

Expanding the boundaries of SSCM: the role of non-traditional actors

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Increasingly, companies are extending sustainable practices beyond their own boundaries. Despite the fact that sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) literature acknowledges the importance of applying sustainability across the entire supply chain (SC), most scholars to date have explored sustainability from the lens of for-profit firms while generally neglecting "non-traditional"

actors in the supply chain. This paper aims to better understand the role of nontraditional actors in the governance of sustainability issues across the supply chain. As results of a systematic literature review, this study identifies three different roles of non-traditional actors in SSCM: instigating, supporting and leading. Two different topics for a research agenda have emerged from the findings. The first highlights the importance of a longitudinal approach in order to gather deeper insight into the evolution of the roles adopted by non-traditional actors in relation to businesses over time. The second research avenue regards legitimacy issues as an essential concept to help scholars to better understand how the different roles of non-traditional actors are accepted to manage environmental and social challenges. This manuscript contributes to the SSCM literature by focusing on non-traditional actors as the level of analysis, which has been underexplored in this field thus far.

Keywords: Non, traditional actors, SSCM, sustainability, literature review

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FULL PAPER

ABSTRACT

Increasingly, companies are extending sustainable practices beyond their own boundaries. Despite the fact that sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) literature acknowledges the importance of applying sustainability across the entire supply chain (SC), most scholars to date have explored sustainability from the lens of for-profit firms while generally neglecting “non-traditional” actors in the supply chain. This paper aims to better understand the role of non-traditional actors in the governance of sustainability issues across the supply chain. As results of a systematic literature review, this study identifies three different roles of non-traditional actors in SSCM: instigating, supporting and leading. Two different topics for a research agenda have emerged from the findings. The first highlights the importance of a longitudinal approach in order to gather deeper insight into the evolution of the roles adopted by non-traditional actors in relation to businesses over time. The second research avenue regards legitimacy issues as an essential concept to help scholars to better understand how the different roles of non-traditional actors are accepted to manage environmental and social challenges. This manuscript contributes to the SSCM literature by focusing on non-traditional actors as the level of analysis, which has been underexplored in this field thus far.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, scholars and practitioners are recognizing the central role of supply chains in achieving sustainability (Wolf, 2011). Supply chain management (SCM) is considered the “locus” of changing towards sustainability and an important contributor to environmental mitigation in a broader ecosystem (Mohrman and Worley, 2010). Two reasons explain the relevance of supply chains in driving sustainability. First, it is within the supply chain that most environmental and social disasters occur. Second, the connectedness among supply chain actors enables them to jointly implement environmental and social practices (Vurro et al., 2009). Within this context, a considerable body of SCM research has explored the diverse dimensions of the transition towards sustainability in supply chains, such as Carter and Easton (2011), Pagell and Wu (2009), Seuring and Müller (2008) and Carter and Rogers (2008). However, to date, most of the SSCM literature remains predominantly focused on the focal-firm-centric perspective and overlooks other supply chain actors (Montabon et al., 2016; Awaysheh and Klassen, 2010; Vachon and Klassen, 2006). More specifically, scholars tend to draw attention to focal companies’ motivations, instruments and outcomes to govern sustainability issues. Competitiveness, reputation, image and stakeholder demands are frequently listed as the main motivational reasons (Seuring and Müller, 2008; Sajjad et al., 2015; Bansal and Roth, 2000).

Regardless of their motivations, almost all focal companies around the world have already put sustainability strategies, policies, projects or initiatives in place. Acknowledging the complexity and the large scope of sustainability issues, focal companies tend to expand sustainability initiatives beyond their boundaries, and therefore, to involve their supply chain partners (Grimm et al., 2014; Wilhelm et al., 2016; Touboulic et al. 2018). Accordingly, the SSCM literature has put a strong emphasis on the focal companies’ use of collaboration, power and standards as means to instrumentally drive sustainability in the supply chain (Seuring and Müller, 2008; Vachon and Klassen, 2008; Beske et al., 2008; Gimenez and Tachizawa, 2012; Grimm et al., 2014; Touboulic et al., 2014; Wilhelm et al., 2016).

Going beyond these traditional (linear) governance logics dominated by focal companies, recent SSCM studies have highlighted the central role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) (including roundtables, unions, councils, consortia and cross-sector partnerships) in actively delivering sustainability across supply chains (Gualandris et al., 2015; Rodriguez et al., 2016; Pagell and Wu, 2009; Gualandris and Klassen, 2018; Carmagnac and Carbone, 2019). For instance, partnerships between NGOs and

businesses have been identified as an important approach for addressing environmental and societal grand challenges, including poverty alleviation, deforestation and climate change (Rodriguez et al., 2016; Bitzer and Glasbergen, 2015). Even more recent, through the political CSR perspective, collaborative initiatives (i.e. MSIs such as consortia and roundtables) have been considered a crucial part of a wide-ranging movement that “brings together a range of stakeholders to create governance solutions for social and environmental problems” (Moog et al., 2015, p. 470). Well-known collaborative initiatives include the Fair Labor Association, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). These new modes of sustainability governance acknowledge the complexity of dealing with environmental and societal grand challenges, and the necessity of addressing them through both long-term commitments and participatory approaches involving multiple stakeholders with diverse expertise and backgrounds (Ferraro et al., 2015; Mena and Palazzo, 2012).

