oil. The cracking of the hard argan nut and, initially, the oil extraction process, depended on the techniques and tools of Amazigh women, making them essential to the creation of a global value chain (ICARDA 2014:15; Lybbert 2011; Taylor 2016). The critical role of women in the production of argan oil dovetailed with gender empowerment discourses about ‘roadblocks and leakages’ that limit the ability of women to benefit from global markets (ICARDA 2014:10). The integration of another women’s exotic forest product, shea butter from West Africa, into global cosmetics chains about ten years earlier gave rise to the view that shortening the value chain, along with better organization of women producers and improved technologies, would improve the ability of local women to benefit from expanding global demand for their commodity (Carr and Chen 2002:15; Chalfin 2004).

These concerns underpinned the formation of women’s production cooperatives funded by the European Union and the Moroccan Agence de Developpement Social (le Polain de Waroux and Lambin 2013:591; Charrouf 2009:4; ICARDA 2014:29). The cooperatives were created as nodes for the provision of technology, market access and price stabilization for women. They have also provided a centralized framework for training women to produce oil to the high quality standard required by global cosmetics firms, as well as providing a steady supply of argan oil through federated cooperatives structures linked to international buying agents (le Polain de Waroux and Lambin 2013:595; ICARDA 2014:12). In addition, the original cooperatives provide a variety of social services such as child minding, adult literacy lessons, and small loans, as well as a source of steady wage income over a much longer period than is available from seasonal oil production at home. Women claim a sense of empowerment owing to the improved access to income offered by cooperatives and greater discression over it. At the household level, argan production is also associated with improved education for girls, both owing to improved household incomes, and the promotion of education at the cooperatives. Households with access to more argan fruit also had a slightly higher level of consumption relative to other households, and accumulated more goats (Lybbert et al. 2013:13964). However, the apparent benefits of argan production to women and households mask more complex changes in the way in which the global restructuring of the argan value chain altered economic and social relations at the household and community levels.

While the formation of cooperatives appears to have shortened the value chain and organized women for greater control over argan profits, a closer look reveals that the cooperatives also give global firms greater control over women’s labour with minimal change to their precarious economic situation. Cooperatives purchase fruits directly, and gather women in a central location to carry out the cracking of argan nuts which global firms and development intermediaries have not yet been able to mechanize, as well as the extraction of oil which has now been mechanized. Cooperatives help women to pool resources for the purchase and use of oil extraction machinery, shifting the costs of technical upgrading onto local women. They also provide a means of pooling cracking labour to provide continuous and low-cost access to this essential skill. Working conditions involved long hours – as much as 10-12 hours a day when the cooperative was under pressure to meet a quota – in spartan working conditions. From this perspective, global value chains can be as much about restructuring labour control as about channelling flows of resources.

The evidence suggests that connection into value chains have also provided rather minimal improvements in women’s access to resources. While women’s cracking techniques and labour are essential to the value chain, the pooling of labour in cooperatives has kept labour costs very low. In some cooperatives, women members receive a share of the proceeds from oil sales, while other more commercialized ‘cooperatives’ simply pay women ‘members’ a wage for cracking nuts often with little or nothing in the way of additional social welfare services. Either way, the returns to women producing oil in cooperatives are not significantly different from home-based production once transport costs are taken into account, and are lower or at best equivalent to the rate of agricultural wage labour (ICARDA 2014:14, 261; LE POLAIN DE WAROUX AND LAMBIN 2013:598). Despite narratives of women’s empowerment, cooperative pricing arrangements have failed to prevent private firms higher up the chain from capturing most of the benefits of high argan oil prices. An article on the argan oil boom in Moroccan international newspaper observed wryly , 'It may be "liquid gold", but it's not the local women at the end of the rainbow' (Moroccan World News 2011).

Evidence at the household level confirms the limited economic benefits of argan oil production. LE POLAIN DE WAROUX AND LAMBIN (2013:599) note that argan oil sales and involvement in argan cooperatives were negatively associated with household asset accumulation in their five study villages. They also found that argan oil accounted for an average of only 4.1% of household income in producing households, although argan income was as high as 11.8% in one village. Non-farm activities and remittances were far more important, with remittances accounting for 35% of household income (le Polain de Waroux and Lambin 2013:589). While the small additional income was often important for poor households, it does not offer a viable means of poverty alleviation. Indeed, the reality of long and arduous work for low returns was described by some as a poverty trap rather a path out of poverty (ICARDA 2014:26; Lybbert et al. 2011:13963). Lybbert et al. (2013:13963) raised concerns about the prospects of leveraging low return forest products into a means of wealth creation:

> Forest products often function as an important safety net by helping vulnerable households cope with hard times and thereby, may prevent households from slipping farther into poverty, but it may be difficult for such households to leverage forest products as a means of accumulating the assets needed to shift to higher-return pursuits.

