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Scaling Up? TRANSNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANISING IN GLOBALISED PRODUCTION

Special Issue Guest Editors: Karin Fischer,
Signe Moe,
Cornelia Staritz

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Karin Fischer, Cornelia Staritz, Signe Moe
Scaling Up? On the Possibilities and Limits of Transnational Labour Organising in Globalised Production

Abstract *This article provides an overview of theoretical and empirical efforts to understand the multiple dimensions enabling and hindering (transnational) labour organising in the context of globalised production. It situates the contributions to this special issue in the broader debate on the role of labour and workers' agency in global value chains and production networks. For this, it brings together chain and network approaches with labour studies in a highly productive dialogue. Focusing on labour as a transnational actor, the article further identifies different approaches of and actors within transnational organising and provides empirical insights on the complexity of the politics of scale in organising efforts. Four key issues are identified as complicating labour organising along global value chains: (i) asymmetrical power relations within organising, particularly between the global North and South, (ii) the continued importance of the local and national scale, (iii) difference and dividing lines between workers, and (iv) the red-green divide. The article argues for the importance of a multi-scalar and intersectional perspective on transnational organising beyond binaries. Such an approach recognises the key role of local alliances as well as the possibilities and limits arising from transnational organising initiatives to confront globalised capital.*

Keywords *labour, transnational organising, activism, global value chains, global production networks, politics of scale*

1. Introduction

Research on global commodity chains (GCCs), value chains (GVCs) and production networks (GPNs)[1] has developed a rich analytical framework for studying globalised production and the international division of labour. It reveals important insights into the spatial expansion of production and firm strategies. Interestingly, labour relations and workers' agency remained a black box for quite a long time. Particularly "first generation" GVC research, which proliferated in the late 1990s, was mainly concerned with inter-firm relations, the resulting modes of governance, and the possibilities for economic upgrading. "Upgrading" denotes a process by which firms, countries or regions move to higher value activities in order to increase their benefits (e.g. order security, higher profits, enhanced capabilities) from participation in GVCs (Humphrey/Schmitz 2002). A better position of supplier firms and producers in the global South, so the expectation goes, would strengthen their bargaining capacity vis-à-vis lead firms that govern GVCs.

The focus on economic upgrading can be explained by many researchers in the field coming from or having close links to development studies. It is nevertheless somehow astonishing that labour issues remained at the margins, since GVCs not only impact on economic development prospects, but also on working conditions, wages, and workers' power and struggles. Labour was, however, mainly treated like a commodity input into production or a cost factor with regard to locational decisions (Thompson et al. 2015: 53; Selwyn 2016: 53; Selwyn 2019).

However, since the 2000s, scholars have opened up to labour issues. At the same time, researchers predominantly concerned with labour and workers' power have approached the GVC/GPN field and transnationalised their agenda. Both can benefit significantly from each other. While labour studies clarify the importance of labour relations and activism for the organisation and the outcomes of GVCs, the GVC/GPN research community brings in the importance of scales and highlights the hierarchical connection of labour regimes at different locations of production. Engaging in a dialogue is therefore a highly productive endeavour. This is what this special issue aims to undertake. The contributions assess how forms of (transnational) labour organising have evolved and changed in

the context of GVCs. They reveal successes, challenges and prospects of labour activism and discuss broader politico-economic and social contexts, thereby contributing to ongoing theoretical and methodological debates, as well as enriching the empirical evidence on cross-border organising.

This introductory article reviews, firstly, key developments in the GVC approach with regard to labour and particularly the development of the social upgrading concept. Secondly, it shows how GVC/GPN research has been enriched by other disciplinary and theoretical perspectives and how a GVC/GPN perspective has been used in labour studies. Thirdly, it discusses labour as a transnational actor, identifying different approaches of, and actors within, transnational organising. Fourthly, it provides empirical insights on (transnational) labour organising and the complexity of the politics of scale, deriving from the GVC/GPN and labour studies literature and the contributions of this special issue. The last section concludes.

2. GVC research and labour: from economic to social upgrading

GVC analysis is a moving research field. This is clearly shown in the discussion on "upgrading". Early GVC research focused principally on industrial or economic upgrading and competitiveness issues (Gereffi 2019). After a first phase dominated by policy-oriented studies, a large number of studies started to dismantle the "optimistic upgrading narrative" (Thompson et al. 2015: 54). They show that economic upgrading is not an automatic outcome of participation in GVCs; rather, it is a contested process and one which firms can remain stuck in, or even downgrade to, low-value positions (Gibbon/Ponte 2005; Bair/Werner 2011). Moreover, even if economic upgrading is successful, it does not necessarily bring with it the assumed benefits (Kaplinsky 2005).

With regard to labour, the implicit assumption in early GVC research was that economic upgrading benefits workers through higher wages and better working conditions. Yet, this "optimistic narrative" was also soon questioned. Early research on GVCs and labour underscored that the gains (and costs) of GVC participation and economic upgrading are not spread evenly (Nadvi/Thoburn 2004; Barrientos/Kritzinger 2004). Following from these insights, researchers defined social upgrading as

a distinct process, independent from economic upgrading, and created a new research field of its own. Social upgrading was defined as the "improvement in the rights and entitlements of workers as social actors, which enhances the quality of their employment" (Barrientos et al. 2011: 324). Evidence for social upgrading is widely classified in two dimensions: measurable standards, which refer to tangible aspects such as wage levels, contractual terms and working hours; and enabling rights, which refer to freedom of association and collective bargaining, non-discrimination, voice and empowerment (Barrientos et al. 2011).