Despite the fact that these organizations are progressively gaining the attention of academics, a large number of scholars still recognize these organizations as “non-traditional” supply chain actors serving the interests of dominant for-profit players (focal companies) (Pagell et al., 2017;2018; Rodriguez et al, 2016; Pagell and Wu, 2009). Contrary to this conventional perspective, this paper argues that non-traditional actors may adopt a focal position in the supply chain, acting as sustainability managers and orchestrators in supply chains. In light of recent calls for new research where non-traditional players are the focal actors in the supply chain (Pagell et al., 2017; 2018), this study aims to better understand the role of non-traditional actors in governing environmental and social issues in the supply chain. More specifically, this paper intends to address the following research question: *What are the different roles of non-traditional actors in the governance of SSCM?* Following Pagell et al. (2017), this study considers “non-traditional actors” as broad-ranging term encompassing “not for-profit organizations”, such as NGOs and MSIs (e.g. consortia, roundtables, coalitions, unions, associations, councils and cross-sectoral partnerships). In order to avoid any misunderstanding, this paper proposes to clarify the NGO and MSI terminology presented throughout this manuscript. In line with Vakil’s (1997) work, this paper argues that the roles of non-traditional actors “cannot be appropriately framed without an agreed upon definition of units of analysis” (Vakil, 1997, p. 2057). In this study, similar to Gualandris and Klassen’s (2018) definition, NGOs are described as “self-governing, private, not-for-profit organizations” (Vakil, 1997). The definition of multi-stakeholder initiatives comes from political CSR scholars who designate MSIs as “private governance mechanisms involving corporations, civil society organizations,

and sometimes other actors, such as governments, academia or unions” (Mena and Palazzo, 2012, p. 527). Due to the similarities present in both descriptions, the terms overlap and are very often used interchangeably. For instance, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the RSPO are classified as both NGOs and MSIs. The main difference between the definition of NGOs and MSIs appears to be the fact that MSIs, such as the United Nations Global Compact, may be linked to a governmental institution, and that many NGOs, such as Greenpeace, are not organized as multi-stakeholder memberships.

This study is based upon a systematic literature review of 45 articles selected from relevant journals in the operations and SCM fields. The findings reveal three different roles of non-traditional actors in the governance of SSCM: instigating, supporting and leading. In doing so, this study contributes to the SSCM literature by focusing on an overlooked level of analysis in the SSCM and by drawing attention to the importance of non-traditional actors in governing sustainability in the supply chain.

2. METHODOLOGY

This article is based upon a systematic literature review of 256 papers identified in 12 relevant operations and supply chain management journals. The systematic literature review is frequently characterized as a more rigorous methodological approach (Tranfield et al., 2003), integrating “a number of different works on the same topic, summarizing the common elements, contrasting the differences, and extending the work in some fashion” (Meredith, 1993, p. 8). For these reasons, the systematic literature review method is relevant for suggesting propositions and discussing future research avenues (Carter and Rogers, 2008). This literature review does not attempt to cover the entire body of literature. Instead, it presents an overall picture of the role of non-traditional supply chain actors in the SSCM literature through a focused analysis of the selected articles.

In an attempt to include the papers that can adequately address the previously delineated research question, this systematic literature review is composed of four steps (Figure 1). The first step comprises the definition of the scope of this review. The literature sample includes articles published between January 2008 and September 2019. Although researchers began exploring sustainability in supply chains prior to 2008, this decision is justified by the fact that the most cited and employed definitions of SSCM were published in 2008 (Seuring and Müller,

2008; Carter and Rogers, 2008). Furthermore, other well-regarded SSCM literature reviews present the growing number of publications post-2008 (Roy et al., 2018; Carter and Washipack, 2018). Three categories of keywords were used to search for the most relevant literature: “sustainable”, “supply chain” and “non-traditional actor” (Table 1). The asterisk symbol “*” was used at the end of some keywords in order to encompass the wide range of possible words, since many studies use slightly diverse terminology to describe the same idea (e.g. “sustainable” vs “sustainability”; “consortia” vs “consortium”; “cross-sectoral” vs “multi-sectoral”). Following previous studies (Gimenez and Tachizawa, 2012), the search string of this paper applies all possible combinations of the three categories of keywords. This paper searched for the “sustainable” and “supply chain” categories of keywords in all texts, while the search for the “non-traditional actors” category was limited to the title, abstract, keywords and highlighted fields. Since the literature review covers both the SCM and sustainability domains, the sample was limited to peer-reviewed papers in order to ensure quality consistency (Touboulic and Walker, 2015). Twelve relevant operations and supply chain management journals were selected (Table 2). These journals are commonly referenced in similar systematic literature reviews (Carter and Easton, 2011; Touboulic and Walker, 2015; Roy et al., 2018). Additionally, they are also often highly ranked by the Association of Business Schools, meaning they are generally considered high-quality publications in the SCM field. Only papers from these 12 journals were included in this study. The searches were conducted on the journals’ websites. This first step generated 259 papers.

