Business and Human Rights Journal (2023), **8:** 477–479

Business and Human Rights Journal

BOOK REVIEW

Rethinking Global Value Chains and Corporate Social Responsibility by Peter Lund-Thomsen (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022). ISBN 978 1 83910 208 0

This new publication by Peter Lund-Thomsen aims to 'rethink and reassess what we know about [Corporate Social Responsibility] CSR in [Global Value Chains] GVCs'. The Business and Human Rights (BHR) community might not be impressed by the focus on CSR, which, despite being increasingly contested, seems to cyclically rise from its own academic ashes. Lund-Thomsen recognises as problematic its loss of meaning and he concedes that a related western-type approach to it is not necessarily applicable (and welcome) at a global level. Nonetheless, the author uses the CSR framework instrumentally as the main lens of analysis to reflect on fifteen years of empirical studies on the intersecting and often contrasting interests of the three main constituents in GVCs: brands, suppliers, and workers. The author seeks what he calls the 'sweet spot in CSR' - an optimal point where the interests of these actors converge. Spoiler alert: very little sweetness is found in the end. A compelling final chapter gives hopes that BHR might be indeed a promising (sweet and alternative) avenue to solve the dilemma of a GVCs governance model that is built on pitting its main actors against each other.

The book is organised in six chapters. The introduction sets the scene with a discussion of the theory of value chain governance with insights on the relational and contested elements of CSR, and related effects on brands, suppliers, and workers. The author also reflects on the challenges of assessing the impacts of COVID-19 on GVCs, discussing the flaws of this global governance model and the organisation of CSR therein.

Chapter two continues in this vein. It analyses the perspective of global buyers (retailers, marketers, and traders) by examining the challenges that emerged during the global pandemic within the two dominant conceptual approaches of CSR in GVCs: the compliance and the cooperation paradigms. The compliance paradigm stands on vertical relations, i.e., power relationships between global buyers and their suppliers, with a marginal role for actors in the civil society domain. Conversely, the cooperation paradigm is based on long-term and trust-based relationships between buyers and suppliers, built on opportunities to collaborate for product and process upgrading within a social compliance regime that is directly facilitated by NGOs, trade unions and multi-stakeholder initiatives. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which clearly exposed some of the structural challenges of the compliance regime in particular, Lund-Thomsen suggests the necessity to expand the traditional on-site auditing system by integrating it with desk-based and virtual monitoring systems. I might be less optimistic than the author, in that I see the limits of distance auditing in collecting first-hand accounts from workers. It is evident that a more robust and assertive research agenda on the overall accounting (measure), auditing (monitor) and accountability (disclose) system in GVCs appears essential. In my opinion, in this research space, the BHR movement should and could contribute more, offering original and applied research on how a rights-holder centred approach can deliver a compliance system designed to reflect the reality of workers' rights on the ground – a system ultimately designed for rights instead of compliance.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bhj.2023.42 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The author suggests a second appropriate variation to the compliance paradigm, that is the inclusion of a two-way system, where the expected compliance with buyers' codes of conduct is complemented by global brands' compliance with ethical purchasing practices. If this change is materialized, suppliers might decide to exclude brands from their GVCs in case of unethical practices, leading to a reversal compliance model. However, given the power dynamics between lead firms and small suppliers from the Global South, this seems highly unrealistic.

In Chapter three Lund-Thomsen offers a specific suppliers-centred view of CSR. Traditionally, the construction of CSR in GVCs encapsulates and prioritises buyers' perspectives, with scarce attention paid to suppliers' positioning. This is reflected by the common inability (or unwillingness) of suppliers to integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations, due to the financial burdens and increasing demands on pricing, seasonal changes, shorter lead times and payment delays that cascade on them from the top of GVCs. Furthermore, suppliers might perceive a western-centred theorization and operationalization of CSR as a kind of economic and cultural form of imperialism (maybe because it really is), with scarce consideration of contextualised experiences from the Global South, that makes the implementation of CSR on the ground even more unlikely.

