FTIS 2026 Conference Theme: Dynamics in an Unpredictable World

25.07.2025

The Global South Studies Center (GSSC) and its affiliated Competence Center Fair Trade (CCFT) are hosting the next Fair Trade International Symposium (FTIS) in 2026 at the University of Cologne, Germany.

The FTIS 2026 will take place between the **23rd of September and the 25th of September 2026** in Cologne.

The FTIS offers an important platform for the promotion of scientific exchange on the topics of 'Fair Trade' and 'Sustainability'. At the same time, the format promotes dialog with policymakers and practitioners.

For reserachers, the FTIS 2026 plays an important role in promoting research and knowledge exchange in the area of Fair Trade research. Researchers will be given the opportunity to present new findings and to discuss current developments in a multi-disciplinary setting. This offers room for discussion and for the development of innovative approaches and solutions to challenges in international trade, including future scientific collaborations.

For policymakers, practitioners, and producer-representatives the intensive two-and-a-halfday exchange will deepen insights in current developments affecting Fair Trade, in future policy measures and in pathways to further promote fair and sustainable production, trade and consumption. Especially, the scheduled workshops are meant to be an open space for multi-stakeholder interaction.

Organized by Prof. Dr. Boris Braun (Human Geography) and Dr. Katharina Gröne (Anthropology) and the team of the GSSC/CCFT, the FTIS 2026 is the main space for dialogue between research, politics, and practice.

The broad theme of the 2.5-day FTIS conference is Dyamics in an Unpredictable World. We plan a series of panels on the five topics related to this theme and invite resarchers and practitioners to propose paper or workshop sessions that respond to these themes.

Following the call for session proposals there will be a second call to invite contributions from the research and practitioner communities.

Conference Theme: Dynamics 2

Dynamics in the Global South 2

Dynamics in International Trade and in Fair Trade Supply Chains 3

Dynamics in Land and Resource Use 4

Dynamics in Political Discourses, Policies and Market Regulations 5

Dynamics among Fair Trade Institutions, Consumers & Markets 5

Host Institution and Networks – GSSC & CCFT 7
a. The Global South Studies Center (GSSC) 7
b. The Competence Center Fairtrade (CCFT) 8
Event Coordinates

Conference Theme: Dynamics

Internationally, there is a significant body of research on Fair Trade today from across disciplines, including sociology, geography, economics and anthropology. Fair Trade related research on issues such as human rights, living and working conditions of producers, environmental impacts, climate change adaptation, trade/climate justice, education, public procurement, civil society movements and political decision-making receive scholarly attention. Research on Fair Trade covers wide-ranging topics with broad societal significance such as human- and labor rights, socially and also ecologically sustainable production and consumption, fair markets, development-, trade-, labor, climate- and environmental policy, supply chain management, gender, intersectionality and (de-) colonialism. Fair Trade principles and their impacts, such as long-term trade partnerships, minimum prices and sustainable pricing mechanisms, and an extra premium are also under analysis; as are Fair Trade's aims which are enshrined in its International Fair Trade Charter (2018)[1] and in Fairtrade's Theory of Change (2018)[2], both embracing the SDG's.

Fair Trade producer countries in the Global South are navigating a complex and often volatile mix of socio-environmental and economic dynamics. These dynamics are shaped by global uncertainty, including climate change, geopolitical tensions, economic instability, and postpandemic recovery. Events like the Ukrainian war and the Covid 19 pandemic have highlighted the vulnerabilities. In this international setting, Fair Trade and its goals are increasingly challenged by climate change and especially its negative effects at the production level, such as water scarcity, soil erosion and land degradation, biodiversity loss and heat waves or catastrophic rainfalls leading to plant diseases. Countermeasures like sustainability-oriented trade regulations such as the EU's EUDR, and HR(E)DD regulations are well meant, but pose challenges on producers and actors along supply chains, often leaving the costs and hurdles for compliance to small-scale farmers, thereby further pressuring the most marginalized group along the chain. In addition, geopolitical tensions and the reorganization of international trade, including trade wars, lead to unpredictable dynamics.

