

# RSA Research Network on Green(ing) Global Value Chains for Sustainable Regional Development (GGVC4SRD)

## Kick-off Workshop Event Report

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London School of Economics and Political Science, Department of Geography and Environment

Organisers: Riccardo Crescenzi (LSE), Valentina De Marchi (ESADE Business School), Oliver Harman (LSE), Carolin Hulke (LSE)



On 12 November 2025, the RSA Research Network on Green(ing) Global Value Chains for Sustainable Regional Development (GGVC4SRD) held its kick-off workshop at the LSE Department of Geography and Environment. The workshop opened the network's three-year programme and was designed to bring together established and early-career scholars across institutional and disciplinary boundaries to engage with environmental governance in value chains, green transitions and sustainability from multiple perspectives. The aim was to create an open and frank forum in which scholars from heterogeneous backgrounds could share ongoing work, surface disagreements, and identify the most productive directions for advancing academic debate and policy-relevant insight on the greening of global, regional and domestic value chains across the Global North and South.

The workshop opened with a brief framing by the network co-organisers (Riccardo Crescenzi, Valentina De Marchi, Oliver Harman and Carolin Hulke), setting out the network's purpose, intended outputs and three-year arc. The main body of the day consisted of a series of two-slide mini-presentations in which each network member outlined their current research agenda in relation to

the network's themes. This was followed by an invited mini-keynote from Stefano Ponte (Copenhagen Business School), and a closing discussion on cross-cutting themes, methodological challenges and future actions.

### **Event Speakers:**

**Roberta Rabelotti** (University of Pavia, with Rasmus Lema, Dalila Ribaud and Brian Vera) presented work on sustainability in the European fashion industry: "Genuine Greening or Greenwashing?". Drawing on Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) applied to 38 European clothing MNEs exposed to a common EU regulatory context, the study examines the firm- and context-level conditions under which lead firms in apparel move beyond incremental compliance with voluntary standards to substantive greening of their GVCs. A distinctive contribution is its attention to place: comparing cluster-based and non-cluster-based firms, and drawing on cases such as Ethiopia's Hawassa Industrial Park to consider how cluster contexts shape collective greening efforts and where the benefits of such greening accrue. The methodological choice of QCA was itself an object of discussion – the approach obliges precision in the use of qualitative information, as illustrated by recent work in the *Journal of International Business Policy*.

**Juan Alvarez-Vilanova** (LSE, with Riccardo Crescenzi and Lee Mager) introduced "A new atlas of green Foreign Direct Investment beyond renewables". The paper addresses a measurement gap: existing approaches to identifying green FDI focus narrowly on 'green' sectors such as renewable energy, yet investment in high-CO<sub>2</sub> sectors can also be green if undertaken in low-carbon ways (an Electric Arc Furnace within a steel plant being one illustrative case). The authors combine the EU Taxonomy of Sustainable Activities with a custom GPT-4 prompt applied to over 100,000 geo-located inward FDI projects into Europe (2013–2024) drawn from Orbis Crossborder. The result is a bottom-up, project-level identification of green activities across virtually every sector, going well beyond energy – and the first atlas of otherwise 'hidden' green FDI projects in the EU27+UK, with an extension to Africa underway.

**Lotte Thomsen** (Copenhagen Business School) presented two related lines of work. The first revisits geographies of dissociation and sustainability (Thomsen & Hess, 2022): how brands actively avoid being associated with negative social or environmental aspects of their GVCs to protect reputational value, with a current empirical focus on gemstones in Thailand's border regions. The second, with Kean Fan Lim (Newcastle), considers the role of illicit activities in GPNs under conditions of geopolitical tension – what Thomsen termed the 'trinity' of the green transition, the gold rush and the AI chip battle, all of which intensify extraction and have material consequences for nature and people in supplier regions (with particular attention to Southeast Asia–China). Intended outputs include a commentary for the *Journal of Economic Geography* and a workshop and special issue at CBS.

