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Elements affecting social responsibility in supply chains

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# Elements affecting social responsibility in supply chains

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to assess elements that affect social responsibility in supply chains and beyond. The elements are classified into drivers, facilitators and inhibitors.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper presents an assessment of supply chain management research published over the period of 2009-2013.

**Findings** – Sixteen elements are identified and presented in a framework along with their proposed constituents. The elements capture structures and management principles of supply chains that are important for social responsibility.

**Research limitations/implications** – The elements provide a basis to better understand how social responsibility in supply chains is related to contextual factors. The framework of elements is still only an initial step toward enhanced understanding of how the context affects social responsibility in supply chains.

**Practical implications** – The framework may guide companies to acknowledge elements that are known to improve or deteriorate social responsibility in supply chains.

**Originality/value** – This paper contributes to capture the state-of-the-art knowledge based upon recent research. It is also a stepping stone toward improved insights on what drives, facilitates and inhibits individuals in social responsibility.

**Keywords** Supply chain, Corporate social responsibility, Sustainable business models

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

Even though social responsibility has received increased attention in research recently, the mechanisms determining individuals' commitment to social responsibility in supply chain management (SCM) are yet to be understood (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012) and lack theoretical foundation (Miemczyk *et al.*, 2012; Winter and Knemeyer, 2013).

The aim here is to start addressing these shortcomings by identifying contextual elements that affect social responsibility in supply chains. Social responsibility is used here to carry out research related to the triple bottom line (TBL; Elkington, 1997) of economic, social and environmental performance, which is addressed by corporate social responsibility and sustainability. Despite some differences (Bansal and DesJardine, 2014), both concepts are considered interchangeable by both professionals and researchers (Fassin and Van Rossem, 2009).

The objective is to assess elements that affect social responsibility in supply chains. It is based on recent empirical findings and conceptualizations in the field of SCM. Two research questions have guided the research:

*RQ1.* What factors are known to affect social responsibility in supply chains?

*RQ2.* How can this knowledge be framed into elements based on how they affect individuals' social responsibility in supply chains?

The current approach differs from previous ones in literature by assessing social responsibility elements revealed in recent empirical findings and theoretical proposals. It is based on common terms in the field of SCM that are relevant and valuable to practice. In addition, it contributes toward the creation of a theoretical construct and helps explain why social responsibility elements (i.e. drivers, facilitators and inhibitors) are effective or ineffective in improving efforts at social responsibility in SCM.

## Methodology

The literature used to identify elements of social responsibility is gathered through a "snowball" principle, focused on data saturation (Eisenhardt, 1989; Suddaby, 2006). Accordingly, the purpose of the methods was to capture common elements of social responsibility in SCM. The starting point for the literature review drew on the research by Gimenez and Tachizawa (2012, p. 532). They used two groups of keywords. The first contained sustainability/corporate social responsibility (CSR) keywords:

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“sustainab\*”, “environment\*”, “green” and “corporate social responsibility”. The second group contained SCM keywords: “supply”, “purchasing”, “procurement” and “logistics”. The most cited journals in their study became the starting point for this literature review. These are listed below. No articles from the *International Journal of Logistics Management* were used in the review, as they did not contain information relevant for this review.

Journals included at the start of the literature review:

- *International Journal of Logistics Management*;
- *International Journal of Operations & Production Management*;
- *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management*;
- *Journal of Business Ethics*;
- *Journal of Cleaner Production*;
- *Journal of Purchasing & Supply Management*;
- *Journal of Supply Chain Management*; and
- *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*.

All articles published between 2009 and 2013 in these journals were included. Articles were selected based on, in order, title, abstract and contents. Earlier key findings pertaining to the success of social responsibility were copied, stored as data points and subsequently grouped based on their meaning and how they suggested that social responsibility may be improved. It was also evaluated if the elements facilitated, inhibited or encouraged social responsibility. As such, the elements are focused on understanding how the context (i.e. the supply chain and its management) affects individuals’ engagement in social responsibility.

