

# **Sustainable Development between Ideology and Materiality: Issues framing in the Global Value chain for African Mineral Resources**

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**Abstract:** The paper draws on recent advances in critical management studies conceptualizing Sustainable Development as a 'contested field' made of tensions and power relations between actors holding a variety of roles in Global Value Chains. On the basis of exploratory fieldwork involving the analysis of 15 discourses produced by representatives of mining corporations, civil society movements, and governments, we explore the ways in which SD is being defined and mobilized in the GVC for mineral resources in Africa. Beyond differences between the SD goals and positions adopted by these various actors, we observe a divide between the 'global discourse' adopted in all three categories of actors to convey a disembodied, broad and long term vision of SD issues, and a 'local' discourse giving concrete, specific substance to SD issues by accounting for the particular types of social, environmental or economic problems encountered at the mining sites. We build on Spicer's notion of 'spatial scale' to highlight the theoretical implications of such results in terms of understanding the dynamics of social and political forces at play in the SD arena of global value chains.

## **Introduction**

Although the concept of sustainable development (SD) is mobilized as a unified analytical construct to convey the idea of a harmonious balance between economic, social and environmental goals in the development of organizations, countries or other territorial entities, the variety of ways in which it can be applied, adapted, or contested, in both academic and practitioner spheres, throws doubts on the existence of a natural convergence of its economic, social and environmental dimensions. Opening the ‘black box’ of SD policies rather reveals a multiplicity of discourses, tools and practices formed and used in an evolving “nebula” (Chiapello, 2013) where economic, social and environmental goals are pursued, often in contradictory or conflicting ways, by heterogeneous actors including firms, social movements, and public institutions (Levy, 2008).

Such view of SD as a ‘contested field’ draws on recent advances in a variety of social sciences including management studies (Levy and Kaplan, 2008; Levy et al., 2010), political economy (Sum and Ngai, 2005; Sum, 2010) or law (Ireland and Pillay, 2010; Rodriguez-Garavito, 2005) where they offer a minority, albeit growing, alternative to consensual views of SD and related issues of corporate social responsibility (CSR) failing to account for power relations, conflicts and contradictions. More than thirty years after the notion of SD appeared in international debates, adopting such critical perspective and challenging the unity of this concept, in order to make visible and analyse the heterogeneous and contradictory forces involved in the development of organizations and

territories, might prove all the more necessary that these unacknowledged and poorly understood dynamics probably play an instrumental role in the persisting difficulties faced by managerial systems to conceive and adopt truly sustainable forms of development.

This paper aims to contribute to such endeavour by analysing the ways in which SD issues have been casted and addressed in the extractive industry, a sector where social and environmental nuisances have been identified as major causes of concerns for the sustainability of industrial activities as a whole (Warhurst, 1998). We adopt a Global Value Chain (GVC) perspective in order to acknowledge the complex inter- and intra-organizational networks forming the backbone of this sector by linking together highly concentrated decision-making centres in the global North, i.e., the headquarters of the few leading transnational corporations dominating the extractive market, to the numerous exploitation sites disseminated primarily in the global South (Bridge, 2008; Mayes et al., 2011), thus forming a so-called producer-driven chain for extractive activities (Bair, 2009; Gereffi, 1994). This chain is exemplar not only in the acuteness of social and environmental problems generated by extractive activities, but also in the variety of actors involved in these issues and debates, including mining corporations, public and private financial institutions, industry associations, international organizations, labour unions, NGOs and civil society movements.

On the basis of an exploratory approach, we offer a first appreciation of the lines of convergence and divergence observable in the ways in which a variety of these actors characterize SD issues. In a first section, we present our theoretical framework to conceptualize SD as a contested field in GVCs. We then present some general

characteristics of extractive GVCs in Africa in terms of power relations and their economic, social and environmental dimensions, followed by our methodological choices for this exploratory fieldwork based on eight interviews and six allocutions of representatives of mining corporations, governments and NGOs located in the North and the South. The third section is devoted to our preliminary results. In line with our theoretical expectation that various actors would hold distinct, potentially conflictual or at least weakly compatible views, we identify core differences in the ways in which corporate, government and NGO representatives frame SD issues and policies. Nevertheless, the main lines of divergence do not so much appear between these various categories of actors as they do between what we characterize as a ‘global’ discourse on SD associated with high levels of abstraction and a long term perspective, and a ‘local’ discourse focused on concrete economic, social and environmental damages calling for pragmatic responses. We elaborate on these findings in a concluding section highlighting the ways in which the SD ‘nebula’ reproduces a dominant coalition of corporate, governmental and civil society interests at the global level that excludes weak groups and evacuate their claims for pragmatic and immediate SD needs at the local level.