Extensive literature emerged studying if, how, and in what form workers, producers or family farmers could increase their benefits and improve their working conditions through economic upgrading processes. Key findings from this literature are that social and economic upgrading were not widespread and that economic upgrading is a necessary but insufficient condition for social upgrading (Pickles et al. 2015; Barrientos et al. 2016; articles in relation to the Capturing the Gains research project[2]). Work can be impacted by economic upgrading in many ways, for example, in terms of qualification, social security, working hours, income, gender equality, or freedom of association. These dimensions can change independently from each other and can improve or worsen (Selwyn 2013; Bair/Werner 2011; Rossi et al. 2014). For example, Anner (2020) highlighted that while economic upgrading may be associated with wage increases, it can simultaneously entail higher work intensity or a backlash against freedom of association.

There is also evidence of social 'downgrading', particularly if the outcomes of economic upgrading on different groups of workers are taken into account. Studies showed that economic upgrading may increase the skill content and improve working conditions for some workers but lead to social downgrading for others, due to cost, quality, and flexibility pressures. Hence, social up- and downgrading often differ by workforce segmentation (permanent vs. temporary, direct vs. subcontracted, etc.) and social identities such as gender, migrant status, ethnicity or race (Rossi 2013; Plank et al. 2014). Within agrarian value chains, "entrepreneurial" farmers might profit from economic upgrading – at the expense of rural wage labourers they hire on poor and ever worsening employment conditions (Amanor 2019; Fischer/Langthaler 2019).

A more radical critique that includes the paradigm of social upgrading as such focuses on the neglect of conflicts of interests and power asymmetries that permeate GVCs. Most forthcoming has been Selwyn (2013: 75), who denoted the social upgrading framework as an 'elite comprehension of relations between capital, the state and labour'. He criticises the concept on three grounds: its assumption that lead firms, states, trade unions and international organisations coalesce around common interests in combating indecent work; its failure to see that the social relations of capitalist production render such cross-class alliances unviable; and its misspecification of the causes of indecent work and, consequently, unrealistic and ineffective policy proposals. As part of a wider turn to 'labor-led development', Selwyn (2016) argued for understanding labour exploitation and class conflict in GVCs from a bottom-up approach (see also Marslev et al. 2021).

In conclusion, it seems fair to say that the GVC camp needed some time to approach the labour issue. The GPN approach, however, was more open to labour issues from the very beginning. GPN researchers, predominantly economic geographers, chose the network perspective instead of chains in order to illuminate the wider social conditions in which production, reproduction, and consumption are embedded. In their research, they attempted to include non-firm actors involved in global production, such as national states, supra-national institutions, business associations and trade unions (Coe et al. 2008). Although the GPN framework acknowledged the importance of integrating labour, it must be stated that some studies still treated labour as the passive victim of restructuring, thus reproducing the factor of production approach (Taylor et al. 2015: 2).

3. GVC/GPN research and labour: engaging in a multidisciplinary dialogue

GVC/GPN research on labour has not only moved forward due to internal discussions. Research communities concerned with labour relations and workers' power and agency have entered the field and further developed it from different disciplinary and theoretical angles. Together

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with the "original" GVC/GPN scholars, a lively research area emerged, whose intellectual sources of mutual inspiration we now identify.

Labour geographers criticised the GVC approach as capital- and state-centric and introduced GPNs as 'networks of embodied labour'. They questioned the focus on workers as objects without a deeper conceptualisation of their agency, making a plea to place labour agency at the centre of GPN dynamics. A central motive is to show that workers are not powerless and condemned to follow the dictates of global capital. Instead, they actively create and shape geographies, even when exposed to high vulnerability and insecurity (Coe/Jordhus-Lier 2010; Carswell/De Neve 2013). Significant here is labour and its 'geographical condition': actions of labour play out in complex social geographies and, at the same time, can be seen as spatial phenomena themselves (Herod 2001).

Feminist scholars emphasise that transnational production is linked to new forms of a gendered division of labour. In feminist theorising, GVCs rely on i) the intermingling of several forms of waged and nonwaged, free and unfree labour; ii) the extraction of visible and hidden surpluses from households; iii) gendered and racial exploitation of workers; and iv) the economic devaluation of household-based work, especially that of women (Dunaway 2014: 2). Feminist perspectives criticise a "productivist bias", arguing for the importance and complex entanglements of the reproduction sphere and social differentiation related to gender and other categories (e.g. race, sexuality, age, nationality) to understand the functioning of GVCs. They highlight how these differences are embedded in local contexts and (re-)created through global relations and structures (Bair 2010; Barrientos 2019; Mezzadri et al. 2021; Sproll 2022).

The reference to Wilma Dunaway illustrates the importance of the world-systems approach that stood at the beginning of GVC/GPN research (Bair 2005). Its seminal founders, Terence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, defined a commodity chain as 'a network of labor and production' (1986: 159). They never thoroughly investigated labour and labour agency, though. Nevertheless, they assumed that commodity chains were based on sexism, racism and the appropriation of surplus value generated in private households. Instead of seeing economic upgrading as the main strategy for development, world-systems theorists advocated for increasing the value

of labour at every single 'node of the chain,' whether by bargaining or through militancy.

