



Disrupted Plurality in Agricultural Sustainability Narratives Worldwide

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability has become central in global agricultural research, especially since the SDGs' adoption in 2015. However, technocratic and market-based narratives still dominate, sidelining equity-based and community-rooted knowledge, particularly from developing countries. This study analyzes 411 Scopus-indexed articles (1990–2025) using bibliometric methods. Focusing on co-authorship, corresponding authorship, and citation networks, the analysis compares the pre-SDG (1990–2014) and SDG (2015–2025) periods. The findings show that, despite expanded international collaboration and increased participation from the Global South in the SDG era, epistemic leadership and citation visibility remain highly concentrated within Global North institutions. While Global South contributions have grown, their largely peripheral positioning limits their influence over dominant sustainability framings. These results indicate that sustainability framing in agricultural research is not conceptually neutral but structurally conditioned by unequal knowledge systems. Addressing such epistemic asymmetries is therefore essential for enabling more plural and context-sensitive sustainability discourses.

Keywords: *Bibliometric analysis; Epistemic injustice; Global North–South; Knowledge production; Sustainable Development Goals*

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable agriculture has emerged as a central pillar in global development agendas, particularly following the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 (Zhang & Drury, 2024; Farley & Smith, 2020). The SDGs call for ending poverty and hunger, achieving food security, promoting sustainable agriculture, and ensuring environmental sustainability by 2030. Within this agenda, agriculture occupies a unique position, simultaneously contributing to and being affected by environmental, economic, and social challenges, and is widely recognized as a strategic entry point for achieving multiple sustainability goals in an integrated manner (Leal Filho et al., 2023; Ndhlovu & Dube, 2024).

In response, international policy frameworks and research institutions have increasingly focused on sustainability transitions in agriculture. This expansion has generated a plurality of sustainability narratives that define what sustainable agriculture entails and how it should be pursued. However, existing scholarship shows that certain framings—particularly technocratic and market-oriented approaches such as climate-smart agriculture, bioeconomy strategies, and carbon certification schemes—have become dominant. These framings reflect institutional priorities and funding incentives aligned with large-scale policy and investment frameworks (Gordon et al., 2023; Weinger, 2025; Fassler, 2021). Such approaches are largely developed and disseminated by actors in the Global North, including philanthropic foundations, development banks, multinational agribusinesses, and elite academic institutions (Bless et al., 2023; Haelewaters et al., 2021; Jarosz, 2014).

Parallel visions of sustainability have emerged from the Global South, emphasizing social equity, farmer sovereignty, local resilience, and agroecological integrity (Amanor, 2024; Wade, 2019). These include grassroots movements, Indigenous knowledge systems, and participatory land governance. In Latin America, for example, La Via Campesina has promoted agroecology as both a scientific and political alternative to the dominant industrial model of agriculture (Herdananta et al., 2024; Jalilov et al., 2025; Pulhin et al., 2024). While these

counter-narratives are vital for context-sensitive and socially just sustainability transitions, they remain underrepresented in high-impact journals and global policy forums (Tripathi, 2021; Waisbich et al., 2021).

These patterns reflect what scholars describe as epistemic asymmetries—structural inequalities in how knowledge is produced, validated, and circulated across geographic contexts (Mormina & Istratii, 2021). Research from the Global North is more likely to be published in top-tier journals, receive citations, and inform policy, while knowledge rooted in Southern contexts often remains peripheral. Such asymmetries are further reinforced by practices such as “helicopter research,” in which researchers from high-income countries extract data from low-income regions without equitable collaboration or recognition of local expertise (Caron et al., 2020; Choquez-Millan et al., 2024; Giller, 2020).

Despite increasing awareness of epistemic inequalities, existing bibliometric studies on agricultural sustainability have largely focused on publication growth, collaboration patterns, and thematic clustering, with limited attention to how epistemic imbalances are structurally embedded in the legitimacy and circulation of sustainability narratives (Chimi et al., 2025; Ndhlovu & Dube, 2024; Nwaogu et al., 2025; Schadeberg et al., 2025). By distinguishing between the pre-SDG era (1990–2014) and the SDG era (2015–2025), this study extends prior bibliometric research through a longitudinal and critically informed analysis of power, narrative dominance, and epistemic inequality in global agricultural sustainability research.

In this study, disrupted plurality refers to the structural conditions under which multiple sustainability narratives exist but do not gain equal visibility, legitimacy, or epistemic authority. Plurality is not disrupted by the absence of alternative perspectives—particularly those emerging from the Global South—but by unequal epistemic structures that shape whose knowledge is recognized, cited, and institutionalized. Structural asymmetries in authorship leadership and citation practices condition the circulation and validation of sustainability knowledge, thereby constraining the capacity of diverse narratives to influence mainstream academic and policy discourses.

This study contributes to the literature on agricultural sustainability and decolonial knowledge studies by integrating a critical epistemological lens into longitudinal bibliometric analysis. By empirically examining how structural dynamics of authorship leadership and citation visibility shape the legitimacy of sustainability narratives across the Global North and South, it provides insight into the epistemic conditions under which plurality is disrupted. In doing so, the study offers policy-relevant implications for research funding, academic publishing, and knowledge governance aimed at supporting more participatory, context-sensitive, and equitable modes of sustainability knowledge production.