To determine saturation, two stages of the research were compared. As the included articles went from 43 to 97, the number of included journals went from 7 to 15 and the number of data points went from 219 to 467. No more groups were added and it was considered that data saturation had been reached. Through this method, it was possible to capture data points, and group them into elements encompassing different nuances of the literature. A structured literature review is often used to show an overview of the field and what is being published (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012; Ashby et al., 2012; Gimenez and Tachizawa, 2012), which was not the intent of this review. Accordingly, the methods used matched the purpose of the study.

### Compilation of social responsibility elements

Drawing on the current assessment of the literature focusing on elements of social responsibility in supply chains and beyond, this section presents and discusses the relevance of the findings. In the discussion below, facilitators/inhibitors are elements that enable/hinder social responsibility efforts in supply chains and beyond, and drivers are elements that encourage social responsibility efforts. The elements affecting social responsibility in supply chains are summarized in Table I.

#### Elements affecting social responsibility in the focal company

“Holistic internal view” is the first element. Social responsibility and internal silos are considered a poor match

Table I Elements affecting social responsibility in supply chains

Within company	Within supply chain	Beyond supply chain
<b>Holistic internal view</b>	Collaboration	Outside pressure
<b>Managerial support</b>	Transparency	Commoditization
<b>Responsibility</b>	Organizational length	
<b>Incentives</b>	Geographical length	
<b>Measurement</b>	Cultural differences	
<b>Education</b>	Holistic supply chain view	
	Vertical integration	
	Power	

(Lee and Kim, 2009) and the role of SCM cuts across all efforts of social responsibility among companies that create progressive social and environmental strategies (Tate et al., 2010). Several strategies exist, such as requiring sourcing personnel to visit supplier factories, so as to integrate corporate social responsibilities into the sourcing department (Mamic, 2005), and focusing on including the design process in work with sustainability issues (Pagell et al., 2010). Being frequently mentioned, organizational culture could arguably be given its own element (Carter and Easton, 2011). However, it is grouped here with the holistic internal view based on the similarity with an internal shared view on core values. Companies need to have a shared and cross-functional approach to social responsibility. The element holistic internal view both drives and facilitates efforts of social responsibility.

Several sources in the literature mention “managerial support” both directly and indirectly. Wolf (2011), for example, proposes that leadership support is required for sustainable SCM integration, while Gimenez and Tachizawa (2012) indirectly highlight managerial support in stating that firms who wish to implement social responsibility efforts need to allocate resources to develop and ensure that the purchasing staff has the appropriate capabilities for evaluating and working with suppliers. Besides support, it must also be clear who is responsible and in charge of the elements of social responsibility (Lee and Kim, 2009). Managers need to make social responsibility a priority. The element managerial support both drives and facilitates efforts at social responsibility.

“Responsibility” is perhaps contingent on managerial support, but affects the individuals in a specific way. Managers should create an awareness of expectations of business sustainability and ensure that purchasing managers take them into account in decision-making (Reuter et al., 2012). It should not, however, only be accountability and responsibility for decision-making without reward. Employees need to have both support and a mandate to opt for socially responsible choices, even when they are costly. Managers might delegate responsibility, but in the company it empowers the individual employees. As such, it has a very specific impact on employees and is here singled out. The element responsibility drives social responsibility.

If business sustainability is on the corporate agenda, “incentives” must be in place linking employee behaviors to enhanced efforts at business sustainability (Pagell and Wu, 2009). Incentives have been proven successful in pushing

forward decision-making for social responsibility in purchasing and supply management (Reuter *et al.*, 2012). Incentives need to reflect the aspirations and efforts toward business sustainability in the organization. The element incentive drives efforts of business sustainability.

“Measurement” of social responsibility efforts at the organizational level is also advocated. Such measurements include work conditions (Carter and Rogers, 2008) and the implementation of sustainable sourcing (Pagell *et al.*, 2010) and are needed for a balanced view on corporate performance. Social responsibility goals should be linked to organizational goals (Azzone and Noci, 1998). Efforts at social responsibility must be part of key measurement indicators. What is not measured is not tangible. The element measurement drives social responsibility.