Table 1: Keywords used in the literature review.

| Sustainable | <i>and</i> | Supply Chain | <i>and</i> | Non-traditional actors |
|-------------|------------|-------------------|------------|---|
| sustainab* | | Supply Network | | NGO or Non-government* meta-organization consorti* association roundtable union multi-stakeholder coalition council forum federation *-sectoral non-profit non-traditional |

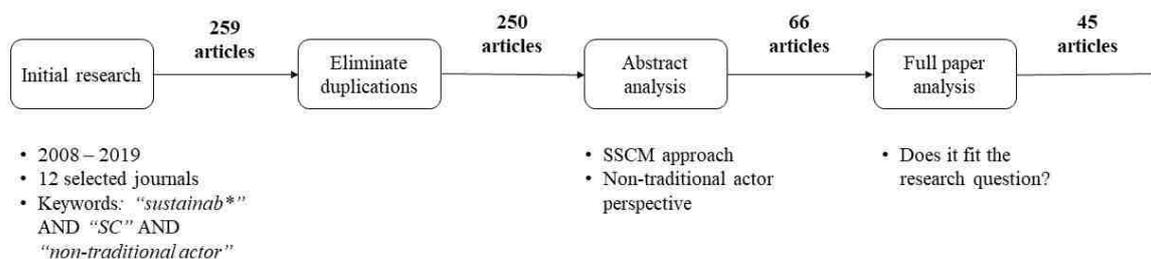
Table 2: List of the selected journals:

| Journal | ABS Ranking 2018 |
|---|------------------|
| International Journal of Operations & Production Management | 4 |
| International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management | 2 |
| International Journal of Production Economics | 3 |
| International Journal of Production Research | 3 |
| Journal of Business Logistics | 2 |
| Journal of Cleaner Production | 2 |
| Journal of Operations Management | 4 |
| Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management | 2 |
| Journal of Supply Chain Management | 3 |
| Production and Operations Management | 4 |
| Production Planning and Control | 3 |
| Supply Chain Management: An International Journal | 3 |

In the second step, duplicate papers were eliminated, resulting in a total of 250 articles. Then, an abstract analysis was carefully conducted to keep only the papers that had both a SSCM perspective and a non-traditional player focus. Editorial papers were excluded in this step. For instance, for most excluded papers, the word “association” was employed in the sense of being involved with or connected to someone or something, such as in the following excerpts: “for identifying the association between the gaps” (Lu et al., 2019) or “unidentified boundary conditions on the association between strategic supplier relationships and product quality” (Chen et al., 2017). In other articles, the term “multi-stakeholders” was employed to describe traditional supply chain actors (suppliers and buyers), as in the study of Ji et al. (2015): “relationships between multi-stakeholders (suppliers and manufacturers)”. Thus, after reading the abstract, the total number of papers was further reduced to 68.

Finally, a content analysis of the 68 articles was performed. Articles were carefully read and only those that could contribute to understanding the role of non-traditional actors in the sustainable supply chain were selected. After this detailed screening, 45 articles remained for analysis. Figure 1 summarizes the progression of this four-step process.

Figure 1: Screening methodology



Each paper was analyzed and coded. The coding strategy employed in this research covers basic bibliographic data (e.g. journal name, year of publication, title, author names) and specific coding groups related to this study. These coding groups, highlighted in Table 3, present information such as the methodology, details about the case study (for empirical studies), the type of non-traditional players that were presented in the paper, their role, and supporting evidence. All this information was entered into an Excel spreadsheet, which made it possible to then select and classify particular data from the papers that might be valuable in answering the outlined research question (Touboulic and Walker, 2015). The results of this analysis and synthesis are presented in the next section. Following Denyer and Tranfield (2009), the analysis and synthesis go beyond a simple description of each paper, reshaping “the information into a new or different arrangement and developing knowledge that is not apparent from reading the individual studies in isolation” (Denyer and Tranfield, 2009, p. 685).

Table 3: Coding scheme

| Coding group | Description of codes |
|---|--|
| Article type | Type of paper according to the following categories: research paper, conceptual, literature review, editorial, viewpoint. |
| Methodology | Methodology employed to collect the study’s data (e.g. case study, survey, archival data, in-depth interviews, and focus group interviews) |
| Case Study | Name of the organization studied in the paper (for research papers) |
| Non-traditional actors involved | Definition of which types of non-traditional SC actors are presented in the paper, corresponding to the keywords listed in Table 1 (e.g. NGO, consortia, roundtable, union and confederation). |
| Open coding regarding role/activities of non-traditional actors | Excerpts from the text that highlight non-traditional actors’ sustainable roles and activities within the supply chain |

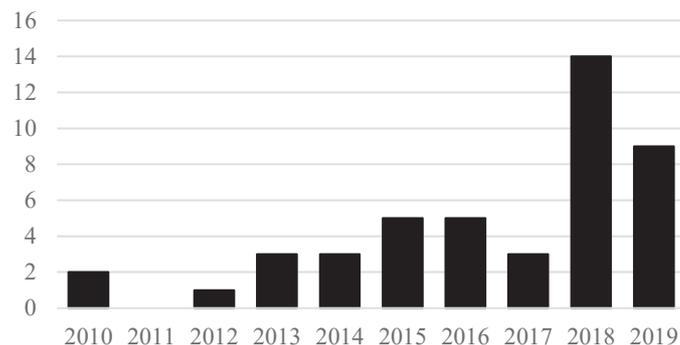
3. FINDINGS

This section starts by presenting the descriptive results of the 45 selected papers, and then continues with a subsection addressing the research question presented in the introduction session (*What are the different roles of non-traditional actors in the governance of SSCM?*). Three roles of non-traditional actors have inductively emerged from the sample: instigating, supporting and leading roles. These roles are not visible from analyzing any one paper individually; they are clearly perceptible, however, once a global analysis draws an overall picture of the selected articles (Denyer and Tranfield, 2009).

