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Human Rights Violations in Global Value Chains: A Locally Grounded Governance Framework

Myriam C. Rapior¹ · Marc Oberhauser²

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Abstract

Social governance models of global value chains (GVCs) are criticized as being dominated by advanced economy multinational corporations (MNCs) and primarily focusing on civil society organizations (CSOs) from developed countries, marginalizing the local agency, knowledge, and needs of rightsholders at the producing end of the GVC. These traditional governance frameworks often reinforce corporate power by framing compliance as a linear, top-down mandate. We address these shortcomings in the literature by proposing a locally grounded governance framework that accounts for vulnerable rightsholders who are often sidelined or underrepresented. The study is based on an inductive qualitative analysis of 54 interviews with CSOs operating in rightsholders' home countries, MNCs' home countries, and globally. Our study contributes in two major ways. First, we develop a theoretical model that conceptualizes a shift from a static, meeting-minimum-legal-standards, compliance-driven model to an adaptive, locally grounded GVC governance framework that is genuinely collaborative and can evolve with local insights. Second, we theorize a shift from a linear top-down framework that reinforces corporate power to an iterative process in which the dynamics of conflict and collaboration interact and shape the outcomes of the governance model.

Keywords Human rights · Global value chains · Civil society organization · Local CSO action · Transnational collective action

Introduction

According to international law, states are the primary duty bearers for providing remedies to human rights violations (Shivji, 2024; United Nations, 2011). However, many instances of human rights violations in global value chains (GVCs) occur in states that “lack the capacity or will to hold companies to account, and judicial recourse in a corporation's home state or a third state is sometimes impossible, always legally and logistically difficult, and infrequently successful” (Knuckey & Jenkin, 2015, p. 801). Therefore, effective non-state remedy measures are required to

fill this void (Schormair & Gerlach, 2020; Shivji, 2023), complementing the ‘bouquet of remedies’ called for by the United Nations Guiding Principles (United Nations, 2011). In consequence, there is a “near-universal recognition by all stakeholders” (Ruggie, 2009, p. 284) that multinational corporations (MNCs) are to be held accountable for human rights compliance, even for issues that initially occurred outside the traditional firm boundaries, namely in their GVCs (Egels-Zandén, 2017; Reinecke & Ansari, 2016). Moreover, contemporary supply chain laws, the most recent and comprehensive of which is the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), are increasingly obliging MNCs to take responsibility for human rights standards (Wilhelm, 2024; Yawar & Seuring, 2017).

Challenged by this so-called full-chain responsibility approach, and due to the complexity and opaqueness of GVCs (Kim & Davis, 2016), even well-intentioned MNCs struggle to prevent and remedy human rights violations directly or indirectly linked to their operations (Marano et al., 2024; Narula, 2019). Scholars from a variety of disciplines have proposed the involvement of civil society and

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other non-traditional GVC actors to mitigate human rights violations and to support the transition to more socially sustainable GVCs (Bruijn et al., 2023; Castaldi et al., 2023; Gereffi & Lee, 2016; Marano et al., 2024; Wilhelm, 2024; Wilhelm et al., 2024). Wettstein (2021, p. 325) emphasizes that “the real force behind the shifting BHR [business and human rights] landscape today are the civil society movements, which increasingly organize and mobilize across national borders in transnational ways.” Civil society can be defined as “an area of organization, separate from both the state and the market, where individuals coalesce to take sustained action in pursuit of common interests” (Bruijn et al., 2023, p. 1). Civil society organizations (CSOs) comprise a variety of different actors, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trade unions, grassroots organizations, community, charitable, and faith-based groups, as well as looser networks like social movements (World Bank, 2000, 2007). In line with scholarly suggestions, MNCs have begun to initiate dialogue with civil society (Liu et al., 2020; Shivji, 2023). For example, the German companies BMW, Mercedes, and ZF collaborated with civil society actors from Germany and Mexico to conceptualize and implement a complaints mechanism for Mexican automotive supply chains (Dohmen, 2023). BMW’s head of Human Rights Management, Oliver Winter, emphasized that civil society is involved not only for ethical and moral reasons but also because its capabilities and local knowledge are needed to complement corporate efforts (Bundesministerium für Arbeit & Soziales, 2023).

The theoretical framing of a collaborative GVC governance model between MNCs and CSOs was introduced by Gereffi and Lee (2016) and called social governance. However, current approaches that have accepted this framing have faced criticism. Soundararajan and colleagues argue that most collaborative GVC governance models, including social governance, are dominated by advanced economy MNCs and focus primarily on CSOs from developed countries (Soundararajan et al., 2021a, 2021b; Soundararajan et al., 2021a, 2021b). This leads to marginalizing the local agency, knowledge, and needs of rightsholders at the producing end of the GVC (Banerjee, 2018; Castaldi et al., 2023; Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2022). As a result, grievance mechanisms that are intended to provide remedies for rightsholders may not be utilized, as these mechanisms are perceived as untrustworthy or disconnected from local realities (Wilhelm et al., 2024). Therefore, collaborations ‘on the ground’ with local CSOs, rightsholders, and their immediate representatives are gaining importance since they promise governance models that account for the rightsholders’ needs. MNCs are likewise interested since they seek to comply with mandatory due diligence legislation (Wilhelm, 2024). While such

collaborations that “take place on the ground” (Bruijn et al., 2023, p. 148) are both aspirational and crucial, they also bring to light issues of power inequalities between the MNCs and local CSOs (Banerjee, 2010; Calvano, 2008). Moreover, they often exhibit a dialectical tension between collaboration and conflict (de Bakker et al., 2013), which interact and shape the outcomes of such collaborative models. Accordingly, this study aims to complement the prevalent collaborative GVC governance models twofold. First, we investigate the impediments of a collaborative model on the ground and identify facilitating conditions to overcome these. Second, we elaborate on the dynamics of local collaboration and how this complements collaboration on the top to bring about an approach of GVC governance that accounts for the marginalized and vulnerable rightsholders. The study is guided by the following research question: How can locally grounded approaches to GVC governance address human rights violations that affect marginalized rightsholders?

We collect data from 54 semi-structured interviews with CSO representatives from the rightsholders’ home countries, MNCs’ home countries, and from global CSOs. Based on an inductive qualitative analysis, we propose a locally grounded GVC governance that integrates local CSOs into transnational networks of CSOs and MNCs. Based on the empirical evidence of our analyses, we develop a theoretical model and argue that context-sensitive mechanisms that center on rightsholders are crucial for effectively addressing diverse human rights challenges, as they allow for tailored responses that resonate with specific local conditions. We suggest that this contextualization of governance mechanisms holds the potential to establish a more ethical form of social governance, one that genuinely upholds the dignity, rights, and well-being of those at the most vulnerable ends of the GVCs.

Theoretical Background

Global Value Chains and Human Rights Violations

As MNCs expanded their global presence and relied on increasingly decentralized GVCs, the task of ensuring that their suppliers complied with human rights standards became more challenging (Sun et al., 2021). For instance, Kim and Davis (2016) report that 80% of the American MNCs they examined could not determine that the host country of their suppliers was conflict-free. This opacity of GVCs makes the organization, governance, and control of operations in GVCs difficult (Narula, 2019). From the perspective of MNCs, this eventually complicates the task of preventing and remedying human rights violations,

particularly at lower-tier suppliers (Lund-Thomsen, 2020; Soundararajan, 2023). Human rights violations in GVCs are a transnational phenomenon affecting individuals and communities in several locations (Feasley, 2016). The terminology of ‘human rights violations’ often serves as an umbrella term, encompassing more narrowly defined issues that are sometimes used interchangeably, like modern slavery, human trafficking, and forced labor (van Buren et al., 2021). These violations span different forms of exploitation, including labor exploitation, child labor, and health and safety risks. But they can also include anything from social injustice over debt bondage to sexual exploitation in the business context (Crane et al., 2022). What these forms of human rights violations have in common is the abuse of power over vulnerable rightsholders (van Buren et al., 2021), the least powerful actors in GVCs (Wilhelm et al., 2024).

Existing studies provide various explanations for the persistence of human rights violations within GVCs. Some scholars have highlighted that MNCs and their suppliers may sometimes not perceive advantages in cooperating on and complying with human rights standards (Caruana et al., 2021; Villena & Gioia, 2018). Others consider the complexity and opaqueness of GVCs a major issue (Narula, 2019), and the geographic and psychic distances to lower-tier suppliers, such as mine workers or farmers, make them particularly difficult to reach for the MNCs (Villena & Gioia, 2018). Therefore, rightsholders at lower-tier suppliers are often considered “peripheral stakeholders” by the MNCs (Huq et al., 2016, p. 22), and their vulnerabilities receive limited attention. Likewise, suppliers are often resource-constrained and may engage in abusive practices for cost reasons while often benefiting from weak regulatory institutional contexts (Idemudia et al., 2020; Lund-Thomsen, 2020). Rightsholders, moreover, may often be unaware of their rights; this would especially apply to those who are migrants with an undocumented status under repressive laws in the host countries (Wilhelm et al., 2024). Moreover, even if rightsholders raise their voices and file corporate foreign direct liability cases against MNCs, most of these lawsuits are dismissed, and rightsholders are left disappointed, since they lack power and influence (Schrempf-Stirling & Wettstein, 2017).