### **Sustainable Development as a Contested Field in GVCs**

SD is typically defined in broad generic terms borrowed from the Brundtland (1987) report, as a form of development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, and with equally broad notions of its “three elements - economic, social and environmental” having to be considered “in equal measure” at the political level, in the words for instance of the

European Commission.<sup>1</sup> Applied at the managerial level, this macro-societal notion translates in terms of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) with two salient characteristics: its voluntary character, based on the free initiative of corporations to “integrate social and environmental concerns to their business operations and their interaction with stakeholders”, as expressed in the Green paper of the European Commission on CSR (2001); and its consensual quality, evacuating any notion of power relations or conflict in the relationships of a corporation to its various stakeholders, in favour of normative notions of “acting in an ethical and transparent way” that “contributes to the health and welfare of society” as phrased in the more recent ISO norm 26000 on the social responsibility of organizations.

Such consensual views are in line with dominant conceptualizations of SD and CSR in the economic and managerial literature where these approaches are typically casted in a contractual, market-oriented perspective based on free will and an emphasis on the economic returns to be obtained from ‘investing’ in socially responsible behaviors (see for instance, Porter and Kramer, 2006) by building win-win relationships with stakeholders (Freeman, 1984).

More recent initiatives such as the highly publicized UN report prepared by John Ruggie (2008) implicitly conveyed some elements of a contested view of SD by addressing consequences of power relations in the exercise of corporate responsibility vis-à-vis stakeholders, in the form of the State “duty to protect against human rights abuses by third parties, including business », the corporate responsibility to « act with due diligence to avoid infringing on the rights of others », and « greater access by victims to effective

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<sup>1</sup> [http://europa.eu/legislation\\_summaries/environment/sustainable\\_development/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/environment/sustainable_development/index_en.htm)

remedy, judicial and non-judicial ». Such evolution enhances the heterogeneity of the SD « nebula » by adding to voluntary unilateral or multilateral initiatives a mix of more constraining combinations of voluntary and legally binding approaches.

A critical perspective on SD draws on social movement research to cast corporate initiatives as a response to mounting social criticism, and an attempt to circumvent these oppositional forces by promoting a neutral, ‘win-win’ approach to stakeholder ‘partnerships’. Hence critics view contemporary CSR as a ‘depoliticized arena of collaboration’ (Rodriguez-Garavito, 2005: 209) that ‘downplays the irreconcilability of interests’ (Ireland and Pillay, 2007) and the ‘deep inequalities’ unfolding between global capital and local labor, between North and South, and as a result of declining state regulation in GVCs (Rodriguez-Garavito, *ibid.*).

In global industries, a GVC perspective proves instrumental to ‘re-politicize’ CSR by uncovering the forms of governance by which so-called ‘lead firms’ or ‘flagship firms’ coordinate and control, either directly in their subsidiaries or indirectly through various layers of intermediates in subcontracting networks, the interrelated but globally dispersed activities involved in the design, production and sales of their products and services (Gereffi, 1994; Ernst and Kim, 2002). Although such chains have predominantly been studied in an economic perspective to assess their contribution to southern countries in terms of jobs and growth (Gereffi, 1995, Gereffi, Humphrey, Sturgeon, 2005; Bair, 2005) a growing literature has been more recently concerned with the rise of new forms of transnational activist networks (TANs) that emerged in the 1990s with the objective of making visible the social and environmental conditions of GVCs operations in the global South, and to challenge the social responsibility of corporate headquarters holding

dominant economic power at the top of these chains (Routledge, 2000), in sectors as diverse as apparel (Rodriguez-Garavito, 2005; Bair and Palpacuer, 2013), coffee (Talbot, 2004), or pharmaceuticals (Andrée, 2005; Schurman and Munro, 2008).

Another line of critical research has focused on uncovering the complex ways in which lead firms or their headquarters used CSR devices as a power tool to further transfer risks and constraints on suppliers (Sum, 2010). Sum sees CSR as offering the micro-governing capacities needed to sustain the hegemony of a neoliberal order at the macro level. In the face of growing civil society discontent with the social consequences of neoliberal globalization, the dominant elites have produced what she labels a ‘new ethicalism’ that ‘helps to re-engineer consent by providing neo-liberal common sense with a soft moral spin’ (*op. cit.*: pp.). Likewise, Ireland and Pillay consider CSR as ‘ameliorative’, seeking to ‘temper without unsettling or displacing the idea of the corporation as a private, exclusively shareholder and profit-oriented enterprise’ (2010:pp). These authors are inspired by Gramsci’s (1971) notion of cultural hegemony and its recent use in international political economy to characterize the ways in which a ‘transnational historical bloc’ forming a new dominant coalition emerged and maintained itself by integrating the structural power of capital with a consumerist ideology (Gill, 1995, Cox, 1987).