Another academic discipline that made important inroads into GVC/GPN research is global labour history. One of the most distinguished scholars in the field, Marcel van der Linden, coined the term 'proletarian multiverse'. The term clarifies the fact that labour power is commodified in many different ways. Formal and informal, regular and irregular, productive and reproductive labour are by no means binary oppositions, but rather a process with many gradations and dimensions. Different modes of labour exploitation can be understood only by their relationship to each other and in a transnational perspective (van der Linden 2008: 32). Insights from labour history prompts GVC/GPN scholars to pay attention to the multi-faceted hidden and informal forms of labour along chains, including reproductive labour, and the long-term structuring and restructuring of transregional commodity chains: in other words, the changing geographies of uneven and combined development (Komlosy 2018).

Sociologists of work with a Marxist background also criticised the "labour blindness" of GVC research. They enriched research through labour process theory (LPT). Their prism of labour control brings labour exploitation and disciplining, consent and resistance to the foreground. While their original focus was on the firm, the factory, or the workplace, LPT scholars profit from GVC/GPN concepts in order to transcend the narrow focus on workplace relations, instead highlighting a multi-scalar conception of labour control (Smith et al. 2018). In a GVC/GPN perspective, local labour control practices such as, for example, labour-saving mechanisation, informality, subcontracting, or gender segmentation can be analysed as constitutive network elements. By tracing the changing social arrangements of trans-regional production at different sites and locations, it becomes clear how lead firms channel labour control pressures 'through the chain' (Thompson/Smith 2009: 915; Taylor et al. 2015). Strategies of control do not end at the factory gate and can be traced "down" to households, as feminist studies at the intersection of LPT and GVC/GPN research show (Baglioni 2018).

Most recently, legal scientists entered the field. Instead of treating law as an exogenous or contextual factor that influences the strategic decision-making of lead firms, law is seen as a vehicle that constitutes power

relations between actors in GVCs/GPNs. While some investigate the connection of legal mechanisms and modes of governance, others extend the economic understanding of "value" to the legal sphere: legal entitlements impact the relative power of actors, and, as a consequence, influence how value is created, captured and distributed within GVCs/GPNs. While GVC/GPN research profits from the "legal geographies" literature, a GVC/GPN perspective forces legal scholars to transcend their narrow focus on juridical subfields. New public and private regulatory arrangements such as the Bangladesh Accord, and certification or due diligence duties have developed in response to the rapidly changing business practices of GVC/GPNs. This prompts legal scholars to investigate the global co-existence and collision of different normative and judicative orders (see The IGLP Law and Global Production Working Group 2016).

4. Labour as a transnational actor: union-based governance struggles and networks of labour activism

Globalised production is a double-edged sword when it comes to transnational organising. On the one hand, GVCs/GPNs introduce new vulnerabilities to supplier firms and workers as lead firms pursue 'regime shopping', playing off firms, workers and states against each other on a global scale. (Re-)locational strategies of lead firms also directly aim to disrupt workers' capacity to organise and defend their interests, and hence to override workers` solidarity by seeing workers in other countries as competitors. Organising is also made more difficult, as it does not only involve multiple locations and countries within one company, but different companies where the direct employer is not the lead firm. On the other hand, GVCs/GPNs link workers up to workers, firms, consumers and states in other countries, exposing them to international initiatives and regulations at different scales. Global norms of workplace rights – such as the ILO core labour standards or corporate due diligence acts – create opportunities for pressure to be exerted on lead firms and states.

While workers are still often portrayed as being confined to the local and national level while capital acts globally, transnational strategies are not only capital's and lead firms' "weapon" to divide and weaken labour.

Workers and their allies have also attempted "to meet capital at its own scale", with transnational labour activism increasing since the 2000s (Brookes/McCallum 2017: 201). Workers have scaled up their activities geographically and bridged space to expand the terrain of struggle outside the factory, the export processing zone, the region and the country, seeking to mobilise support on various scales to pressure employers, lead firms and states (Merk 2009: 606). "Jumping scale and bridging space" is a concept developed by labour geography that has described transnational labour activism (Merk 2009). It offers a broad spectrum for research scattered across various disciplines. There are no criteria for categorising the wide range of empirically observed types of transnational labour activism and the many different actors involved, but we roughly delineate two broad streams based on the actors in focus – workers and trade unions on the one hand and broader civil society alliances on the other.[3]

The first stream of research places global union efforts and bargaining campaigns at the heart of collective labour agency. Accordingly, the focus is on the global structures of the trade union movement and the 'governance struggles' (McCallum 2015) that are directed at modifying employment regulations at a transnational level. Most prominent governance tools are global framework agreements (GFAs) (Helfen/Fichter 2013; Brookes/McCallum 2017). GFAs are negotiated between a global union federation (GUF), such as IndustriALL Global Union or UNI Global Union, and the management of a TNC, with the purpose of ensuring minimum standards, social dialogue and collective bargaining at the TNC, its affiliates and sometimes also its suppliers. GFAs are, however, concentrated at TNCs with headquarters in Europe, particularly in Germany, France and Sweden, and more than 50 % of all GFAs were signed in three sectors – construction and wood, metal (largely automotive) and chemistry.[4] In fact, the large majority of agreements have been achieved by IndustriALL.[5]

After some early hype, many studies show limited outcomes of GFAs on the ground, stressing the lack of local ownership and inclusion of trade unions at the production sites (Helfen/Fichter 2013; Bauer 2021) as well as the absence of a (global) regulatory apparatus to safeguard workers' rights. McCallum (2013) identifies key reasons for the limited success of GFAs, namely a shortage of resources at GUFs, the absence or insufficient incorporation of local unions, the absence of communication between national trade unions and, last but not least, a lack of lead firms' influence on suppliers.

