

Twenty-five years of *Living Under Contract*: Contract farming and agrarian change in the developing world

Mark Vicol¹  | Niels Fold²  | Caroline Hambloch³  |
Sudha Narayanan⁴  | Helena Pérez Niño⁵ 

¹Rural Sociology Group, Wageningen University and Research, Wageningen, The Netherlands

²Department of Geosciences and Natural Resource Management, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

³Thaer-Institute of Agricultural and Horticultural Sciences, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany

⁴International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), NASC Complex, New Delhi, India

⁵International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Den Haag, The Netherlands

Correspondence

Helena Pérez Niño, International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Kortenaerkade 12, 2518 AX Den Haag, The Netherlands.
Email: perezniño@iss.nl

Abstract

The expansion of contract farming schemes through regions of the developing world in the era of the globalization of agriculture raises questions that are central to the study of agrarian political economy. Contract farming has extended the footprint of commodity production and integrated land and labour not otherwise captured in forms of direct production and marketing. 25 years after the publication of *Living Under Contract: Contract Farming and Agrarian Transformation in Sub-Saharan Africa*, a foundational collection edited by Peter Little and Michael Watts, it is necessary to take stock of the most prominent developments in the practice of contract farming and in the political economy literature studying it. The ultimate contribution of *Living Under Contract* was framing contract farming as expressing the unevenness of power relations in agriculture and grounding it in specific political, historical and social contexts that were not examined in the mainstream accounts. This introduction to the special issue revisits the questions that have remained relevant or re-emerged in the political economy literature on contract farming; it raises new questions that reflect contemporary developments and it explains how the papers in this collection contribute to the expansion of the theoretical and empirical horizons of the

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research on contemporary contract farming in low and middle-income countries.

KEYWORDS

contract farming, critical agrarian studies, global value chain analysis, political economy

1 | INTRODUCTION

The expansion of contract farming schemes through regions of the developing world in the era of the globalization of agriculture raises questions that are central to the study of agrarian political economy, both given the historical significance of the processes unfolding and as a vantage point for studying contemporary tensions in agricultural production and exchange. In the sphere of production, contract farming allows capital to set the process in motion without having to gain access to land or mobilize labour directly—as in the case of estates and plantations. In terms of exchange, contract farming allows buyers and processors to bypass open markets, frequently also suppressing market competition. In this way, contract farming has elicited the expansion of the footprint of commodity production and the integration of land and labour not otherwise captured in forms of direct production and marketing. Although historical examples abound, contract farming has become ubiquitous in the wake of decolonization, through the process of agricultural liberalization and alongside the rise of global trade in agricultural commodities. It provided a transition from colonial plantations and it replaced parastatals when ‘rolling back’ of the state did away with sources of financing and channels for marketing. In a period of productive restructuring and containerization, contract farming has opened new frontiers of agricultural sourcing.

Through the 1980s and 1990s mainstream agricultural economics and new institutional economics examined emerging contract farming schemes to evaluate their possible contribution to agricultural development and to the welfare of smallholder farmers in developing countries (Binswanger & Rosenzweig, 1986; Glover, 1987, 1989). These empirically rich studies were mostly descriptive and broadly optimistic: for many, contract farming amounted to an institutional innovation that provided a private-led solution to existing market failures (Allen, 1972; Grosh, 1994; Minot, 1986). More critical voices were registered too: from those concerned with the implications for gender and intrahousehold power relations of production by contract (Currie & Ray, 1986; von Bülow & Sorensen, 1993), to those that studied the socialization of risk and corporate concentration through contracting (Wilson, 1986) and those interested in the effects on social differentiation and the possibility of accelerated proletarianization (Buch-Hansen & Marcussen, 1982; Korovkin, 1992).

However, it was the publication in 1994 of *Living Under Contract: Contract Farming and Agrarian Transformation in Sub-Saharan Africa*, a collection edited by Peter Little and Michael Watts, that marked a seminal moment in critical scholarship on contract farming in the developing world. The contributors to the volume collectively outlined a political economy approach to studying contract farming, placing it front and centre of debates on processes of agrarian restructuring in Sub-Saharan Africa. Eschewing a general theory of contracting, Little and Watts emphasized the heterogeneity of contract forms and relations, describing contract farming as a ‘constellation of institutional and production relations [that] represents...a crucial means by which agriculture is being industrialized and restructured’ (Little & Watts, 1994a, p.6).

Living Under Contract called for situating the rise of contract farming in the 1990s as part of the international restructuring of the global food regime and of the international division of labour. The contributions in the book rejected the emphasis of previous work on the institutional arrangement or the characteristics of the contract, proposing instead to frame contract farming as expressing the unevenness of power relations in agriculture at different scales (the household and the farm; local and global) and grounded in specific political, historical and social contexts

that were not examined in the mainstream accounts. *Living Under Contract* dispelled ideas of contract arrangements as voluntaristic or benevolent and showed how they were used to reallocate production and pricing risks. It demonstrated that narrow conceptualizations were unable to see through the apparent autonomy gained or retained by direct producers and that far from responding to techno-biological determinants, contract farming was on the rise—in a variety of guises—as a renegotiation of the labour process in the specific conjunctures of decolonization, liberalization and agricultural globalization. Finally, *Living Under Contract* dispelled the idea of contract farming as private-led, by studying state-managed schemes and demonstrating the myriad of ways in which private buyers relied on state-provided finance, infrastructure, services and policies to sustain the pricing mechanisms and the monopsonic rights that undergirded outsourced production. This political economic critique made a distinct departure from the mainstream economic and neo-institutional analyses that had hitherto dominated research and policy narratives on contract farming.