3.1. General descriptive results

A list of the 45 selected papers is depicted in Table 4. As discussed in the methodology section, despite the fact that this study set out to include papers between 2008 and 2019, only papers after 2010 were presented in the final sample (Figure 2). Interestingly, the majority of the articles (51 per cent) were published after 2018, which indicates that research on “non-traditional” actors is only recently developing. In relation to the journals, two of them are not represented in the final sample (Journal of Business Logistics and Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management). All the others are equally distributed. The exception is the Journal of Cleaner Production, which published 18 of the 45 selected papers. This could be accounted for by taking the focus of the journal into account, as its main themes include cleaner production, environmental, and sustainability research. Regarding the research method, this review encompasses a predominance of papers (81 per cent) classified as empirical.

Figure 2: Number of articles per year



With respect to the keywords related to the non-traditional actors, it is possible to observe a vast number of papers (23 of 45) referring to these actors as NGOs (see Table 4). This feature may be explained by the fact that a wide variety of forms of organizations are grouped under the umbrella terms of NGOs (e.g. roundtables, councils and federations) (Arenas et al., 2009). All other keywords related to non-traditional actors have, likewise, been observed in the final sample. Surprisingly, neither Pagell et al. (2017) nor any paper from this literature review define the terms of NGOs, MSIs or non-traditional actors. The exception is the article by Gualandris and Klassen (2018) that defines international NGOs as “self-governing, private, nonprofit distributing, voluntary organizations that operate across countries” (Gualandris and Klassen, 2018, p. 35).

Table 4: Research Sample

| <i>Role</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>Type of non-traditional actor</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>Reference</i> |
|------------------------|----------|--------------------------------------|----------|---|
| Instigating | 4 | NGO | 3 | Dieterich and Auld (2015); Ike et al. (2019b); Lin et al. (2017) |
| | | Multi-stakeholder | 1 | Fayezi et al. (2018) |
| Instigating Supporting | 9 | NGO | 6 | Chen et al. (2018); Dendler (2014); Harangozó and Zilahy (2015); Kudłak et al. (2018); Lorek and Spangenberg (2014); von Geibler (2013) |
| | | Multi-sectoral | 1 | Castka and Corbett (2016) |
| | | Roundtable | 1 | Shukla and Tiwari (2017) |
| | | NGO Union Consortium | 1 | Huq et al. (2016) |
| Supporting | 23 | NGO | 4 | Kumar and Havey (2013); Huq et al. (2014); Orlins and Guan (2016); Shah et al. (2019) |
| | | Association | 1 | Ike et al. (2019a) |
| | | Coalition | 2 | Asian et al. (2019); Seok and Nof (2014) |
| | | Consortia | 2 | Xu et al. (2016); Touboulie et al. (2018) |
| | | Forum | 1 | Blind et al. (2018) |
| | | Multi-stakeholder | 2 | Alvarez et al. (2010); Gold et al. (2015) |
| | | Non-profit | 3 | Flygansvær et al. (2018); Hickmann (2017); Ribeiro et al. (2018) |
| | | Non-traditional actors | 4 | Garcia-Torres et al. (2019); Nicolletti et al. (2019); Stevenson and Cole (2018); Schröder et al. (2019) |
| | | Consortia Association | 1 | Meehan and Bryde (2015) |
| | | Council Cross-sectoral | 1 | Tröster and Hiete (2018) |
| | | NGO Consortium | 1 | Best et al. (2018) |
| NGO Multi-stakeholder | 1 | Garcia et al. (2019) | | |
| Supporting Leading | 1 | Cross-sector partnerships | 1 | Herlin and Pazirandeh (2012) |
| Leading | 8 | NGO | 5 | Awasthy et al. (2019); Adivar et al. (2010); Gualandris and Klassen (2018); Pullman et al. (2018); Rodríguez et al. (2016) |
| | | NGO Cross-sector | 2 | Johnson et al. (2018); Vega and Roussat (2015) |
| | | Cross-sector partnerships | 1 | Nurmala et al. (2018) |

3.2. The role of non-traditional actors in the SSCM

This study identifies three main roles of the non-traditional actors in SSCM, which fall into the following categories: instigating, supporting and leading. Each of these roles has particular features (Table 5, 6 and 7) that will be explained in the following subsections.