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The second stream focuses on broader advocacy networks that support particular struggles linked to GVCs/GPNs. Alliances of this kind not only cut across the boundaries of national/transnational, but also across production/consumption and labour/community (Munck 2002: 154-173). Scholarship on and from the global South in particular, goes beyond traditional 'workplace' issues and takes broader reproductive and livelihood issues into account, including housing, health care, domestic work, violence, etc., as well as broader development issues, including ecological and cultural concerns and resistance against the (neoliberal) model of development as such (Burawoy 2010; Ruwanpura 2015; Nowak 2017). This is also related to trade unions often being weak and concentrated in few (formal and/or public) sectors, making other institutions of labour agency important, including community, ethnic or religious groups and neighbourhoods, households and families (Bieler/Nowak 2021).

New phrases have been coined to describe this phenomenon as a form of "networked worker agency and activism", including transnational advocacy networks (TANs), transnational labour alliances (TLAs) and networks of labour activism (NOLAs). One of the most prominent campaigns is probably the anti-sweatshop movement in the USA, Australia, Canada and the European Union ('Clean Clothes Campaign'). Other examples include ethical campaigning around food and agrofuels production and the Global Workers Justice Alliance, which fights for migrant workers' rights. Such campaigns are based on broad alliances, from independent or informal labour unions to development NGOs and human rights activists.

In contrast to the first stream, this scholarship focuses more closely on grassroots mobilisations around labour and wants to bring 'non-unionized (or not solely unionized) worker agency into focus' (Zajak et al. 2017: 901; Nowak 2017; Bieler/Nowak 2021). This form of labour-oriented activism is often separate from formal trade union organising and comparable to a 'community unionism' (Wills 2001) or 'new social movement unionism' perspective (Scipes 1992), which views unions as vehicles for broader socio-political change pursued in alliance with other social movements – women's, ecological, human rights or peace movements. Both old and new social movement unionism have their roots in the global South and are quite distinctive from unionism in the global North. The "old social movement unionism" emerged during the 1970s and 80s in countries such as Brazil, South Africa and South Korea. Trade unionists fought side by

side with non-unionised workers and other social movements for democratisation and workers' rights. The "new social movement unionism" of the late 1990s is, unlike its predecessor, less affiliated with national political parties, or, in general, with national political organisations, and takes transnational organising more seriously (Waterman 1991; Webster et al. 2008; Nowak 2017: 968-69).

Accordingly, activists and academics take a critical view of (Northern dominated) global unions. Transnational union alliances tend to be dominated by their most powerful and financially strong affiliates, i.e. European- or U.S.-based unions, and their views and practices. This is especially true for unions in capital-intensive producer-driven chains such as automotive, machinery and chemistry. According to the criticism, many of the global unions have not moved beyond a conception of transnational collective bargaining. Sceptics argue that, beneath the surface, the international confederations' orientation to alliance-building and membership mobilisation is 'a largely strategic manoeuvre to cope with its weakened status within both the international corridors of power and the radical contours of the global justice movement' (Hodkinson 2005: 36, cited in Webster et al 2008: 196). They are unwilling or afraid to take on global capital (and solidarity with Southern labour), according to this criticism (Lindberg 2011; Palpacuer 2019).

Following the delineated research communities from the first and the second camp, a dividing line seems to exist between those who give priority to the labour issue and labour agency (stream one), and those who see livelihood struggles and rainbow coalitions as transformative forces (stream two). For researchers of the former, workers and their organisations are (the only) strategic actors. They argue that workers have a unique capacity to physically disrupt production and to appeal to employment relations institutions on various scales. Moreover, workers are embedded in laws, rules and regulations specific to the employment relationship. Thus, transnational labour alliances can afford a set of strategic tools that are unavailable to other types of actors (Brookes 2017; Selwyn 2016).

Marxist sociologists of work have developed the Power Resources Approach (PRA), which draws attention to the room for manoeuvre and strategic choices of workers. PRA comes from labour research (first stream), but was further developed in a lively debate among scholars and trade

unionists in the global North and South, and eventually transnational-ised. Its origins go back to Erik Olin Wright (2000) and Beverly Silver (2003). They focused on structural power as the power stemming from labour's position in the economic system and the capacity it provides for disrupting capital accumulation, and associational power arising from collective political or trade union workers' associations. The basic concepts were extended by additional 'power resources', including societal power as the capacity arising from cooperation with other actors and organisations and the public support for workers' demands (Schmalz et al. 2018), and institutional power as the capacity to hold employers accountable 'through laws, regulations, and other formal or informal rules' (Brookes 2019; Chun 2009; see also contributions in Global Labour Journal 2018).

This newly awakened scholarly interest in the power resources of workers and the up-scaling of the – originally place-based – approach was a reaction to the emergence of new trade union movements, innovative organising strategies and campaigning between labour and non-labour actors, including at the transnational level. This also means that the PRA approach has not only been used to assess workers' and trade unions' tradi-tional strategies and resources, but also to what extent labour can link with non-labour actors to increase power resources as well as to assess the strat-egies and resources of TANs, NOLAs and other social movements. Hence, while labour scholars used to link associational power to the predomi-nant forms of formal worker organisations, such as trade unions, polit-ical parties and works councils, recent studies have examined associational power in more diverse, unconventional and informal forms, such as for rural migrant workers (Hui 2021) and informal workers (Britwum 2018).