Levy (2008) integrates such developments in a neo-gramscian framework seeing GVCs or global production networks (GPNs) as ‘contested organizational fields’ unfolding in a ‘transnational space’ governed by international elites, institutions and ideologies, in which actors of various types seek to shape the field along their own agenda, including not only firms and governments but also activists and their role in “constructing and

politicizing the GPN as a field in which corporate practices are linked economically and discursively to poor working conditions (...) in developing countries” (2008: 13). Levy further points the limits of conventional CSR perspectives that have “tended to view corporate practices, prices, and working conditions as matters of managerial discretion rather than an outcome of production networks as economic, political, and ideological systems » (2008 : 947). In their analysis of the CSR framework elaborated by the Global Reporting Initiative, Levy, Brown and de Jong (2010) uncover the contrasted ways in which NGOs and corporations have respectively used the discourse of CSR, the former seeking « to shift the locus of corporate governance towards civil society stakeholders », while the latter used CSR « as a form of self-regulation that serves to accommodate external pressures, construct the corporation as a moral agent (...), and marginalize more radical activists” (2010 : 10). Levy and his colleagues primarily investigated these interrelations in ‘global issues arenas’ (Levy and Kaplan, 2008) such as the Global Reporting Initiative or international climate change negotiations (Levy and Egan, 2003), at a level qualified by Spicer (2006) as a ‘global space’, but leaving aside the dynamics at work in other ‘spatial scales’ of GVCs such as the national and the local. Spicer (2006) defines a spatial scale as a ‘geographic level of social activity’, produced by actors engaged in ‘political struggles’ through the core dynamics of capital accumulation, regulation, and political discourse. While he primarily used this notion to investigate the shifts in scale occurring through the processes of globalization, spatial scales can also prove useful to explore interrelations between



the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ in the SD dynamics of GVCs.

The current research uses such neo-gramscian perspective to investigate SD issues in the GVCs for mineral products in Africa, seeking to assess the degrees of convergence and divergence observable in the discourses of a variety of actors within this field. We investigate convergences and divergences not only between actors of various type such as corporations, governments and civil society organizations forming the backbone of the ‘transnational historical bloc’ in GVCs (Levy, 2008), but also between actors operating in various ‘spatial scales’ ranging from the global to the local. In doing so, we follow Spicer’s (2006) proposition that « the concept of spatial scale is particularly useful (...) to theorize the multiple geographic levels in which organizational logics are embedded », with a primary focus on the organizational logics developed around SD issues in GVCs.

## **Research field and Methods**

The mining industry exhibits key features of a GVC insofar as a few multinationals have gained control over a growing part of production and sales activities through a process of continuous mergers and acquisitions since the 1990s. The share of the top ten lead firms in the total value of global mineral production has grown from 26% in 1995 to 35% in 2008 (ECA, 2011), increasingly shifting the balance of power from States towards large corporations with transnational scopes of action. According to UNCTAD (2007), 15 out of the top 25 mining corporations were headquartered in the global North in 2005, with those at the top of the list such as Rio Tinto, Glencore, Anglo American or Wstrata,

headquartered in Switzerland, the UK or Australia, counting among the largest corporations in the world, while production was widely disseminated with a significant part in the global South.

Africa is one of the main producing regions for minerals in the world, generating about 75% of world platinum, 40% of chrome, and more than 15% of gold and manganese (APP, 2013), and it benefits from the well established presence of major mining multinationals such as Rio Tinto, Glencore, and others. However, with the exception of South Africa, this region is characterized by the low value of its mineral production, stemming from the fact that it mainly exports raw minerals in the form of concentrated or non-transformed products to which little or no value has been added locally (Curtis, 2011, ECA, 2009). From a GVC perspective, most of the economic value generated within these chains is thus captured outside the region. For instance, the value of production is multiplied by 117 between the upstream end and the downstream end of the chain for copper, by 173 for precious stones, and by 38 for iron (ECA, 2011).

Such highly unequal distribution of value across space in the GVC for African minerals combines with social and environmental nuisances that have received growing attention in recent years. The mining sector as a whole has been under increasing scrutiny in the press, scientific and NGO reports where the responsibility of leading corporations has been challenged by “organizations that denounced environmental damages, wealth capture and the lack of respect for the rights of local populations” (De Foucaucourt, 2011). Reports were produced by EarthWorks (2014), Oxfam America (2004), Human Rights Watch (2011, 2012), and the World Rainforest Movement (2004), among others, drawing on engineering expertise, at times coming from the extractive industry itself, to

assess and publicize its impacts at the local and global levels (De Foucaucourt, 2011).

Mining corporations have responded to these criticisms by developing CSR policies and joining multi-stakeholder initiatives such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative launched by Tony Blair at the Earth Summit of Johannesburg in 2002, now widely used as an industry standard to assess a corporation's engagement in SD policies. Moreover, loans made by international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation, and the African Development Bank, have increasingly been made conditional on the incorporation of a number of protective measures on the social and environmental conditions of extractive operations (APP, 2013). Finally, the Africa Progress Panel, a group of high profile international personalities formed by Kofi Annan in 2007, enhanced the visibility of these issues in the international arena, notably through its 2013 report focusing on *Equity in Extractives*.