While the factors mentioned above undoubtedly complicate GVC governance, leading scholars have suggested that what has failed is the often-pursued private governance models, including the ‘cascading compliance’ approach (Soundararajan et al., 2021a, 2021b; Soundararajan et al., 2021a, 2021b; Wilhelm, 2024). As noted by early GVC research, these MNC-centric governance models focus on lead firms that seek to control the GVC by prescribing supplier codes of conduct and audit-based monitoring through social auditing organizations (Gereffi & Lee, 2016; Narula,

2019). By controlling the governance structures, MNCs often retain decision-making power, which limits the ability of local actors to shape compliance measures or challenge exploitative practices (Banerjee, 2018). Private governance approaches, particularly social auditing organizations, are also often criticized for lacking effectiveness (Raj-Reichert, 2013) and pursuing self-interest (Angelini & Curphey, 2022). Lund-Thomsen and Lindgreen (2014, p. 13) emphasize that social auditors “often lacked sufficient incentives to ‘rock the boat’ by demanding significant changes in work conditions, from either buyers or suppliers.” Therefore, the literature on labor rights argues that only worker-driven social auditing can provide effective mechanisms to guarantee compliance with labor rights within GVCs (Angelini & Curphey, 2022; Marslev et al., 2022; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021). Acknowledging these arguments and transferring them to the broader issue of providing remedies to and preventing human rights violations in GVCs, scholars have pressed for a more context-sensitive mode of GVC governance that accounts for local agencies and includes local actors from civil society (Schormair & Gerlach, 2020; Wilhelm et al., 2024).

Civil Society’s Role in GVC Governance: Collaboration on the Ground

Several systematic reviews and a dedicated special issue on MNC-CSO interactions have been prompted by the wide variety of roles CSOs can take on and the tasks they can be involved in (Bruijn et al., 2023; de Bakker et al., 2013; Kourula & Laasonen, 2010). CSOs frequently step in to fill institutional voids on a supranational level when corporations and governments fail to do so (Rana & Sørensen, 2021). CSOs challenge MNCs through conflictual forms of activism such as boycotting, petitions, and protests to put pressure on MNCs (Burchell & Cook, 2013; Schäfer et al., 2024), but they also complement MNCs’ operations through collaborative approaches. These often take the form of multistakeholder initiatives in which they jointly develop norms while also transmitting, monitoring, and enforcing them (Gereffi & Lee, 2016; Grimm et al., 2024). MNCs can particularly benefit from such initiatives through a ‘buy-in’ of CSOs’ expertise instead of ‘making’ it themselves (Bodewyn & Doh, 2011; Jamali & Keshishian, 2009). This can be regarded as a firm-specific advantage from the MNC’s perspective (Bruijn et al., 2023). CSOs are also credited with having substantially influenced the introduction of a range of legislative innovations (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011), like the UK’s Modern Slavery Act (Islam & van Staden, 2022) and France’s Law on Duty Vigilance (Delalieux et al., 2024). This is particularly true for large CSOs that operate globally,

because they “demonstrate analogous qualities to MNEs in that they manage across borders, cultures, and institutions; feature international governance and operational challenges; and formulate strategic goals and establish performance measures in their international operations” (Sun et al., 2021, p. 1835). For instance, IndustriALL Global Union, a global CSO, recently signed an updated global framework agreement protecting the interests of more than one million garment workers in collaboration with the multinational clothing retail company H&M (H&M Group, 2024).

However, such collaborations between MNCs and large, global CSOs often serve to legitimize corporate practices rather than truly addressing the needs of rightsholders (Banerjee, 2018; Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2016). These collaborations, albeit often framed as deliberative processes (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006), frequently marginalize local CSOs and communities, reinforcing power imbalances that silence the voices of those most affected by corporate activities (Banerjee, 2018; Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2022). Therefore, it is argued that current approaches do not sufficiently differentiate between high-level collaborations, e.g., between MNCs and large CSOs, and those on the ground, e.g., ones involving the affected rightsholders, local communities, and grassroots CSOs (Castaldi et al., 2023; Soundararajan et al., 2021a, 2021b; Soundararajan et al., 2021a, 2021b). This critique is in line with the shortcomings in the literature identified by Bruijn et al. (2023): few studies have investigated both conflictual and collaborative interactions, examined interactions across multiple countries, or focused on MNC-CSO collaborations “which take place on the ground” (p. 148). This “on the ground” is where CSOs serve as direct representatives of those negatively affected by corporate activities and demand that MNCs take responsibility for societal issues (Chowdhury et al., 2021; Doh & Guay, 2006).

In light of the shortcomings identified in the literature, and in line with Banerjee (2018) and Ehrnström-Fuentes (2016, 2022), we argue that a locally grounded approach to GVC governance is crucial to properly account for the rights and interests of marginalized and vulnerable rightsholders. Banerjee critiques how MNC-CSO collaborations often legitimize corporate power rather than addressing the needs of vulnerable populations, and Ehrnström-Fuentes emphasizes the need for governance models that include grassroots CSOs and elevate rightsholders’ voices. While large global CSOs exert significant influence (Baur & Palazzo, 2011; Baur & Schmitz, 2012), the inclusion of less powerful actors in GVC governance amplifies concerns about power inequalities and the risk of corporate co-optation (Banerjee, 2010; Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2016). In order to interrogate these structural power inequalities,

we draw on the notion of power dynamics as discussed in critical studies of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Banerjee, 2014; Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2022). This literature emphasizes how power inequalities between MNCs and civil society actors often reinforce corporate dominance and marginalize the voices of affected communities. Adopting the lens of critical CSR to focus on power dynamics encourages a rethinking of MNC-CSO collaboration, and thus helps us to see more clearly whether, and how, it can truly serve the interests of marginalized rightsholders.

Methodology

We choose a qualitative research design, following Gioia et al. (2013), since this approach is particularly suitable for under-researched topics and facilitates the generation of novel context-sensitive knowledge. The main data source for this study is 54 semi-structured interviews with representatives from CSOs. We conducted an inductive qualitative data analysis, thus assuring proximity to the CSO perspective. In the following, we illustrate the data collection process and then describe our qualitative data analysis.

Data Collection

We began the data collection with a three-fold approach. First, an initial stakeholder mapping was executed to identify the suitable interview participants. For this, CSOs working on human rights violations along GVCs, with or without collaboration with MNCs, were listed by researching key terms, such as ‘civil society,’ ‘non-governmental organization,’ ‘trade union,’ ‘human rights,’ ‘value chain,’ and ‘supply chain.’ Second, we contacted the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, a German foundation with proven expertise in supply chain due diligence and human rights violations along GVC (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2022), to gain access to the regional networks and local CSOs. The foundation frequently publishes studies and reports on human rights issues, not only in Germany, where they are headquartered, but also in its many international locations. We contacted 16 offices of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in developing countries with low human rights standards (Amnesty International, 2021) and received suggestions for suitable interview partners. Third, an NGO that we identified as relevant suggested that we send the research request via an internal global NGO mailing list. We used this mailing list to solicit participation in the interviews and ask for expert knowledge or experiences.

Despite initial difficulties in reaching and convincing appropriate interview partners who held sensitive data and worked in countries where governments oppress civil society and human rights activists, we aimed for geographic inclusivity and diversity within our sample. Apart from the many positive and negative replies, we also received recommendations about other CSOs with experience in the field. We discovered that CSOs working on the matter are, at times, extremely specialized and have strong international connections to CSOs from other countries. This international connectivity is not widely publicized. To include smaller CSOs with low online presence, we extended our list of relevant CSOs via snowball sampling and were redirected numerous times from primary correspondents. The websites, where available, of all recommended organizations and other publicly available information were researched by the authors themselves and carefully screened. Before a CSO was contacted as a potential addition to our sample, it had to meet the following prerequisites: allowing individual membership, proven expertise or experience in supply chain due diligence and human rights violations, and independence from corporate funding sources, such as corporate foundations. In total, 285 CSOs were contacted.

The final sample consisted of 54 interviews with 56 partners (two interviews were conducted with two interviewees) from 51 CSOs. The interviews lasted an average of 46 min, making a total duration of about 41 h. CSOs operating on a national level are based in 20 different countries, including many developing countries where human rights violations often occur, such as Mozambique, Ecuador or Indonesia (Villena & Gioia, 2018). This was a relevant criterion to us, as we intended to stay close to the perspective of rightsholders and their representatives. We also included CSOs with a supranational scope, to obtain a global perspective on interactions and collaboration between CSOs and MNCs. Overall, the CSOs interviewed can be categorized into three groups: CSOs from rightsholders' home countries (hereafter called 'local CSOs'), CSOs from MNCs' home countries (hereafter called 'home CSOs'), and CSOs operating on a global scale (hereafter called 'global CSOs'). The sample comprises 29 interviews with local CSOs, 11 interviews with global CSOs, 10 interviews with home CSOs, and four interviews with CSOs operating in both the home countries of rightsholders and the home country of the MNCs. Appendix 1 gives details of all the participating CSOs, their respective geographic work purview (global, regional, or national), and their type of activities (advocacy, field, or research work).

The interviews were conducted one-on-one via 'Zoom,' in English or German between July and November 2021

and were led by the corresponding author of this study to maintain consistency. Four interviews, with organizations working in Mozambique, Brazil, and Costa Rica were held in Spanish and Portuguese, assisted by professional interpreters. To increase analytical rigor, the interviews were conducted over three phases (Nag & Gioia, 2012). During the first five interviews, the interviewer asked open and exploratory questions such as 'Can you describe your experience in interactions with MNCs on the topic of human rights violations along GVC?' or 'What happens with information on human rights violations once they occur? Which communication flows develop?'. The insights gained from these first interviews were used to refine the questionnaire and the interview guidelines. In the second phase, the adjusted questionnaire was used for the following 44 interviews. In the third phase, comprising five interviews, preliminary findings were discussed in addition to the questionnaire. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using the software 'MAXQDA.'