The "value added" of a GVC/GPN perspective is also shown in PRA studies. It highlights that the manner in which workers and their organi-sations possess structural and associational power depends not only on power relations in employment relations and in society at the local and national context, but also on the role that workers and firms have in glob-ally dispersed production networks. For example, workers who occupy choke points or bottlenecks in production processes – e.g. by making critical components – enjoy higher levels of structural power than those making easily replaceable goods (Brookes 2019). Just-in-time delivery and stringent buyer requirements can render supplier firms particularly vulner-

able to workers' action. In GVCs/GPNs with tight quality requirements, such as Fairtrade tea from Kenya, even small disruptions by workers can compromise a farm's ability to meet retailer demand (Riisgaard/Okinda 2018; Selwyn 2013). Globalised production does not only limit associational and coalitional power, but can also provide opportunities for transnational collaboration and activism, as Anner (2011) shows for manufacturing sectors (see also Brookes 2017).

5. Politics of scale: empirical insights into complex realities

The reality of transnational labour organising is of course complex and multi-faceted. Success depends on many factors, such as state-society relations, capital-labour relations and governance structures in GVCs/GPNs. Research into these factors cuts across the broadly defined camps defined above, showing that the two forms of today`s labour internationalism – one based on unions, the other on grassroots alliances – are not clearly separable and that common challenges arise. We highlight four key issues complicating transnational labour organising, drawing on empirical insights from the literature and the contributions of this special issue.

Firstly, transnational organising networks can be rather diverse, including unions and many other actors, and do not need to represent the binary classifications outlined above. These networks are embedded in asymmetric North-South power relations and structures, which they can challenge or reproduce or do both at the same time. Transnational union activities today are not confined to capital-intensive sectors and Northern dominated top-down agency. Organising activities have reached out to the lower ends of GVCs/GPNs and into services. A good example of transnational union organising in these sectors is the GFA for private security guards, achieved by UNI Global Union and Service Employees International Union, or the regulations for hospitality workers negotiated by IUF that represents workers' associations in agriculture and catering. Both of these have a strong foothold in the global South (Helfen/Fichter 2013; McCallum 2015; Lindberg 2011). Ford`s case study confirms a 'global union renewal' in Asia that goes beyond 'traditional constituencies': GUFs joined forces with (international) solidarity groups and local unions and reached

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out to assist and organise temporary migrant workers. This 'hybrid cooperation' was particularly successful in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Thailand (Ford 2021). Union networks do also not necessarily revolve around big Northern-based GUFs. The ExChains network, for example, connects garment workers in South and South East Asia with works councils of big buyers in Germany. It cuts across the North-South divide and has established horizontal, non-hierarchical relationships between its members (Nowak 2021).

Asymmetric power structures, a frequent point of criticism regarding global trade union networks, also affect TANs and NOLAs. Dominance of well-equipped Northern NGOs can be found in ostensibly "horizontal" advocacy networks too, reproducing power hierarchies by benefiting voices from the global North and more institutionalised actors with larger resources (Palpacuer 2019). In addition, Wells makes the point that the role of Northern agency is privileged in successful campaigns for labour rights, thereby neglecting the role of Southern agency. He highlights the fact that local-level activism in factories in the South – in alliance with local communities – is a stronger determining factor of a movement's success than the activities of Northern solidarity groups (Wells 2009; Seidman 2009).

In this special issue, two contributions specifically focus on power imbalances in transnational organising efforts. Jona Bauer and Anna Holl analyse institutionalised, trade union-centred, transnational labour rights mechanisms. By applying the PRA to two initiatives in the apparel sector, a GFA and the ACT on Living Wages Agreement between trade unions and global brands and retailers, they show that institutionalised labour relations in GVCs /GPNs can be "double-edged". They provide a local channel for workers' voices in conflicts with their direct employers, for instance in cases of union busting or withheld wages. At the same time, the mechanisms stabilise the position of lead firms by allowing them to govern labour issues more effectively and preventing worker struggles from spreading to other locations or scales. They also show that institutionalised mechanisms in their current state are not able to address sector-wide issues, such as low wages. Luke Sinwell in this issue also takes a critical stance on union politics, showing that union leaders facilitated the upscaling of a strike movement at platinum companies in South Africa while at the same

time trying to confine it within the scope of their own organisation in the context of inter-union competition.

Anti-sweatshop alliances such as the Clean Clothes Campaign are prominent evidence that it is also possible to use North-South power hierarchies in GVCs/GPNs to workers' advantage. In this issue, Karinda Flavell and Samanthi Gunawardana contribute to the debate on the pitfalls of Northern-based solidarity efforts. They combine the PRA approach and feminist conceptualisations of power to unpack how activists engaged in Australian civil society organisations perceive different types of worker power of women garment workers in Asia and how these assumptions affect North-South cooperation in labour rights campaigns and funded projects. The article warns that when actors in the global North (intentionally or unintentionally) reproduce stereotypes, such as when framing women workers as passive and docile, they can end up ignoring worker agency in GVCs and within their own initiatives (see also Wells 2009).