RESEARCH METHODS

In this study, epistemic asymmetry is operationalized through observable bibliometric indicators that capture structural patterns of knowledge production and validation. Specifically, two interrelated dimensions are examined. First, authorship leadership and institutional dominance are analyzed through co-authorship networks and corresponding author affiliations, which indicate the concentration of research coordination and agenda-setting capacity across countries and institutions. Second, epistemic authority is examined through citation concentration and cross-regional citation flows, reflecting whose knowledge gains visibility and recognition within academic discourse. Together, these indicators link epistemic asymmetry to measurable structures of global knowledge production.

Data Source and Screening Procedure

Scopus was selected as the primary data source due to its extensive coverage of high-impact, peer-reviewed journals and its established use in bibliometric research (Aghaei Chadegani *et al.*, 2013; Fraces Boyle & Damien Sherman, 2006). Its standardized metadata structure, citation indexing system, and disciplinary scope support longitudinal analysis of scholarly publication and citation patterns. It is recognized that Scopus predominantly indexes English-language journals and publications affiliated with institutions in the Global North, which may limit the representativeness of global knowledge production. This characteristic is therefore explicitly considered in the methodological design. Rather than being treated solely as a source limitation, the coverage profile of Scopus is analytically relevant for examining how dominant academic discourses and visibility structures are reproduced within mainstream publication infrastructures. Consequently, Scopus is employed as an empirical domain through which patterns of epistemic dominance and discursive centrality in sustainability research can be systematically examined.

The literature selection followed a transparent, multi-stage screening process designed to ensure reproducibility while remaining consistent with the study’s critical epistemological orientation. Searches were

conducted in Scopus between January and February 2025. The following exact Boolean search string was applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords (Carcassi & Sbardolini, 2023):

(“sustainab” AND (“agricultur” OR “agri-food system” OR “food system*)) AND (“narrative*” OR “discourse*” OR “framing” OR “epistemic*” OR “knowledge politic*” OR “decolon*”)***

Searches were conducted separately for two periods: the pre-SDG era (1990–2014) and the SDG era (2015–2025), enabling longitudinal comparison of discursive shifts. Results were limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English within relevant subject areas.

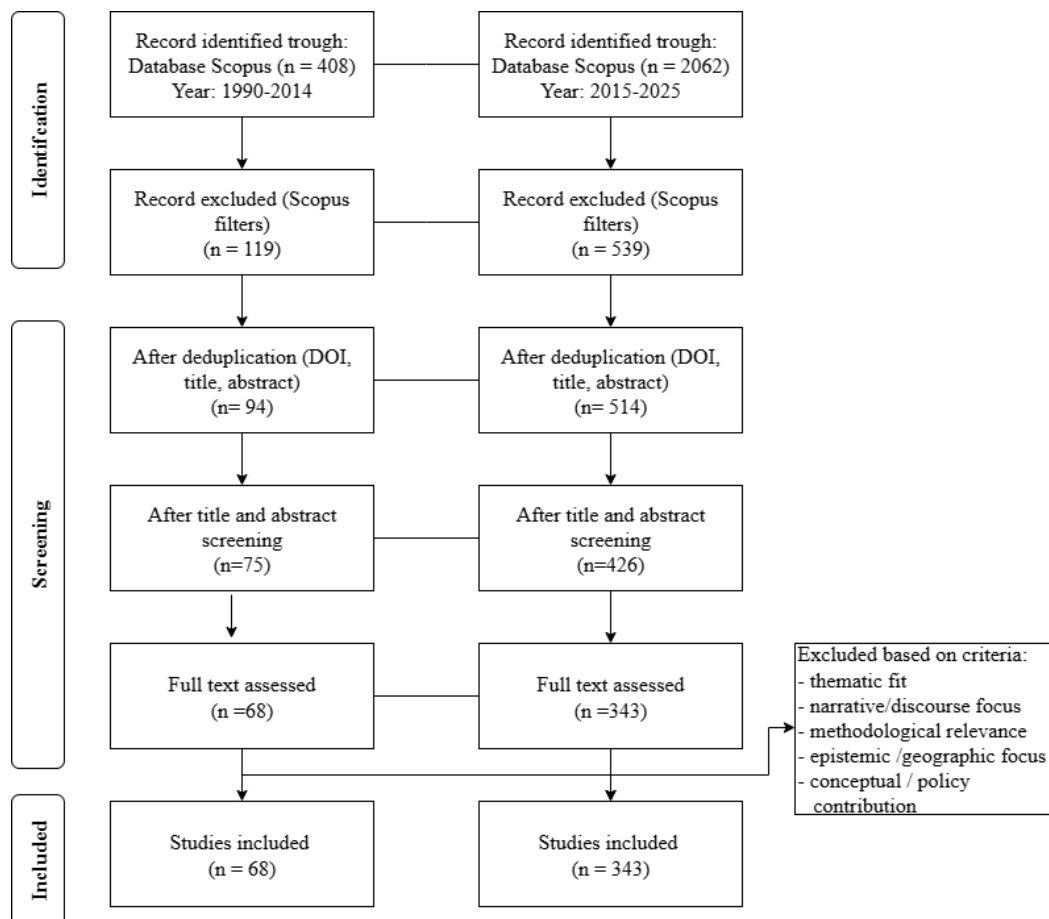


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

Screening proceeded in three stages. First, duplicate records were removed based on titles and DOIs. Second, titles and abstracts were screened using binary inclusion criteria: (1) relevance to agricultural or agri-food sustainability; and (2) explicit engagement with sustainability narratives, discourse, or knowledge framing. Articles failing either criterion were excluded.