Qualitative Data Analysis

The authors followed an inductive analysis approach to develop codes and themes close to the statements of the CSOs (Gioia et al., 2013). We engaged in open coding, which allowed us to stay close to the interviewees' terminology and expression (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Klicken oder tippen Sie hier, um Text einzugeben. This approach allowed for a change in perspective and the integration of subjective views (Locke, 2001). After evaluating first-order codes, we arranged them in a preliminary order within a spreadsheet. In the next step, we conducted axial coding to identify second-order themes with a slightly higher degree of abstraction, taking them to a theoretical dimension (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Throughout all themes, the first-order codes give a detailed insight into the activities of MNCs, CSOs, suppliers, and other actors that positively or negatively affect human rights standards in GVCs. The second-order codes then grasp the overarching practices that can be identified by combining these activities. For example, the codes 'MNCs involve home CSOs and local CSOs to implement complaint procedures along the GVC' and 'Local CSOs forward the complaints received from rightsholder to global CSOs and home CSOs' describe activities related to handling complaints. They are assembled into the practice of 'Establishing a grievance mechanism.' We enhance data transparency by showing in Appendix 2 additional exemplary quotes from the interviews from which the first-order codes were derived. To create aggregate dimensions with a higher level of theoretical abstraction, we wove data and theory together by alternating between induction and abduction, thus creating

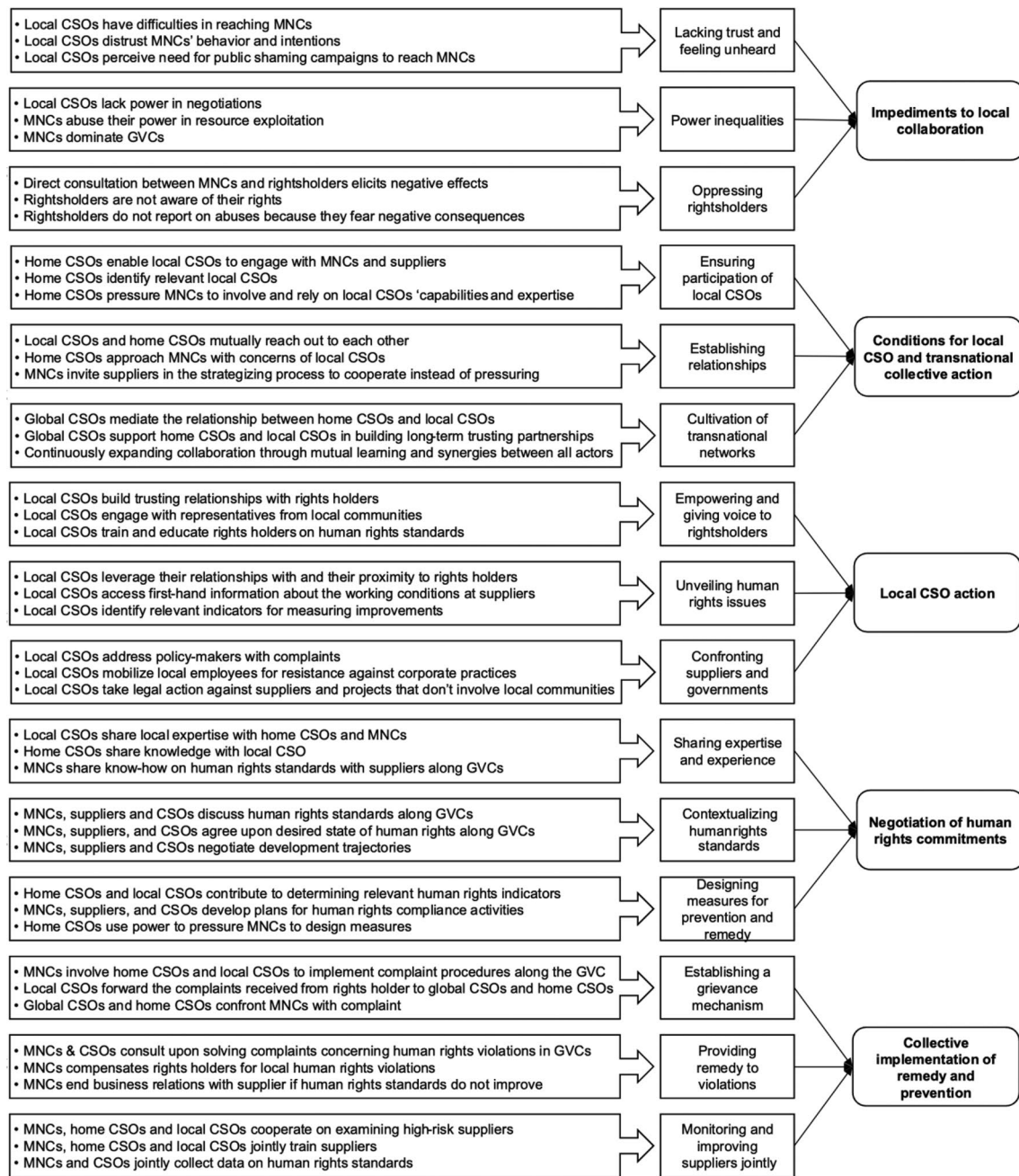


Fig. 1 Data structure of the qualitative analysis

novel theoretical insights (Magnani & Gioia, 2023). We identified five aggregate dimensions from the data, and all were screened and discussed in depth by the two authors. The data structure is displayed in Fig. 1.

Findings

Our findings show how distrust, power inequalities, and the oppression of rightsholders impose significant impediments to collaboration at a local level. We derive the conditions that need to be established to address these impediments and which allow for local CSO action and transnational

collective action. Local CSO action refers to community-driven efforts led primarily by local CSOs, focusing on context-specific advocacy, grievance mechanisms, and direct engagement with local suppliers and communities. In contrast, transnational collective action involves multiple stakeholders—including home and global CSOs, MNCs, and suppliers—who collaborate across borders. We also present elements of local CSO action and how the integration of local CSOs addresses some of the shortcomings prevailing in current social governance approaches. Finally, we outline how local CSO action can complement transnational collective action and contribute to a locally grounded GVC governance by collectively negotiating and implementing measures of remedy and prevention. Our interviewees point out how involving various actors from civil society—local, home, and global CSOs—can lead to the remedy and prevention of human rights violations. The data structure, including the aggregate dimensions, is illustrated in Fig. 1.

Impediments to Local Collaboration

Lacking trust and feeling unheard. A major impediment to collaboration at the local level is the lack of trust, particularly on the part of local CSOs toward MNCs, but also mentioned by global and home CSOs. Interviewees doubt the intentions and behaviors of MNCs and distrust the supply chain due diligence processes:

‘To believe that truly there is any transnational cooperation that is truly willing (...) to act responsibly, I mean, we don’t believe that is, that is true. (...) They want (...) to maximize the benefits (...). So, I mean due diligence in particular often has been enough for (...) only kind of a reporting obligation for companies.’ [CSO 6, Uruguay]

Representatives of local CSOs report that they often feel unheard by developed country MNCs as they run into the void with their requests. On the local level, there is little to no trust that MNCs will solve pressing issues, which often leads local CSOs to abandon collaborative efforts and instead run public campaigns. Local CSOs report similar difficulties when trying to reach their local governments. One CSO representative showed his frustration with the government and the failure of MNCs to respond:

‘In countries like ours, the big companies don’t care about the civil society, unlike in the European countries, because we are a small country and our politicians are highly corrupt. (...) The companies do not do that sort of a consultation voluntarily.’ [CSO 38, Sri Lanka]

Power inequalities. One of the main sources of conflict is the substantial power inequalities between MNCs and CSOs in general and local CSOs in particular. From the local CSO perspective, MNCs dominate GVCs and abuse their power to exploit resources. This concentration of power is considered unjust. Therefore, local CSOs question the fairness of round-table negotiations and discussions between local CSOs and MNCs. Though these are often framed as dialogues among ‘equals,’ local CSOs doubt they have any say in corporate decision-making. One interviewee from Mozambique highlights this perceived helplessness against these more powerful actors and outlines how they rather see their role in being active on the ground:

‘It is truly very difficult, because we as the civil society, we don’t have the power. Especially here in Mozambique, it’s not only the civil societies that are considerably powerless, but the mining companies even have more power than the actual government. So it is quite complicated to have this power, this balance on a macro level, but since we have this conversation on a micro level with employees of other companies, the power issue is not as strongly felt by us.’ [CSO 48, Mozambique]

Oppressing rightsholders. The breaching of human rights standards often begins in the relationship between the rightsholders and the suppliers, which is characterized by power inequalities. According to our interviewees, suppliers often try to systematically uphold the unequal relationship by not informing rightsholders about their legal rights and the suppliers’ duties. In addition, our interviews reveal that even if rightsholders are aware they are being treated illegally, they often do not dare to report any violations because they fear negative consequences, such as the termination of their contract or physical abuse. One interviewee highlights the structurally weak position of rightsholders as the reason for their silence:

‘They [workers] are being systematically, structurally put in the position, like there are no other options. They need to go to work. They need to bear with all the poor, terrible working conditions. They need to bear with the sexual harassment and any other terrible working conditions. Because they need to do the work, they need to get the income from the work, and they need to feed the family. So, they just keep silent.’ [CSO 33, Asia]

The CSO representatives interviewed report that, even when MNCs involve rightsholders directly, the interaction between MNCs and rightsholders often produces negative

outcomes for individuals and the whole community. Consequently, CSOs deem MNCs unsuitable interlocutors for direct engagement with rightsholders.