In any event, the organisation of cross-border agency presents a great challenge for the actors involved. Many attempts at transnational organising collapsed, related to conflicts which emerge along divides caused by ideological and strategic differences, resource inequalities, and differentiated priorities and access to decision makers and elites (Brookes/McCallum 2017; Zajak et al. 2017). Regarding the organisation of action, while an over-centralisation and top-down approach can result in strategies that ignore local contexts and might lead to dysfunctional outcomes, a decentralised structure does not seem to be the solution either. If workers and their allied organisations do not establish a coordinating centre – be it a GUF or an experienced global grassroots network – they can only have an impact on single nodes of GVCs, at best. Thus, workers' organisations and networks need a certain degree of centralisation to coordinate action across specific locations; at the same time, they have to respond to specific logics in local and national contexts (Nowak 2021).

The complicated relationship between the local and the global is, *secondly*, a core topic in research linking transnational labour organising and GVCs. Critical statements towards cross-border "networks of labour" approaches can be found in the literature, stressing the continued importance of the local, national and regional focus of many struggles. Without local and national struggles and unionisation, transnational campaigns

and organising efforts remain weak and lose momentum. Gains can be consolidated, as many studies show, only by locally organised forces and their pressure on lead firms and local management to adhere to labour standards and on (sub-)national authorities to enforce them (Wells 2009; Ryland 2016; Schmalz et al. 2021). Studies further suggest different targets of struggles: while Northern advocacy campaigns mostly target lead firms or big buyers and are oriented towards large consumer markets, Southern labour confronts local authorities, on the firm and state level (Wells 2009). In short, many see the local and national still as the central "hub" where the success or failure of labour disputes is decided.

Several contributions in this special issue address the local-global relationship. In her case study of the cotton sector in Burkina Faso, Bettina Engels reiterates the importance of local organising. She extends the definition of "work" and "workers" beyond waged work and questions the adequacy of trade unions. This enables a broader view of worker organising, which leads her to argue that when local marginalised groups unite, they can resist global capital. However, her contribution also provides evidence that the ownership structure of companies and the type of links to end consumers can determine whether labour struggles at the local or global level succeed.

The local and national context clearly shapes organising possibilities and prospects. Jeroen Merk presents a failed effort of organising at the Nikomas footwear factory in Indonesia as an example of how national labour regulations and local elites can hinder worker unity. Even though the factory had been targeted by international campaigns, and workers, at least on paper, enjoy some degree of labour rights, successful worker organising did not materialise. His case study exemplifies the importance of local political economy factors in addition to GVC power dynamics. Merk's contribution warns against the generalising of individual cases and points out that much can be learned, not only from successful organising, but also from failures.

Luke Sinwell's study of the platinum workers' strike in South Africa, on the other hand, shows that major worker movements can arise from the most basic forms of (local) worker cooperation. He traces the South African five-month strike at the world`s three biggest platinum companies in 2014 back to its beginnings, when two workers decided to confront

management with their wage demands. Activists were able to link to other struggles and broader social movements, nationally and transnationally. The case shows how GVC/GPNs are one concrete manifestation of the broader issue of global and national inequality. When workers at the lowest nodes of GVC/GPNs are able to put words to this inequality and organise, the demands can both move to different scales and foster broader social movements.

Hence, local and national struggles and transnational campaigning can complement each other. In regions where labour activism confronts authoritarianism, connecting the local to the global is essential. Joining forces with trade unions and NGOs in the global North can, in such settings, allow workers to connect to institutions and political contexts in other locations, such as formal complaint channels or GFAs, thus opening new avenues to exert pressure on lead firms (Anner 2015; Brookes 2019; Zajak et al. 2017). Similarly, transnational linkages to ethical campaigns, global multi-stakeholder initiatives or civil society campaigns can trigger a 'boomerang' effect (Keck/Sikkink 1998) whereby extra-local networks are used to upscale workers' struggles and provoke powerful "outside" actors (e.g. states or lead firms) to intervene or influence behaviours of employers or authorities (Merk 2009). Research reveals a banal but cogent truth: success cannot be achieved without local organising but is strongest if organising is multi-scalar (Munck 2021; Schmalz et al. 2021). Hence, transnational activism should not be seen as a panacea but as an opportunity structure which can potentially provide local actors with additional sources of power (McCallum 2013; Zajak et al. 2017).

Thirdly, multi-scalar transnational organising faces "internal" differences that can become dividing lines. A fundamental barrier to organising, as Beverly Silver said, comes from workers themselves: workers maintain boundaries against others in order to defend particular privileges (Silver 2005). In other words, conflicts often do not develop along the line of capital, but take on the form of labour-labour conflicts. Internal division lines can evolve on a plant, firm or sector level, between blue-collar and white-collar, old and new or between regulated and informal or temporary workers or employees (Gerőcs et al. 2021) as well as between workers of different gender, race, age, nationality or ethnicity (Mezzadri et al. 2021; Sproll 2022). This reduces the chances and scope of joint organising.

Labour-labour dividing lines also play out along the global North and South axis. For Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout (2008), the most fundamental challenge to labour internationalism in the age of globalisation remains that of bridging the North-South divide along GVCs. Some twenty years ago, Beverly Silver and Giovanni Arrighi also argued that this divide continues to be the main obstacle to the formation of a 'homogenous world-proletarian condition', as they call it. They argue that labour movements in the core have historically more often than not decided that their "bread is buttered" on the side of national-protectionism, which involved working-class racism and anti-immigrant stances (Silver/Arrighi 2000: 53, 71).