Third, full-text screening assessed conceptual and analytical relevance. Articles were included if they met at least three of the following criteria: (a) explicit engagement with sustainability discourse or framing; (b) analytical or theoretical contribution beyond descriptive reporting; (c) relevance to Global North–South dynamics or comparative sustainability contexts; and (d) contribution to policy, conceptual, or methodological debates on sustainability. The threshold of three criteria was applied to ensure inclusion of studies engaging with multiple analytical dimensions rather than making only a single thematic reference. Inclusion decisions were recorded using structured coding sheets.

Screening and coding were conducted by the authors based on predefined operational criteria. To enhance consistency and reduce individual bias, ambiguous cases were discussed iteratively until consensus was reached.

This approach emphasizes procedural transparency and deliberative consistency, rather than claims of value-neutral objectivity, consistent with critical and decolonial research traditions.

The PRISMA framework (Page et al., 2021) informed the documentation of the screening process, particularly in tracking inclusion and exclusion across stages. However, PRISMA was explicitly adapted for this critical bibliometric study by prioritizing transparency of selection decisions rather than intervention-based effect assessment. A PRISMA-style flow diagram is provided to document the screening stages and exclusions. A PRISMA diagram illustrating the selection process is presented in Figure 1.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in four stages. Data were analyzed using VOSviewer (v1.6.20) and Bibliometrix (R-package version 4.5.1) via Biblioshiny interface. Co-authorship networks were generated to examine patterns of collaboration and authorship leadership across countries, while citation analyses were used to assess the distribution of epistemic authority through citation visibility and cross-regional citation flows. Countries were ranked based on cumulative citation counts of affiliated authors to identify centers of epistemic dominance.

Focusing on authorship and citation indicators allows for a structural examination of how sustainability knowledge is produced and legitimized within the academic literature. The combination of these analyses enables triangulation between collaboration patterns and citation hierarchies, strengthening the robustness of findings. By embedding standard bibliometric techniques within a critical epistemological framework, the methodology provides insight into the structural conditions that shape dominant framings of agricultural sustainability

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Patterns of Dominance in Knowledge Production

1. Co-authorship networks and Corresponding Author Distribution

Figures 2–5 present the co-authorship networks and corresponding author distributions for the pre-SDG (1990–2014) and SDG (2015–2025) periods. Together, these figures illustrate structural patterns of collaboration, leadership, and epistemic authority in agricultural sustainability research.

Figures 2 and 3 visualize the co-authorship networks generated using VOSviewer with full counting, a widely adopted bibliometric mapping tool for analyzing scientific collaboration structures. In these networks, nodes represent countries based on author affiliations, with node size indicating publication frequency, while edges represent co-authorship relationships, and edge thickness reflects the strength of collaboration. Colors indicate clusters identified through VOSviewer's clustering algorithm, representing groups of closely connected authors and countries within collaborative knowledge networks.

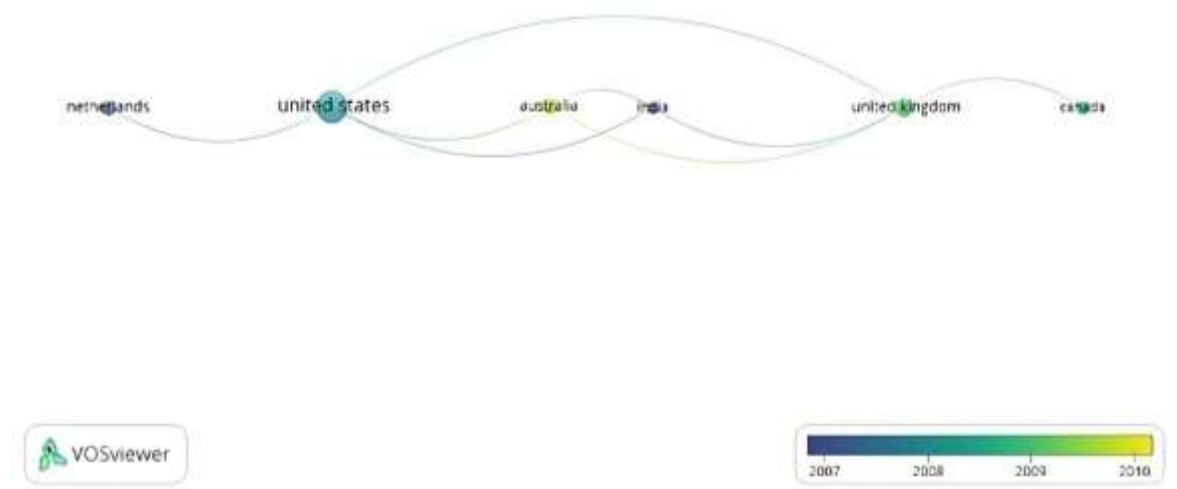


Figure 2. Co-authorship networking pre-SDGs [1990-2014] (Secondary data processed, 2025)

As shown in Figure 2, the co-authorship network during the pre-SDG period exhibits a highly centralized structure dominated by Global North countries. The United States, United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, and Canada occupy central positions characterized by large node sizes and dense interconnections. These countries form tightly knit collaborative clusters, while authors and institutions from the Global South appear largely peripheral, with limited link strength and network connectivity. This pattern reflects a concentration of knowledge production capacity and agenda-setting power within Northern academic systems, consistent with prior studies on global scientific inequality (Holst et al., 2018; Fricker, 2013).