Integration into the global argan oil value chain tends to increase dependence on a low return forest product among people with few other options, intensifying rather than reducing vulnerability. Some commentators highlight prospects for even greater vulnerability, given efforts by the industry to mechanize the cracking stage of production, with the objective of replacing the dependence of the value chain on the artisanal cracking skills of rural women (ICARDA 2014:26; Taylor 2016). Not only does the narrative of women's empowerment concentrate women in a low status, low return activity, but the industry is actively seeking forms of mechanization to make them redundant.

The vulnerability or rural argan oil producers is further increased by the ways in which the articulation of the global value chain reshapes access rights to argan trees, ecological sustainability and gender relations in the area. While access to argan trees is governed by customary rights ranging from open access to inherited usufruct rights, UNESCO designated the argan forest a United Nations Biosphere Reserve in 1998 creating new restriction about the harvesting and felling of trees, and insinuating the international community into decisions about access rights. The increased value of argan fruits has also generated conflicts within villages and households over access rights (le Polain de Waroux and Lambin 2013; Lybbert et al. 2011). Lybbert et al. (2011:13964) noted an increased tendency to erect permanent barriers around seasonal usufruct forest areas, as well as increased tendencies to 'excessive' and 'aggressive harvesting' which has damaged trees and reduced forest regeneration by eliminating the incentive to leave fruit to seed. The tendency to invest argan profits in small livestock has put further pressure on argan forests owing to the tendency of goats to graze on argan leaves. The result is that efforts to preserve the forest have been associated with a marked decline in argan forests in the past two decades (Lybbert et al. 2011; LE POLAIN DE WAROUX AND LAMBIN 2013:595; ICARDA 2014:12). Lybbert et al. question the underlying strategy of 'conservation through commercialization', owing to the tendency of intense economic pressure to encourage short-run fruit collection over long-term forest conservation. Immediate income concerns undermine longer-term sustainability of argan forests, intensifying the vulnerability of poor women and households depending on argan income. Given these trends, the role of the UN in protecting argan forests and the interests of international firms in a steady future oil supply may turn against local systems of bio-resource control as narratives of ecological sustainability diverge from the interests of precarious argan oil producers.

The reconfiguration of gender relations by global value chains also appears to be creating new tensions and vulnerabilities. Traditionally, usufruct rights are held by men, women and other household members gather the fruits, men transport them home, women extract the oil, and men market the oil and divide the proceeds with women based on conventional understandings of roles and responsibilities within the local production and marketing chain (ICRADA 2014:12-14). Cooperatives have essentially cut men out of their previous role in marketing and resource distribution in the traditional argan oil value chain. The loss of discresionary control over argan oil proceeds, combined with the tendency of cooperatives to occupy women outside the home for long periods, have given rise to domestic tensions. While argan cooperatives are credited with empowering women and bolstering their social recognition, they have also created new tensions in gender relations and forms of social resistance. Turner (2016) draws attention to a conservative Islamic backlash in response to concerns about inappropriate gender mixing within cooperatives, and incorporation into risky conservation practices. Such disruptive feedback effects of local norms are referred to as instances of 'failed translation', in which local values cannot be aligned with the value-calculus of global chains, giving rise to nodes of resistance. While global value chains have reconfigured social arrangements to gain access to local labour and resources, they done so in ways that create new tensions and vulnerabilities within and between argan oil-producing households, in ways that often intensify rather than stem the threat of poverty and social unrest.

Conclusion: Losing

This paper reflects on whether connection to global value chains offers a solution to the plight of Africa's precarious workers. Drawing on examples precarious agrarian labour in South Africa and Morocco, it is clear that inclusion in global value chains does not necessarily benefit marginalized workers at the bottom of the chain. Rather than simply creating conduits of opportunity, global connections reconfigure local institutional ecosytstems in the process of connection. Understanding the livelihood effects of these global connections requires a more detailed focus on how inclusion of precarious workers in global value chains reshapes institutional connections and the creation and allocation of value. A closer look at the mechanisms through which global formal sector firms engage with poor informal workers reveals that global connections are not just governed by codes and standards, but also by intermediaries, such as labour brokers or cooperatives, that tap into diverse systems of ethnic, religious, gendered, and racial practices to activate cheaper forms of labour control. In the process, intermediaries realign these diverse local regulatory arrangements with the commercial interests of the chain, translating local values into capitalist value for firms farther up the chain. In South Africa, racist migrant labour systems and ethnic authority structures are repurposed to feed 'temporary' off-farm labour into export fruit farms, shorn of paternalistic responsibilities or access to labour rights. In Moroccan argan oil production, indigenous property rights are altered by new economic pressures and conservation practices, while local production systems are restructured into cooperatives to capture women's essential cracking skills with a view to ensuring a steady supply of oil with little improvement in returns to labour.

