Guest editorial: The social sustainability of global supply chains – a critical perspective on current practices and its transformative potential

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Social sustainability in supply chains: current challenges

The number of publications on social sustainability in the logistics, operations and supply chain management (SCM) fields has increased over the last years (e.g. Bubicz *et al.*, 2019; Yawar and Seuring, 2017; Govindan *et al.*, 2021). However, it can be questioned, whether scholars in these fields have done enough to critically challenge current practices, and proactively drive real, transformational changes (Matos *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, there is still a limited use of critical perspectives on the social dimension in the supply chain sustainability (SCS) literature (Carter *et al.*, 2019; Fritz and Silva, 2018; Glover and Touboulic, 2020). While the logistics, operations and SCM literature investigate actions and supply chain strategies used by firms to address a set of social issues, the impacts of intellectual outputs on real and transformative changes in the wider society remain unclear.

Current literature is focussed on reporting what initiatives firms have done in terms of social sustainability and on showing up the difficulties to manage them (Huq *et al.*, 2014; Mani *et al.*, 2018). However, little advancements exist defining transformation and impact. For instance, Mani and Gunasekaran (2018, p. 151) claimed that social SCS adoption relies on "products and process aspects in the whole supply chain that invariably affect the safety, health, and welfare of people." Such perspective shows some nuances and potential firms' initiatives in supply chains, but we do not have a clear view on what actions and decisions can transform the current thinking and practices amongst firms such that they actively drive social SCS. To this end, this special issue offers a critical perspective of research in SCS, which goes beyond figuring out what the main social sustainability issues/indicators/strategies/practices are from a focal firm perspective, by questioning how their actions can be transformed or reconfigured to improve social conditions and benefit the wider society.

Another reflection provided in this special issue relates to a dominant reliance on the North-Western perspective in the SCS field (Gold and Schleper, 2017) with limited inclusion of perspectives from other regions of the world where serious social issues arise. To study social sustainability in global supply chains a more diverse perspective is necessary, shifting from simply focussing on buyers from the so-called "developed countries", to also acknowledge the role of suppliers in "developing/emerging countries" as these have different perspectives and mindsets to cope with social sustainability risks (Brix-Asala *et al.*, 2021; Chen and Chen, 2019; León-Bravo *et al.*, 2022). In this context, according to Touboulic and McCarthy (2020), inter-disciplinary research (including management and other social sciences) is relevant to investigate how social sustainability, alone or combined with multiple sustainable development goals, can impact physical distribution, logistics, operations and SCM. Therefore, in this special issue we open the black box of social sustainability having in mind that nuances exist across the globe for its implementation within businesses and society.

New Frontiers on critical perspectives and transformative practices
This special issue welcomed studies focussing on social sustainability transformation to show the real impacts of supply chain (re)design and (re)configuration for an improved social performance and practice, but also studies that demonstrate how current supply chain configuration can address social sustainability issues without creating harm to their economic, environmental, governance or cultural environment (Fritz and Silva, 2018). In total, seven papers were accepted for publication due to their critical perspective. These contributions acknowledge four main new frontiers of research necessary to develop social SCS studies, which we formulate as follows:

(1) A paradigm shift in theory and practice is required for supply chain members in integrating social sustainability;

(2) Cultural practices should play a relevant role for social sustainability as there is a need to consider contextual differences;

(3) Inclusiveness can emerge through transformative practices on diversity, equity and inclusion for social sustainability; and

(4) A decolonised research perspective is vital to increase our knowledge on social sustainability in global supply chains.

These four new frontiers change our reflection on the subject as we move away from mainstream research on social sustainability to a more transformative perspective in line with what Wieland (2021) metaphorically labelled as "dancing the supply chain", referring to the need to understand supply chains as socio-ecological systems that adapt to changing cycles related for instance to time and space. In what follows, we will detail how these areas support a step forward on social sustainability in global supply chains research.

Social sustainability as a new supply chain paradigm
When the call for contributions in this special issue was circulated, we encouraged scholars to extend existing theories, for example those that explain communication on how managers cognitively construe the sustainability challenge (Crilly *et al.*, 2016); paradigm shift like the idea of sustain-centrism versus sustainability (Gladwin *et al.*, 1995); managing conflicting goals, such as poverty alleviation versus profitability (Battilana and Dorado, 2010), and learning how social enterprises manage hybrid organisations (Pullman *et al.*, 2018). Our intention was to open the discussion for further theory elaboration. Therefore, the relevance of social sustainability for SCS should not be limited to new initiatives to reinforce the instrumental logic of profitability (Gold and Schleper, 2017; Montabon *et al.*, 2016), but a source for learning and resilience, in which social sustainability concerns relate more to long-term interest (Sauer *et al.*, 2022).