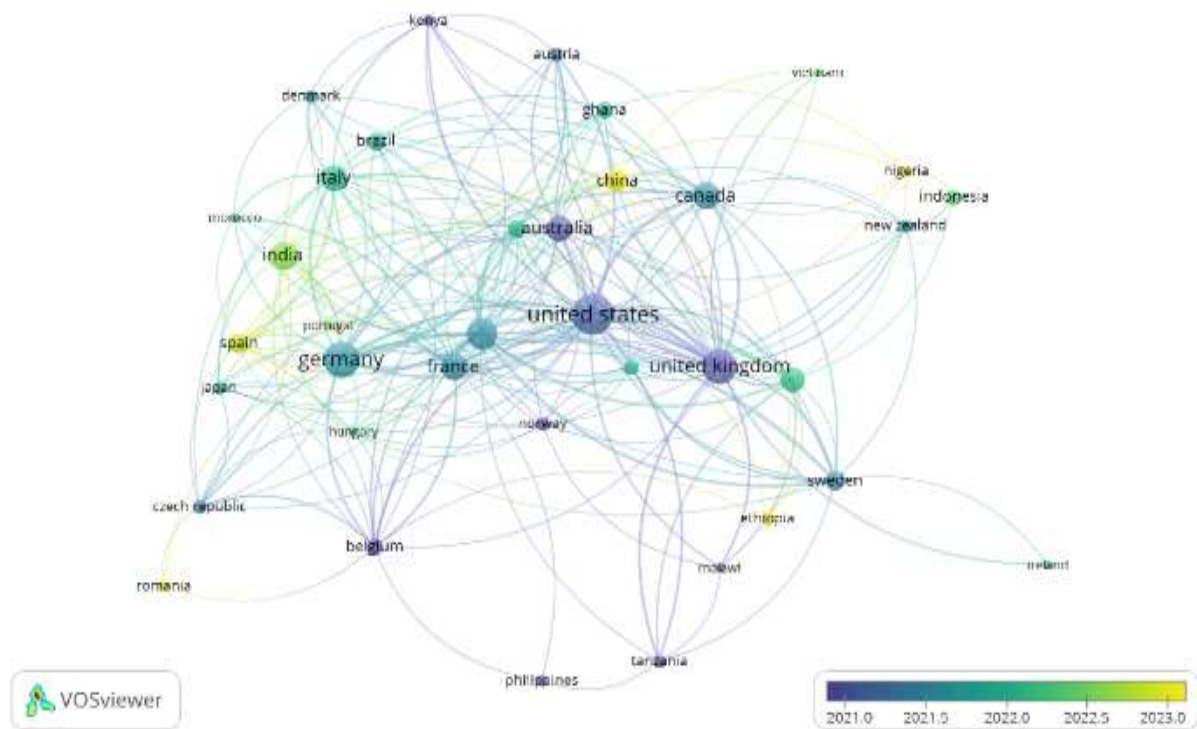


Figure 3. Co-authorship Networking SDGs era [2015-2025] (Secondary data processed, 2025)

Figure 3 indicates that, during the SDG era, international collaboration intensified and the overall network expanded. Nevertheless, Global North countries, particularly the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and the Netherlands, continue to occupy central hub positions with the highest node sizes and link strengths. Although countries from the Global South become more visible compared to the pre-SDG period, they largely remain positioned at the periphery of the network. As a result, collaboration growth largely reproduced, rather than redistributed, epistemic authority (Choquez-Millan et al., 2024; Santos, 2014).

Figures 4 and 5 complement the network analysis by presenting the distribution of corresponding authorship by country, distinguishing between single-country publications (SCP) and multiple-country publications (MCP). The SCP–MCP distinction is widely used in bibliometric research to assess the nature of scientific collaboration and the distribution of epistemic authority (Osinski, 2022; Mignolo, 2010). SCPs indicate knowledge production conducted within a single national institutional context, while MCPs reflect cross-national collaboration and, potentially, shared epistemic leadership.

Corresponding authorship is particularly significant, as corresponding authors typically coordinate research design, manage collaborations, and oversee publication processes, making it a widely recognized proxy for scientific leadership (Von & Latridou, 2003; Zhang et al., 2017). Consequently, patterns of SCP and MCP corresponding authorship provide insight not only into participation, but also into control over knowledge framing and validation.