**Stefano Ponte** (Copenhagen Business School) used his two-slide mini-presentation to map his current theoretical interests across the GGVC space – governance and upgrading; power and inequality; and value, values and valuation – alongside the empirical and geographic foci across which these are explored: agro-food (wine, coffee, biofuels, seafood), capital-intensive GVCs with mobile assets (shipping, aviation), and labour-intensive GVCs (apparel, furniture, leather), with deep regional engagement in Eastern and Southern Africa and complementary work in Europe, Latin America and Southeast Asia. He returned to several of these threads in his longer mini keynote (below).

**Matthew Alford** (University of Manchester) framed his agenda around bringing the state more centrally into GVC analysis – its facilitating and regulating roles – and around a neo-Gramscian reading of governance that takes seriously the heterogeneous experiences of different actors, including labour as agents within chains. His sectoral focus is on agri-food (fruit, vegetables, wine) and garments, with geographical depth in Sub-Saharan and East Africa (South Africa, Kenya, Lesotho) and Latin America (Chile). A key emphasis is shifting attention from purely global value chains to regional and domestic value chains, and from Northern lead firms to Southern actors – including Southern MNEs that operate as lead firms in their own producer countries.

**Aarti Krishnan** (University of Manchester) outlined an agenda built around trade-offs and contradictions in value chains as sites of economic, social and environmental contestation. Current threads include restoration and conservation in VCs; multiple environmental crises and uncertainty (with their spatial implications); digital traceability as both a tool of governance and a space of unsustainability; and methodological work bringing together remote sensing and satellite measurements of high carbon stocks and biodiversity, NLP and machine learning, and digital ethnography ("photo voice"). Looking forward, Krishnan flagged green imaginaries and futures as a question of growing importance – including whether different actors talk about circularity and sustainability in commensurable ways.

**Francisco Mango** (University of Bristol) presented research on regional diversification into circular economies and what this implies for (G)GVCs – from raw-materials sourcing toward Product-Service Systems, and from globally extended chains toward physically shortened, closed-loop value chains. Building on his 2025 Ecological Economics paper on polycentric climate governance and the circular economy in the EU, his current work uses patent abstracts and a Neural Network Language Model to map circular economies and match them with EU patents at NUTS-2 level, drawing on an Economics of Relatedness and Complexity framework with QCA for causal inference. A productive caveat was acknowledged: the circular economy is itself a concept at risk of overstretching.

**Felipe Irarrázaval** (University of Chile) shared early-stage work on the greening of mineral supply chains, focused on Chilean copper. His emerging dataset covers 28 copper mines together with associated SMEs, with greening currently tractable along two dimensions that are relatively easy to trace – freshwater reduction and carbon reduction. A central tension he flagged is that, in the absence of product differentiation in copper markets, the incentive structure for going beyond these basics remains unclear: a question with wider implications for greening in commoditised mineral supply chains.

**Valentina De Marchi** (ESADE Business School) introduced the forthcoming Encyclopedia of Global Value Chains (Edward Elgar, edited with Juli Lang, Roberta Rabellotti and Ari van Assche), to be published in summer 2026 and presented at SASE in Bordeaux. The volume brings together over 90 founding and emerging scholars across international economics, GVC theory, international business, sociology, political economy and economic geography, with 78 entries organised into eight sections including environmental upgrading and sustainability, digitalisation, and firm agency. She also flagged ongoing parallel work on inter-organisational tensions in GVCs, on MNE–city co-creation for sustainable urban futures, and on the economic geography of climate change.

**Carolin Hulke** (LSE) opened an agenda focused on decarbonisation schemes as instruments for "de-polluting" GVCs, with particular attention to carbon trading as a site of firm–state and state–state bargaining. A key empirical concern she raised is the discrepancy in bargaining power between



comparatively thin. Environmental upgrading: the necessary and sufficient conditions for upgrading to occur; the distinction between upgrading as a process and as an outcome; and how upgrading travels along the chain rather than only at single nodes. Sustainability standards and certifications: useful as governance instruments and as entry points into value chains but doing rather less than is sometimes claimed to enhance environmental performance. Green FDI and greening FDI: including links to clusters and districts. Green industrial policies: increasingly regional in flavour, especially around strategic materials for the green transition. And GVCs and climate change: adaptation and mitigation, carbon accounting and footprinting, and the existential implications for some agri-food value chains – with English sparkling wine offered as a vivid example of a regional value chain being made by, and possibly unmade by, climate change.