To develop an impactful paradigm, a new sustainability management mindset is needed, in which sustainability becomes part of managers' daily operations instead of remaining at the strategic level, leading to little advancement in reality. The sustainability mindset is a concept borrowed from the psychology research field and furthermore developed into an educative tool targeting students (i.e. future managers) and professionals' ability to identify, understand and address sustainability challenges (see Rimanoczy, 2020). It involves "a way of thinking and being that results from a broad understanding of the ecosystem's manifestations, from social sensitivity, as well as an introspective focus on one's personal values and higher self, and finds its expression in actions for the greater good of the whole" (Rimanoczy, 2020, p. 19).

Developing ones' sustainability mindset enables to understand more holistically the sustainability challenges surrounding businesses, individuals and nature and thus offers a wider range of possibilities to solve sustainability issues effectively. For instance, Fritz and Cordova (2021) argue that stimulating a sustainability mindset amongst supply chain

managers could be a key enhancer of SCS, when coupled with transformative leadership approaches. For Silva *et al.* (2022a) changing the mindset of end customers can also support further engagement with SCS practices as new behaviours can emerge. Therefore, developing one's ability to have a "supply chain view of sustainability management" as, argued and illustrated by Fritz (2022), is a way to cultivate and enrich one's sustainability mindset, which underlines the importance of SCS research and teaching at a business and societal level.

Aligned with this reflection, **Marlene Hohn** and **Christian Durach** conducted a literature review on how firms take their responsibility to practice social sustainability in supply chains. These authors explored an integrative view against the win-win instrumental view and the reluctant view for social sustainability in order to value multiple stakeholders' interest. By highlighting the need for firms to "take a different view", the authors call for a paradigm shift from firms' self-interest to social sustainability value creation. As discussed above, little is known to date on how conventional (i.e. profit maximising) firms may shift to an integrative view. However, Hohn and Durach (2023) state that firms following an integrative view prioritise moral considerations to social SCS, ratifying the potential to move towards a new supply chain paradigm.

The role of cultural practices for social SCS
Recent studies have called for social sustainability studies that examine the influences of cultural elements on SCS (Fritz and Silva, 2018), such as local traditions (e.g. indigenous connection with nature and ancestral values; León-Bravo *et al.*, 2022) and religious practices (e.g. donation to religious organisations; Mani *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, cultural settings have a strong influence on individuals' beliefs, behaviours, decision-making (e.g. Crane and Matten, 2016) and on the supply chain operations, as it may support (Marshall *et al.*, 2015), or hinder (Silvestre *et al.*, 2018) social SCS.

Culture has been explored in the SCS literature related to a firm's organisational culture or national culture (Carter and Rogers, 2008; Elbaz and Iddik, 2020; Marshall *et al.*, 2015); however, other nuances are little considered in global supply chains. For instance, León-Bravo *et al.* (2022) investigate the supplier's perspective of the cocoa supply chain in Ecuador and found that buyers are not always interested in local cultural practices. They suggest that organic certification need to take into account influences on local life and the dynamic of local communities. Social sustainability, as a broader context, thus needs further linkage amongst different supply chain members to ensure that compliance with rules and requirements does not lead to unintending detrimental effects to local traditions.

Camila Lee Park, **Mauro Fracarolli Nunes** and **José Machuca** examined the influences of cultural aspects on local practices. Their role-playing experiment investigated the effects of Chinese *guanxi*, Russian *blat*, South Korean *yongo* and Brazilian *jeitinho* on buyers' perceptions concerning social sustainability items. They found several differences of ethical perceptions across cultures by using a non-North-Western perspective. Additionally, they presented the so-called "cultural void" as a way to explain the influence of culture on local practices. Therefore, Lee Park *et al.* (2023) reinforce the notions that social sustainability awareness and cultural practices are intertwined, by ratifying that the former affects the latter in multiple global supply chains practices.

Adding to this debate, **Valérie Fernandes**, **Cemil Kuzey**, **Ali Uyar** and **Abdullah Karaman** used data from the logistics and transportation sector to investigate the role of culture and gender diversity as drivers of social sustainability. By cultural diversity they mean directors' citizenship which differs based on the headquarter location. They found that board structure policies have a moderator effect in this context, that female directors are significant predictors of social sustainability issues, which is consistent with feminist theories. They also show that multiple cultural backgrounds of directors tend to lead to opportunities in terms of community development, human rights and product responsibility.

By calling the attention to board culture diversity, Fernandes *et al.* (2023) confirm the relevance of culture and gender diversity within an often male-dominant sector.