3.2.1. Instigating role

The instigating role of non-traditional actors towards sustainable practices across the supply chain is the first and probably the most recognized of the three roles this study has identified. Adopting a confrontational position in regard to their relationship with businesses, non-traditional actors assuming such a role may act as “starting points” (Seuring and Müller, 2008) by activating sustainability initiatives in supply chains (Carmagnac et al. 2019). This role is supported by three main activities: advocating, campaigning and exercising pressure upon traditional supply chain firms as illustrated in table 5.

Table 5: Evidence for the “instigating role”

| Activities | Illustrative quotes |
|---------------------|---|
| Advocating | "Violations are routinely detected by NGOs (...) who conduct independent investigations and then publicize violations if any are found" (Chen et al., 2018) |
| Campaigning | "Focusing on the recent forest conservation policy of Asia Pulp and Paper (...) we analyze the challenges companies face in implementing sustainability commitments made as a result of NGO and market pressure" (Dieterich and Auld, 2015) |
| Exercising pressure | "If NGOs want to affect corporate behavior, they must use tools and a language that corporations understand. Confrontation can play an important role in seizing public and corporate attention " (Harangozó and Zilahy, 2015) |
| | "NGOs can organize public demonstrations, run media campaigns to generate attention, and shame management into correcting social failures" (Huq et al., 2016) |

The SSCM literature has widely investigated the role of non-traditional actors (NGOs in particular) in urging for sustainability. Indeed, NGOs are increasingly holding organizations accountable for environmental and social outcomes throughout their supply chains (Huq et al. 2016). Some non-traditional actors see themselves as advocates for regulations and sustainable practices, being able to judge and evaluate the activities of for-profit organizations in the sustainability realm (Arenas et al., 2009). Through a Delphi study, Kudlak et al. (2018) identify that NGOs play a prominent role in mobilizing CSR behavior. According to the scholars, in developing countries, NGOs may assume a watchdog position, by monitoring and exposing misconduct in the absence of mandatory and legal requirements. Chen et al. (2018) also highlight NGOs’ function in practicing ‘routine’ scrutiny and, subsequently, in publicizing sustainability violations when detected. The advocating role is similarly described by Busse et al. (2017), who argue that NGOs and unions may make use of their voice and power to attract public attention to companies’ misconduct.

Through the advocating role, non-traditional actors can organize public manifestations and develop sets of campaigns against for-profit organizations in order to hold these companies responsible for wrongdoing in their supply chains. Such campaigns are well-known and often cited in the SSCM literature. For instance, in 2009 Nestlé faced an aggressive campaign launched by Greenpeace, accusing the company of promoting deforestation in its supply chain (Wolf, 2014). In 2016 Amnesty International accused Apple and Microsoft of exploiting child labor in their supply chains (Busse et al., 2017). Many other similar examples exist, all demonstrating how companies are being held accountable by non-traditional actors for unsustainable practices within their supply chains (e.g. Fayezi et al., 2018; Shukla and Tiwari, 2017). The objective of such campaigns is to draw public attention (by damaging companies' image) and then to force them to adopt more sustainable initiatives (Wolf, 2014; McCarthy, 2012; Huq et al., 2016; von Geibler, 2013).

Through advocating and campaigning, non-traditional actors can both activate bottom-up action and apply the pressure necessary for organizational changes toward sustainability (Lorek and Spangenberg, 2014). The SSCM literature in general has acknowledged the importance of external stakeholder pressure as one of the major driving forces of sustainability (Seuring and Müller, 2008). In the same vein, this review has identified a set of papers that highlight the normative pressure of NGOs driving SSCM (Anisul Huq et al., 2014; Dendler, 2014; Kudlak et al., 2018; Ike et al., 2019). Huq et al. (2016) demonstrate the instigating role of different non-traditional actors in the clothing industry. According to them, NGOs may run campaigns to attract consumers' attention; labor unions can exercise pressure through their collective bargaining power; and trade bodies may force the adoption of social standards as a requirement of membership. In fact, these non-traditional actors earn legitimacy from the effectiveness of their activities, which in turn comes from their technical and local expertise, their transparency and their neutral position (since the interests of the parties they represent are often hidden or nonexistent) (Harangozó and Zilahy, 2015; Shukla and Tiwari, 2017).

While the instigating role of non-traditional actors and their advocacy campaigns and pressure are often recognized as important, these activities sometimes fail to lead to sustainable changes and promote only short-term transformations (Harangozó and Zilahy, 2015; Chen et al., 2018). According to Arenas et al. (2009) one reason to contest the effectiveness of their activities is the increasing diversity and heterogeneity of NGOs, which have different (and sometimes conflicting) ambitions and roles. Despite the fact that these actors assume that they are “pursuing shared, overarching objectives,” promoting activities that are “similar in design,

content and intentions,” they are in fact increasing complexity and creating tension in order to defend their own interests (Reinecke et al. 2012, p. 791). This literature review also includes articles which demonstrate that non-traditional actors can assume more than one role through an evolutionary or dynamic path. This involves moving from a confrontational position towards a more collaborative and supportive position in regard to their relationship with businesses over time (e.g. Rainforest Alliance, Oxfam) (Alvarez et al., 2010; Gualandris and Klassen, 2018). In fact, increasingly, non-traditional actors are also fulfilling a wider function and expanding their scope of action through time to focus on long-term engagement through collaboration, technical consulting and collective arrangements, as presented in the next section (Lorek and Spangenberg, 2014).