The legacy of *Living Under Contract* is evident in the sustained engagement with contract farming by critical scholars in the subsequent three decades since its publication. While *Living Under Contract* focused exclusively on Sub-Saharan Africa, studies have subsequently documented and analysed contract farming schemes in India (Narayanan, 2014; Singh, 2002; Vicol, 2019), Southeast Asia (Thiers, 2019; White, 1997), China (Zhang, 2012), and to a lesser extent Latin America (Key & Runsten, 1999). There has been ongoing interest in Africa (Fold, 2008; Kuzilwa et al., 2017; Martiniello, 2021; Pérez Niño, 2016). As Oya (2012) points out, contract farming makes for ripe terrain for ideological contestations over rural development, smallholder agriculture and agrarian change. A clear divide in the literature has been between new institutional economics (NIE) approaches that conceptualize contract farming as an institutional solution to the ‘market failures’ that are said to beset smallholder agriculture; and those taking a more critical political economy approach. Agricultural economics has tended to approach the question of the welfare outcomes of participation in contract farming using econometric analysis (Barrett et al., 2012; Otsuka et al., 2016; Ton et al., 2017, 2018). Yet, there remain significant methodological difficulties in measuring the discrete impacts of contract farming, as well as a lack of quantitative studies that account for heterogenous effects (Bellemare & Bloem, 2018; Narayanan, 2014; Meemken & Bellemare, 2020). In contrast, recent critical political economy engagement with contract farming has sought to place contract farming within broader political and historical questions about capitalist development, agrarian change and contemporary agrarian questions (Kuzilwa et al., 2017; Pérez Niño & Oya, 2021; Vicol, 2019), albeit without the empirical coverage of agricultural economics’ case studies and facing other limitations in terms of comparability and external validation.

These debates have taken on renewed significance in recent years as low and middle-income countries increasingly position contract farming as a key pillar of rural and agricultural development policy (e.g., Government of India, 2018; Mazwi, 2020). There has been an explosion of interest in contract farming from policy makers and agribusiness. Contract farming has been increasingly promoted by states, donors and agribusiness as a ‘win-win’ rural development strategy for smallholders and agricultural corporations. Multilateral institutions such as the FAO (2013) and the World Bank (2007, 2014) have re-positioned contract farming as a tool of inclusive growth, part of a dominant ‘markets-plus’ discourse of rural development premised on connecting entrepreneurial smallholder farmers to markets via value chains (Bernstein & Oya, 2014). In contract farming’s new ‘pro-poor’ development guise, it is promoted as both a collaborative business model and as a way to make large-scale investment in agricultural land in the developing world more small-farmer ‘friendly’ (Vicol, 2017). In this context, there is a lot we do not know about the significance and contemporary character of contract farming. Some of these questions have remained relevant or have re-emerged since the time of *Living Under Contract*: What is distinct about contract farming as a mode of agricultural production or path to agrarian transition? Does contract farming accelerate or reshape the capitalist penetration of the countryside (Oya, 2012)? What are the implications for smallholder livelihoods, patterns of differentiation and class formation? What is the role of the state? Other new questions reflect contemporary developments in the years following the publication of *Living Under Contract*: What is contract farming’s role in contemporary processes of market restructuring and agro-food value chains? Can contract farming be an inclusive form of rural development?

What are the implications of contract farming for rural politics and political struggles 'from below'? What are the ecological dimensions of contract farming?

This special issue makes a timely contribution to this debate. The special issue had its genesis in a planned workshop in 2020 (subsequently postponed due to COVID-19) to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the publication of *Living Under Contract*, and to establish a network of critical contract farming scholars from Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and Europe. The aims of the workshop/network and this subsequent special issue are twofold: (a) re-engage with and reflect on the significance of the contributions in Little and Watts' *Living Under Contract* 25 years on; and (b) situate contract farming within new (and old) themes and issues of global uneven development that have (re)emerged in the last three decades. In the next section, we briefly reflect on what *Living Under Contract* meant for alternative engagements with contract farming when it was published in 1994. We then outline the key themes addressed in the individual papers of the special issue, in the context of the new issues and developments that have emerged in last three decades. The individual papers take inspiration from the pioneering work of *Living Under Contract*, while also pushing research on contract farming in new directions. The contributions to this special issue therefore update and reaffirm the importance of a critical political economy approach, while also signposting a path forward for critical research on contract farming in all its forms throughout the developing world.