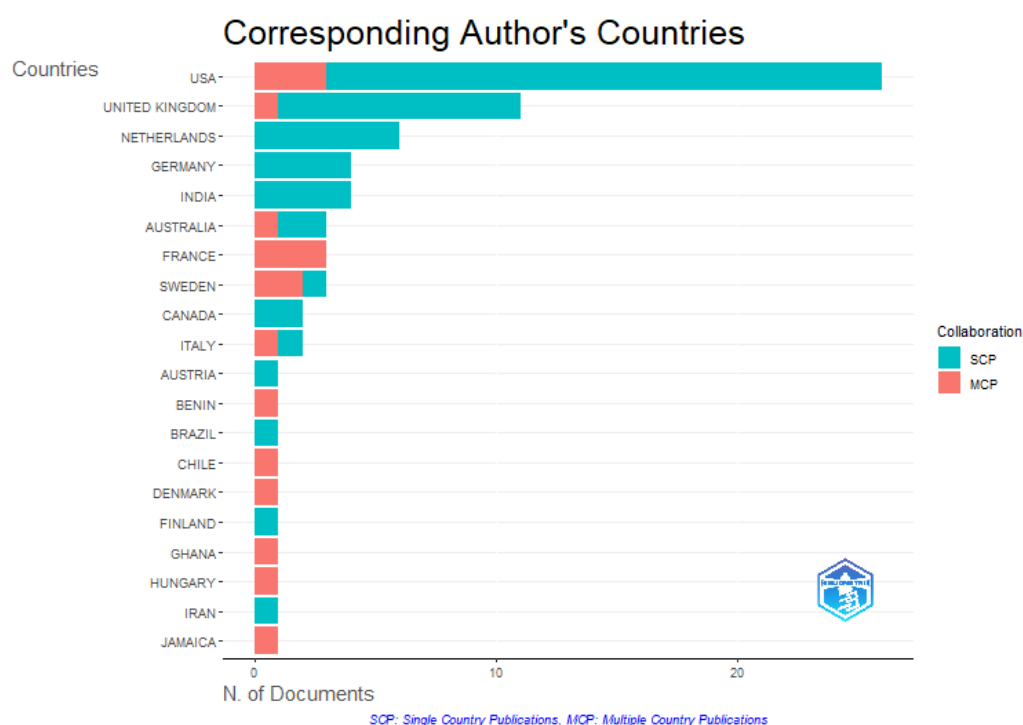


Figure 4. Corresponding Author's Countries pre-SDGs [1990-2014] (Secondary data processed, 2025)

Figure 4 shows that during the pre-SDG period, SCPs overwhelmingly dominated publications led by the United States, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, accounting for more than 80% of their total output. This dominance of SCPs suggests that agricultural sustainability research was largely internally driven within Global North institutions, with limited engagement in cross-regional knowledge co-production. The low proportion of MCPs and the near absence of Global South corresponding authors indicate that international collaboration was structurally constrained, reinforcing the concentration of epistemic authority within Northern academic systems (Bradley, 2007; Figg et al, 2006).

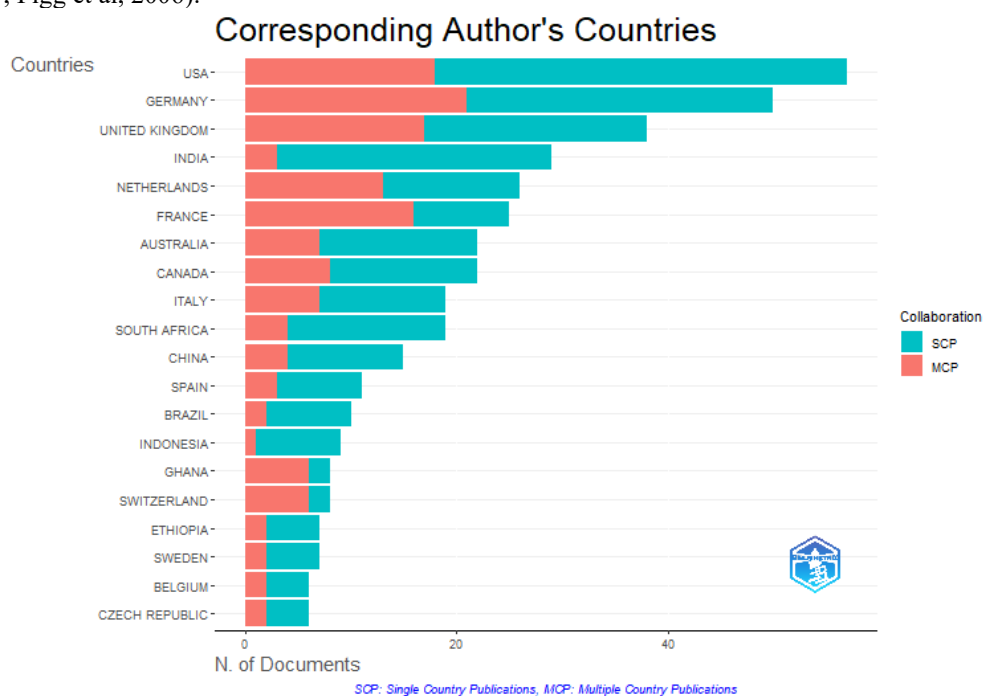


Figure 5. Corresponding Author's Countries SDGs era [2015-2025] (Secondary data processed, 2025)

Figure 5 illustrates changes in corresponding authorship patterns during the SDG era. While the overall volume of MCPs increased, reflecting the SDG emphasis on global partnerships. SCPs continue to dominate publications led by Global South countries such as Indonesia, Ghana, and Nigeria. This suggests that although Global South participation expanded in numerical terms, these contributions remained largely domestically oriented and less embedded within international collaborative leadership structures.