Win-win narratives play a central role in enabling these disadvantageous terms of global inclusion by glossing over the capital-labour relations between capitalist firms and vulnerable workers (Oya 2009; Taylor 2016; Tsing 2009). Legitimating narratives of gender empowerment, poverty alleviation, authentic artisanal cultures, or ecological sustainability are used to shroud in a veil of philanthropic endeavour the reality of global firms employing local workers on precarious terms. These legitimating narratives of corporate benevolence are fast becoming the opiate of the development community, diverting attention from actual labour relations to illusions of the philanthropic afterlife. Inadequate attention is given to whether agrarian workers and producers who are globally 'linked in' have sufficient capacity to retain an adequate share of the value they create, owing to an imaginary that value is being bestowed on them from above.

In addition to the problematic nature of connections, integration into global value chains also bypasses or undermines other types of enabling linkages at the local, regional and national levels. While connecting with the informal actors and resources of interest to local firms, global value chains sideline the realities of local livelihood systems, local value chains, and formal rights and regulations. Alternative connections are framed out of the analysis, or even actively delegitimized in order to justify the 'right' connections required for the economic viability of the global value, often privileging external rather than internal needs. As Neilsen and Shonk (2014:285) observe, 'The implicit assumption behind many value-chain interventions for rural development is that the identified commodity offers the best possible opportunity for livelihood improvements. Commodity identification, however, is frequently dictated by either the needs of lead firms to improve supply or by prevailing developmental politics.' It is assumed that the chosen commodity can be turned into a source of accumulation and decent job creation, with little attention to the status of the activity, the prevailing working conditions, or the effects on income relative to other activities in a household's livelihood mix. More attention is needed to the actual effects of global connections on the local value of the activity, and the presence of preferred alternatives.

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that the problem of poverty and precarity in contemporary Africa has less to do with exclusion from global linkages, than with how marginalization at the local level shapes the terms of global inclusion (Elias & Arora-Jonsson 2016). It is not inclusion in global value chains that circumvents social exclusion, but social exclusion that shapes the ability to gain from global inclusion. In the related context of West African shea butter producers, Elias and Arora-Jonsson (2016: 108) emphasize 'the possibilities that can be opened for greater equity for producers on the ground; not automatically by their inclusion in value chains or in collectives, but by paying heed to the structural, organizational and political work required to bring about a more equitable trade.' The central question is how communities, households or women are empowered to claim labour, property, or citizenship rights at the local and national levels, with a view to ensuring a more equitable share of benefits from engagement with the global economy. As Visser (2016) observes, using global linkages to press for enforcement of national labour protection rather than driving their evasion remains key to making global inclusion beneficial for South African farmworkers. Similarly, gains for argan oil producers depend heavily on national measures not just to facilitate connections, but to empower local communities to retain property rights over argan fruit, to ensure a fair distribution of benefits to producers at the bottom of the chain, and to facilitate entry of women into more profitable parts of the value chain (ICRADA 2014; le Polain de Waroux and Lambin 2013; Taylor 2016). Without greater inclusion in national rights and regulations, precarious workers lack the institutional leverage to gain from global inclusion.

Just as bypassing formal protection intensifies worker vulnerability, engagement with informal arrangements and 'second best' institutions also weakens the ability of precarious workers to struggle for better. Strategies of tapping into local diversity to cheapen labour or marshal essential artisanal skills accentuates labour fragmentation. By turning diversity into a tool of labour control, Tsing (2009:157) observes that, 'The situation of labour is further complicated by the fact that performances of identity are by their nature particularistic, drawing oppositions and lines of exclusion with others who might otherwise have similar class interests.' Worse still, the economic and social tensions created by harnessing cultural practices for capitalist profit have given rise to more unruly and divisive forms of labour unrest, including xenophobic violence among South African farmworkers, and a conservative Islamic backlash against disruptive conservation practices and gender relations in Morocco's argan forests. As global value chains ensnare precarious workers in their own communal relations, labour is further fragmented and turned against itself. 21st century labour struggles call for more liberating types of connection: Precarious workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your value chains!

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