Against this backdrop of unpredictable dynamics, the FTIS 2026 opens up room for multi- and transdisciplinary scientific debate and transdisciplinary exchange in different formats ranging from scientific panels and roundtable discussions to multi-stakeholder workshops. The symposium is organized around five major thematic strands:

[1] https://www.fair-trade.website/the-charter-1
[2] https://www.fairtrade.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/legacy/doc/Fairtrade_Theory_of_Change%20-%202018.pdf

1. Dynamics in the Global South, e.g.:

- Growing economic power in 'the Global Souths'
- New structures of South/South relations
- Fair Trade and increasing urbanization
- Fair Trade 2.0 – localization and adaptation to domestic demand - Informal sectors
- Youth unemployment
- Gender disparities

The Global South is undergoing significant transformations, marked by growing economic power and shifting geopolitical influence. Emerging economies, including BRICS countries increasingly challenge historically entrenched dependencies shaped by colonialism. The traditional North-South extractive model is contested as countries in the Global South establish independent trade and cooperation networks. The Global South is increasingly a driver of its own economic, political, and social agendas. At the same time, rapid urbanization is driving the expansion of a middle class with increased purchasing power bringing about shifting consumption patterns. Growing domestic markets have potential for Fair Trade products and reflect a move toward more localized and equitable economic models, reducing dependence on Northern consumers and markets and fostering sustainable development.

These dynamics necessitate a critical examination of power, capital flows, and the ongoing decolonization of global economic structures. At the same time, there is a high prevalence of inequality and social unrest in regions of the Global South, with growing (income) inequality, especially in urban areas. Rising living costs and austerity measures have triggered protests (e.g., in Kenya, Argentina, and Nigeria). Youth unemployment, migration and displacement are driven by a mix of climate stress, conflict, and lack of opportunity – dynamics that increase urban pressure with women and girls bearing the brunt of climate shocks and economic crises while suffering from limited access to education, land, and finance which further inhibits participation in decision-making and economic life. In the context of these climate, environmental and trade injustices, grassroots and indigenous movements are demanding land rights, climate reparations, and sustainable development, while often facing criminalization or violence in resource-rich but governance-weak regions. Against this backdrop it becomes clear that the Global South is no longer just reacting to global trade rules or sustainability frameworks – it is increasingly redefining them. For many, this means that Fair Trade and sustainability movements to remain relevant, they must evolve from exportcentric models to intersectional, place-based, and politically conscious approaches that reflect this new reality.

2. Dynamics in International Trade and in Fair Trade Supply Chains, e.g.:

- Connections between flows of resources, goods and ideas ('flows')
- New and old power dynamics in value chains
- Reprioritization of global agendas and climate change
- Impact of Fair Trade standards on different product groups

- Impact of sustainability-oriented trade regulations

Fair Trade supply chains reflect the complex interplay of resources, goods, and idea flows within global markets. These flows can both challenge and reproduce existing power dynamics in value chains, where historically dominant actors continue to exert influence while new networks and hierarchies emerge. Fair Trade standards shape these structures differently across product groups, influencing production practices, labor conditions, and market access. A longstanding focus of Fair Trade's work has been on fair prices and fair remuneration in the form of Living Wages and Living Incomes. However, in times of geopolitical crises (e.g., Ukraine war, Middle East instability) global priorities are shifting away from climate action and sustainability toward energy security or defense. Funding for Fair Trade and sustainable development initiatives may be deprioritized. At the same time, sustainability-oriented trade regulations – particularly from the Global North – are increasingly shaping global markets. While these regulations are meant to drive positive environmental and social change, their impact on producers in the Global South is complex and double-edged. Trade regulations affect producers across economic, social, and institutional dimensions, e.g. posing increased compliance burdens and costs on producers to meet strict environmental, labor, and governance standards, amplifying the risk, of market exclusion if they cannot meet the standards. Examples include EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR), Corporate and the Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD).

3. Dynamics in Land and Resource Use, e.g.:

- Impact of new cultivation methods, e.g. agroecology, regenerative agriculture or precision agriculture
- Crop diversification and livelihoods
- Climate impact adaptation and mitigation
- Local food systems and food security
- New forms of socio-ecological practices, e.g. 'sharing' and 'commoning'

New cultivation methods that combine traditional knowledge with scientific expertise such as agroecology and regenerative agriculture represent promising models in which farmer agency, producer livelihoods, community resilience and local knowledge are centred – as opposed to tech-driven top-down interventions. Regenerative methods can boost long-term yields and resilience to climate stress – but require transition time and upfront investment. Precision agriculture may help with resource efficiency (e.g., drip irrigation, targeted fertilizer use), but risks creating technological dependency. These approaches aim to enhance sustainability, improve soil health, and reduce dependency on industrial inputs, while also contributing to climate adaptation and mitigation. Agroecology and regenerative farming are said to sequester carbon and reduce emissions from inputs. Crop diversification and the production of by-products via agro-forestry systems for instance, require training, market access, and sometimes new infrastructure, but offer – once established – multiple income streams reducing the risk of dependency on one volatile commodity (e.g. coffee or cocoa). Crop