The exploratory research conducted in the sector thus aimed at understanding and characterizing the interplay of corporate, civil society and governmental actors in the 'contested field' of GVCs for African minerals through a first round of interviews in these various categories of actor. Data were collected during several phases. First, one of the author was immersed for five months in 2012 in a French start up for consulting services dedicated to mining operators in Africa, ranging from technical services to financial engineering and training for mining operations and CSR policies. From a grounded theory perspective, issues of tensions and contradictions between the goals and approaches followed by a variety of actors first emerged from this insider observation. A second phase involved the systematic collection of secondary data on SD issues in the mining industry, and participation in 2013 to two multi-stakeholder conferences

dedicated to these questions, respectively held in France and Switzerland<sup>2</sup>. The first focused on the local case of Salsigne, one of the largest gold mines in Europe located in the South of France and closed in 2004, while the other addressed SD issues at the global level. Five allocutions made at these conferences were taped and transcribed. In addition, interviews were conducted, registered and transcribed in 2013 with a variety of actors located in Europe (France, the UK, Switzerland) and in Africa (Burkina, Gabon). Table 1 provides information on the profiles of corporate, public authority, and civil society actors whose discourses were analysed for this research (see Annex). One of the main limits of our methodological approach at this stage of the research lies in the lack of theoretical representativeness of the sample. Although this first round of exploratory data collection and analysis proved rich and useful in identifying emerging conceptual categories, it will have to be complemented by more systematic sampling and data collection for such categories to be deepened and elaborated upon in a theory-building perspective.

Our initial objective being to characterize SD discourses according to the institutional roles – enterprise, government, civil society – and location – North, South – of actors who produced them, we coded discourse contents by actors' category under three major headings including SD perceived problems, desirable solutions and obstacles, along the lines of our interview guide. However, over the course of our data analysis, we observed that while SD discourses did exhibit some distinctions between actors holding various institutional positions, major lines of differentiation did not occur so much between

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<sup>2</sup> Conference on « *Mineral resources : scientific and societal debates* » University of Geneva, Edytem & Isterre Labs, Geneva, 5-7 february 2013. Conference on « *Salsigne : the mine sleeps, pollution is awake.* », University of Montpellier, Law Departement, 20-21 march 2013.

enterprises, NGOs and government discourses, as expected, as they did between actors operating at various spatial scales that we labeled as ‘global’ and ‘local’ in the emerging conceptual categorization presented in the next section.

### **A Global / Local Divide on SD issues in the GVC for African minerals**

All actors interviewed identified some economic, social and environmental problems associated with the development of extractive activities and we observed that corporate, civil society and public actors conveyed distinct views of SD in terms of desirable solutions and lines of actions. Corporate actors explicitly pursued as a primary goal the acquisition of a ‘social licence to operate’ in order to lift societal obstacles to the continuation of their economic activities: “The mining industry has to make Olympic changes, changes of Olympic proportions, in the ways it deals with communities and how it distributes the wealth of our operations if we ought to continue to have that license to operate. In last October alone there were 167 cases of active social conflicts against mining operations in Peru that disrupted production, it delayed and increased costs and it negatively affected the investments.” (ENT1/N). The competitive rationale of such SD posture was shared by other enterprise representatives explaining that: “[our enterprise] has the objective to become a global leader in how we operate in terms of health, security, environment, communities, etc. Our goal is to be the leader, to win points on all sides, with investors, governments, the population and employees” (ENT2/N); “[our company] exploits mines opened since 1930 and has not decided to leave the country so we seek to preserve a legitimacy and a social authorization, by being responsible” (ENT3/N).

By contrast, civil society actors’ primary objective was to increase the voice of

stakeholders in arenas of national and international decisions through “strong global governance” (SYN1/N), “a participative process” (NGO1/S), or the need to “push through the common messages of civil society from the North and the South” (NGO2/N). As explained by one representative: “For populations to benefit from extractive revenues, for these revenues to contribute to SD by improving the living conditions of populations and environmental preservation, it is essential that contracts be made in a participative process, both upstream and downstream” (NGO1/S). Likewise, the global union representative on SD issues states that “we need to organize workers and communities to succeed in gaining power in collective bargaining” (SYN1/N). From the perspective of the government, the relevant logic is again different in that it prioritizes a legal approach: “the fundamental element that allows for a sustainable development, for the administration and economic operators in the mining sector, is the law (...). It can be good or bad but one needs to apply the law. That’s when you realize the failures of a law that you can amend it, rewrite it” (INST1/N). Beyond such differences in the normative ways in which appropriate SD policies were framed, these actors converged in focalizing their discourses on the processes by which SD should be achieved in the long run, in what we qualified as a ‘global’ discourse characterized by high levels of abstraction, shared by actors belonging to the corporate (ENT1/N, ENT2/N, ENT3/N), civil society (NGO1/N, NGO2/N, SYN1/N) and governmental (INST1/S) categories, and strongly contrasting with a ‘local’ discourse of much stronger concrete and immediate content, expressed by an elected local official (INST2/N) and civil society actors including scientists (SCIEN1/N, SCIEN2/N, SCIEN3/N, SCIEN4/S, SCIEN5/S) and a film director (MED/N).