Finally, “education” includes the need for employees to be trained in social responsibility (Starik and Rands, 1995). Issues for training include environment and labor conditions (Strand, 2009). Employees need to understand what they do and the results of their actions. The element education drives social responsibility.

#### Elements affecting social responsibility within the supply chain

One element in supply chain is a focus on “collaboration”. Several aspects of collaboration are included, for example, the importance of achieving sustainable performance through trust (Strand, 2009), long-term engagements with suppliers (Mamic, 2005), partnerships (Wolf, 2011) and knowledge sharing (Andersen and Skjoett-Larsen, 2009). Moving from arm’s-length relationships to partnerships is also significant. The element of collaboration facilitates efforts of social responsibility.

Perhaps related to collaboration, the openness or “transparency” of supply chains is a common theme. Topics range from inviting the public to the company to show that there is nothing to hide (Svensson and Wagner, 2012), stressing the importance of such transparency when measuring social and environmental performance (Wolf, 2011) and ensuring traceability (Pagell and Wu, 2009). Structures and activities in the chain need to be made visible. The element of transparency drives and facilitates efforts of social responsibility.

Awaysheh and Klassen (2010) note, with regard to “organizational length” (i.e. number of organizations from source to sink), that it becomes more complicated to oversee social responsibility. A need for systems to formally develop social responsibility, such as the use of supplier labor practices and codes of ethics, becomes more important and is increased. A multi-tiered supply chain reduces transparency, which leads to bounded rationality (Carter and Easton, 2011), which is most certainly problematic if there is a will to improve social responsibility. Moreover, global corporations are being held accountable for the actions of their suppliers and even their suppliers’ suppliers (Seuring and Müller, 2008) and thus have an incentive, or even competitive advantage to gain by including the upstream supply chain in the efforts of social responsibility (Mahler, 2007). A multi-tiered supply chain is likely to have sub-suppliers in low-cost regions. Supply chains

with fewer tiers are preferable. The element of organizational length facilitates or inhibits efforts of social responsibility.

While it is a common argument that the “geographical length” (i.e. geographical distance from source to sink) itself complicates efforts at social responsibility (Strand, 2009), Hoejmose *et al.* (2013a) do not find support for a relationship between geographical length and sustainable SCM. However, they argue that distance moderates the role and importance of power/dependency in shaping sustainable SCM. They continue that with distance, power might be necessary for instilling efforts at social responsibility, thus claiming that the length of the chain, by proxy, is important. The length of the chain is easy to understand and explain when communicating what is important to improve social responsibility. Consequently, we highlight it as a separate element even though it might have causal connections to other elements. Upstream activities that are located close to consumption markets are desirable. The element of geographical length facilitates or inhibits efforts of social responsibility.

Considerations with regard to local regions are vital when implementing codes of ethics (Mamic, 2005) as parts of the supply chain operate across “cultural differences” (Strand, 2009). Experience with local manufacturing is considered to reduce anxiety about cultural differences (Cho and Kang, 2001). Even so, governments and policies in developing countries are generally less stable (Akamp and Müller, 2013). Cultural gaps need to be bridged to increase understanding. The element of different cultural environments inhibits social responsibility (assuming production in developing countries and consumption in developed countries).

The need for a “holistic supply chain view” is inherent to the multi-tiered structure of supply chains. However, there is a lack of consistency between the boundaries of responsibility and ownership (Faruk *et al.*, 2002). To fully assess corporate efforts at social responsibility, the assessment must include not only the supply chain but also the extended network (Miemczyk *et al.*, 2012). Krause *et al.* (2009, p. 18) write: “A company is no more sustainable than its supply chain”. The expected line of responsibility thus cuts across the entire extent of a company’s supply chain (Ashby *et al.*, 2012). Perhaps the elements of organizational length and holistic supply chain view have an internal relation, where also a sweet spot balancing the two is possible to find. The element of holistic supply chain view drives efforts of social responsibility.