Conditions for Local CSO Action and Transnational Collective Action

Ensuring the participation of local CSOs. Home CSOs recognize the importance and expertise of local CSOs and perceive the need to pressure MNCs to acknowledge the benefits of creating spaces for their involvement within GVC governance. For example, our interview partners explain that local CSOs can increase the traceability of sensitive information on human rights issues. In order to identify relevant local CSOs, home CSOs step in and use their field knowledge to propose suitable organizations to the MNCs. In addition, home and global CSOs support the local CSOs, both in their engagement with the MNC and when they interact with the suppliers on a local level. This involvement of home CSOs can be considered a necessary step to establishing a space for collaboration on the ground:

'If you seriously want to engage in a dialogue, all affected parties must first be identified. So, who is in any way negatively or positively impacted by a company's activities? All these groups need to be invited. (...) NGOs that are active in this area and have expertise in this topic should also be invited, specifically local NGOs on the ground who work with those affected.' [CSO 47, Global]

Establishing relationships. Our interviewees emphasized that a precondition for enabling local and transnational action was the establishment of relationships among the actors involved, both current and prospective, in the governance approach. Local CSOs and home CSOs often mutually connect as they complement each other with their capabilities and expertise. Local CSOs have access to sensitive information, whereas home and global CSOs have the power and visibility to ensure that this information is considered important by decision-makers in MNCs. Hence, home and global CSOs help foster relationships with MNCs that play a significant role in addressing the challenges faced by local CSOs. Likewise, MNCs invite and incentivize their suppliers to participate in shaping novel mechanisms jointly, as described by one CSO:

'One company, that has contributed a lot to this discussion is X [MNC], which clearly said, "In these processes [on human rights in GVCs], we have tried to

shape the work with the suppliers in the long term and to include them in our strategies accordingly, instead of constantly putting pressure on the suppliers. (...)". That's exactly what I mean by shaping business relations.' [CSO 42, Germany & Global South]

Cultivation of transnational networks. In order to ensure the long-term functioning of the transnational collective action, the actors involved need to work continuously on their relationships and collaborations. Our interviewees emphasize that if all actors nurture their direct relationship and when all are 'on board,' the multilateral collaboration creates opportunities for mutual learning and allows for synergies in creating a governance model that reaches marginalized and vulnerable rightsholders. Transborder networks are perceived as major facilitators of the remedy and prevention of human rights violations, as one interviewee stated:

'The cooperation from civil society organizations from the North and the South can be really beneficial. Because sometimes they also know more about the company, because usually they are located in the Global North and can also offer more input on that. So, I would stress the importance of transnational partnerships on a civil society level.' [CSO 36, Brazil]

Global CSOs also assist in mediating between local and home CSOs on the one hand and MNCs on the other hand in governing these arising networks. Building long-lasting, trusting partnerships is considered a key aspect, as one interviewee highlights:

'I think the success factor is that it simply takes civil society organization, it takes such long, trusting partnerships. So, there is one of our organizations from the network in Brazil that has been working very closely with trade unions on the ground for a very long time. And they understand their work. They trust each other. And when these trade unions say: Hey, we have to do something here. Then the organization from our network comes to us and says: Hey, something has to happen now.' [CSO 52, Global]

Local CSO Action

Empowering and giving voice to rightsholders. Local CSO representatives mention their crucial role in including and representing rightsholders and local communities. They serve as their first and main contact point, consult rightsholders in person, and establish a trust-based relationship with them. Local CSOs also educate rightsholders on

acceptable and unacceptable behavior that they experience on a daily basis. This greatly empowers rightsholders since it allows them to identify a violation of their and their co-worker's rights and to develop their own standards, which eventually enable them to speak up. Moreover, local CSOs can raise their voices by drawing attention to their situations. One interviewee working on a local level in Brazil expressed the mediating role of CSOs as follows:

'I believe that an intermediary is needed here. These are very unequal levels—large multinational corporations on one side and the affected local communities on the other (...). And it's no coincidence that power imbalances heavily favor large corporations, where wealth, power, decision-making authority, and political influence are concentrated. This is positioned far above those affected. I think it's crucial that these communities have intermediaries to support them, so they can advocate for their rights and be placed in a position where they can negotiate. Otherwise, they stand no chance at all.' [CSO 5, Germany & Brazil]

Unveiling human rights issues. Local CSOs see themselves at the forefront of the upstream GVC. They are experts in leveraging their close relationships with rightsholders and local communities and achieving improvements by working with them. This grants them direct access to first-hand information about the working conditions at the suppliers, which ultimately enables them to reveal human rights violations. This also aligns with the self-understanding of local CSOs, who are aware of their limited reach on a macro level and consider their strength to be being able to address human rights issues where they emerge. One interviewee working in a grassroots organization in Mozambique depicts:

'We cannot make any significant changes on the macro level (...). But we can work on a micro level with the employees of companies that work in the extractive areas here on the rural areas. So, we usually talk, we can make changes on a basic level.' [CSO 48, Mozambique]

Confronting suppliers and governments. Local CSOs consider it necessary not to shy away from confrontational approaches when interacting with suppliers, local administration, and national governments. In contrast to the public campaigns against MNCs, these interactions occur between local actors and are not taken to the public. Instead, local CSOs aim to leverage the marginal power of rightsholders and local communities by mobilizing them to pressure suppliers directly.

'But because we are here and we know the situation of the people, we are able to articulate their concerns and their problems to the multinationals better. So we expect that they respect the people and the laws, whether they are giants or not. And that's why we are able to mobilize the people in the company to stand against them when they fail the laws. Even if they are giants and they are rich, we also have our way of working, we can mobilize and we can collectively stop their activities.' [CSO 50, Ghana]

Local CSOs also use legal procedures, such as suing companies and having large-scale projects halted by the courts. However, this often leads to additional tensions for local CSOs, because they come to the attention of local governments, which may evaluate the situation differently.

Negotiation of Human Rights Commitments

Sharing expertise, experience, and knowledge. A shared pool of information and knowledge is essential for transnational collective action and the development of effective human rights mechanisms in GVCs. As interviewees highlight, each actor contributes distinct expertise. Local CSOs possess deep knowledge of how to work with and empower vulnerable rightsholders, while home CSOs bring knowledge of the legal recourse mechanisms available in MNCs' home countries and prevailing GVC governance models. Together, these organizations pressure MNCs to increase transparency and share their knowledge of human rights standards with suppliers. As one interviewee from Germany emphasizes, establishing knowledge-sharing channels is crucial for fostering a common foundation from which transnational collective action can emerge:

'It is absolutely necessary to involve partners from the Global South and then also to create discussions where the actors are first picked up in the sense of getting the same level of knowledge. Because it is usually very abstract to convey to partners from the Global South what we mean by the concept of due diligence.' [CSO 25, Germany & Global South]

Contextualizing human rights standards. Our interviewees emphasize the necessity of dialogue among all involved actors to foster a shared understanding and contextualization of human rights standards within GVCs. While human rights principles are universal, their interpretation and enforcement mechanisms need to be contextualized to account for regional legal frameworks, economic structures, and cultural factors. This, in turn, requires that diverse stakeholders,

including MNCs, suppliers, and CSOs at different levels, be in communication with each other. In particular, CSOs strongly advocate for discussions where actors work together to clarify expectations, responsibilities, and pathways for enforcement, ensuring that human rights standards are meaningfully integrated into governance structures rather than remaining abstract commitments.

'Any company that is truly interested in making things better, needs to have this dialog in a 360-degree format with producers, with local suppliers, with political leaders, with NGOs or civil society.' [CSO 45, Uganda]

These discussions sometimes take place in structured multistakeholder roundtables, but more often occur in informal bilateral settings, allowing different actors to share perspectives and identify locally appropriate approaches. The next step involves developing practical implementation strategies that ensure human rights standards are meaningfully upheld. This requires early engagement between MNCs, suppliers, and local CSOs to establish proactive mechanisms for preventing rights violations and ensuring compliance with due diligence obligations. An interviewee from Germany underscores the importance of such early-stage interventions:

'The goal must always be to improve working conditions so that human rights violations do not occur. Therefore, it is very important that the colleagues from the factories take the precaution of approaching the company again and also demand that no (...) violations take place along the supply chain or that the situation improves so that the due diligence obligations are observed (...) Probably, formats are required in which all stakeholders are participating.' [CSO 35, Germany]

Designing measures for prevention and remedy. According to our interviews, home CSOs and local CSOs contribute to the detection of cases and patterns of human rights violations by identifying the relevant evidence. Within this design phase, local CSOs again play an extraordinary role due to their pertinent local knowledge, which allows them to anticipate the functionality and the local acceptability of the measures. Equipped with this information, all actors jointly develop compliance activities that can be incorporated as an essential part of the governance model. One interviewee working in a global CSO highlighted the importance of bringing essential stakeholders together to design measures for prevention and remedy:

'If you [MNCs] have suppliers, get into establishing a mechanism to really go and understand the context, where the activities of your suppliers are happening. It would involve dialog with grassroots and civil grassroots and civil society organizations working on the territories of your suppliers. (...) I think that that's important, this dialog to establishing internal mechanisms to have a constant dialog also with suppliers.' [CSO 44, Global]

Collective Implementation of Remedy and Prevention

Establishing a grievance mechanism. CSOs call for grievance mechanisms that are accessible to rightsholders and that they consider trustworthy. Therefore, MNCs rely on the involvement of local and home CSOs to implement a complaints procedure along the whole GVC. After helping the rightsholders formulate and file a complaint, local CSOs transfer it to home CSOs and global CSOs, who then confront the MNCs with the accusations and leverage their power to pressure MNCs to resolve the issue. This process is described in an exemplary quote from a CSO representative based in Germany but operating globally:

'There is a situation in melon farming in Brazil right now. There are wage negotiations and the employers are exerting incredible pressure to dissolve the collective agreement and not to extend it. And there we are faced with extreme wage losses for workers on the ground. And we approached companies that buy melons from there and with whom we are in contact: 'Hey, have you heard anything about this?' And they answered: 'It wasn't on our radar, we'll take a look.' (...) I see my responsibility in strengthening the position of local organizations and their bargaining power.' [CSO 52, Global]