2 | RE-ENGAGING WITH *LIVING UNDER CONTRACT* 25 YEARS ON

Contract farming had expanded rapidly in the late 1970s and through the time of publication of *Living Under Contract*. In the introductory sections to the book, Little and Watts argued that the acceleration of certain historical 'push factors' fostered a conducive context for this particular way of organizing agricultural production in Africa—and many other parts of the 'Third World'. Contract farming had been used during colonial rule but for the new independent governments the particular way of organizing agriculture was considered as a means to refashion colonial models of plantation production into settlement schemes for land poor or landless peasants. Contract farming also subsumed peasant agriculture under national revenue-driven agricultural policies that aimed at providing food for a growing urban population, to diversify production, upgrade to non-traditional high value exports, and to increase import capacity of manufactured goods (Watts, 1994). *Living Under Contract* showed that contract farming was proposed as a means of increasing the political legitimacy of the governments of new independent states as it raised the expectations of many social groups—from poor rural and urban dwellers and emerging groups linked to the manufacturing sector—that their demands would be addressed. Further, by virtue of transferring production risks to growers and making payments conditional on final output, contract farming created pressures for the self-disciplining of farmers, when not their outright self-exploitation, and it partly neutralized political dissent by aligning growers' interests with production and changing the arenas of agrarian contestation from wages and work conditions to pricing and production requirements. At the same time, contract farming also represented an 'exit strategy' for plantation capital who substantially reduced sunk costs in land, while maintaining control of supplies and markets through contract farming schemes (Watts, 1994, p.69–70).¹ Finally, contract farming continued to appeal to policy makers in the 1990s, because it appeared to realize the then prevailing preference for private and market-led pathways to agricultural growth (Little, 1994, p.219). For example, another push factor came from multilateral and bilateral donors who promoted various contract schemes as a means for 'rural transformation' and later pressured national governments to implement structural adjustment programs that included contract farming of non-traditional exports (such as fresh fruits and vegetables) as a remedy to 'solve' the debt crisis of most African countries via increased export revenue.

Theoretically, *Living Under Contract* embedded contract farming in broader discussions about capitalist development in agriculture and its relation to trends in global manufacturing. Watts and Little stressed, after Mann (1990),

¹See also Baglioni and Gibbon (2013).

agriculture's divergence from industry by pointing out the biological limitations in nature that set barriers for capitalist accumulation processes. Here, contract farming is considered to offer 'functional' solutions in two ways: Firstly, it reduces capital's risks linked to negative impacts on production from natural disasters (drought, flooding, storms, etc.) and transfers the risks to sub-contracted producers. Secondly, contract farming advances capital's penetration of agriculture and the commodification of social life through the interlinking of markets for credit, factors and produce. This is institutionally anchored in the conditions in contracts that stipulate a price determination mechanism, how production must be carried out, and specifications about the use of industrial inputs (fertilizers, pesticides, etc.) and equipment (Watts, 1994, p.27, 60–61).

Living Under Contract also situated contract farming in global capitalist development by showing how it contributed to the convergence of industry and agriculture. Watts hypothesized that contract farming was akin to neo-Fordism in manufacturing in that it sustained more flexible specialization (Watts, 1994, p.69–70). Accordingly, contract farming was a signifier for an epochal transformation of the global agri-food system including the increasing trans-nationalization of agribusiness and the ongoing global restructuring of agriculture. Viewed in this perspective, contract farming—particularly of products where quality requirements and standard compliance is essential—was interpreted as a mechanism to organize specialized production that satisfied the need for product differentiation by global buyers, while at the same time sustaining mass-production of standardized foods. *Living Under Contract* contributed to understanding capital's attempts to increase its flexibility by incorporating low-cost temporary farm labour, self-exploiting family enterprises and marginal out-grower producers, the latter functioning as a buffer that cushioned agribusiness capital against demand fluctuations. *Living Under Contract* thus engaged extensively with the issue of labour and the labour process in contract farming. Influentially, Michael Watts (chapter 2) and Roger Clapp (chapter 3) theorized contract farming as a form of 'disguised proletarianization', where nominally independent growers in supposed equal partnerships with firms retain the 'illusion of autonomy', but in reality "function as little more than a propertied laborer, a hired hand on his or her own land" (Watts, 1994, p.33; Clapp, 1994, p.81). The empirical dimension of this generic process is reflected in the labour-intensive nature of most contract farming commodities, the heavy exploitation of women and children as 'free' family labour (fostering intra-household gender and generational conflicts), and the low returns per labour unit forcing households to find supplementary income sources (e.g., in off-farm activities). While acknowledging contextual differences, *Living Under Contract* proposed conceptualizing contract farming as an 'agrarian counterpart' to outsourcing and sub-contracting in manufacturing industries.

Watts, Little and other contributors to the edited volume therefore challenged a conceptualization of the farming contract that had been developed in earlier contributions to the literature, namely, that fair and legal contracts could reflect an egalitarian partnership between two parties who have come to an agreement on a 'pure' commercial transaction (Watts, 1994, p.65). The book pointed out that such idealised conceptualization of contracts was far from the reality on the ground in an (African) agrarian context (Watts, 1994, p.60). Instead, the authors proposed to examine the contingent and incomplete nature of contracts prevailing in agriculture and accept the influence on them by social relations, culture and custom—even though one of the parties operates in the formal economic sphere.