The challenge of inclusiveness as transformative practices
One of the transformative practices under-studied within global supply chain social sustainability research relates to inclusiveness, which involves diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) issues. Inclusion addresses opportunities to consider those groups excluded in society in terms of cultural, social and economic activities (Dillard *et al.*, 2013). A review of 142 academic articles by Yawar and Seuring (2017) indicates that limited efforts have been made to understand inclusion of marginalised people and minority development. However, as mentioned by Carter *et al.* (2019) in their revision of 164 articles, the interest for this subject has been increasing over time.

Diversity should go beyond the idea of simply having several new stakeholders in the firm supplier portfolio (Worthington *et al.*, 2008) and consider both workplace and supply chain relationships. For instance, Ruel *et al.* (2022) mention that while firms are often interested in increasing women-owned businesses as part of their suppliers, they lag behind in considering women as change-makers within supply chain relationships. The literature has demonstrated that when firms consider women-owned businesses as simple action of "being" diverse instead of "becoming" diverse (see Wieland, 2021), they reinforce the victim approach of women in a male-dominant context such as SCM (Ruel and Fritz, 2021). One should highlight as well that diversity is not only a question of gender (i.e. number of women compared to number of men employees/managers). Further research could investigate other diversity-related issues including other genders (see Arora, 2022).

Equity involves opportunities for multiple stakeholders not only to fairly join supply chain relationships (Soundararajan and Brammer, 2018), but also offers a target for strict adherence of gender non-discrimination policy (Mani *et al.*, 2016). Further studies should add a critical perspective to understand whether the right resources and opportunities are given to individuals or groups of people. In addition, there are issues related to equity and stakeholder perceptions about the business inclusiveness that are overlooked. For instance, Silva *et al.* (2022b) shed lights on micro and small enterprises (MSEs) supply chain as these firms have different effects on social sustainability in comparison to multi-national companies. Echoing United Nations statements about the role of MSEs for (social) sustainability (UN, 2020), Silva *et al.* (2022b) demonstrate how important MSEs are for the inclusion of minority and marginalised people.

Moving the focus to inclusion, multiple supply chain studies have addressed this topic several years ago (see Malcolm, 2010). For example, while Hall and Matos (2010) discussed about how social exclusion affects SCS, Bateman *et al.* (2020) reflected on supplier diversity programmes, and Silva and Ruel (2022) acknowledged the existence of inclusive purchasing initiatives. A key element to have in mind is that a strong focus on efficiency and costs may reduce opportunities to promote inclusion (Touboulic and McCarthy, 2020). Thus, Silva and Ruel (2022) argue that firms may develop supply chain capabilities of suppliers (e.g. empowerment) through the purchasing department as a way to enhance their resilience to supply chain disruptions and social sustainability. Additionally, Carmagnac (2021) has argued that SCS research should extend the boundaries in terms of which stakeholder to consider when analysing sustainability. This can lead to sustainable value creation that benefit the entire supply chain socio-ecological system, especially through procurement activities inclusiveness (Boruchowitch and Fritz, 2022). Such a perspective opens room for studies that relate to suppliers with several ownerships, but also include the role of non-governmental organisations and social movement as part of SCM (Peng *et al.*, 2022; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2016).

Following these elements of inclusiveness for social sustainability in supply chains, researchers should avoid a broader understanding of DEI initiatives and devote more efforts

to comprehend how firms and other stakeholders can contribute to transformative practices. As mentioned by Wieland (2021), social sustainability research should zoom in supply chain relationships and increase studies that have individual workers, families, and local communities as unit of analysis. New relationships can emerge from this perspective because DEI initiatives will help firms to move from "being" to "becoming", as previously discussed. For instance, Lee (2021) mentioned the example of the Esquel garment factory that targets equity of working conditions in terms of working hours and wage payment. While still interested in improving productivity, this firm opened space for workers to better enjoy personal time with their family. Lee (2021) calls that supply chain with a conscience, which has close relation with inclusiveness practices. The selected articles for this SI edition raise interesting discussion in this regard.

Priscila Miguel and Maria José Tonelli explored woman-owned suppliers as part of supplier diversity programmes to buy from minorities in Brazil. By developing a mixed-method approach, the authors investigated supplier diversity through a critical management perspective and showed supplier diversity as a rhetoric instead of a real practice. Miguel and Tonelli (2023) mentioned that the current procurement mindset does not support inclusiveness, as their findings show that buyers' perspective of supplier diversity is evaluated by the expenditure on minority suppliers, while suppliers focus on potentials to reduce inequality. The critical perspective presented in the paper call the attention to buyers' lack of commitment in carving inclusiveness practices as it conflicts with traditional economic goals.