3.2.2. Supporting role

The term “supporting” in this paper is used to describe the capacity of non-traditional actors to support and assist companies in adopting sustainable practices (Lee and Klassen, 2008). The supporting role can be widely observed in the SSCM literature through the terms of collaboration and partnership, where non-traditional actors assume a “catalyst role” (Lorek and Spangenberg, 2014) or act as “vehicles” (Meehan and Bryde, 2015) to deliver sustainability benefits (Harangozó and Zilahy, 2015). This study sheds light on four activities employed by non-traditional actors to support companies in addressing sustainability along their supply chains: developing standards, providing technical assistance, advising and organizing joint initiatives (to produce contracts, conduct audits and create value) (Table 6). Despite the fact that much of the literature highlights the advantages for businesses to collaborate with non-traditional actors through these activities, a growing number of studies also reveal a set of threats that could arise from this kind of collaboration. Additionally, many have contested the effectiveness of these activities in properly tackling and solving sustainability challenges (Harangozo and Zilahy, 2015; Seuring and Müller, 2008).

Table 6: Evidence for the “supporting role”

| Activities | Illustrative quotes |
|------------|---|
| Training | "A short Memorandum of Understanding was signed by Nespresso with Rainforest Alliance to develop training sessions, a farm assessment tool and a traceability system" (Alvarez et al., 2010) |
| Advising | "We characterize a Norwegian reverse supply chain in which non-profit companies provide managerial direction in the recycling of electronics products and components" (Flygansvær et al., 2018) |

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Forming joint initiatives | "Procurement consortia in the sector are increasingly used as vehicles to deliver social and economic benefit and to embed the core values of sustainable procurement" (Meehan and Bryde, 2015) |
| Developing standards | "Third-party standards and certification schemes may facilitate transparency of business activities and traceability of materials and products down the supply chain and have been widely used for ensuring sustainability" (Gold et al, 2015) |

A first set of papers emphasizes the importance of providing technical support particularly to emerging countries. For instance, Alvarez et al. (2010) describe the technical role of the Rainforest Alliance as member of Nespresso Sustainable Quality Program, by developing training, farm assessment tools and a traceability system. Huq et al. (2016) claim that multinational garment buyers collaborate with local and international NGOs to provide training programs to their Bangladeshi suppliers in order to implement social sustainability. These educational programs include vocational support to qualify disabled people, training centers for adolescents (who are legally prohibited from working full time) and educational sessions (regarding family planning, female worker inclusion and personal care). Through a survey conducted with farmers in rural areas of Pakistan, Shah et al. (2019) demonstrate that farmers who are members in NGOs are more likely to adopt better agricultural management practices when compared to independent smallholders.

Due to their expertise, non-traditional actors also act as consultants to assist companies with specific sustainability issues. For instance, Orlins and Guan (2016) demonstrate the role of NGOs in supporting companies to find safer e-waste recycling solutions. Schröder et al. (2019) also illustrate the consultation role of an Indian cooperative in developing plastic waste solutions for a social enterprise.

Several studies from this literature review draw attention to the formation of joint initiatives, consortia in particular, as a vehicle to address environmental and social issues in the supply chain. Touboulic et al. (2018) reveal that participating in consortium can be part of a company's carbon reduction strategy. According to the authors, by acting as a platform for non-competitive interaction, the consortium plays a motivational and legitimizing role for individual members, who are constantly dealing with uncertainties related to the implementation of sustainability in supply chains. Meehan and Bryde (2015) demonstrate that a procurement consortia in the UK social housing sector has provided long-term supply chain partnering contracts and has also delivered social benefits, such as improved education and more local jobs. Best et al. (2018) investigate the formation of a consortium of seven UK NGOs in providing public social services by helping disabled people to find or maintain employment. Huq et al. (2016) identify a set of

consortia which were formed after the Rana Plaza collapse in order to conduct audits of their suppliers, and therefore improve social standards. According to the scholars, the NGOs' input in the consortium audits contributes to the expansion of the scope of buyer audit capabilities by addressing overlooked and ignored issues (e.g. fire, electrical and structural safety). Collaborative audits are also highlighted by Stevenson and Cole (2018) as a powerful tool to identify modern slavery in supply chains, since such practices reduce the uncertainty faced by single companies by sharing knowledge costs and legitimizing audits. All of the aforementioned articles highlight the multi-stakeholder feature as a source of legitimacy, even when involving very diverse stakeholders (sometimes even competitors) working together for a common cause.