Moreover, *Living under Contract* addressed the ideological connotations of contract farming that prevailed at the time of its publication, a period dominated by the policy debates that favoured structural adjustment and the liberalization of agriculture. At the time, contract farming was presented in the literature predominantly as an example of lean and efficient organization in the private domain in stark contrast to wasteful and exploitative state marketing boards. But this was largely an illusion: although it was presented as private-led, making it more palatable to contemporary advocates against state intervention, contract farming occupied the vacuum left by parastatals and resulted in a commodification of access to finance, input supplies, extension services and marketing (see also Oya, 2012). The reform process that dismantled most of the national marketing boards also promoted private contract farming schemes as a means to enable market-based arrangements for rural development particularly targeting small-scale farmers.

Living Under Contract took issue with these discursive fallacies about state involvement in so-called private contract farming schemes. It showed how states were involved—as joint or full owners of key productive assets

(land, equipment, processing facilities, etc.) and/or providers of 'enabling environments' to contractors (irrigation, price incentives and regulations, monopsonic conditions, infrastructure, services), essentially creating imperfect markets in sharp contrast to the rhetoric. The heavy, albeit highly differentiated, involvement of state capital and state power is shown to appear in a 'panoply of institutional forms' richly elaborated with empirical examples in the book that illustrate the differentiated involvement of states—and the varied constellation of growers.

Another discursive fallacy that was addressed in the book is the so-called 'peasant content' of private contract farming and its potential as a means for rural development. Watts argued that in many instances, middle- and high-income family farms dominate the private schemes, while small-scale and poor farmers became marginalized. Even in cases where small-scale farmers participate in substantial numbers, their share of total output is modest if not insignificant—contract farming in its 'private' form is generally not adapted to cater for the needs of poor peasants. Moreover, the benefits from participation in contract farming are found to be unequally distributed and highly biased towards the richer strata of growers. Nevertheless, this is not an intrinsic and unchangeable feature of contract farming—the book also mentions examples where schemes have been designed by cooperatives and NGOs in such a way that profit motives were not the overriding concern, and transparency and equality were prioritized. Little called for studying the dynamics of contract farming beyond the effects on households participating directly in the scheme proper, not only because a range of impacts will be experienced by non-scheme farming households, but also because contract farming tends to be one among many livelihood strategies pursued by small- and middle-scale farmers (Little, 1994, p.217).

Despite the apparent neutrality and inclusiveness of details pertaining to production, logistics and marketing of agricultural products, the involved parties may manipulate contracts and disagreement of interpretations and practice often leads to diverse forms of conflicts. *Living Under Contract* engaged with this set of issues. It exemplified the more mundane forms of manipulation: such as contractors cancelling buying obligations in cases of bumper crops or dwindling market prices. In other instances, they apply 'flexible' versions of quality requirements, standards, etc. to reduce buying prices. Growers on the other hand may for instance divert input supplied by the contractor as credit in kind to other crops or sell contracted crops to alternative buyers who offer higher prices ('side-selling'). In this vein *Living Under Contract* discusses 'the moral economy of the contract' in terms of how the parties reach some kind of mutual understanding of allowed aberrations on both sides as long as the formal hegemony of the contract is maintained, i.e., no subversive or collective actions are taken on the growers' side and no legal action or eviction is taken on the contractor's side (Clapp, 1994).

In those instances in which the moral economy of the contract effectively breaks down, the dissatisfaction with contract conditions can escalate to open conflict. Even though these situations are relatively few in numbers, the course of the conflict is in any case heavily influenced by the extent of a despotic labour regime sustained by state power. Growers' organizations are relatively fragile and weak—especially in contract farming schemes where small-scale farmers are the main participants—and not capable of taking charge of a collective opposition. Hence, growers' actions are mostly relegated to individual actions and of minor importance for the scheme's financial sustainability—although some schemes collapse due to the sheer number and scope of 'hidden resistance'. Judith Carney's chapter in *Living Under Contract* also addressed the intra-household conflict and gender relations emerging from participation in contract farming; this remains a fertile and under-researched topic (Carney, 1994).

The key contribution of *Living Under Contract* was not only the rich analysis of the themes identified in the previous section: the book also showed the importance of a critical political economy approach to understanding the phenomenon of contract farming. The themes at the centre of *Living Under Contract* were also a product of its time and the context in which the contributors were writing in. Since its publication, the global agri-food system has undergone significant restructuring, giving rise to a renewed interest in research on contract farming and the role it plays in the integration of small producers and agribusinesses into the global economy. In the next section, we address the (re)emergence of new and old issues and questions in the contract farming literature as they relate to the themes of the papers in this special issue.

3 | CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The publication of the World Bank's 2008 World Development Report (World Bank, 2007) was a pivotal moment in 'bringing back' contract farming to the centre stage of international development discourse and practice. Contract farming is now promoted as a key solution to integrate smallholders into so-called (export) agro-food value chains, part of a discourse of 'pro-poor' market-led agricultural development. International development organizations such as the World Bank and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) promote contract farming as a 'win-win' scenario for large agribusinesses and smallholders (World Bank, 2007, 2014; Murekezi et al., 2018; see Oya, 2012). It is in this context that a set of new issues has emerged (and some old issues have re-emerged), capturing the attention of a new generation of critical contract farming scholars. Inspired by the novel conceptual and empirical interventions made by *Living Under Contract*, the papers in this special issue address seven core themes of contract farming in the contemporary global economy: (1) the analysis of contract farming as a form of global value chain organization, and the place of contract farming in contemporary value chain development discourses; (2) the changing role of the state vis-à-vis contract farming and rural development; (3) the rise of new actors in contract farming schemes and value chains; (4) the politics of resistance and forms of farmer agency; (5) contract farming and land questions; (6) contract farming and contemporary agrarian questions of labour; and (7) the internal dynamics of contract farming schemes.