Chia-Yi Liu researched how a participatory guaranteed certification system can build a governance mechanism that supports transformative practices in Taiwan, based on collective interests. The author consider the issue of social equity by investigating which role disadvantaged agri-food stakeholders play in social movements affecting sustainable solutions. To this end, a research model was developed using an institutional isomorphism perspective. Therefore, a survey was carried out with marginalised stakeholders from the Green Conservation Label managed by Taiwan's Tse-Xin Organic Agriculture Foundation (TOAF) on social sustainability in the supply chain. Liu (2023) observed that disadvantaged stakeholders mobilised a pool of resources to establish alternative institutions. The study provides recommendations to managers and policy makers for decision-making related to agriculture.

Adding to these debates, Linh-Chi Vo, Mary Lavissière and Alexander Lavissière carried out a qualitative research in the maritime sector, which is male-dominated, to investigate how female managers handle work–family conflicts. To do so, they explored the sector across the African continent to build the idea of work–family balance logic to discuss talent retention. In this research, Vo et al. (2023) demonstrated that female managers act as institutional entrepreneurs due to their self-reflective perspective. For instance, as women needed to work harder than their male colleagues, they needed to create multiple strategies to cope with the conflict between work and family. This research demonstrates the need for a closer attention to social sustainability by means of female managers to demonstrate that there is room for further reflection on how to manage gender diversity within global supply chain contexts.

Decolonising social SCS research
There is a rising debate about the need to introduce different voices within the SCS research (Touboulic and McCarthy, 2020), which becomes even more necessary when thinking about social sustainability. A call for decolonising research was mentioned by Fritz and Silva (2018) who conducted research in Latin America settings. They suggest that local characteristics should have more representation in the global conversation of SCS. Recently, Marques et al. (2021) made an analogy of "colonised" research with a "hamster wheel" and ratified that

instead of mimicking research proposals often provided by North American and European scholars (see Gold and Schleper, 2017), Global South scholars should search for their own knowledge creation with research proposals that better address the unique challenges faced locally (Marques *et al.*, 2021).

Moving this perspective to social sustainability in global supply chains, buyer firms in "developed" countries should not only target fulfilling their requirements, but also understand locally what the challenges in the suppliers' context are. As mentioned by Fritz and Silva (2018, p. 833), approaching social sustainability "is not only about how to introduce human elements in the SC [i.e. supply chain], but also how the SC activities influence people's lives". There is a need to move beyond and re-imagine what social sustainability means in different settings (Aman and Seuring, 2021; McCarthy *et al.*, 2018). Decolonising research then should consider that different mindsets for businesses and managers exist, and the diversity of perspectives should be reconciled and celebrated. This should especially be applied to social sustainability, as the concept is blurry and opens to multiple perspectives.

Decolonising social sustainability opens space for critical research not only in terms of theoretical contributions, but also with possibilities to use new methodologies that help scholars from any place to increase their knowledge on the subject. Additionally, new interpretations of SCM can emerge in this regard, as informality and inequalities are drivers of supply chain relationships that are not often mapped in the literature (Brix-Asala *et al.*, 2021; Silva *et al.*, 2022b; Silvestre *et al.*, 2018). The use of concepts pre-defined during "colonised" research do not fit with local meaning and understanding of "decolonised" research. Several of the previously mentioned issues relate to cultural and inclusiveness practices which can generate different insights from a decolonised perspective. Also, new research paradigms can emerge to help global supply chain scholars.

Aligned with this perspective, **Enrico Fontana**, **Muhammad Atif** and **Mark Meuer** developed a study focussed on supplier social sustainability initiatives implementation due to pressures from buyers and similar suppliers. A qualitative research was conducted with Pakistani managers to explore social governance in the apparel sector. By adding a postcolonial critique to existing literature on SCS, the authors show the existence of "counter-pressures" from suppliers as a result of unrewarded commitment. Such a perspective opens opportunity for a reflection on how commercial relations with buyers can hold back the existence of transformative change for social sustainability in suppliers' context. The decolonised perspective used by Fontana *et al.* (2023) suggests that buyers and suppliers will need to further understand workers' needs for social sustainability in global supply chains.

Moving forward with social SCS research

The four new frontiers explored along this special issue introduction demonstrate that social SCS research still needs scholars' and practitioners' attention to avoid a narrow practice of social sustainability. In order to amplify the potential of social SCS research in moving forward through a critical perspective and towards transformative practices, Table 1 summarises future research's suggestions extracted from the accepted papers.