Providing remedies for violations. Our interviewees explain how home and local CSOs assert the validity of previously defined rules in their countries. They report that once MNCs receive and consider a complaint, they often consult home and local CSOs on how to remedy the violation. In this situation, local CSOs' expertise and knowledge of their suppliers' operating sites are key to finding appropriate and effective remedial measures. Equipped with information about the local situation at suppliers' sites, MNCs can specifically demand the remedy of non-compliant operational processes and often compensate oppressed rightsholders. In some cases, MNCs threaten to terminate business relations with their suppliers as a result of consultations with home and local CSOs. These

threats have greater credibility in light of the local information provided by local CSOs and sometimes actually end in the termination of business relations, as described by one interviewee:

‘One positive example (...), X [MNC], they did a Human Rights Impact Assessment, where some [civil society] organizations from the Netherlands have worked on the, on the conception and have also commented on it. (...) It really considers the most diverse stakeholder perspectives. (...) On the basis of this, X [MNC] also ended business relations with a supplier in Colombia.’ [CSO 47, Global]

Joint action to monitor and improve suppliers. MNCs engage home and local CSOs in assessing suppliers within GVCs, especially those where serious human rights violations are suspected. Assessment practices include monitoring and auditing. In these cases, local CSOs are empowered to investigate human rights standards independently and to gather feedback and data from potentially affected rightsholders. A local CSO reports on their impact on global due diligence practices after monitoring suppliers at Vietnamese production sites:

‘We were like only local researchers, and we were able to go into X’s [MNC] factories and their suppliers in Vietnam, do a research (...). The result was not very pretty. X [MNC] was really embarrassed.’

(...) They tried to improve it. And after three years, I think we, we came back in 2013 and do another update-research on X [MNC]. And we found that like nearly 80 % of the problems that we identified in 2011 have already been addressed. And even better, that X [MNC] also adjusted their supply chain policy for the whole world, the whole supply chain, not just in Vietnam.’ [CSO 21, Vietnam]

MNCs and CSOs are also interested in improving rightsholders’ conditions once they identify any issues. Therefore, they offer a set of activities to the suppliers that include specific training, incentivizing, and pressuring.

‘I think it’s crucial that we do trainings, we do communication so that slowly, they [suppliers] will become better in complying with the standard and improving beyond. (...) Civil society can be partners (...), we can help with setting up the monitoring, monitoring guidance, and some of the interventions.’ [CSO 21, Vietnam]

Discussion and Conclusion

This study empirically investigates how a locally grounded approach can lead to GVC governance that prioritizes the needs of marginalized rightsholders. Based on the empirical evidence of our interview data, we develop a

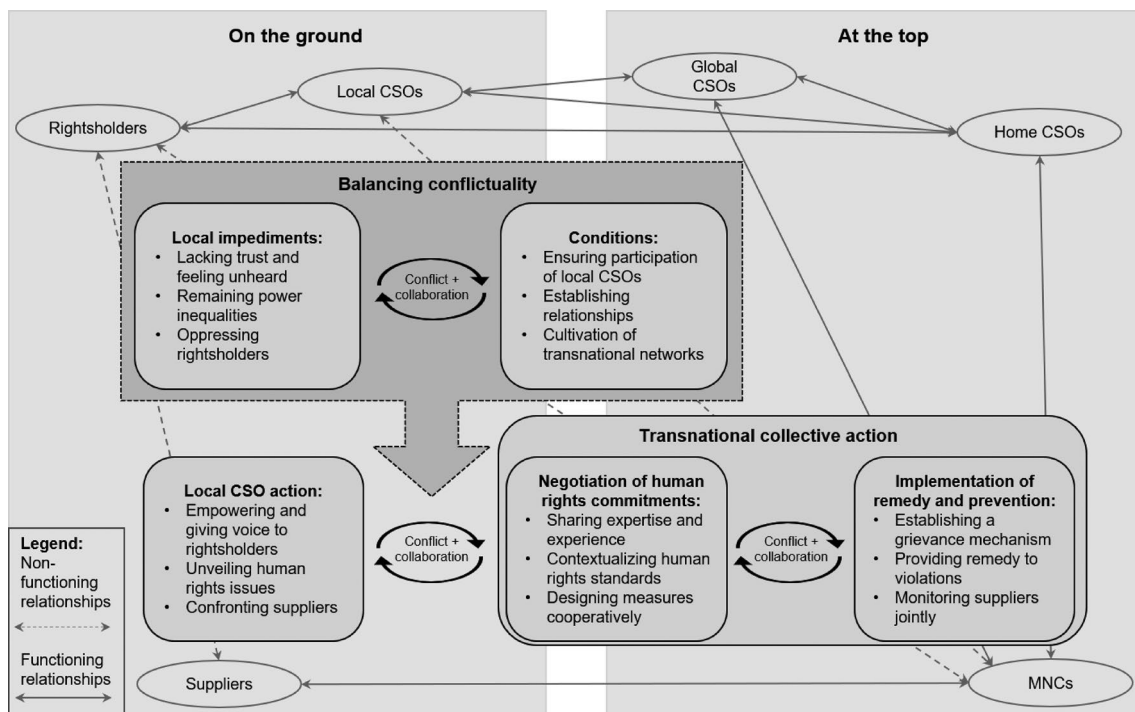


Fig. 2 A locally grounded GVC governance framework

theoretical model that conceptualizes the impediments to and conditions for the inclusion of local CSOs. The model also captures local CSO action and its interplay with transnational collective action, which together form the foundation for locally grounded GVC governance. The theoretical model is illustrated in Fig. 2.

Our model centers on the critiques offered by Castaldi et al. (2023) and Soundararajan and colleagues (Soundararajan et al., 2021a, 2021b; Soundararajan et al., 2021a, 2021b). Thus, it positions local CSOs not merely as support acts but as central contributors within the governance model, providing essential, context-specific insights into the conditions and needs of rightsholders. Local CSOs bridge the gap between rightsholders and MNCs, fostering a flow of information essential for responsive and context-aware governance. They also play a pivotal role in empowering rightsholders to engage in governance processes themselves. Through education, advocacy, and capacity-building, local CSOs can raise rightsholders' awareness of their rights and acceptable workplace standards. The local CSOs' established relationships with rightsholders enhance the relevance and accuracy of governance decisions and facilitate trust, often lacking in interactions solely governed by MNCs and home CSOs. Local CSOs also leverage their presence to build up pressure on suppliers pursuing confrontational approaches. If necessary, they orchestrate the mobilization of rightsholders and support their resistance against the practices at the suppliers or may even take legal actions should the local institutional environment allow them to do so.

Our analysis reveals key obstacles that impede effective collaboration between MNCs and CSOs at the local level: trust deficits, power inequalities, and the oppression of rightsholders. These impediments can prevent collaborative governance approaches from reaching vulnerable and marginalized rightsholders within MNCs' GVCs. The impediments also create a challenging environment for meaningful dialogue and transnational collective action, particularly where local CSOs feel marginalized by MNCs. For instance, our data reveal a pervasive mistrust among local CSOs regarding MNCs' commitment to due diligence, with interviewees expressing concerns that corporate efforts are often symbolic rather than substantive. This aligns with the critical CSR perspective that describes GVC governance as frequently skewed in favor of corporate interests, thereby perpetuating power imbalances (Banerjee, 2018; Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2022). CSOs also emphasize the obstacle created by power inequalities experienced by rightsholders and local CSOs. These structural power inequalities and their abuse by those who hold power largely explain why human rights violations often remain unreported and, therefore, unrecognized. Similarly, collaborative relationships between heterogeneous

actors characterized by substantial power inequalities are often unsuccessful (Gray et al., 2022).

To address these impediments, our theoretical model emphasizes the need to establish conditions that address the obstacles and facilitate local CSO action and, ultimately, transnational collective action. Home and global CSOs persuade MNCs to recognize and use the unique capabilities and expertise of local CSOs. However, MNCs may not be willing to open up spaces and provide the conditions to integrate local CSOs. This frequently leads to CSOs switching from a collaborative to a confrontational approach. In such scenarios, home and global CSOs can leverage their collective power, exerting substantial pressure on MNCs. Should the MNCs still decide not to engage, CSOs may move away from their collaborative agenda and pursue conflictual approaches—public outreach, blaming campaigns and forms of activism such as boycotting, petitions, and protests (Burchell & Cook, 2013; Schäfer et al., 2024)—which usually brings collaboration to a temporary halt. Once the MNC is convinced, global and home CSOs amplify the voices of local CSOs by providing additional visibility and influence, enabling negotiations between MNCs and local CSOs, who often have little or no formal authority at the international or national level (Banerjee, 2018). Notably, relationship-building activities help alleviate some of the distrust by fostering mutual understanding, thus laying the groundwork for long-term partnerships. Fostering these partnerships also facilitates transnational knowledge-sharing networks that contribute to a continuous learning process across all levels of the GVC. Through these networks, MNCs can benefit from the local insights of CSOs and rightsholders, leading to more informed decision-making. Under these conditions, the power within GVC governance is distributed more equally, with local CSOs being empowered to advocate effectively for rightsholders' interests.

Figure 2 illustrates how the relationships between actors in GVC governance can be either 'functioning' or 'non-functioning' in relation to the goal of addressing human rights abuses. Functioning relationships are characterized by active, trust-based, and collaborative engagement in which information flows effectively and coordination leads to tangible improvements in governance. In contrast, non-functioning relationships are marked by communication gaps, lack of trust, or structural barriers that hinder meaningful engagement between actors. These dynamics are particularly visible, for example, when we contrast the strong, trust-based relationships between local CSOs and rightsholders with the often disconnected or strained interactions between suppliers and rightsholders or the interactions between MNCs and local CSOs.