In order to implement sustainability practices, non-traditional actors, commonly NGOs, offer supply chain members a wide range of environmental and social standards and certifications, such as ISO 14001, SA 8000, FSC, MSC, Fair trade and GHG Protocol's Corporate Standard (Castka and Corbett, 2016; Hickmann, 2017; Tröster and Hiete 2018). In addition to providing certification, some of these standard-makers also offer companies membership in collective initiatives, such the RSPO, Ethical Trading Initiative, Fair Labor Association (von Geibler, 2013; Shukla and Tiwari, 2017; Chen et al., 2018). Xu et al. (2016) demonstrate that standards consortia, are relevant not only in developing standards, but also in improving community socialization in China by enhancing knowledge-sharing and trust among consortia members. The SSCM literature has widely explored the role of standards in the diffusion of SSCM (Carmagnac and Carbone, 2019), particularly in relation to the companies' motivations and the outcomes of adopting such standards (Beske et al. 2008). These private governance regulations are often applied in countries where government regulations are weak or nonexistent (Hickmann, 2017; Castka and Corbett, 2016). In European countries, the demand for environmental and social standards comes mainly from consumers, who are progressively becoming aware of sustainability issues and changing their consumption behavior accordingly (Dendler, 2014; Lorek and Spangenberg, 2014; Castka and Corbett, 2016). In emerging countries, standards have increasingly gained attention, since they seem to be more effective than legal requirements (von Geibler, 2013). Through the adoption of these voluntary standards, companies may obtain a set of benefits, such as improving sustainability performance, promoting stakeholder satisfaction, better managing reputational risks and reducing information asymmetries and transaction costs (Curkovic and Sroufe 2011; Harangozó and Zilahy, 2015; Castka and Corbett, 2016; Blind et al. 2018).

Non-traditional actors have increasingly been recognized as important stakeholders to support supply chain members (buyers and suppliers) in addressing sustainability issues. However, not all scholars have a positive view of these collaboration strategies and the legitimacy of their activities (training, advising and developing certification) are constantly put into question. For example, the WWF is blamed for changing its strategy over time and for prioritizing collaborations with for-profit organizations over campaigning for the environment (von Geibler, 2013). The NGO has established a set of partnerships with industries that are constantly being accused of environmental misconduct. Similarly, von Geibler (2013) and Shukla and Tiwari (2017) critically analyze the role of the RSPO, a certification scheme in the palm oil supply chain. According to both studies, despite the fact that the RSPO can be considered a “good first step,” the roundtable faces huge legitimacy challenges related to its: lack of transparency, accountability and traceability; limited inclusion of some stakeholders (e.g. smallholders and consumers) as members; drawbacks regarding the decision-making process based on consensus; high costs for implementation; and imbalanced power dynamics (von Geibler 2013; Schouten and Glasbergen, 2011; Carmagnac and Carbone 2019).

3.2.3. Leading role

While scholars and practitioners have overlooked the participation of non-traditional actors as members of the supply chain for the past 30 years, their participation has become quite regular and stable, with these actors expanding their supporting role to assume a leading position within supply chains (Johnson et al., 2018). The SSCM literature has only recently started to enlarge the focal-firm-centric perspective in order to include non-traditional actors in the supply chain (Gualandris and Klassen, 2018). This literature review calls attention to the active role of non-traditional actors as leaders of sustainability issues within the supply chain. This leading role is supported by four main activities: managing supply chains, implementing change, connecting supply chain actors and promoting engagement as illustrated in Table 7 (Pagell et al., 2018; Gualandris and Klassen, 2018; Arenas and Pagell, 2016; Hyatt and Johnson, 2016).

Table 7: Evidence for the “leading role”

| Activities | Illustrative quotes |
|---------------------|---|
| Managing SC | "INGOs have a vital role in delivering transformational change in societies industries and firms’ supply chains" (Gualandris and Klassen, 2018) |
| Implementing change | "NGOs and other not-for-profits are likely to take a leading role in the creation of socially sustainable supply chains" (Rodríguez et al., 2016) |

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Connecting SC actors | "NGO may have reach across multiple knowledge disciplines, thus enabling them to broker the emergence of cross-disciplinary knowledge and action (e.g. interaction of water use, human health, and economic development)" (Johnson et al., 2018) |
| Promoting engagement | |
| | "NPOs [not-for-profit organizations] are required to intervene in the supply markets in different ways to motivate other actors and encourage an increase in supply of products" (Herlin and Pazirandeh, 2012) |

Non-traditional actors adopt a leading role mainly through their ability to manage supply chains toward environmental and social issues. In the first “Emerging Discourse Incubator” of the *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, which called for topics of “research where the focal actor in the network is not a for-profit firm”, the journal has published three invited papers where NGOs and social enterprises act as managers of their own supply chains. In the first paper, Pullman et al. (2018) show how social enterprises manage their supply chains in order to generate social welfare and simultaneously achieve economic viability. As a possible solution to these competing logics, social enterprises may promote the formation of two supply chains: one responsible for obtaining profits, and the other supply chain responsible for investing these profits in social goals. In the second paper, Johnson et al. (2018) examine the role of NGOs’ social capital in order to achieve environmental transformation through cross-sector partnerships. In applying the social capital lens, the scholars investigate how three dimensions of social capital (receptivity, reach and richness) may create value for NGOs. In the third article, Gualandris et al. (2018) investigate the effectiveness of international NGOs and their supply chains in driving transformational change. The authors demonstrate that the effectiveness of an intervention is related to the uncertainty introduced by the diversity of stakeholder demands, by the likelihood of stakeholders to be dedicated to a particular intervention, and by the ability of these international NGOs to respond to these diverse demands through the adoption of different roles over time (Gualandris et al., 2018).