3.1 | Contract farming, global value chains, and rural development

The study of contract farming as a feature of global value chains (GVC) has received significant attention in both academic and practice-oriented debates in the years following the publication of *Living Under Contract*. In this literature, contract farming is generally conceptualized as a form of captive or hierarchical coordination in value chains, where lead firms use contracts to control, for instance, produce quality and business practices. Lead firms at the downstream end of the chain such as supermarkets and large processors employ contract farming arrangements at the upstream end of the chain to coordinate and control the quality and supply of agricultural goods, significantly reconfiguring the institutional environment for farmers (Reardon & Berdegué, 2002). In fact, different studies demonstrate that, to meet high quality and process requirements, smallholders are faced with higher barriers to access certified chains and markets due to stricter production requirements relating, for example, to best practices, inputs, safety, and high certification costs, which often lead to the exclusion of smallholders in favour of medium- to large-scale producers (Fold & Larsen, 2011; Gibbon, 2003; Meer, 2006; Swinnen & Maertens, 2007). Central questions asked in this literature relate to dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of small-scale producers vis-à-vis contract farming schemes, benefits and disadvantages including upgrading and downgrading trajectories, and value capture and exploitation (Barrett et al., 2012; Daviron & Gibbon, 2002; Gibbon, 2003; Swinnen & Vandeplass, 2012).

Several contributions to this special issue shed light on some of the limitations of the GVC approach by showing how contract farming mediates the multi-scalar relation between localized agrarian communities and globalized commodity chains. This is at times as the precursor of agrarian change unleashed by integration into GVCs and at times also a channel through which direct producers contest or renegotiate their conditions within chains. Hambloch (2022) contends that contrary to prevailing analysis in the GVC literature, chain governance involving contract farming is not merely driven by corporate strategies but also shaped by the producers' acts of resistance and collective mobilization. This intervention on farmers' agency adds a different (class) layer to the now wider literature on workers' collective action and intervention in the struggles within commodity chains (Bair, 2019; Selwyn, 2012). However, contract farming seems to play a different role in contexts in which the process of commodification is more advanced: in Zhang and Zeng's (2022) analysis of the pig sector of Sichuan province, contract farming is one among various avenues available to capital accumulated elsewhere in China and seeking investment opportunities in agriculture. The consolidation of contract farming is a contingent outcome of the interaction of various dynamics of capitalist development, such as processes of social differentiation, state-driven investment and financial and regulatory reform.

A parallel development in the last three decades has been the role of contract farming in global commodity production, as conceptualized in GVC and GPN analyses. Cohen et al. (2022) contend that states, donors and multilateral organizations promoting contract farming as a 'pro-poor' value chain development strategy have co-opted the powerful critique in *Living Under Contract* that pointed out how contract farming is marred by the exploitative implications of uneven bargaining power between firms and farmers. When contract farming proponents use this critique, they perform a conceptual flip, by claiming that with the aid of regulation and farmer aggregation into producer organizations, contract farming can overcome bargaining imbalances and unleash broad-based growth. This welfarist and voluntaristic turn has resulted in deactivating the poignancy of the original critique and relaxing the push for a more profound redefinition of power balances in contract farming, especially, as illustrated in the Indian case studies, since regulatory interventions typically default to light touch approaches that do not upset the status quo in agrarian relations of production. In a similar vein, Martiniello et al. (2022) examine sugarcane contract farming arrangements in Uganda and find that inclusive rural development as promoted by development partners and the government have not led to widespread improved rural livelihoods, but instead to the dispossession and dislocation of some, resulting in fragmented politics of resistance against the entrenchment of contract farming arrangements and often leading to increased state coercion.

3.2 | Contract farming and the state

A recurring theme since the publication of *Living Under Contract* has been the analysis of the role of the state in contract farming. Some contract farming expansion in the 1990s was characterized as an attempt to provide services and coordination, the functions from which the state had retreated through structural adjustment reforms. Once private-led contract farming expanded in different regions of the developing world, the prevailing role for the state was directly and indirectly that of enabling, facilitating and actively promoting contract farming through, for instance, public-private partnerships with the objective of rural inclusive development, the provision of incentives (subsidies, monopsony rights) and other 'enabling' policy settings. State intervention in the regulation of contract farming relations is uneven, with considerable say in the setting of purchasing prizes, conflict arbitration or contract enforcement in some contexts, and an arm's-length approach in others. All papers in this special issue deal with the complex, contextual and changing role of the state in one way or another, while two papers in particular advance the analysis of the state further.