The functioning relationships are the foundation for the collaborative phases outlined in our model, namely, the negotiation of human rights commitments and the collective implementation of prevention and remedy measures. These two elements are collaborative, iterative phases that bring together MNCs, home, local, and global CSOs, and suppliers to establish responsive and context-specific solutions. Negotiation begins with an inclusive dialogue, which is essential for setting actionable benchmarks that reflect both corporate expectations and local realities, ensuring that MNCs, suppliers, and CSOs coalesce around a unified set of principles. The implementation phase is grounded in measures for both prevention and remedy. Local CSOs, supported by home and global CSOs, actively create accessible grievance mechanisms that rightsholders perceive as trustworthy. Preventive measures, meanwhile, include regular local audits, ongoing monitoring, and compliance assessments, often co-led by local CSOs to ensure transparency and legitimacy. In cases of non-compliance, the model emphasizes prompt remedies, such as financial compensation and the culturally appropriate revision of harmful practices. However, there is no guarantee that the remedy and prevention measures will be successful. Particularly in situations that cannot be successfully addressed from the outset, strong partnerships, including local CSOs, are essential. Their active participation fosters an iterative approach in which the measures are continuously reassessed and refined, based on local feedback. This iterative feedback loop promotes adaptive learning across all levels of the GVC, allowing governance mechanisms to evolve in response to rightsholders' lived experiences and emerging challenges. The governance model thus fosters a proactive, locally grounded framework that addresses violations as they arise and builds systemic resilience against future human rights abuses.

A transversal element of the theoretical model is the dialectical interaction between conflict and collaboration. Our model suggests that this interaction is inevitable for effective and context-sensitive governance. Collaboration fosters shared standards and mutual understanding, while moments of conflict serve to challenge and refine these standards in response to local needs and power inequalities. This dialectic highlights the productive role of tensions and conflicts as essential to governance that is adaptive and responsive to rightsholders' realities (Banerjee, 2018). Unlike traditional top-down approaches that rely on cascading standardized practices, our model, informed by local CSOs, can adapt to each community's unique socio-political, cultural, and economic conditions (Wettstein et al., 2019). By tailoring solutions to local realities, MNCs are better equipped to respond proactively to emerging issues, ideally preventing human rights violations before they occur. By centering the voices of local CSOs and rightsholders, this model holds the potential not only to mitigate human rights violations but

also to establish an ethical form of governance that genuinely upholds the dignity, rights, and well-being of those at the most vulnerable ends of the GVCs.

Theoretical Contributions

In this study, we investigate how locally grounded frameworks, including local CSOs, can develop a mode of social governance of GVCs that prioritizes the needs of marginalized rightsholders. While existing social governance approaches regard civil society as an important non-economic actor (e.g., Gereffi & Lee, 2016), little attention has been paid to what is happening 'on the ground' in GVCs (Bruijn et al., 2023). Building on this, we identify the distinctive characteristics of locally grounded collaboration and its impediments and facilitating conditions. We elaborate on the unique role of local CSOs and how their close relationships with rightsholders provide important insights for transnational collective action. We propose a locally grounded GVC governance that integrates local CSOs and affected communities often sidelined or underrepresented in current GVC governance frameworks. Our main theoretical contributions are twofold.

First, the study contributes to the scholarly conversation on contextually sensitive GVC governance models. Based on a unique dataset, we develop a theoretical model of how local CSOs can be integrated into the governance of GVCs, enabling locally grounded GVC governance that accounts for the needs of marginalized rightsholders. This contextualization of governance mechanisms holds the potential to establish a more ethical form of social governance that genuinely upholds the dignity, rights, and well-being of those at the most vulnerable ends of GVCs. Traditional frameworks often treat governance standards as universally applicable, relying on one-size-fits-all approaches that fail to account for the nuanced socio-political and cultural realities of different regions. Conversely, our model theorizes that context-sensitive mechanisms that center on rightsholders are crucial for effectively addressing diverse human rights challenges, as they allow for tailored responses that resonate with specific local conditions. Such a rightsholder-centric approach resonates with recent calls in the business ethics literature for governance models that account for local agencies (Schormair & Gerlach, 2020) and to "consider multiple voices and perspectives in the process of governing and finding solutions" (Böhm et al., 2022, p. 839). At the same time, a rightsholder-centric model may be the only way to address the root causes of human rights violations (Shivji, 2024; Wilhelm, 2024) and thus render MNCs' due diligence truly effective. The proposed model offers a theoretical shift from a static, meeting-minimum-legal-standards, compliance-driven model to an adaptive, locally grounded

GVC governance framework that is genuinely collaborative and can evolve with local insights.

Second, our study contributes to the discussions within critical CSR by challenging the traditional, MNC-centric top-down structures that have historically characterized GVC governance. Traditional GVC governance frameworks often reinforce corporate power by framing compliance as a linear top-down mandate, where MNCs set standards and dictate practices with limited input from local stakeholders. By contrast, we introduce a model that redistributes power within GVCs (Banerjee, 2018), positioning local CSOs as essential rather than peripheral actors. This approach extends the critical CSR perspective by demonstrating how local actors, when empowered, can generate context-sensitive insights and help shape adaptable, responsive measures that reflect the lived experiences of rightsholders. The model is built on a multi-actor, iterative process in which the dynamics of conflict and collaboration interact and shape the outcomes of the governance model. This dialectic can lead to tensions and conflict, but also to effective collaboration between MNCs and CSOs. We argue that this coexistence is essential to the development of a mode of social governance that is adaptive and responsive to rightsholders' realities. Little previous research combined analysis of both conflictual and collaborative interactions (Bruijn et al., 2023). By viewing the coexistence of conflict and collaboration as a necessary driver of the model, we extend current understandings with a dialectical element of iteration.

Avenues for Future Research

When interpreting the results of this study, some limitations need to be considered. First, the study adopts a civil society perspective (Sun et al., 2021), for which no information was directly collected at the level of MNCs. This helped us to preserve the anonymity of our interview participants, since a decision not to do so would have meant revealing the names of CSOs to corporate representatives in order to discuss the collaboration from their perspective. Thus, all mentions of non-civil society actors are from the perspective of CSOs. Integrating additional perspectives could enhance our understanding of the processes and dynamics of the collaborations investigated. For instance, one interviewee described collaborations between several MNCs within one industry, who join forces to address human rights issues at their joint supplier; as this was just one such reference, it was not followed up here. We decided, on balance, that the case for preserving the anonymity of our informants, particularly for such a sensitive topic, outweighed these potential benefits: they will be a fruitful area for future research. This tradeoff could be usefully explored via a case study of a particular MNC-CSR network, examining the various actors and their roles.

Second, two limitations derive from our study being solution-oriented, seeking to explore approaches that successfully address human rights violations in GVCs. Firstly, when conducting the interviews, we were strongly motivated to identify solutions, speaking primarily about successful collaborative approaches between CSOs and MNCs. Therefore, elements of conflictuality may be underrepresented in the data we gathered, including potential conflicts and power inequalities between the various CSOs in the model. Secondly, this solution-oriented nature shines a favorable light on our main informants, the CSO representatives and their organizations, which risks framing them as saviors. However, CSOs do not, by definition, hold the moral high ground regarding human rights issues in GVCs. While they may not be profit-driven, "their power and legitimacy to represent marginalized groups must also be scrutinized along with their motives and intentions" (Banerjee, 2014, p. 91). Moreover, not all outcomes of CSO involvement benefit local communities and rightsholders. Therefore, another fruitful direction for future research would be a critical perspective that examines potentially undesired outcomes of CSO involvement.

Finally, and closely related to the above, our theoretical model assumes that MNCs can, under certain conditions, be persuaded to integrate local CSOs into GVC governance. However, as the critical CSR literature highlights, MNCs often possess substantial structural power, potentially rendering CSO advocacy ineffective, particularly when corporate interests are misaligned with human rights objectives (Banerjee, 2018). In cases where MNCs remain unconvinced or actively resist engagement, CSOs may escalate their confrontational strategies, but this does not always yield change, particularly when MNCs have little reputational risk or operate in institutional contexts where external pressure has limited influence. This presents a boundary condition of our model, since its effectiveness depends on MNCs being at least somewhat susceptible to normative, reputational, or legal pressure. Future research could explore cases where CSOs fail to influence MNC behavior, examining alternative mechanisms—such as legal action, investor activism, or regulatory interventions—that could complement civil society advocacy when MNCs remain unresponsive to collaborative or confrontational approaches.

Appendix

See Tables 1, 2.