In contrast, Global North countries not only maintained high publication volumes but also exhibited higher proportions of MCPs with Northern corresponding authors. This indicates that Global North institutions continued to coordinate international research agendas, manage cross-national collaborations, and control publication visibility. As a result, increased collaboration did not lead to a substantive redistribution of epistemic authority, but rather reinforced existing hierarchical roles within global research partnerships (Carbonnier et al., 2015; Obamba & Mwema, 2009).

The SCP–MCP distinction thus provides critical insight into the nature of collaboration underpinning agricultural sustainability research. While MCP growth is often interpreted as evidence of inclusive global partnerships, the findings demonstrate that collaboration alone does not guarantee epistemic redistribution. When MCPs are predominantly led by Global North corresponding authors, international collaboration may reproduce existing hierarchies by positioning Global South institutions as contributors rather than agenda-setters (Hsiehchen et al., 2015; Santo et al., 2023).

The persistence of SCP dominance among Global South countries further reflects structural barriers to international leadership, including unequal access to research funding, publication networks, and institutional recognition. Consistent with prior analyses of North–South research partnerships, Southern actors are frequently integrated into collaborative projects without proportional influence over research agendas, theoretical framing, or interpretive authority (Bradley, 2007; Mignolo, 2010; Carbonnier et al., 2015; Choquez-Millan et al., 2024).

Overall, the results indicate that while the SDG era has been associated with increased international collaboration in agricultural sustainability research, this expansion has not fundamentally altered the underlying structure of epistemic dominance. Global North institutions continue to function as central agenda-setters and validators of sustainability knowledge. These patterns raise critical questions about the transformative potential of SDG-driven research frameworks, suggesting that without explicit attention to epistemic justice and leadership redistribution, global sustainability partnerships may continue to reproduce long-standing hierarchies rather than dismantle them.

2. Citation Networks and Citation Concentration

Figures 6 and 8 present citation networks for the pre-SDG (1990–2014) and SDG (2015–2025) periods, respectively, while Figures 7 and 9 display the distribution of the top 10 most-cited countries for each period. Citation networks were generated using VOSviewer with full counting, where nodes represent countries based on author affiliations and node size corresponds to total citation counts. Edges indicate citation link strength, reflecting the intensity of citation flows between countries.



Figure 6. Citation Network pre-SDGs [1990-2014] (Secondary data processed, 2025)

In the pre-SDG period (Figure 6), the citation network is characterized by a highly centralized and weakly interconnected structure, with a small number of Global North countries occupying dominant positions. The United States functions as the primary citation hub, while other Northern countries such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, and Japan form secondary but closely connected nodes. This configuration reflects a classic center-periphery structure of scientific knowledge production, where epistemic visibility and authority are concentrated within a limited set of countries (Santos, 2014; Osinski, 2022).

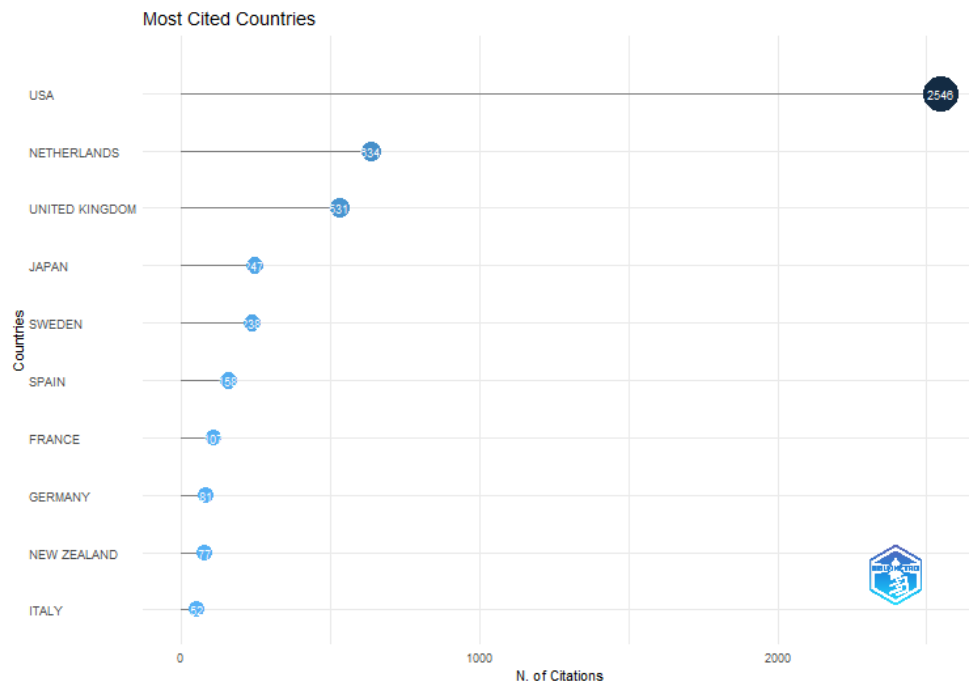


Figure 7. Top 10 Most Cited Countries pre-SDGs [1990-2014] (Secondary data processed, 2025)

This concentration is further illustrated in Figure 7, which shows that the top 10 most-cited countries in the pre-SDG period were exclusively from the Global North. The disproportionate citation advantage of the United States, followed by Western European countries, mirrors patterns documented across multiple scientific fields, where citation accumulation reinforces existing hierarchies of academic visibility and legitimacy (Giff et al., 2006; Fricker, 2013). Such concentration suggests that agricultural sustainability narratives during this period were largely shaped and validated within Northern academic circuits.

