

Global Value Chains and their Employment Relations Consequences

Call for Papers

Workshop and Special Issue

Organisers

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Aims and Scope

The conference and proposed special issue of BJIR concerns the issue of the emergence, growth and evolution of global commodity chains and related employment relations issues. The relationship between supply chain relationships and the workplace is topical and referred to explicitly by the ILO agenda on international work and by the OECDs concerns with skills (OECD, 2017). While topical, much of the research in the area focuses on power relations between firms in chains and employment relations concerns being a secondary issue. However, this is changing and for example an emerging number of recent publications in the BJIR examine the employment relations consequences of supply chains. As such, this initiative proposes to bring this emerging research together into a coherent and unified volume.

Globalisation of production has brought significant economic growth and employment opportunities; for example, it has been estimated that 80% of world trade passes through GVCs (UNCTAD,2013) and some 453 million jobs have been created in OECD and emerging economies (ILO, 2015). Further, it was once assumed that economic upgrading of value chains would lead to social upgrading. However, the potential asymmetric power relationships in supply chains have implications for both the employment relationship and social relations at work. This is particularly so in situations where there has been a ‘race to the bottom’ to secure contracts through low wages where, for example, industry entry and exit costs are low and developing economies are fearful of footloose large firms ‘cutting and running’ or where small firms in the lower tiers of the chain face being left behind. Participation in such chains may therefore result, in the worst case scenario, in country-wide economic benefits in developing countries but a degradation of working conditions and

‘social downgrading’, particularly for those working in low tier suppliers and irregular, informal, female and immigrant workers. Indeed, while there has been an extensive literature on GVC, there is increasing concern with the use of, for example, child labour, vulnerable workers and working conditions.

There have been attempts to use a variety of regulatory methods to improve work standards, tied to the ILO’s *Decent Work* Framework, but such attempts to regulate labour standards in chains (particularly apparel and footwear ones supplying to major western retailers and brands), may force undue pressures on firms in the supply chain trying to reconcile the conflicting demands of cheap labour and suppliers asking for higher standards. To date, much of this research has been framed in terms of the Corporate Social Responsibility agenda, however the industrial relations lens brings a particularly important and underexplored focus. The competition for surplus value between local, national and international capital has led to many examples of extreme demands on workforces already subject to multiple layers of socio-economic disadvantage. In such contexts, both public, statutory and private, voluntary regulation have proved woefully inadequate, particularly over issues of enforcement and non-compliance.

However, there is evidence that supply chains are evolving (to include, for example, high skill level services in locations such as India) and consolidating (for example, in the automotive industry) but also that the continuing geographical spread of activity may be under some threat as a consequence of automation, with consequences for the potential for national upgrading strategies (OECD, 2017).

The special issue seeks to consolidate recent research in the area and advance theoretical and applied knowledge on how decisions in the supply chain impact upon employment relations at work. As such we wish to draw papers from a number of disciplines including human resource management and the sociology of work, as well as industrial relations. In this special issue we wish to elicit submissions that are rich in empirical content and connect to theory in such a way as to build a detailed picture of the ways that broader social phenomena play out at the workplace level, in the specific context of international value chains and production networks. We would, therefore, welcome submissions from a range of areas including the effects of global supply chains on social relations at work. Research has focused on the role of MNCs in implementing employment practices across borders and the development of global supply chains. Much of this has been driven by the emergence of global value chains, which in turn are predicated upon trade liberalisation and intense (often labour) cost competition. We would like to see papers which draw upon:

- (1) Control, struggle and the labour process in GVCs, for example, labour control and resistance in production at GVCs which has led to increased work intensity and control through pay systems, employer control over workers and threats to independent unionism.
- (2) Class, rights and identity in industrial relations in GVCs, focussing on the ‘intersectionality’ of class, gender, race and ethnicity, and the exploitation of migrant labour.
- (3) The presence of forced labour and modern day slavery in value chains.

The special issue would also welcome papers on the governance of global value chains and the role of private, public and social regulation, including NGOs and international trade unions. We would like to see papers which draw upon:

- (1) Institution building in GVCs which highlight both the potential and the complexities of institution building.
- (2) Social accountability and sustainable work in GVCs, encompassing not only issues of job quality and the decent work agenda but also issues of private versus public regulation.
- (3) Human relations and workplace realities in GVCs, focussing on the debate over human rights versus employment rights.
- (4) The extent to which apparatuses such as Codes of Conduct and International Framework Agreements have enabled the democratisation of workplaces.
- (5) Emerging connections between civil society and the trade union movement.

References

ILO (2015) *World Employment and Social Outlook 2015*. Geneva: ILO.

OECD (2017) *OECD Skills Outlook, 2017: Skills and Global Value Chains*. Paris: OECD.

UNCTAD (2013) *World Investment Report: Global Value Chains*. Geneva: United Nations Publications.

Workshop and SI Organisation

The workshop will take place on May 11th 2018 at Cardiff University. Authors wishing to present a paper should send a 1000 word abstract to the organisers by April 13th 2018. This should outline the paper's rationale and, if empirical, its main methods and results. After the workshop, authors will be invited to revise the papers within three months for submission to the journal. All papers for publication will be subject to the strict BJIR refereeing procedure Guidelines for BJIR authors can be found at

[http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1467-8543](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1467-8543).

Cardiff University has limited funds to pay for workshop costs (not including travel) for those whose papers are selected for presentation.