### ***The ‘Global’ Discourse: an Abstract, Long Term Perspective on SD***

Actors referred to the existence of “environmental disasters” (ENT2/N), the “heavy (...) environmental legacy of the mining industry” (ENT3/N), “environmental stress” (ENT1/N), “environmental constraints” (INST1/N), “environmental impacts” (NGO1/S), “environmental questions” (SYN1/N) or “environmental themes” (NGO2/N). Allegations could be heavy or more neutral, but in both cases, they remained vaguely defined in broad and abstract terms. Unexpectedly, among actors classified in this category, corporate representatives were those providing the greatest level of details on these questions. The CSR manager of a large mining corporation mentioned the destruction of animals’ habitat, the production of wastes to be managed, problems of rehabilitation, and the erosion of natural resources (ENT3/N). An executive pointed to « *the depletion of irreplaceable natural resources* » and compared the mineral production of the multinational<sup>3</sup> to equivalent country-wise use of resources: « *we controlled land equivalent to the area of Switzerland (...). We consumed as much energy as all of Austria (...). We used over a billion liters of water, that’s two and a half bottles per people and we produced more CO2 into the atmosphere than Norway does* » (ENT1/N). Nevertheless, in the first case, issues were listed in a non systematic or organized manner, while in the second case, the comparison at country levels remained broadly defined at the level of the multinational as a whole.

Hence, technical specifications remained scarce and specific cases or situations were not mentioned in this global discourse. The particular risks or impacts associated with the

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<sup>3</sup> “half a million tons of copper, almost 400 000 ounces of gold, almost 7 billions pounds of uranium, 35 millions tons of bauxite, 9 millions tons of aluminum, half a million tons of borite, 30 millions tons of coal, almost 12 millions carats of diamonds, almost 200 millions tons of iron ore, 1.4 millions tons of titanium dioxide, etc.” (ENT1/N)

extraction process of specific minerals, for instance, were not discussed. Rather than being rooted in concrete material conditions through examples giving substance and nuances to SD issues, the stakes were enunciated in abstract terms that gave them a dematerialized quality.

Likewise, social issues were qualified in broad terms such as “the social problems that the opening of a mining site might entail” (ENT2/N), the “heavy (...) human heritage of the mining industry” (ENT3/N), the “social (...) impacts of different extractive investments” (NGO1/S), the “risk (...) of social disintegration” (SYN1/N), the “need (...) and right of populations to access essential services such as health and education” (NGO2/N), “social stakes” (INST1/S), “social damage”, “community stress” (ENT1/N), as well as the “poverty” and “subjugation” of populations (NGO1/S).

Because these discourses were not illustrated by specific situations, social issues remained defined in vague and allusive ways. For instance, it was acknowledged that “social problems can result from the opening of a new mining operation, such as immigration problems or social movements” (ENT2/N), and references were made to “concerns with land attribution” ((ENT3/N), or “respect of human rights, labor rights, labor unions” (SYN1/N). Another actor explained: “the mine is located somewhere and (...) necessarily neighboring some habitations” (INST1/S) where it would generate social issues. These discourses tended to enunciate qualitative opinions rather than precise facts. It was said that in a Central African country,: “many people are sick and suffer from various pathologies, other illnesses have developed such as the HIV making ravages (...) Populations feel helpless, they are frustrated but they are like chained, paralyzed” (NGO1/S). Although this actor mentioned illnesses, their link to mining activities was not



made visible and the only illness being specified, AIDS, was not directly linked to the industry. In another case, it was said that: “if we account only for environmental or economic issues isolated from their social impacts, we might destroy cultures, societies, communities and the lives of many workers and citizens without having anything to offer in return” (SYN1/N). Such enunciation expressed the idea of risks to come but concrete cases of realization of such risks were not mentioned.

Economic issues were expressed in more heterogeneous ways and incorporated several aspects. The capture of wealth and unequal redistribution along the chain was mentioned in all categories of actors including corporations (“the core business of the mining industry could also equally be stated as the depletion of irreplaceable natural resources to provide wealth to its shareholders » or « for the benefit of remote interests and external personal gain » ENT1/N), public authorities (“the products extracted from the mines should be redistributed locally so that the wealth of the mine could benefit to everyone” INST1/S), and civil society (“a more equitable distribution of benefits derived from the mining industry” SYN1/N).

Civil society actors also mentioned issues of corruption and opacity in the extractive GVC, referring to “the corruption of governments and the greed of mining corporations” (SYN1/N), or “corruption, the management of income, taxation, the idea that enterprises should pay their fair share” so that “it doesn’t provide returns only to a few industries or elites but to all of the population” (NGO2/N). Likewise, in a country of Central Africa, a local civil society actor denounced that “many projects are voted in the State budget, many credits are allocated but when one goes to the field these projects are never effective. Money is embezzled (...)” so that “the exploitation of resources has not

brought any development (...). No development, no infrastructure (...) so the cities have not benefited from the revenues generated by their lands” (NGO1/S). A northern NGO representative expressed in such terms his opinion on the case: “the situation is rather delicate” because of “a deterioration or at least a lack of improvement in transparency (...). Clearly the government in place is not in favour of communicating information” (NGO2/N).