Theoretically and thematically, Ponte set out a series of priorities: re-examining governance and power through the lens of how 'green' elements underpin different forms of bargaining and institutional power, and how those tensions in turn shape what counts as green (the discursive register often outpacing the practical); deepening work on value and valuation, including the value(s) of nature and place and what one might call a (green) spirit of capitalism; pushing forward on upgrading – both methodologically and theoretically – and including more comparative and large-N work alongside the existing case-study tradition; carving out space for green industrial policy as a green entry point into broader debates; engaging seriously with intersectionality in green GVCs (gender, race and labour); and finally a set of horizon questions – Anthropocene versus Capitalocene framings, and the possibility of utopian work on better and beyond-capitalism GVCs.

The kick-off workshop delivered on its primary aim: surfacing the breadth of work already underway across the network's members, identifying points of disagreement as well as overlap, and producing a shared sense of where the most productive directions lie. The network leaves the day with a clearer conceptual map, a set of methodological alliances to develop, a programme of follow-up events through to 2027, and an explicit commitment to keep the conversation policy-relevant and openly accessible to early-career and Global South scholars. The day's exchanges underscored that the greening of value chains is an under-discussed and under-utilised pathway for sustainable regional development, and one that the regional studies community is well positioned to push forward.

To detail, the mini-presentations and keynote together opened a rich discussion that organised itself around four interlocking question sets. These echo the network's stated themes, but the day's exchanges sharpened them and added empirical and methodological texture.

### Conceptualising "(de)green/ing" in value chains

Can and should we analytically separate environmental dimensions (upgrading, governance, value) from economic and social outcomes in greening processes? Within environmental upgrading itself, how do we treat the differences between, for instance, emissions reductions and biodiversity outcomes – and do we have the data to measure such outcomes rather than only processes? Do we need concepts that move beyond the established focus on upgrading and governance, theorised back from comparative case work, given the particularities, shifting dynamics, spatial-temporal characteristics and variegated institutions of greening? And is the unit of analysis the greening of GVCs, (or for those inclined the greening of GPNs) – and how do those framings differ in practice?

### Governance, the state and new regulatory landscapes

How can we theorise the role of the state within greener value chains – including as facilitator, regulator and increasingly market actor through carbon trading and industrial policy? How do we connect concepts and empirical analyses of new regulatory instruments (carbon taxes, due diligence laws, sustainability standards, carbon markets), and what kinds of theorisation are needed to capture their effects across scales? What is the relationship between global standards and place-specific natures, and is there scope for distinct Southern standards to emerge from producer regions?

#### Actors, agency and demand in green transitions

How can GVC frameworks help us capture the roles of diverse, multilayered actors – including firms, states, workers and consumers, and including Southern lead firms operating within their own producer countries? What is the role of consumers and demand-side dynamics in driving or constraining greening processes? Where in the chain does environmental power actually sit, and how does the firm-versus-place distinction play out in practice as power asymmetries between, say, smallholder farmers and the institutional intermediaries that structure carbon markets above them?

#### Methods and comparative approaches for policy-relevant research

How can we generate policy-relevant insights through comparative regional approaches and attention to local–global linkages that blur conventional territorial boundaries? What do we mean by "regional", and what do we mean by "local"? What methodological operationalisations – counterfactuals, designs beyond single case studies, sentiment analysis, remote sensing, QCA, NLP – are needed to speak convincingly to policy makers? And what alliances at the methodological level might enable the network to draw productively on other disciplines while preserving the contextual depth on which much of this work depends?