As summarised in Table 1, there are plenty of opportunities to evolve the social SCS field in terms of approaches, interests and multiple stakeholders' needs. Such a perspective shows that instead of only focussing on profitability and cost efficiency, managers should advance their (sustainability) mindset to incorporate novel elements, such as: increased concern for cultural practices, adoption of inclusiveness practices and a less colonised approach within supply chain relationships. This special issue contributes to filling the gap on the social dimensions of SCS research, including in the context of developing economies (e.g. Brazil, Pakistan, Taiwan and African countries) and open reflections on which lessons could be

Author	Suggestion for future research
Hohn and Durach (2023)	*Future research should specifically target firms' social SCS development processes*
	Need to adopt different perspectives such as NGOs and activist groups for social sustainability
	Studies need to question how far conventional firms can develop social SCS
Lee Park *et al.* (2023)	*Future studies on SCS should identify nuances on how "cultural voids" affect relationships for social sustainability*
	Need to research from a supplier perspective to investigate their perception about local practices
	Increase the number of respondents from other countries, which reinforces the need for studies that do not only follow North-Western perspective
Fernandes *et al.* (2023)	*Cultural diversity deserves further attention from other sectors than logistics and transportation*
	Future studies should consider different contingencies to study board diversity for social sustainability
	More investigation about the role of board nomination committees can help further understanding about cultural and gender diversity
Miguel and Tonelli (2023)	*More research on different regions of Brazil and other emerging economies*
	Studies should target diverse suppliers' profiles (certified, non-certified, minority-owned companies)
	More research beyond dyadic relations of buyers and suppliers to include tier-n suppliers
Liu (2023)	*Additional research on Participatory Guaranteed Systems are required from other regions due to the influence of culture and membership obligations*
	Studies should go further concerning the role of local cultural practices
	More research can be developed to reinforce the need for creating social value in supply chains for multiple marginalised people
Vo *et al.* (2023)	*Further studies should explore retaining women talent as key topic for gender diversity and social sustainability*
	More research on women empowerment can be developed assuming women as institutional entrepreneurs in their workplace
	Studies can apply the proposed work–family balance logic to investigate institutional change in different sectors
Fontana *et al.* (2023)	*Why is there still a lack of commitment from suppliers to social SCS?*
	Studies should go in-depth into the understanding of suppliers' social SCS practices instead of oversimplifying
	Conduct more research with non-traditional or emerging theories in the field such as the sustainability logic
	Decolonise SCS research and let knowledge creation emerge from the local context

Table 1.
Overview of future research suggestions

learnt by supply chain stakeholders from developing economies. However, opportunities to represent further the local contexts of various developing economies and cultures are still manifold and we encourage researchers to dig further into this direction. We also see the need to develop studies that are able to show the interactions between the different sustainability dimensions when they are addressed in SCM and their impacts on the business, nature and people (whether positive or negative). This is meant to avoid focussing only on one dimension of sustainability that would develop a research silo focussing only on social sustainability, as it was the case with environmental sustainability.

Although this special issue made significant contributions to the social SCS field, SCM research has not sufficiently engaged with the role of digital technologies as new venues of solutions to social sustainability in the logistics, operations and SCM. Digital technologies can help develop a transparent supply chain, improving visibility and alignment with the UN sustainable development goals (Bischoff and Seuring, 2021). These technologies have the potential to enhance sustainability through improved communication, coordination and cooperation amongst supply chain actors and influencing pro-environment behaviour

(Matos *et al.*, 2022; White *et al.*, 2019). However, it is still unclear how such benefits translate into social sustainability, especially in terms of diversity, equity and inclusion. This is because most studies in the field of operations and SCM have not sufficiently tapped into what social outcomes can potentially be achieved through the use of digital technologies and what resources are needed. Future SCM studies thus have a critical role to play in enhancing our understanding of the opportunities offered by such technologies in addressing social sustainability. These must include examining to what extent, where and how digital technologies can positively affect inclusiveness in supply chains. Such future research avenue also needs to address the sustainability of the digital technology itself in order to emphasise positive impacts and avoid unexpected negative externalities related to new technology adoption (Bai *et al.*, 2020; Beier *et al.*, 2020).

Conclusions

This special issue introduction acknowledges the need for further application of critical perspective within social SCS research and practice, which revealed opportunities to let real and transformative practices emerge in global supply chains. More than "being" aware of their role for social SCS, firms and other supply chain members should "become" responsible for an effective transformation. This special issue introduction provides clues of how scholars and practitioners can understand their contributions and excel in the development of implications for research and society, as well as in their application of social SCS practices.

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