A third economic question was mentioned by corporate representatives, in relation to the lack of sustainability of the dominant pattern of growth in the world economy. This top executive pointed that: “the world economic growth requires a doubling of metals and minerals production by 2030 », which involved a global collective responsibility: “we all use minerals (...) All of us destroy the earth, that’s the question. What is the morality of that? (...) If you accept that the once global poor are now aspiring to stand the equivalence to the global rich so that everybody wants to be like you, who owns the moral right to say that they can’t have it? Who has the right to say you cannot keep on tearing the earth to give it to me? If we all agreed that the whole population of the world shares equally, who would decide on which ecosystems would disappear, who has the right to commit genocide on animals, plants? (...) We need to sit back there and buy cars, fly airplanes, use refrigerators and turn that into the debate” (ENT1/N). By situating the debate at the level of the growth pattern of the global economy, the discourse of this corporate representative drew on dematerialized entities and called for a general human responsibility that de-responsibilized his own particular corporation.

Hence these actors adopted a type of SD discourse that could be qualified as incantatory. They expressed generalities with varied levels of catastrophism to characterize their

views on economic, social and environmental problems in extractive GVCs. Observations were broad, diffuse, and lacked precisions on technical and locational aspects. Broad categories such as “pollution”, “environmental disasters”, “generalized corruption”, “corporate greed”, “social problems”, or “poverty” offered a dehumanized and dematerialized qualification for SD issues, dissimulating actual choices and actions, and naming no victim or responsible party. The high level of generalization on which such discourse is elaborated contributes to naturalize SD issues and distantiate both enunciators and addressees from concrete particular situations and the actual responses that these issues might be calling for, situating SD as a global, long term question. As summarized by one of the actors: “it is the complex question of sustainable development (...). Integrating these preoccupations is the essence of sustainability, and I think that the mining sector has not understood these concepts as a whole”, “there is no simple and short solution (...)” (SYN1/N).

### ***The ‘Local’ Discourse: Concrete Problems Rooted in Material Conditions***

The discourses classified as ‘local’ share the characteristics of qualifying environmental, social and economic problems with reference to concrete features rooted in material realities that these actors have experienced or witnessed. Being defined with reference to specific situations, these issues no longer call for generic long-term responses but rather for particular, at times urgent, actions.

Rather than making general claims on environmental issues, the ‘local’ discourse names specific ecological impacts situated through time and space. On particular mining sites, mention was made of “big problems of dust generated by the extraction of minerals (...),

reinforced by all the CO<sub>2</sub> problems” (SCIEN1/N) due to their transportation, “hills (...) being torn down by bulldozers” (SCIEN4/S), or the existence of “toxic rain and smokes” (SCIEN2/N) so that “in heavy rains, clothes left outside for air-drying got holes from the rain, since so much toxic products were spread” (INST2/N).

On an African site for manganese extraction, another researcher described a “huge landscape transformation”, “a landscape scattered with debris cones and non-rehabilitated dumps left on the plateau for about 40 years” as well as “non-rehabilitated excavations” (SCIEN5/N). This geographer mentioned “streams that have been totally deformed, from the source to the confluence”, “a disorganized river basin”, and explained that: “when the company cleans the manganese, the stored mud gets furrowed and leaks with the rain, provoking a siltation of the stream by muddy fines of manganese”. Mention was also made of “the destruction of the aquatic fauna and flora” “pollution of the phreatic table”, and “soil fertility reduced almost to sterility” due to “soil erosion” and “abundant heteroclite waste”, turning the zone into an “open dump” (SCIEN5/S).

On the basis of research or simple observation, environmental problems were characterized, situated, and explained. Relations between causes and consequences were specified in a given space-time context, rather than remaining abstractly figurative in a global, disembodied reality.

Social issues were also characterized in specific terms with reference to work conditions within the mine and living conditions for the nearby population. Interestingly, similar types of observation emerged from the cases of the French gold mine and the Central African manganese mine, particularly in terms of work conditions. A former worker at the French mine pointed to the “hazardousness and unhealthiness of mining work”. He

recalled that following the opening of the extractive site in the 1960s, “within six months, out of 120 workers we counted 60 work accidents”, and that workers in charge of cleaning the oven used to burn toxic wastes were ill-equipped and “covered with pustules” after their work (INST2/N). This actor further recalled being “immediately dismissed” after having communicated on “heavy human and environmental danger” to a journalist.

Other actors characterize professional illnesses in the mining sector on the basis of “convergent and unambiguous results in sociology, toxic chemistry and epidemiology” on “excess cancer occurrence, carcinogen risks, (...) and unprotected professional activities” (SCIEN3/N). In the case of manganese exploitation in Central Africa, “professional illnesses of truck drivers and dock workers” were resulting from their obligation to “transfer the ores”. In addition, one of the most sensitive issue was “to develop health-at-work medical specialties because they are based at the capital while we are more inland where doctors are generalists.” As a consequence, “many professional illnesses have not been classified and recognized as such” (SCIEN1/N).