Table 1 Overview of interviewed Civil Society Organizations, with their geographical work purview

#	CSO Description	Geographic work purview	Country of operation, if non-global	Involved advocacy work	Doing field-work	Doing research	Date of interview	Duration of interview
1	Organization for sustainable development	Global	Global		x	x	10.08.2021	00:45
2	Organization for the protection of indigenous people and nature	National	Brazil	x	x		10.08.2021	00:47
3	Global organization for a just and ecologic agricultural sector (national branch)	National	Germany	x	x		10.08.2021	00:23
4	Association for the protection of the environment	National	Germany	x	x	x	11.08.2021	00:23
5	Network strengthening bilateral exchange between civil society and corporations	Binational	Germany & Brazil		x	x	11.08.2021	00:36
6	Association aiming at social, economic, and environmental justice	National	Uruguay	x	x		12.08.2021	00:30
7	National branch of a global anti-poverty organization	National	Vietnam	x	x	x	14.08.2021	00:43
8	Trade union federation	National	Germany	x	x		24.08.2021	01:13
9	Trade union	National	Nigeria	x	x		24.08.2021	00:52
10	Organization aiming at gender equality and working against hunger* ^o	National	Brazil		x		25.08.2021	00:15
11	Association for local development and education	National	Brazil		x		25.08.2021	00:45
12	National representation for indigenous peoples ^o	National	Brazil	x	x		26.08.2021	00:27
13	Member association for environmental protection	National	Sweden	x	x	x	30.08.2021	00:46

Table 1 (continued)

#	CSO Description	Geographic work purview	Country of operation, if non-global	Involved advocacy work	Doing field-work	Doing research	Date of interview	Duration of interview
14	Organization aiming for national sustainable development and community health	National	Colombia	x	x	x	31.08.2021	00:43
15	Association for the protection of the environment	National	Germany	x	x	x	01.09.2021	00:51
16	Institution for dialogue and an inclusive society	National	Bangladesh	x		x	01.09.2021	01:02
17	Initiative for environmental protection and stakeholder inclusion	National	Ukraine	x	x		02.09.2021	00:50
#	CSO description	Geographic work purview	Country of operation, if non-global	Involved advocacy work	Doing field-work	Doing research	Date of interview	Duration of interview
18	Network combating poverty and hunger	National & Regional	Germany & Global South	x		x	07.09.2021	00:34
19	Think tank for global sustainability and polity analysis	Global	Global	x		x	09.09.2021	00:35
20	Global organization for a just and ecologic agricultural sector	Global	Global	x		x	10.09.2021	00:46
21	Thinktank for labor and human rights	National	Vietnam		x	x	10.09.2021	00:53
22	Network strengthening working conditions at plantations	Regional	Southeast Asia	x	x	x	10.09.2021	00:55
23	Institute for developing, promoting, and protecting human rights	National	Indonesia	x	x	x	13.09.2021	00:55

Table 1 (continued)

#	CSO description	Geographic work purview	Country of operation, if non-global	Involved advocacy work	Doing field-work	Doing research	Date of interview	Duration of interview
24	Initiative pressuring managers and shareholders for corporate sustainability	National	Germany	x	x		13.09.2021	00:39
25	Network for justice around the globe and the preservation of livelihoods	National & Regional	Germany & Global South	x		x	14.09.2021	01:01
26	Organization for environmental policy analysis	Global	Global	x		x	14.09.2021	00:55
27	Trade union for industrial production workers	National	Turkey	x	x		15.09.2021	00:44
28	Advocacy and campaigning organization for sustainability	Global	Global	x	x	x	15.09.2021	00:22
29	National organization for sustainable development and social justice*	National	Brazil	x	x		16.09.2021	01:15
30	Network for sustainable and just development	Global	Global	x	x		20.09.2021	00:45
31	Institution for democracy, equality, and justice	National	Indonesia	x	x		20.09.2021	00:43
32	Civil society organization aiming for social equity	National	Brazil	x	x		22.09.2021	01:05

Table 1 (continued)

#	CSO description	Geographic work purview	Country of operation, if non-global	Involved advocacy work	Doing field-work	Doing research	Date of interview	Duration of interview
33	Regional coalition for high working standards in the garment sector	Regional	Asia	x		x	23.09.2021	00:58
34	An organization for a sustainable society, justice, and human rights*	National	Costa Rica	x	x		23.09.2021	01:06
35	Trade union and active member in a trade union network	National	Germany	x	x		23.09.2021	00:52
36	Advocacy organization for economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights	National	Brazil	x	x	x	23.09.2021	00:41
#	CSO description	Geographic work purview	Country of operation, if non-global	Involved advocacy work	Doing field-work	Doing research	Date of interview	Duration of interview
37	Action-oriented organization for sustainability	National	Uganda	x	x	x	28.09.2021	00:42
38	Initiative for equal environmental rights and sustainability	National	Sri Lanka	x	x		11.10.2021	00:55
39	Platform for just transformation	National	Czech Republic	x	x		12.10.2021	00:41
40	Global network fighting for fair trade	Global	Global	x	x	x	12.10.2021	00:47
41	Independent association for socio-economic transformation	National	Slovenia	x	x		14.10.2021	00:28

Table 1 (continued)

#	CSO description	Geographic work purview	Country of operation, if non-global	Involved advocacy work	Doing field-work	Doing research	Date of interview	Duration of interview
42	Institute aiming to bring economic relations together with justice and peace	National & Regional	Germany & Global South	x	x		14.10.2021	00:57
43	Labor union	National	Nigeria	x	x		15.10.2021	00:22
44	Organization for legal protection of human rights	Global	Global	x		x	21.10.2021	00:43
45	Global organization for a just and ecologic agricultural sector (national branch)	National	Uganda		x		21.10.2021	00:51
46	Initiative analyzing and supporting collective social and human rights	National	Egypt		x	x	27.10.2021	00:56
47	Organization combatting poverty and human rights violations	Global	Global	x	x	x	6.10.2021	00:51
48	Organization for gender equality and protection of women*	National	Mozambique		x		11.11.2021	01:18
49	Global union and network for national trade unions	Global	Global	x	x	x	12.11.2021	00:43
50	Trade union	National	Ghana		x		12.11.2021	00:35
51	Association for the protection of national cultural and environmental heritage	National	Georgia	x			15.11.2021	00:36
52	Organization for the alleviation of global poverty	Global	Global	x	x	x	23.11.2021	00:31

Table 1 (continued)

#	CSO description	Geographic work purview	Country of operation, if non-global	Involved advocacy work	Doing field-work	Doing research	Date of interview	Duration of interview
53	Member association focusing on the protection of nature	National	Germany	x	x	x	26.11.2021	00:48
54	Organization for the protection of human rights and environmental standards*	National	Brazil		x	x	30.11.2021	01:11
								Σ 41:38

*The interview took place in Spanish or Portuguese with a translator

°Two interview participants were present during the interview

Table 2 Additional interview quotes for all second-order themes

Sample interview excerpts	1st order theme	2nd order theme	Aggregate dimension
‘There are multinational companies, they are companies from the West, but if you try to engage them on unionization, they tell you “oh no, we tell you, we are working for company X, and that company X has no office in Nigeria.” I don’t understand how I’m going to look for the end employer if there is no, if this kind of interaction is not put in place.’ [CSO 9, Nigeria]	Local CSOs have difficulties in reaching MNCs	Lacking trust and feeling unheard	Impediments to local collaboration
‘When we work against companies and they have differences in standards in Europe or in the United States to Colombia. And we evidence that, that this is something that happens for instance with the oil and gas sector, we know that in Colombia human right issues are very common. And this is not supposed to be expected in any of the global north companies but still happens. And they just, let’s say, they clean their hands and, and say “okay something which is happening there, but it is nothing that they will stop doing what they do because it is sort of issues.” So, this human rights violation is, which is very common in Colombia (...) are used to hide (...) from the headquarters which are in the global north and is, and is nothing changing.’ [CSO 14, Colombia]	Local CSOs distrust MNCs’ behavior and intentions		
‘X [MNC] is refusing to conduct an impact assessment, and at the moment, we’re at a point where we’ve reiterated this demand. If there’s no positive response, it essentially means that our dialogue is over, and we’ll focus on public outreach instead.’ [CSO 47, Global]	Local CSOs perceive need for public shaming campaigns to reach MNCs		
‘We, civil society and the transnational corporations would be sitting in the same table as if we were on an equal standing with transnational corporations to take decisions or whatever. That doesn’t work. That simply doesn’t work. I mean, we don’t have any place (...) in the decisions of, of companies. I mean it can, it can, try and play us out and pay lip service to our demands and think, but, no, truly mean that, that doesn’t, there’s no place for us in their decisions.’ [CSO 6, Uruguay]	Local CSOs lack power in negotiations	Power inequalities	
‘Who is actually gonna benefit from the mine that X [MNC] is gonna have in Chile? Probably not the vast majority of people. There’s probably not gonna be any sort of trickle-down economic benefits happening. It’s probably, the profit is gonna concentrate in the hands of a very small number of people. I don’t see a conflict there. I see an abuse of power there. I really wouldn’t call it a conflict of interest, I would call it an abuse of power by people who are more powerful than others.’ [CSO 28, Global]	MNCs abuse their power in resource exploitation		
‘But I think it’s sometimes difficult because you have a great imbalance of power you know. So you have the trade unions that depend on the jobs (ahm), that depend on the economy and you have the local communities that have not many resources, (ah) language barriers, time scarcity (ahm) and on the other hand you have companies with big things and everything. And the government involved sometimes also wants to read the benefits from an economical point of view.’ [CSO 36, Brazil]	MNCs dominate GVCs		
‘While getting involved with the communities and talking to them, what happened was that the community was really separated, there were problems within the community, divisions were created. (...) Corporations in this context do not well to the communities they are involved with. (...) The risk of human rights and environmental defenders being threatened or killed within these processes of dialog with corporations is really high.’ [CSO 44, Global]	Direct consultation between MNCs and rights holders elicits negative effects	Oppressing rightsholders	
‘This is a huge business [suppliers]. You are a small person in a small village (...) There has been a lot of conflicts and problems, some dangerous ones when they tried to kind of keep the people quiet and maybe pay them off.’ [CSO 17, Ukraine]	Rightsholders do not report on abuses because they fear negative consequences		

Table 2 (continued)