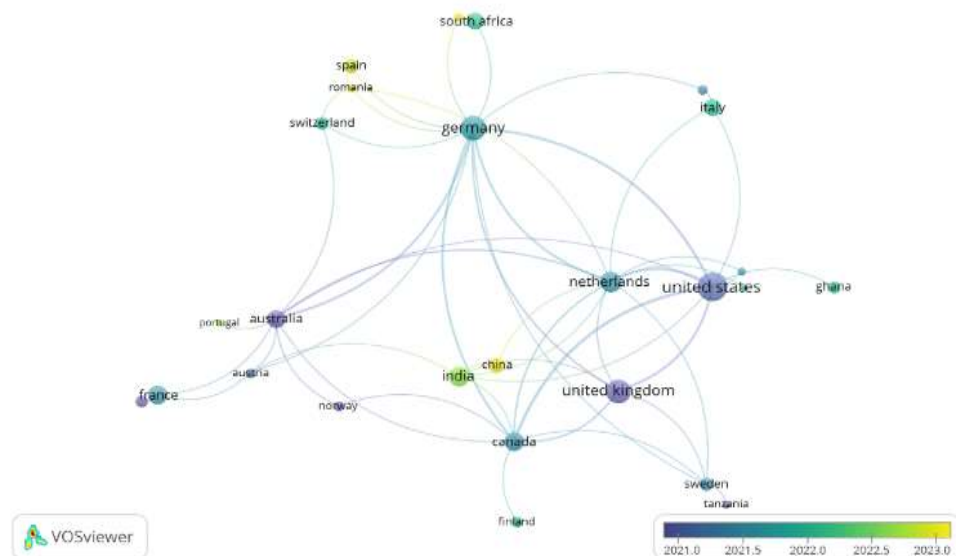


Figure 8. Citation Network SDGs era [2015-2025] (Seconder data processed, 2025)

In the SDG era (Figure 8), the citation network expands and becomes more interconnected, reflecting the overall growth of sustainability research and the SDG emphasis on international collaboration. However, despite increased network density, the hierarchical structure of citation flows persists. The United States remains the most central citation node, while Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands continue to occupy prominent intermediary positions. Although additional countries, including some from the Global South, appear in the network, they remain largely peripheral, characterized by smaller node sizes and weaker citation link strength.

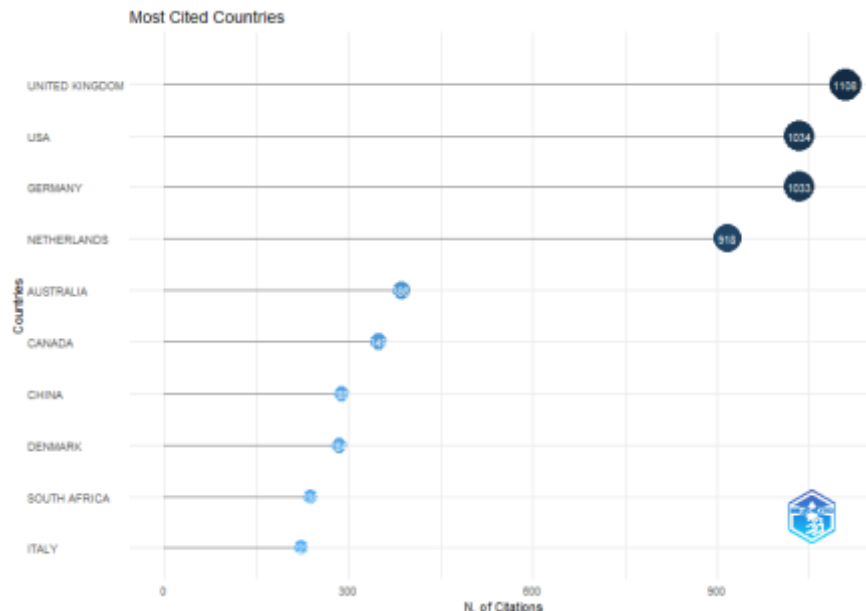


Figure 9. Top 10 Most Cited Countries SDGs era [2015-2025] (Secondary data processed, 2025)

Figure 9 confirms this pattern by showing that, while the SDG era introduced limited diversification in the top 10 most-cited countries, citation visibility remains overwhelmingly concentrated in the Global North. The inclusion of countries such as China and South Africa does not substantially alter the overall distribution of epistemic authority, as citation gaps between leading Northern countries and newly included Southern countries remain pronounced. Similar patterns have been observed in recent bibliometric reviews of sustainability and environmental research, which note that increased participation from the Global South does not necessarily translate into equivalent citation influence or agenda-setting power (Ndhlovu & Dube, 2024; Nwaogu et al., 2025; Schadeberg et al., 2025).

Taken together, Figures 6–9 demonstrate that citation practices function as mechanisms of epistemic validation, reinforcing structural asymmetries in global agricultural sustainability research. While the SDGs have coincided with broader participation and expanded publication output, they have not fundamentally redistributed epistemic authority. Instead, Global South countries increasingly contribute empirical knowledge that is often validated, contextualized, and circulated through Northern citation networks, reinforcing their role as knowledge providers rather than agenda-setting actors (Bradley, 2007; Obamba & Mwema, 2009; Mormina & Istratii, 2021).