Various social consequences were also identified on living conditions near the mines. Respondent emphasized “anything having to do with dust” (SCIEN1/N), “toxic smokes entering into the houses on windy days” (SCIEN2/N), or “houses built for miners on radioactive heaps, with polluted water points” (SCIEN5/S). The destruction of cultural and historical heritage was another nuisance caused by mining sites. Local discourses indicated that mining corporations might open extractive sites “in spaces where populations have left traces of their heritage” that “nothing come to (...) protect” so that they were “destroyed.” The case was given of a mining company operating in a zone in West Africa holding at least a hundred archeological sites. “In Africa, writing is

anecdotal, so these vestiges should be preserved for populations to know about their past” (SCIEN4/S). Another consequence of the development of mining sites involved the “displacement of population”. In the case being discussed, the opening of the mining site required “destroying a village formed of five neighborhoods with distinct historical origins”. In the words of the respondent, to “destroy everything” meant to deprive populations of the possibility of “telling the new generation who they were, how they lived, what the prevailing social structure of the time was”. However, in this case, “nothing was respected”: “there have been no archeological excavations, no protection of the sites”, “the village has been destroyed and populations live in badly constructed houses” (SCIEN4/S).

In this local discourse, social issues that are only vaguely evoked in the global discourse take flesh in the history of named persons. Rather than concerning the extractive GVC as a whole, they apply to specific people and places, and exhibit higher levels of complexity, variety and nuances than is conveyed in a global representation.

Economic issues were portrayed in strong tension with social and environmental concerns. As expressed by a mining worker: “our problem is to make a living without losing our lives” (quoted by SCIEN2/N). When they existed, economic stakes appeared to prevail on negative impacts: “because the mine gave work, we kept quiet on environmental problems, that was the price to pay for getting the job, work almost forbid us from complaining” (INST2/N). Likewise, “the wives of miners knew that their husband would die early”, the risks were “accepted” and “integrated” (SCIEN2/N). Hence, only people who were not, or no longer, economically dependent on the mine would agree to talk on environmental or social issues. To obtain information, “you have to go for those who

have worked there for a while and have retired or been dismissed. Those have nothing to gain and nothing to lose, they can talk about things that are tough to swallow.” By contrast, “those who still depend at 100% on the company” would say that “things are clear, nothing bad is hidden about the environment” and that they cannot take “the risk of unemployment” (SCIEN5/S). This actor remarked: “you cannot cut the hand that feeds you”. Likewise, the director of the film “The blue cows”, documenting the epidemics of lung cancer that swept through employees of the mining corporation operating on the French site of Salsigne, mentioned her “great difficulties” in obtaining the testimony of the local population: “people did not want to talk”, “denial of the risks” was frequent, except among ill people or the family of workers who had died because of their work at the mine. She considered that “it was difficult for a miner to admit that his daily bread could poison him”, so that among both workers and the local population “people accepted to endure because the mine fed the whole region” (MED/N). Those who agreed to talk could also face resentment from workers and their families, “the wives of miners were the most virulent because he had risked to make their husbands lose their jobs” (INST2/N).

While we expected actors operating at the global level to be reluctant to address the negative consequences of mining activities, they actually did so – although in such broad and rhetorical ways as to evacuate their own responsibility – , and it was at the local level, on the contrary, that silence prevailed for those who were placed in a situation of economic dependency. In other words, those most exposed to the risks and dangers of mining activities were those who most strongly attempted to dissimulate them. The fact that local discourses were similar on these points, both for the French mine still operating ten years ago and for African sites mentioned by our respondents, brings support to the

idea that spatial scale is a more significant element in explaining major differences between discourses than could be the specific role or position of actors within the chain. Local actors also shared the characteristics of avoiding generalization on SD issues, not qualifying them with a few broad environmental, social or economic terms, and not considering them as long term, systemic issues. Their discourses focused on particular places, the exploitation of specific ores, and the needs to remedy to specific social and environmental damages. The very term of ‘sustainable development’ was actually not used during the two-days conference dedicated to social and environmental problems at the French site of Salsigne.

To sum up, while the ‘global’ discourse articulated SD issues in a theoretical construct of broad and diffuse shape, organized around its ritualized triptych, the ‘local’ discourse gave such issues a heterogeneous and fragmented content, based on the experience and observation of concrete situations. Such distinction in terms of issue framing between local and global ‘spaces’ of the GVC holds significant implications insofar a solutions are casted in a general, systemic, hence necessarily long term perspective in the global scape, while they take a precise, ad hoc and urgent character in the local space.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The exploratory nature of this research entails that greater nuance and variety might appear in our discourse categorization over the course of our data collection and theorizing process, both at the global level, where for instance, corporate discourses on SD might be more or less elaborated depending on companies’ previous exposure to campaigns and involvement in SD policies, and at the local



level, where economically dependent actors might engage in protest movements as an alternative to silence and resignation, thus modifying not only the content of a ‘local’ discourse but also possible its spatial scale, if a ‘rescaling’ process allowed such discourse to reach a global space. This is typically the case when activists substantiate their global claims by focusing on the specificities of a local case in order to give flesh to broad conceptual categories, as observed for instance in global campaigns on ‘work conditions’ exposing the concrete situation of workers in particular factories supplying identified brands (Bair and Palpacuer, 2013).