Feminist decolonial research shows, however, that difference does not necessarily have to create dividing lines. Rather, difference can be a fruitful starting point for rethinking workers in GVCs, worker organising, and transnational networks (Werner et al 2016; Desai/Rinaldo 2016). By acknowledging the plurality of perspectives and the intersectionality of oppression instead of fighting it, struggles and analyses can become broader and stronger. Along these lines, Madhumita Dutta argues, in her contribution, which is on the resistance of women in India, for a systematic integration of quotidian processes and everyday theorising into labour geography. She emphasises that social relations and lived experiences shape the politics of labour beyond wages and formal employment. Her feminist "bottom-up" approach to theory creation can do more justice to the role of everyday resistance and 'knowledge production by working class women forged through work and struggle' in workers' lives and in broader struggles for labour rights than many earlier contributions in labour geography. In addition, Dutta's article highlights how this change of perspective can open up space for new political alliances and solidarities.

Successful organising in highly fragmented platform economies with diverse labour forces also shows how difference does not have to be a limitation and has indeed fostered resistance and activism, based on global best practice and novel repertoires of action (Miguez/Menendez 2021). The contribution by Kruskaya Hidalgo Cordero shows how the rise of platform economies has exposed the limits of classic unions. At the same time, she emphasises that platform workers are subjected, to a varying extent, to categories of oppression such as class, gender and race. Her decolo-

nial perspective delivers empirical insights on how platform workers have created room for action within and beyond national borders despite these multiple dimensions of oppression. Workers can harness their global connectedness as an organising tool, as shown here in the case of delivery workers in Latin America, and specifically Ecuador. Naming and linking different experiences of oppression is a first step towards bridging the gap between workers in different locations and work relations. This process starts with everyday theory production, and shared platforms can facilitate the diffusion of such knowledge.

Fourthly, organising initiatives are confronted with a red-green divide. This can be considered a continuation of the distinction between those who "prioritise" labour and union-led struggles, and those focusing on social movement- or NOLA/TAN-led struggles. Particularly in the global South and in resource-based sectors (but not only), labour and social struggles have often been linked to broader livelihood and environmental issues, fighting against exploitation, the commodification of nature, and the destruction of livelihoods. Burawoy (2010) even argues that market-driven commodification (Polanyi) and not exploitation (Marx) is the key experience in our world today and that nature-linked struggles for land *and* labour will take the lead.

Meanwhile, the global union movement has also integrated environmental issues by putting 'just transition' at the centre of debates and politics around climate change (Rosemberg 2020; Stevis 2021). However, the concept has only been selectively picked up by national unions in the global North and even less in the global South. Newly emerging global regulatory strategies that embrace environmental *and* labour rights in GVCs/GPNs could bring "red" and "green" concerns together and foster transnationally organised joint activities. While international "soft law" standards such as the OECD and UN guidelines for multinational corporations remain rather toothless, recent legislative initiatives in countries in the global North have introduced mandatory human rights due diligence for lead firms and their supply chains. Depending on their reach and design, due diligence laws have the potential to support levelling some of the power imbalances in GVCs (see Lorenzen 2022). Transnational legal activism will be most successful where it combines (and not plays off against each other) labour and environmental issues, and when it addresses and seeks

to resolve inequalities and asymmetric power relations between actors in the global North and South (Seck 2018).

Research can facilitate a synthesis between labour and environmental struggles by including the reproductive sphere and broader livelihood issues, in which workers are embedded, as has been stressed by feminist, intersectional and decolonial perspectives. If workers conceive of themselves as ecologically vulnerable and embedded in relationships of family, community, and environment, the 'labour vs environment contestation could be re-imagined as a mutually beneficial search for sustainable livelihood choices', as Seck (2019: 7) states. In their contributions, Bettina Engels, Luke Sinwell and Mahudmita Dutta show space for new political alliances and solidarities based on such a broader and more interrelated view of labour and environmental issues. Forging a common agenda between labour, social, livelihood and environmental issues, and among countries of the global North and South remains a key issue facing transnational solidarity on a global scale. This will require a strategical multi-scalar and intersectional perspective beyond binaries like local versus global or North versus South.

As Munck (2021) argues, there has been an opposition set up in labour studies between "old" and "new" social movements. "Old" social movements, here defined as union-centred alliances, are deemed bureaucratic and stale, top-down, largely located in the global North and focusing on the state and the local level, whereas "new" movements, here defined as NOLAs and TANs, are seen as democratic and vibrant, bottom-up and global, focusing on the broader civil society and including and emerging from the global South. We discussed the fact that these binaries cannot be supported by the increasing number of empirical case studies of transnational organising. Labour struggles do not fit neatly into one of the two camps we have identified above. Yet, more importantly, such binaries do not help in developing strategies for labour organising in a globalised world and for understanding successes and failures and addressing related challenges. Analysis of transnational labour organising must remain attentive to contexts while of course aiming to identify generalisable factors of success and failure in the context of broader dynamics of global capitalism.

Speaking of generalisable factors of success and failure, although there is an increasing number of case studies from different sectors and locations,

we do not have systematic knowledge about the overall number, characteristics and outcomes of transnational labour organising. Marissa Brookes' contribution in this special issue addresses this lacuna by introducing and critically analysing the efforts around establishing the Transnational Labor Alliances Database. The database collects information on the characteristics, actors and developments of a great number of successful and failed transnational organising attempts. The article explores the possibilities and limits of large-N qualitative data collection. She proposes a typology of TLAs, asking (1) who workers are, (2) what they want, (3) where they campaign, (4) why the TLA forms, and (5) how tactics are deployed. This stakes out a path for comparative work on the power dynamics, political contexts and varied actors which cooperate in the context of GVCs and strengthen or weaken campaigns.