In addition to these three articles, this literature review has also identified a set of studies in which non-traditional actors act as “agents of social transformation” (Arenas et al., 2009, p. 188) and assume a leading position by connecting supply chain actors in the humanitarian and emergency response contexts (Awasthy et al., 2019; Adivar et al., 2010). Nurmala et al. (2018) argue that cross-sectoral collaborations between for-profit organizations and NGOs may enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian logistics. According to the scholars, these collaborations, which are beneficial for both actors, may assume four levels of engagement, classified as philanthropic, strategic, business, and political. On the one hand, it can help for-profit organizations to legitimize their sustainability efforts (Herlin and

Pazirandeh, 2012; Vega and Roussat, 2015). On the other hand, these cross-sectoral collaborations in the humanitarian field can help NGOs to obtain financial resources and provide logistical services (Vega and Roussat, 2015).

Although the leading role of non-traditional actors is emerging in the literature, scholars are still calling for studies where these actors assume a focal position in the supply chain (Pagell et al., 2018). With the exception of humanitarian logistics, where mainly NGOs manage the supply chain, and connect a wide range of heterogeneous supply chains actors, most SCM literature to date has been limited to the for-profit centric perspective. However, these previous examples shed light on the potential of non-traditional actors to manage supply chains towards sustainability. A central question about their leading role concerns the legitimacy of these non-traditional actors for truly implementing sustainable changes. On the one hand, within this literature review, these actors are perceived and recognized by external stakeholders as the right players who “have legitimate authority to influence them” in a specific sustainability context (Pullman et al., 2018). Therefore, they are able to properly address environmental and social issues along the supply chain. On the other hand, ensuring and maintaining the legitimacy of non-traditional actors fulfilling a leading role may be even more challenging. These actors are usually embedded in more complex and uncertain chains, arising from the heterogeneity of the stakeholders and the scarcity of resources (Pagell et al., 2018). Moreover, to a further extent than for the other roles, non-traditional actors need to guarantee that they are effectively implementing sustainability changes. However, this can be extremely hard to assess due to the long-term nature of environmental and social achievements, and also due to the difficulty of measuring sustainability outcomes (e.g. poverty eradication) (Bäckstrand, 2006).

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper has investigated the roles of non-traditional actors in the transformation of supply chains towards sustainability by conducting a systematic literature review of 45 articles. More specifically, this study has identified that these actors may assume three different roles: instigating, supporting and leading. A twofold interpretation of these roles can be highlighted. First, non-traditional actors cannot be considered as homogenous, and therefore assume different roles. For instance, although Greenpeace and WWF are both considered environmental NGOs, Greenpeace assumes an exclusively instigating role (in elaborating

campaigns and exercising pressure on businesses), while the WWF has adopted a more and more supporting role over time (advising and collaborating with companies). Second, a single non-traditional actor can adopt more than just one role. Increasingly, NGOs are expanding beyond their initial roles and supporting businesses in a more collaborative approach (e.g. providing technical support, advising) in combination with the assertion of their instigating role (as campaigners or advocates), such as in the previously mentioned case of Oxfam. The importance of the dynamic nature of the roles of non-traditional actors over time reflected in this paper, emphasizes the need for future studies adopting a longitudinal approach. This article posits that such a methodological approach may allow scholars to gather richer insights into the evolution of roles employed by non-traditional actors in relation to businesses.

Despite the growing participation of non-traditional actors in the supply chains, their roles are still seen as controversial. Each role is perceived differently by the supply chain actors, and the effectiveness of their activities is often difficult to measure or confirm. Therefore, as a second topic of the research agenda, this paper suggests integrating certain political CSR perspectives into the realm of SSCM literature. Following Bäckstrand (2006), this paper argues that the inclusion of these actors as members of the supply chain creates new governance dynamics, and, consequently, raises different inquiries about their effectiveness and legitimacy (e.g. how these players are perceived as justified, or how effective they are in addressing sustainability issues) (Bäckstrand, 2006). In order to better understand the presence of non-traditional actors as member of the supply chains, this study encourages scholars and practitioners to pay special attention to legitimacy issues.

This research contributes to existing literature by responding to recent calls to expand the scope of research to include non-traditional players as focal actors in the chains (Pagell et al., 2017). Although the literature has widely explored both the role of NGOs and MSIs in driving sustainability in the supply chain, a more global understanding of the dynamics at play has not been investigated to date (Arenas et al., 2009; Moog et al., 2015; Bäckstrand, 2006). This article represents the first study to integrate a set of diverse actors under the umbrella term “non-traditional actors”, and thus reveals three common roles.

Despite its theoretical and managerial contributions, this study has some limitations. The first comes from the potential drawbacks associated with any systematic literature review, particularly in relation to data selection. This paper has limited its search to twelve journals from the operations and supply chain disciplines and used a restrictive keyword search. Other

papers could be included in this study if more journal sources or keywords were considered (e.g. Carmagnac et Carbone, 2019; Reinecke et al. 2012; Schouten and Glasbergen, 2011; Arenas et al., 2009). Second, this manuscript suggests two main avenues for future research on SSCM: adopting a more longitudinal approach and the inclusion of legitimacy issues. It is entirely possible that different scholars might suggest other research avenues after conducting a similar literature review.

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