One way to avoid issues with ownership and boundaries of responsibility is through “vertical integration” (Ciliberti *et al.*, 2009; Svensson and Wagner, 2012). Organizations need to improve activities along the entire supply chain and it can be achieved by aligning the boundary of responsibility with the boundary of influence through joint ventures and governance initiatives. Vertical integration is the reduction of organizational length. The element of vertical integration drives efforts of social responsibility.

Finally, asymmetries in “power” can determine buyer or seller strengths. Buyer strength allows the buyer to dictate how its suppliers should conduct business, and can thus force them to enhance their efforts at business sustainability. Moreover, relationships based on joint dependencies, where the two rely on each other, have a strong positive association with socially responsible SCM (Hoejmose *et al.*, 2013b). Companies must

work with actors on whom they can either impose efforts at social responsibility or collaborate with to improve social responsibility. The element of power drives and facilitates or inhibits social responsibility.

### Elements affecting social responsibility beyond the supply chain

“Outside pressure” comes from several parties. Consumers (arguably internal to the supply chain) may demand and seek out sustainable products. Thus, certain target markets require a focus on social responsibility (Svensson and Wagner, 2012). A common element is legislation, which is repeatedly mentioned in the literature and also considered important (Walker and Brammer, 2009), but so too are non-governmental organizations, whose importance seems to increase due to their ability to manifest broad social movements and thus represent the society (Teegen *et al.*, 2004). Hoejmose *et al.* (2013a) further elaborate on this by showing that companies with socially responsible SCM are more common in B2C markets than in B2B markets. The reason is that B2B is prevalent in the upstream supply chain, which is not as visible and thus does not undergo the same level of stakeholder scrutiny as B2C firms. Network influences, specifically relational and structural embeddedness, have been linked to the dispersion of sustainable practices (Tate *et al.*, 2013). Also, outside actors need to pressure companies to focus on all efforts of social responsibility (Walker and Brammer, 2009). The element of outside pressure thus drives efforts of social responsibility.

“Commoditization” is another element beyond the supply chain. Producers are under pressure to reduce costs, an effect of globalization and the recent credit crunch. They may ignore aspects of social responsibility to remain competitive (Hoejmose *et al.*, 2013a). Companies that go for a differentiated strategy are more likely to engage actively with their suppliers to cater for consumer requirements (Cousins, 2005). A strategy focused on differentiation, instead of price, is preferable. The element of commoditization inhibits efforts of social responsibility.

### Concluding thoughts

The current assessment of social responsibility elements offers a plethora of opportunities for supply chain practitioners seeking to improve social responsibility. Elements are constructed and named to be easily accessible for practitioners investigating their impact on the TBL.

While practitioners surely have implicit knowledge of some of the elements, we do provide a framework built upon an extensive base of literature and also highlight if the elements encourage, facilitate or inhibit social responsibility. The three layers also help practitioners to grasp in what areas they are reliant on their own efforts, the interests of the supply chain or the relation with actors external to the supply chain. As such, the framework not only highlights elements that can be addressed directly but practitioners can also identify elements that they cannot address directly and therefore need to monitor closely.

The framework of social responsibility elements is constructed to appeal to practitioners and it also holds theoretical contributions. A hands-on framework can help

researchers to address social responsibility from a more practical point of view. The elements are very different in nature and have relations to different contextual conditions. As such, they imply that research need to align their level of analysis and theoretical framework depending on the element being investigated.

Subsequently, the current assessment highlights the need for further research on a foundation of social responsibility elements in focal companies, supply chains and beyond. The assessment plays an important role in outlining and understanding how contextual aspects may influence individuals’ sense of moral responsibility.

In a recent literature assessment, this was considered particularly important to progress the research area (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012). Evidently, it is possible to construct different frameworks of elements based upon the literature presented. Nevertheless, we believe that the current assessment benefits researchers striving to better understand the relationship between moral responsibility and SCM.

The empirical findings and theoretical proposals in the field of sustainable SCM are based mainly on lessons learned and knowledge generated in previous studies that provide direction and insights into what has worked before and thus might work in other contexts. This is not to disregard the validity of the claims because they are derived from a large body of both qualitative and quantitative findings that support each other. A theoretically derived concept could help to understand not only “what” should be done but also “why”, in future research.

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