diversification is likely to improve nutritional security and enhances resilience to market and climate shocks. New cultivation methods, especially agroecology and regenerative agriculture, embrace landscape-based and systems-based sustainability – where land, community, climate, and culture are interconnected. Based on this perspective, these approaches are promoted as alternatives to or as accompanying measures to product-based sustainability through certification of single products. At the same time, local food systems and the urban-rural integration play a crucial role in strengthening food security and resilience by promoting shorter supply chains and resilient agricultural practices. Emerging socioecological models, such as sharing and commoning, challenge market-driven land use by fostering collective resource management. Understanding these shifts is essential for assessing the future of sustainable agriculture, food security and equitable resource governance.

4. Dynamics in Political Discourses, Policies, Regulations and the Market

- EU regulations and national/supranational supply chain laws and their impact, e.g. compliance costs, complementarity to Fairtrade standards
- European/Global Green Deal
- Power-critical discourses and decoloniality
- Food sovereignty

The increasing engagement of supranational organizations, such as the EU, with the consequences of climate change and unsustainable trading practices introduces new discourses, policies, and market regulations that impact global supply chains. While these aims enhance corporate accountability, they also reinforce existing power asymmetries, raising questions about whose interests they ultimately serve. With many countries in the South being rich in critical minerals (e.g., cobalt, lithium) green energy goals in the Global North are creating extraction booms that risk environmental damage and community displacement. This poses a major threat to communities in the Global South, with the role of Fair Trade and its standards being unclear in this realm.

At the same time, market regulations can help rebuild trust in global trade. In response to global uncertainty, consumers, companies, and policymakers increasingly seek ethical and traceable supply chains. Fair Trade can benefit as a trusted label in times when unethical practices (e.g., forced labor, environmental degradation) come under scrutiny. Furthermore, based on long-term contracts, community-based networks and social premiums that are reinvested in local resilience, during the COVID-19 pandemic Fair Trade supply chains have shown notable resilience.

Yet, in this setting, power-critical and decolonial perspectives challenge dominant regulatory frameworks, framing them as “green protectionism” and advocating for more equitable trade relations and greater recognition of Global South agency and influence in standard setting. Food sovereignty movements, for instance, push for localized control over food systems, resisting external dependencies, while rights-based initiatives advocate for farmer- and

worker-driven context-sensitive standard-setting and auditing and a greater producer voice in governance as well as equity-centered compliance frameworks and a just transition in general.

In this context, decoloniality goes beyond power-critical discourses. It is about dismantling the lingering effects of colonialism in knowledge, institutions, and practices – centering Indigenous and marginalized peoples' worldviews, values, and sovereignty. Within Fair Trade, this means a critique on how certification schemes may reproduce Northern-centric standards and power imbalances and – by embracing alternative epistemologies around land, labor, and community – a (re)consideration of how Southern voices could be embraced in governance, knowledge production, and policy setting. This discourse pushes Fair Trade beyond a technical fix to a political and ethical movement demanding structural change.

Another rapidly growing trend involves the substitution of climate-vulnerable tropical crops – such as cocoa or coffee – with temperate alternatives (e.g. sunflower seeds, barley) or labgrown equivalents ("cellular cocoa/coffee"). While framed as climate adaptation, this shift raises profound justice concerns. A shift to substitutes without addressing the role of the market in exploitive practices now and in history and the contribution of those practices to climate change, can be understood as capitalism 'doing it again'.

5. Dynamics among Fair Trade Institutions & Consumers

- Learning and teaching at educational institutions and in markets
- Consumer awareness and willingness to buy
- Sustainable consumption literacy
- The role of different Fair Trade movements and communities in the sustainable market transformation

Fair Trade institutions, consumers, and markets are all vital for the movement's growth and impact. Educational institutions – from schools to universities – play a crucial role in embedding the social dimension of sustainability, human and labor rights in global trade as well as Fair Trade principles early on. The concept of sustainable consumption literacy goes beyond just knowing that certain brands and seals promise ethicality. It is about understanding the broader implications of consumption choices on the climate, the environment, on labor rights, and social equity. Sustainable consumption literacy involves an awareness of product lifecycle impacts, an understanding supply chain complexities and knowing how to advocate for systemic changes (e.g., policy, corporate accountability). Literacy encourages active citizenship that goes beyond 'green/fair consumerism'. It is strongly connected to ethical consumption in general, which also needs to be addressed as a mode of social distinction in contemporary consumer culture. Here, individuals use purchasing practices to construct and communicate a morally virtuous identity. Through the mechanism of moral branding, consumers identify with products that symbolize ethical values—such as ecological sustainability, fair labor, and a decent remuneration —thereby adopting a prepackaged moral narrative that elevates their consumer choices beyond utility or aesthetics. By making branded choices ethical consumption functions as social signifier, allowing individuals to demonstrate