In Cole's (2022) study of northeast Laos, the state is intent on pushing for the agricultural commercialization of regions dominated by swidden and subsistence farming, but it has left it to independent small-scale cross-border traders to provide the conditions for the expansion of the market frontier in remote upland regions. Contract farming arrangements have tied maize farmers to traders supplying the Vietnamese industrial feed sector, with the provision of roads and credit as part of the deal. Cole refers to traders in these contract farming schemes as performing quasi-'developmental' functions, responding to the failure of the state, in a process that has resulted in the integration of local economies into regionalised supply chains.

Veldwisch and Woodhouse (2022) illustrate a similar case of contract farming and the production of export commodities inducing the visibility that attracts the state to engaging marginal farmers in Mozambique. Here, the state's and other development agencies' involvement in supporting and investing into the formalization of smallholder-based irrigation in certain areas in Mozambique is associated with greater formality of contracts through the integration into export agriculture.

3.3 | New actors

In the context of the changing role of the state, contract farming studies since the 2000s have focused on analysing the heterogeneity of a range of private actors that are now involved in both formal and informal contract farming.

Special attention has been given to emerging buyers' transformation of the sphere of commercialization of production, including specialist export firms (Miyata et al., 2009), agro-processors (Adams et al., 2019) and supermarkets (Reardon & Berdegúe, 2002; Reardon et al., 2003). Other transformations had effects upstream of production: a range of new—predominantly private—players in credit, input, logistics and extension services have also attracted academic interest. The different papers in this special issue contribute to the case for the 'contract farming turn' as a profound transformation of the actors and logics driving the articulation of agrarian social formations in the developing world to increasingly standardized, globalized agricultural markets. Evidence of restructuring upstream and downstream of production belies a tendency to conceive of contract farming as a mere transformation of marketing practices. *Living Under Contract* pioneered an approach to contract farming as a systematic transformation of the social, economic and political world of farming. This special issue attempts to push research in this direction.

It is increasingly clear that the 'contract farming turn' does not only involve the growing ascendancy of large corporate, and at times transnational, buyers: recent literature on contract farming has charted the ways in which the emergence of a wider range of actors has also led to the proliferation of what was proposed as 'intermediary models' in which contracting firms employ specialist traders and agents to source production (Eaton & Shepherd, 2001; Prowse, 2012). These intermediaries might purchase from small-scale producers on contract (both formally and informally) or mediate the contractual relationship between the agribusiness and producers for a commission. Such arms'-length contracting has emerged especially where agribusiness expand their reach into remote regions. Cole's paper (2022) provides a detailed study of the traders and middlemen that promote maize farming using contractual arrangements in northeast Laos. The paper shows how the power relation between traders and farmers is mediated by patronage, the construction and maintenance of personal relations and the construction of infrastructure as part of the contractual arrangement. In contrast with the more antagonistic tenor of contract farming relations in most of the literature, this study provides evidence of a more balanced relation of interdependence, at least until falling yields and prices undermined the sustainability of contract farming in this borderland region. At the other extreme lie consolidators and global brokers that given the scale of their operations struggle to maintain contractual relationships with a large number of small-scale producers (Michelson et al., 2018, e.g., Walmart in China). In some of these instances, traders and trading agents are co-opted into relations mediated by contracts and facilitate processes of agrarian commodification (Bernstein, 2010; White & Wijaya, 2022).

Political economy approaches to contract farming have also interrogated accounts of contract farming as a form of outright exploitation of peasantries in the hands of transnational corporations. Recent case studies, including Veldwisch and Woodhouse, White and Wijaya, and Zhang and Zeng (all this issue) demonstrate that the growth of contract farming in developing countries is not only driven exclusively or overwhelmingly by transnational agricultural capital, but in many instances also by the expansion of local, as opposed to global, agricultural and merchant capital seeking avenues for investment in the countryside (in movements akin to Byres' (1996) tendencies of 'accumulation from above' but that Zhang and Zeng (2022) refer to as 'capitalism from without'). Veldwisch and Woodhouse (2022) demonstrate how small-scale producers find it more accessible to finance production costs through informal contract farming arrangements with local traders than formal financial institutions, contributing not only to the financing of farmer-led irrigation development but also to increased social differentiation.

3.4 | Agency and resistance

Research on the conflicts arising between buyers and contract farmers as well as farmers and farm workers has expanded our understanding of how societal power structures and market dynamics are manifested in contract farming. Although the political economy literature has charted the limitations for accumulation and upgrading of production within contract farming, it also increasingly rejects the account of contract farming as *tout court* exploitation and of contract farmers as passive victims of contractual conditions. Recent developments have contributed to understanding the various overt and indirect ways in which farmers and workers mount acts of resistance that

complicate such unidimensional analysis. Contract farming schemes in which the profitability of buyers is threatened by farmers' side-selling and defaulting or where producers are squeezed via contractual conditions, price crises or mounting debt seem to be maintained, at least temporarily, by a highly precarious balance between exploitation and resistance, but do regularly collapse.

