

Global Supply Chain Responsibility A Sensemaking Perspective

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Eighty per cent of global economic activity is undertaken within global supply chains. Hence, a crucial, but far from trivial, component of governance for sustainable development is that multinational companies (MNC) take responsibility for their supply chains. A common assumption in the international business literature is that the MNC can effectively coordinate and control CSR performance along their supply chains if they wish to do so, i.e. wish to “walk the talk” (see Asmussen & Fosfuri, 2019 as one recent example). According to this view, supply chain responsibility is understood as a series of “micro-translation” processes (Gutierrez-Huerter et al., 2020; cf. Jamali & Karam, 2018) that connect HQ with the various tiers of the supply chain and disseminate the MNC’s approach to corporate sustainability. However, even though there are MNC practices that are indeed initiated by the headquarters and transferred along the value chain (such as a company’s non-financial reporting regime, Gutierrez-Huerter et al., 2020), this does not apply to corporate social performance in a wider sense. In this paper, we argue that global supply chain responsibility needs to be understood as a multi-directional diffusion and translation process that accounts for the context-specific problem structure of sustainability challenges as well as notions such as responsibility, local responsiveness or embeddedness. We apply a sensemaking perspective (Daft & Weick, 1984; Weick, 1988) to explore perceptions of responsibility within one specific global supply chain. Based on 30 semi-structured interviews along the entire value chain of a European agri-food MNC, we shed light on the interplay between headquarters, subsidiaries, suppliers and other relevant actors that results in specific manifestations of CSR and sustainable development (or the lack thereof, in some areas). This perspective helps us to better understand how key messages travel along supply chains and are transformed in the process, what the dividing/converging lines between sustainability perspectives are, as well as what the multitude of contextual – and often unintentional or even undetected – factors along the value chain are that shape the effectiveness of corporate sustainability initiatives.