But what would a 'Southern-centred' CSR perspective look like? This question is partially presented in Chapter four, which explores the drivers and challenges of collective CSR engagement in industrial clusters linked to GVCs. Elaborating on Barrientos' definition of social upgrading[1], Lund-Thomsen discusses how gendered forms of employment in some clusters prohibit any 'improvements in the rights and entitlements of workers as social actors', with women likely to experience social downgrading during global economic contractions.

Chapter five then discusses how CSR policies of global brands impact workers' agency in export-oriented industries. It contributes to the literature on labour agency in GVCs by analysing how the cooperative approach to CSR in GVCs can impact a 'responsible supplier disengagement' and enable workers' rights in the context of value chains disruptions. Using a case study from Pakistan, Lund-Thomsen tries to answer the question of whether CSR policies of international brands might enable or hinder labour agency in GVCs. The author concludes that most CSR-related activities promoted by the brand do not seem to facilitate worker agency. This calls for new research, to examine whether the cooperative paradigm improves worker agency over their rights in GVCs.

The book ends with a chapter on the future of CSR in GVCs - a future that coincides with the timeframe of the Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development. Following the current policy drive for due diligence, BHR is mentioned by the author as a worthy area of research in GVCs. Lund-Thomsen provides a list of the fast-evolving guidance and regulatory efforts on due diligence, but he does not present any deeper and more general reflection on the alternative governance framework offered by the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights for addressing workers' rights in GVCs. A research question thus remains unanswered: whether and, if so, how can internationally recognised standards of human rights -including environmental rights- replace the nebulous CSR-umbrella framework? Yet, Lund-Thomsen also argues that there is a tendency to overlook local contexts, with the assumption that the Global North understanding of what constitutes business responsibility might lead to ignore local voices of suppliers and workers. A broader reflection about the ontologies,

[1] For a reader not familiar with the work of Professor Stephanie Barrientos, her book *Changing Gender Patterns of Work in Global Value Chains* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) represents an excellent reading and a summary of decades of research and theorization on women workers in GVCs. Interestingly, in 2020 Peter Lund-Thomsen wrote a review of that book that can be found here https://doi.org/10.1177/1024529420937992.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bhj.2023.42 Published online by Cambridge University Press

epistemologies and universality of human rights, especially in terms of their prioritization and suitability in different contexts, seems then essential to advance the BHR agenda in GVCs. As the book concludes, it looks clear that CSR cannot have sustained positive impacts on workers' agency and rights. I would agree and argue that a BHR approach might be the way forward for protecting workers (and to some extent small suppliers) in GVCs, overcoming some of the failures of the CSR paradigm.

Overall, this book represents a valuable and absorbing read for anyone interested in reflecting on decades of proclaimed CSR action in GVCs. It invites -maybe not always directly- the BHR community to get into the debate and contribute more to the GVCs field. After all, both the compliance and the cooperation systems are grounded on the relationships among actors from different governance regimes, including businesses, public bodies and civil society organisations. This polycentricity of different societal systems that simultaneously operate through their networks is at the centre of GVCs functioning. But BHR scholars know very well that the complementary interplay among different societal actors is what also regulates the enjoyment of human rights and the respect for right-holders. It looks to me that the BHR movement might have a lot to contribute to the GVCs debate, bringing at its centre workers, local suppliers and affected communities.

Beyond the BHR movement, I would strongly recommend the title to all business and management scholars and students alike that might be less familiar with development studies and the main theoretical underpinnings of global value chains. Contesting the idea of responsibility in the creation of value at a global level starts from business and management people being able to reflect on current practices and the failures of a system that does not respect the rights of people and sustainable development for all.

Funding statement. The research and writing of the manuscript have not been funded or commissioned by third parties.

Competing interest. The Author declares none.

Lara Bianchi
Nottingham University Business School
University of Nottingham, Jubilee Campus
Nottingham, NG8 1BB, UK
lara.bianchi@nottingham.ac.uk
doi:10.1017/bhj.2023.42

https://doi.org/10.1017/bhj.2023.42 Published online by Cambridge University Press