Notwithstanding the possibility for greater elaboration on the articulation of scale and content in our discourse analysis, and for greater integration of these discourses into the material and organizational conditions of their elaboration in the extractive GVC, current results bear some conceptual significance by revealing the political nature of the discursive elaboration made by actors of the ‘historical bloc’ in the spheres of corporations, civil society, and public authorities, who contribute to maintain the hegemony of the GVC by producing a convergent discourse on SD issues. Such discourse provides an ideological foundation to legitimate, and thus stabilize, the GVC as a system of resource exploitation, offering to global corporations the ‘social licence to operate’ (Wilburn and Wilburn, 2011) that they explicitly searched for through the means of their SD policies.

As suggested by Levy (2008) in his neo-gramscian reading of GVCs/GPNs, the

‘global’ discourse on SD or CSR serves to reabsorb societal criticism and contain the counter-hegemonic ambitions of oppositional forces in the political struggle characterizing the dynamics of GVCs. By mobilizing the notion of spatial scale from Spicer’s (2006) framework, this research brought new elements to such understanding of SD as a contested field in GVCs. We showed that the oppositional dynamics developed between corporations, civil society, and public authorities were embedded at the ‘global’ level into a paradigm of convergence on SD issues that evacuated the concrete conditions in which these issues materialized at the ‘local’ level to the benefit of a broad discursive strategy postponing prospects for solutions to a long term, systemic transformation. The ‘relations of force’ that characterize a neo-gramscian reading of GVCs were therefore observed not so much in the interrelationships of corporations, civil society, and public authorities within the chain, as they were between the coalition formed by these actors at the *global* level through their shared consensual view of SD issues, and the more dispersed, fragmented, and denunciatory views expressed at the *local* level. In Spicer’s (2006) words, “by articulating a discourse, social actors are able to establish boundaries of a spatial scale, and fix the qualities of that scale. This circumscribes which logics may be included in that scale and which should be excluded.” The exclusion from the global discourse of the acute material problems involved by mining exploitation at the local level can thus be casted as a political process allowing for the perpetuation of the GVC.

Such contrasts between the broad, dematerialized quality of SD issues framed at the global level and the concrete, material problems qualified at the local level follows the lines of distribution of unequal economic power in GVCs insofar as leading actors hold direct control over key ‘global’ dematerialized resources embedded in branding and R&D activities, while material transformative activities are relegated to the ‘local’ where ecological systems and the living and working conditions of people are also being affected. In other words, the social, ideological and geographical distance between the places of decision-making where the ‘global’ discourse on SD is elaborated, and the places of production where the ‘local’ discourse casts environmental and social damages, is constitutive of the GVC. Consequently, the organizational, economic and material structure of the GVC can be seen as providing the backbone on which the global/local divide on SD is elaborated. And conversely, the SD divide can be seen as offering the ideological foundation on which the hegemony of the ‘global’ continues to operate on the ‘local’ within the GVC. Hence, this research contributes to our theoretical understanding of GVCs by ‘scaling’ discourses and showing how such scale operates to reinforce the unequal distribution of economic power within the chain, and prevent the adoption of concrete immediate solutions to the social and environmental damages produced by extractive activities.



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## ANNEX

**Table 1 – Categories and titles of actors studied, January-April 2003**

Category	Titles	Nord/Sud	Coding
<u>Industry</u>	Executive of an anglo-australian multinational (UK)	North	ENT1/N
	Coordinator for the West African mining site of a mining multinational (Angleterre)	North	ENT2/N
	Environmental manager, European mining corporation (France)	North	ENT3/N
<u>Public authorities</u>	General director for Environment and SD in Africa (Gabon)	South	INST1/S
	Mayor of a mining town after closure and former mining worker (France)	North	INST2/N
<u>Civil society</u>	Director for Health, Security and SD in an global union federation (Switzerland)	North	SYN1/N
	National coordinator of the Publish What You Pay campaign coalition in Africa (Gabon)	South	NGO1/S
	NGO activist on financial transparency in extractives (France)	North	NGO2/N
	Scientist and trainer for Health, Security, Quality and Environment (France)	North	SCIEN1/N
	Geographer, National Center for Scientific Research (France)	North	SCIEN2/N
	Sociologist (France)	North	SCIEN3/N
	PhD student in archeology and cultural heritage (Burkina)	South	SCIEN4/S
	PhD student in geography and mining impacts (Gabon)	South	SCIEN5/S
	Film Director of activist documentary <i>The blue cows</i> (France)	North	MED/N