6. Conclusions

This article gave an overview of literature on GVCs/GPNs and labour and specifically on the role, possibilities and limits of transnational labour organising in GVCs. GVC/GPN research has clearly evolved and incorporated workers and concepts from labour research into its theoretical and, particularly, empirical analysis. In turn, labour research from different perspectives has taken up a chain and network perspective that helps to situate labour exploitation and struggles in multi-scalar hierarchical contexts, sector dynamics and lead firm strategies. These relations are mutually fruitful, providing a broad case study literature on experiences of workers and agency in global production in many sectors and locations.

Labour as a transnational actor has been approached from different actors' perspectives, but there are common challenges related to organisational issues, conflicts of interest and different priorities, as well as resource inequalities and power asymmetries among actors within transnational organising. A GVC/GPN perspective can help us to understand such asymmetries and the material possibilities and limitations of solidarity between workers in different positions in GVCs/GPNs. Analysis of the structure of GVCs/GPNs, their power relations and value expropriation and distribution, can also help us to find leverage points with which

to challenge firm strategies. The focus on production needs to be expanded in order to understand power relations, struggles and solidarities, and in order to include the sphere of reproduction as well as that of livelihoods and discursive aspects of power.

When it comes to resistance and organising in globalised production, local actors and struggles are crucial for success. Transnational relations have supported organising and struggles, but, without a local base, transnational initiatives and campaigns remain weak and unsustainable. Issues beyond classical workers' issues are crucial in order to forge alliances and to be relevant for the majority of workers. Dynamics in the workplace and in households as well as the commodification of nature in the context of broader neoliberal development projects effect workers all over the world every day. Forging a common agenda between labour, livelihood and environmental issues and the global North and South remains a (or the) key issue facing transnational solidarity on a global scale. This will require a strategic multi-scalar and intersectional perspective beyond the binary opposition of local versus global.

1 Behind these acronyms are different strands of research that have been discussed, for example, in Bair (2005), Hess (2009) and Fischer et al. (2021). In this article, we use the respective acronyms if we refer to their genealogies; when we address general issues independent of the theoretical background or empirical findings, we talk about GVCs/GPNs.

2 www.capturingthegains.org (accessed in November 25, 2021).

3 This research field has been labeled new global labour studies (NGLS), which is in itself an interdisciplinary field. NGLS emerging in the 2000s can be differentiated from new international labour studies (NILS) emerging in the 1980s. While both focus on studying labour from a global perspective and bringing labour (agency) into the analysis of globalisation, expanding the traditional, Euro/global North-centric industrial relations approach, NILS tends to focus on national labour movements transnationalising while NGLS on broader global labour movements and alliances (Brookes/McCallum 2017). This distinction is related to the distinction in the literature into "old labour transnationalism" (which began in the 19th century lasting until the last decade of the 20th century) based on trade unions, political parties and other bureaucratic organisations, and "new labour transnationalism" or "social movement unionism" based on social movements and more decentralised and horizontal networks, often coming from the global South (Webster et al. 2008). The two strands we outline below are based on this distinction.

4   European Commission and International Labour Organisation, "Database on transnational company agreements", https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=978 (data from 2019, accessed in November 25, 2021).
5   For a list of GFAs concluded between IndustriALL and TNCs, see: www.industriall-union.org/global-framework-agreements (accessed in November 25, 2021).

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Abstract *Dieser Artikel gibt einen Überblick über die theoretischen und empirischen Bemühungen, die vielfältigen Dimensionen zu verstehen, die eine (transnationale) Organisierung von Arbeiter*innen im Kontext globalisierter Produktion ermöglichen und einschränken. Zu diesem Zweck werden Ketten- und Netzwerkansätze in einen produktiven Dialog mit den Labour Studies gebracht und die Beiträge im Heft den verschiedenen theoretischen Ansätzen*

Karin Fischer, Cornelia Staritz, Signe Moe

und Debattensträngen zugeordnet. Ausgehend von diesen Debatten und den Fallstudien dieser Schwerpunktausgabe identifiziert der Beitrag unterschiedliche Akteure und Strategien und liefert empirische Einsichten in die komplexen politics of scale bei der Organisation von Arbeitskämpfen. Vier zentrale Faktoren erschweren aus Sicht der Autor*innen die Organisierung von Arbeiter*innen entlang von globalen Wertschöpfungsketten: (i) asymmetrische Machtverhältnisse bei Organisierungsprozessen, insbesondere zwischen Akteuren im Globalen Norden und im Globalen Süden, (ii) die anhaltende Bedeutung der lokalen und nationalen Ebene, (iii) Unterschiede und Trennlinien zwischen Arbeiter*innen sowie (iv) die Spaltung zwischen „roten" und „grünen" Anliegen. Der Artikel unterstreicht die Bedeutung einer multiskalaren und intersektionalen Perspektive auf transnationale Organisierung. Ein solcher Zugang berücksichtigt die zentrale Rolle lokaler Bündnisse ebenso wie die Chancen und Grenzen, die sich aus transnationalen Organisierungsbemühungen in Kämpfen gegen das globalisierte Kapital ergeben.

Karin Fischer
Institute of Sociology, Johannes Kepler University
karin.fischer@jku.at

Cornelia Staritz
Department of Development Studies, University of Vienna
cornelia.staritz@univie.ac.at

Signe Moe
s.moe@posteo.de