Sample interview excerpts	1st order theme	2nd order theme	Aggregate dimension
'An intermediary is needed here. These are very unequal levels—large multinational corporations on one side and the affected local communities on the other (...). This is what it takes to make a supply chain work. And it's no coincidence that power imbalances heavily favour large corporations, where wealth, power, decision-making authority, and political influence are concentrated. This is positioned far above those affected. I think it's crucial that these communities have intermediaries to support them, so they can advocate for their rights and be placed in a position where they can negotiate. Otherwise, they stand no chance at all.' [CSO 5, Germany & Brazil] 'We have colleagues at X [CSO], at Y [CSO] in Brazil. (...) If they have fears, that is the whole essence of the network. Is for them to network with their counterparts in those countries. (...) "These are the issues; how do we resolve it?"' [CSO 9, Nigeria] 'We work a lot with solidarity campaigns across the world (...) to show our support and for example with the situation in Chile, we would also write letters. In this case not to the president of Chile, but letters expressing that we stand in solidarity with the situation in Chile and have also received letters from other countries regarding the situation that we have here.' [CSO 48, Mozambique] 'Dialogue takes place on a case-by-case basis, focusing on specific issues. For instance, we're currently holding discussions with X [MNC] about water pollution in Mexico, as we have partners there with specific concerns regarding X [MNC].' [CSO 47, Global] 'Now the art, is to get as much global flair as possible. That's why we have European and global trade union organizations. (...) They [global CSOs] simply say, "Okay, we know very well that Y [German CSO] is on the supervisory board [of a company in its country]. If there is a problem [in a different country], then we write to Y [German CSO] and they (...) they will take care of it." [CSO 8, Germany] 'And I believe that collaboration to a large extent will douse whatever tension. (...) We want the issues to be discussed, we want to bring out facts to the table. (...) Let's discuss, let's engage, let's understand what the fears are. Until we understand the fears, we cannot cooperate. (...) The German Multinational Companies win, the Nigerian workers win, it becomes a win-win situation.' [CSO 9, Nigeria]	Home CSOs enable local CSOs to engage with MNCs and suppliers Home CSOs identify relevant local CSOs Local CSOs and home CSOs mutually reach out to each other Home CSOs approach MNCs with concerns of local CSOs Global CSOs mediate the relationship between home CSOs and local CSOs Continuously expanding collaboration through mutual learning and synergies between all actors	Ensuring participation of local CSOs Establishing relationships Cultivation of transnational networks	Conditions for local CSO and transnational collective action

Table 2 (continued)

Sample interview excerpts	1st order theme	2nd order theme	Aggregate dimension
‘So, the workers at the bottom will not be able to do the process, unless there will be somebody or institutions like labor NGO who can provide support.’ [CSO 22, Southeast Asia]	Local CSOs build trusting relationships with rights holders	Empowering and giving voice to rights holders	Local CSO Action
‘The workers can identify the practice of GBVP [gender-based violence practice] that they experience in daily life, in daily working experience. More like, they name what the GBVP, that happens every days in your production line, is. Yelling, throwing bundles of stuff, things. And then, they [workers] make the list, and then they use the list as a standard, as an indicator to monitor. (...)It will give power to the workers.’ [CSO 33, Asia]	Local CSOs train and educate rights holders on human rights standards		
‘We have used this power of little stakeholders in some of our confrontations and we could have a right with little improvements. But, you know that this group, they are really, they are marginal. The group of stakeholders which always, I don't know they, they could stand with their position but it won't be a real like way of changing the set of the big companies.’ [CSO 14, Colombia]	Local CSOs leverage their relationships with and their proximity to rights holders	Unveiling human rights issues	
‘Civil society can be partner of that kinds of companies. We can do say, we can help with setting up the monitoring, monitoring guidance, and some of the interventions. In terms of sustainability, human rights and to do evaluations and see who are affected, whose human rights are most violated.’ [CSO 7, Vietnam]	Local CSOs access first-hand information about the working conditions at suppliers		
‘And when there is violation and conflict of interest, there needs to be a dialogue happening on, on the roundtable that I mentioned earlier. What we often do is, we write, we write a letter with all of our concerns and our worries and our expectations and we send that to the president and he then addresses this letter to all the institutions that are involved and urges them to answer to this letter. And the president sends it to the companies and to all the different stakeholders and this is how we would act in such a situation.’ [CSO 48, Mozambique]	Local CSOs address policy-makers with complaints	Confronting companies and governments	
‘We started this complaint process in Georgian court and also with the organisation. And then the project itself went badly and the conflict arises with locals. Because they didn't participate in the project at all and their interests aren't reflected. There is always tension. We have so many stopped project, for example hydro projects, and our government is saying, they are angry, they blame it to my organization for example that we stopped it and we need it. But it's there problem because they didn't manage a fair process for locals.’ [CSO 51, Georgia]	CSOs sue companies or project when local communities are not involved		

Table 2 (continued)

Sample interview excerpts	1st order theme	2nd order theme	Aggregate dimension
'And I believe that collaboration to a large extent will douse whatever tension. (...) We want the issues to be discussed, we want to bring out facts to the table. And until we bring our facts to the table and engage them [MNEs] in negotiations.' [CSO 9, Nigeria] 'Of course, it is utopian to have everyone at the table. (...) But one possibility is to have a broad selection of established civil society organizations, which have contacts at the local level or to minorities, to smaller population groups. So, to channel knowledge. And that's what we [German CSO] are trying to speak, in the preliminary work, through networks, so to speak, that the knowledge is channeled.' [CSO 4, Germany] 'Then it goes to a global level, where the global company, together with Y [Global CSO] or another global trade union organization, then sits down and asks where are the problems when it comes to complying with human rights?' [CSO 8, Germany] 'When we found this [hazardous material] in this [product] actually, we launched this data and we have invited all the companies. (...) And then we said "ok, we will help you to, to reduce your [hazardous material] levels and we have brought the raw material importers, the laboratories, and also the small and medium companies. And companies like X [MNC], all these international brands, so they were also there, and they had some difficulties, and we tried to resolve some of those issues. (...) We were able to resolve it [issues] because the big companies can do all this. But medium, the SMEs don't have that capacity. So that is where we have supported.' [CSO 38, Sri Lanka] 'We are still developing indicators. (...) Finding independent indicators is not that easy. I think it's good to work along these criteria of effectiveness and to adapt the indicators flexibly again and again. (...) But we are still in the middle of it.' [CSO 18, Germany & Global South] 'The goal must always be to improve working conditions so that human rights violations do not occur. Therefore, it is very important that the colleagues from the factories take the precaution of approaching the company again and also demand that no (...) violations take place along the supply chain or that the situation improves so that the due diligence obligations are observed (...) Probably, formats are required in which all stakeholders are participating.' [CSO 35, Germany]	Local CSOs share local expertise with Home CSOs and MNCs Home CSOs share experience with Local CSOs MNCs, suppliers and CSOs discuss human rights standards along GVCs MNCs, suppliers and CSOs negotiate development trajectories Home CSOs and local CSOs contribute to determining relevant human rights indicators Home CSOs use power to pressure MNCs to design measures	Sharing expertise and experience Contextualizing human rights standards Designing measures for prevention and remedy	Negotiation of human rights commitments

Table 2 (continued)

Sample interview excerpts	1st order theme	2nd order theme	Aggregate dimension
‘We have a dialogue [between CSOs and MNCs] on grievance mechanisms, they [MNCs] participating in dialogue have their own. I don’t think they are perfect. They know that too. That’s why they said they wanted to think about a cross-company complaints mechanism. And we have chosen X [country] as a, let’s say, test country, or, or, or where we will try it out. For the reason that many these companies are also located there. There are also many suppliers there. So there is also a network of suppliers there. And we are part of it. Of course, we have also made contact with civil society in X [country]. That means trade unions, but also human rights institutions, for example, have been included.’ [CSO 8, Germany]	MNCs involve home CSOs and local CSOs in implementing complaint procedures	Establishing a grievance mechanism	Collective implementation of remedy and prevention
‘It’s crucial for any lead firms to monitor their supply chains in the certain countries by having good contacts with the local civil society. (...) We have a lot of in-depth information that the lead firms have no idea about. And we have networks of workers who are able to tell us exactly what’s going on. (...) I’m sure that even by the best auditing tools, the lead firms were not able to, to get to know (this).’ [CSO 21, Vietnam]	Local CSOs forward the complaints received from rights holder to global CSOs and home CSOs		
‘That is to say, in such a case [complaint of human rights violation] we would of course discuss it with the companies and then of course also use the mechanisms that we have, so to speak, the monitoring system that we have established with X [MNC], to solve the problem. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t.’ [CSO 49, Global]	MNCs & CSOs consult upon solving complaints concerning human rights violations in GVCs	Proving remedy to violations	
‘I find this idea actually very good and something similar happened recently in a company in the north of Mozambique, where there were several complaints of violations. And the company or the, the (åhm) parent company of the original country heard of all of these complaints and then decided to compensate all the people in Mozambique locally, that suffered from these violations, which I thought was a very good thing to do, to happen.’ [CSO 48, Mozambique]	MNCs compensates rights holders for local human rights violations		
‘Workers’ councils from Europe (...) determine the working conditions at suppliers together with the management, and sometimes look directly at them. And at the same time, they [workers’ councils] have the job of talking to the trade unions. Because the conversation between trade unionists and trade unionists is more open than if there is someone from the management present. (...) This naturally leads to networks.’ [CSO 8, Germany]	MNCs, home CSOs and local CSOs cooperate on examining suppliers	Monitoring and improving suppliers jointly	
‘To take part collaboratively as a partner to do the audit because I mean, it’s not only X [MNC], it’s not only the brands that have their interests to do the audit. (...) The problem is the union has never been asked to collaborate in the equal term to do the audit. (...) That’s really a problem, the top-down process of the audit. So, that kind of process, it’s really not helpful in making this supply chain sustainable. (...) It should be like a collaborative because I mean both parties are highly interested in the audit process and because sometimes the audit result will affect the workers.’ [CSO 33, Asia]	MNCs and CSOs jointly collect data on human rights standards		

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Declarations

Ethical Approval This study adheres to standards of integrity and transparency and is compliant with all ethical standards. Impartiality of the research and conflicts of interests are not given. All interviewees consented to the anonymized publication of the interview content. Interviews were only recorded and transcribed when the interview participants explicitly consented.

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