These findings align with broader critiques of epistemic injustice, which argue that knowledge systems are not neutral but are shaped by institutionalized practices of recognition, citation, and validation (Fricker, 2007; Holst & Molander, 2018). In the context of agricultural sustainability, such dynamics risk privileging technocratic and policy-oriented framings aligned with Global North priorities, while marginalizing alternative perspectives rooted in agroecology, land rights, and locally embedded knowledge systems. As a result, citation concentration not only reflects academic inequality but also shapes the contours of what sustainability problems are recognized and which solutions are deemed legitimate within global research and policy arenas.

Implication for Research Policy

The bibliometric findings presented in Figures 2–9 reveal persistent asymmetries in authorship leadership and citation visibility within global agricultural sustainability research. Importantly, these patterns emerge despite the expansion of international collaborations and funding initiatives explicitly aimed at strengthening research capacity in the Global South. Previous studies indicate that while such initiatives have increased participation and

output, they have not consistently translated into proportional epistemic leadership or agenda-setting power (Bradley, 2007; Mormina & Istratii, 2021). Building on this literature, the following implications are proposed.

First, existing Global South-focused funding schemes should be evaluated not only in terms of participation but also epistemic leadership outcomes. International funding programs increasingly prioritize North-South collaboration and capacity building. However, empirical evaluations show that these schemes often reproduce asymmetrical roles, with Global North institutions retaining control over research design, publication strategies, and theoretical framing (Bradley, 2007; Carbonnier et al., 2015; Choquez-Millan et al., 2024). Rather than proposing entirely new funding mechanisms, this study suggests that current programs could be strengthened by incorporating leadership-sensitive indicators, such as corresponding authorship distribution, decision-making authority, and intellectual ownership, into funding assessment frameworks.

Second, academic evaluation systems should complement citation-based metrics with contextualized indicators of contribution. While citation-based evaluation remains dominant, a growing body of scholarship demonstrates that such metrics systematically favor well-resourced institutions and reinforce cumulative advantage (Lariviere et al., 2013; Osinski, 2022). Recent debates in research evaluation advocate for broader recognition of collaborative roles, regional relevance, and knowledge exchange impacts (Mormina & Istratii, 2021). In this context, the present findings suggest that evaluation reforms already under discussion could more explicitly address epistemic inequality by recognizing leadership and agenda-setting roles in international collaborations.

Third, international research collaborations would benefit from formalized co-production practices rather than reliance on participation alone. Studies of North-South research partnerships consistently report that collaboration does not automatically lead to epistemic equity, particularly when roles are not clearly negotiated at the outset (Obamba & Mwema, 2009; Kunert et al., 2020). Existing guidelines for equitable collaboration, such as shared authorship agreements and joint agenda-setting frameworks, provide practical tools that could be more systematically adopted within sustainability research projects (Haelewaters et al., 2021). The bibliometric patterns observed in this study reinforce the importance of embedding such practices within project governance rather than treating collaboration as an end in itself.

Last, policymakers and global sustainability platforms should interpret citation concentration as a signal of structural imbalance rather than solely academic performance. Research has shown that policy-relevant knowledge is often filtered through highly visible academic circuits, which may marginalize context-specific insights from less-cited regions (Waisbich et al., 2021). While SDG-aligned platforms increasingly seek inclusive knowledge inputs, greater transparency in knowledge sourcing and deliberate inclusion of regionally grounded research could help mitigate epistemic blind spots. Such measures build on, rather than replace, existing inclusivity efforts within global sustainability governance.

Overall, these implications do not suggest that current reforms are absent or ineffective. Rather, they indicate that existing initiatives have improved access and participation but have yet to substantially alter the underlying structures of epistemic authority. By aligning funding evaluation, research assessment, and collaboration governance with leadership-sensitive criteria, incremental but meaningful progress toward more inclusive knowledge production in agricultural sustainability research may be achieved

Limitations

This study relies on Scopus-indexed journal articles, which may underrepresent locally published or non-English scholarship, particularly research produced outside dominant academic publishing circuits. While this constrains the inclusiveness of the dataset, it reflects the infrastructures through which academic visibility and epistemic legitimacy are most commonly produced and circulated in global sustainability research. As such, the dataset captures the structural conditions under which sustainability knowledge gains recognition within mainstream academic discourse. Future research could complement this approach by incorporating regional databases and qualitative inquiry into knowledge production practices among Global South researchers, enabling deeper insight into sustainability knowledge that remains marginal to dominant publication systems.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how the framing of “sustainability” in agricultural research is shaped by structural patterns of knowledge production and epistemic authority. Using a longitudinal bibliometric analysis of authorship and citation networks before and after the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the findings show that epistemic leadership and citation visibility remain concentrated within Global North institutions, despite increased participation from the Global South in the SDG era. While contributions from the Global South have expanded, their predominantly peripheral positioning limits their influence over dominant sustainability narratives. These results indicate that sustainability framing is not conceptually neutral, but structurally produced through unequal knowledge systems that shape recognition and legitimacy within academic discourse. Addressing such epistemic asymmetries is therefore essential for enabling more plural, context-sensitive, and inclusive sustainability discourses in agricultural research.

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