Several papers in this collection study such processes, which perhaps tell us more about the power relations and contingent outcomes of struggles within contract farming than the success stories. In some cases, farmers' resistance is fragmented or covert, as documented by Hambloch (2022) in the Philippines, where oil palm contract farming is beleaguered by lopsided contracts, endemic indebtedness and the loss of land used as collateral for production loans. Contract farmers have responded by deploying a range of covert forms of resistance, including side-selling and strategic defaulting to level the otherwise skewed playing field. But more direct forms of confrontation have also been documented: Shonhe and Scoones (2022) disentangle the operation of contract farming in Zimbabwe as embedded in a context profoundly shaped by political relations and mediations, not least in the context of a redistributive land reform, where contract farming expands as a way to counter a crisis of finance unleashed by international sanctions. In a similar vein, Zhang and Zeng (2022) retrace the financial crisis and fiscal reform that have given rise to contract farming in the pig sector of the Sichuan Province as an adaptive strategy: the nature and impact of a fiscal reform has pushed highly-indebted large commercial farmers into producing under contract as a survival strategy, in a context in which smaller farmers are being displaced out of the sector and large farms can tap into alternative sources of funding to avoid contracting.

3.5 | Contract farming and land

The land question in contract farming has received renewed interest since the emergence of debates about the so-called global land rush, which interrogates the place of production under contract in contemporary agriculture. Recently, contract farming has been proposed by international organizations as a more inclusive alternative to large-scale land acquisitions by multinational agribusinesses (Cotula & Leonard, 2010; World Bank, 2014; see Vicol, 2017) in the context of increasing financialization of agriculture and the continued search for 'idle' and 'unproductive' lands (Clapp, 2014; Montefrio & Dressler, 2016). One strand of literature argues that contract farming may act as a means of land control and land 'grabbing' (see, e.g., Alonso-Fradejas, 2012; Hall, 2011; Vicol, 2017).

Contributing to this, Isager et al. (2022) emphasize that not only land ownership as such is important in determining the conditions of participation in contract farming, but more importantly access to land, economic and social resources. By incorporating the long history of contract farming arrangements in sugarcane in Tanzania, the authors demonstrate how contract farming influences local land relations in the context of limited potential for land expansion, in particular contributing to a rapidly expanding land rental market and changes in land use and ownership. In addition, Martiniello et al. (2022) examine how struggles over (customary) land influence the dynamics and outcomes of sugarcane contract farming in Uganda. The authors argue that these land struggles manifest themselves in the state-led dispossession of land, which intersect with other ongoing struggles such as labour exploitation, debt and environmental impact. But the good social credentials that are associated with contract farming in the grey literature can also be harnessed to cover for the less palatable realities of land-grabbing (Hall et al., 2017).

3.6 | Contract farming and labour

A further prominent theme since the publication of *Living Under Contract* has been the agrarian question of labour. This literature responds to the promised benefits for labour resulting from contract farming arrangements which have been promoted in early schemes (see e.g., Glover & Kusterer, 1990) as well as in the more recent 'win-win' idea of contract farming (see World Bank, 2007). Political economy analyses of the labour question in contract farming

have often analysed the exploitation and mobilization of both wage labour and (largely unpaid) household labour. Understanding contract farming as a particular labour regime has gained considerable prominence in political economy studies on contract farming. White and Wijaya (2022) compare contract farming and sharecropping as different labour regimes, concluding that contract farming acts as a distinct route of capital penetration (whilst sharecropping does not) characterized by the indirect access to cheap labour by the contracting party. The authors find, along the lines postulated in *Living Under Contract*, that in some contract farming arrangements in Java contract farmers can be understood as 'proletarians in disguise' (Clapp, 1988; Little & Watts, 1994b).

Papers in the special issue also focus on the analysis of different forms of surplus extraction and appropriation through the unequal exchange relations underlying the contract. The study of Java by White and Wijaya illustrates how surplus in contract farming arrangements flows from contract farmers to different types of agribusinesses, using monetary mechanisms of pricing of inputs and outputs. The authors argue that contract farming serves as a channel of penetration of capital into the rural economy as the contract relations enable contractors to access cheap labour indirectly. The findings of Isager et al. (2022) contribute further to this theme by demonstrating the persistence of a (land owning) agrarian class of labour (many of whom are migrants) that is able to sustain its reproduction through renting out land and temporary wage labour, but that is struggling to accumulate sufficient capital to finance sugar-cane production.

3.7 | Internal dynamics of contract farming

A final fertile ground for emerging analysis of contract farming is the range of impacts that the creation of contract farming schemes may have locally, in terms of social differentiation. Far from stories of undifferentiated impoverishment, a range of contributions have unveiled more contingent outcomes of contract farming expansion that depend on local balances of power between growers and contractor, the availability and cost of mobilizing hired labour, how and how much are states willing to intervene in the regulation of contract terms and prices, among other. It is in this context that cases of accumulation from below have also to be found in contract farming schemes, for instance where petty commodity producers manage to reinvest surplus, extend their production, increase their productivity, diversify and upgrade (Oya, 2007; Oya, 2012; Zhang, 2012; cf. Vicol, 2019). Papers in this special issue contribute to the study of the class dynamics in contract farming that complicate earlier analysis, also in *Living Under Contract*, of contract farmers as 'proletarians in disguise' or 'wage-labour equivalents'. The contract farmers in the Sichuanese hog sector are not family units, but middle- and large-scale firms that have come to replace the domestic pig breeders that used to produce the lion's share of output in the sector (Zhang & Zeng, 2022); the Zimbabwean land reform beneficiaries that participate in state-led maize contract farming are not directly investing their own labour power, instead they are politically connected cadres that hope to transition into an agrarian and entrepreneurial bourgeoisie (Shonhe & Scoones, 2022); in Maharashtra, India, it is a group of 'middle farmers' who have been targeted by contract farming schemes, while rich households increasingly accumulate through non-farm activities (Cohen et al., 2022); and it is the 'Big Growers' in the Kilombero sugarcane scheme that accumulate capital through acquiring access to land and transform control over financial and productive resources into profits (Isager et al., 2022). The more we know about contract farming, the more we know about the various agrarian class structures in which it can operate and the more we understand about the ways in which it reinforces and reshapes social differentiation and class formation in the developing world.