their ethical awareness and differentiate themselves from others who are perceived as less conscientious or politically engaged. As such, ethical consumption, while framed as a moral practice, also operates within a broader system of symbolic distinction that privileges individual expression over collective structural change. In this context, the phenomenon of certification fatigue gains importance: consumers face confusion over different labels, which can dilute trust or impact purchase behavior. Scientific studies on Fair Trade examine both consumer behavior and market dynamics, providing insights into its transformative potential and structural limitations.

Host Institutions and Networks – GSSC & CCFT

The FTIS 2026 will be collaboratively hosted by the Global South Studies Center (GSSC) and the Competence Center Fair Trade (CCFT) which maintain an institutional strategic cooperation with Fair Trade Germany. The host institutions collaborate with the new Vice Rectorate for 'Sustainable Development' and the new Vice-Rectorate for 'Transfer to Society' as well as the Sustainability Office of the University of Cologne. This institutional setting allows for a broad international reach of the FTIS 2026 topics and talks and provides an important space for networking amongst scholars, politicians, and practitioners.

a. The Global South Studies Center (GSSC)

The GSSC was established as part of the Federal German Excellence Initiative in 2014. It coordinates global, interdisciplinary research at the University of Cologne focusing on highly relevant topics such as migration, sustainability and infrastructures in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The GSSC research profile covers numerous departments, institutes, and research units among them the Institute of Geography, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Department of History, Linguistics and Literary Studies, Regional Studies, Islamic Studies, Modern Chinese Studies, and African Studies.

Research conducted at the GSSC occurs within a framework of research alliances and is based on exchange relationships between international and national academic as well as institutional partners. The GSSC's framework enables research collaboration with partners from the Global South, providing a good institutional basis for north-south collaboration on Fair Trade topics.

The center's central office provides the administrative framework by coordinating and facilitating a wide range of activities, such as research, workshops, conferences, and public lectures. A recent prominent example for a conference organized by the GSSC is the European Conference on African Studies (ECAS) 'African Futures' conference in 2023[3]. ECAS is one of the major activities of AEGIS - the Europe-wide African Studies association, connecting Europe based member institutions focusing on research and education on and in Africa and African Studies.

[3] see here: https://ecasconference.org/2023/

b. The Competence Center Fairtrade (CCFT)

The Competence Centre Fair Trade (CCFT) was established in July 2020 at the University of Cologne and affiliated with the Global South Studies Center in order to promote the academic study of Fair Trade in German-speaking countries. In addition to supporting research and teaching, it offers a forum and an institutional framework for professional exchange and networking. The CCFT attaches great importance to interdisciplinarity and is a point of contact for non-academic institutions and organisations. In addition, the Competence Center promotes cooperation with researchers from the Global South.

Since its foundation, the CCFT has played an important role in both research and teaching (Bachelor's and Master's seminars as well as the scientific support of a citizen science project group) at the University of Cologne on the topic of Fair Trade, as well as in scientific and public lectures and the organization and implementation of (international) events and conferences. Several scientific publications have been realized or are in preparation. The CCFT is active in internal university networking on the topic of sustainability and participated in the 1st and 2nd Sustainability Forum of the University of Cologne led by the new Vice-Rectorate for 'Sustainable Development' of the University of Cologne. Above that, since 2024 the CCFT transfers findings of basic research on Fair Trade to politics and society in the form of policy briefs and short position papers.

As an interface between science and politics/society, the CCFT supports scientists involved in making their findings accessible for social discourse and policy decisions.
The thematic focus lies on the social dimensions of sustainability, issues of social justice and fairness in trade and in agricultural and food systems. The specific content of CCFT's research includes the effects of climate change and options for adapting to climate change at the level of smallholder farming, the implementation of HREDD measures in supply chains (deforestation-free supply chains, due diligence law). Complementary topics to Fair Trade are also introduced, such as decolonial perspectives and indigenous knowledge. The specific topics are selected by a steering group set up at the CCFT in dialogue with Fairtrade Germany. The competence centre is co-financed by Fairtrade Germany.

Contact:

For academic matter queries contact
Dr. Katharina Gröne
katharina.groene@uni-koeln.de

For logistics and organizational questions contact
Pia Dilchert
pdilche1@uni-koeln.de