4 | CONCLUSION

The growing ascendancy of contract farming in low and middle-income countries was more tentative and some had good cause to doubt its purchase still in the late-1990s (Raikes & Gibbon, 2000). In the intervening years contract

farming has become dominant in some regions and crops and an established alternative model of production elsewhere. Given the vast variety of modalities, arrangements and conditions, it is challenging to define contract farming theoretically, and therefore difficult to measure its incidence and expansion. Furthermore, contract farming is in some instances found to be operating alongside other productive arrangements, such as sharecropping and land leasing, making it difficult to isolate its effect or to attribute changes observed to its operation. This makes a case-study based political economy approach, an approach shared by all papers in this special issue, especially useful, as there is no attempt to analytically isolate contract farming. On the contrary, the intent is to study it in its interaction with land markets, with labour hiring practices, with idioms of accumulation and embedded in the rich social, political and cultural systems mentioned above.

The recent literature provides convincing evidence to challenge any purported strong technical or crop-specific suitability for contract farming. Examples of its deployment have been recorded in agrarian social formations with very different land and labour regimes and in the production of a wide array of crops, though some degree of adaptation to local challenges does give different examples of contract farming distinct characteristics. The extreme heterogeneity in the form and features of contract farming arrangements militates against attempts for a more robust theorization (Gibbon & Ponte, 2005). But an empiricist approach that simply typifies these variations along a preselected set of indicators also fails to produce a fruitful conceptual matrix for understanding how contract farming interacts and contributes to dynamics of commodification, market integration and agrarian change in the developing world.

A workable alternative will likely require more systematic study of the labour and land dynamics in constellations of contract farming. Building on the recent contributions to this literature, the challenge remains to better understand the implications of the various processes of transformation unleashed by the expansion and collapse of contract farming schemes, including for instance research on schemes that straddle or combine contracting with land rentals, joint ventures and communal land (Dubb, 2017; Mazwi, 2020) and on the long term consequences of the trajectories of accumulation or marginalisation among participant out-growers and farming districts. Papers in this special issue chart the sheer variety in the size and formality of various schemes, thereby suggesting that contract farming has been variously adapted to suit the specific political economy of vastly different agrarian formations. We hope then that the papers collated in this special issue can contribute to the ongoing task of theorizing contract farming from a critical political economy perspective.

The research approach pushed forward by this special issue received an early and powerful thrust from the publication of *Living Under Contract*. Contract farming is of course one among several dimensions of transformation in agrarian societies, frequently acting in combination or in tandem. The analyses of contract farming in this special issue have benefitted from debates about land grabbing and financialization, for instance. Yet, there also remains much more to say about contract farming specifically beyond even the papers collected here, justifying a distinct contract farming research agenda within critical agrarian studies. Debates about precarity and social differentiation touch directly on aspects central to the set of structures that sustains contract farming arrangements at household, local and national levels, and this warrants closer examination. Future research should also cast a more granular lens on the complex labour exploitation dynamics at play in contract farming schemes and particularly on the gender and intrahousehold power dynamics that transcend family farms. Contract farming studies have typically only tangentially engaged with the ecological implications of contract schemes: building a political ecology of contract farming will be a key area for future research. There are also fruitful engagements to be had between critical contract farming scholars and critical legal studies scholars that can illuminate the undertheorized legal dynamics of contracts and agrarian change. Finally, there is an urgent need for better data on the range and extent of contract farming globally, calling for a deepening of collaborative, systematic attempts to map out the dynamics of contract farming.

The editors and authors of this special issue intend to further contribute to this research agenda and the ongoing development of a political economy approach to contract farming. We hope this special issue is the beginning of future collaborative work on contract farming, and we welcome the engagement of others. In our attempt to kick start this conversation we have charted the various developments around global value chains and the implications of

contract farming in terms of its mobilization of hired and household labour as among the most influential developments in this literature since the 1990s. Some of the conceptualization challenges with which *Living Under Contract* grappled remain unresolved or require further development and research. This special issue provides a panoramic view of the state of contract farming studies in critical agrarian studies, expanding the geographical scope and raising some pressing questions.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available.

ORCID

Mark Vicol  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0165-9379>

Niels Fold  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1133-6525>

Caroline Hambloch  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2450-1742>

Sudha Narayanan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1048-2341>

Helena Pérez Niño  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9961-2717>

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