

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: The Ambiguous Role of Multistakeholder Meta-Organisations in Sustainable Supply Chains

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Abstract

Multistakeholder Meta-Organisations (MS-MOs) are often perceived as a 'magic bullet' that can tackle societal grand challenges in global supply chains. In this paper, we consider the case of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), and we investigate the extent to which an MS-MO reshapes the attribution of responsibility for sustainability in supply chains, especially in relation to underlying power dynamics. We conduct a multimodal critical discourse analysis of a broad range of sources, including videos and interviews. We show that through its discursive strategies, the RSPO allocates the responsibility for social and environmental issues to the two extremes of the supply chain: objectifying consumers at one end and smallholders at the other; hence reproducing and even exacerbating the traditional imbalanced power dynamics in supply chains. Our work contributes to the emerging, more critical strand of research investigating meta-organisations (MOs) and sustainable supply chain management.

Keywords: *Meta-organisations; Sustainability; Discourse; Power; Responsibility; Supply chains*

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Who in the supply chain should be held responsible for addressing environmental and social issues, including deforestation, human rights violations and the extinction of species? Should suppliers, operating and employing people on the ground, or (Western) multinational companies (MNCs), continuously decreasing the cost of production, be held responsible? These are critical questions for both research and practice about the attribution of responsibility when considering the transition to more sustainable practices (Newell, 2005; Reinecke & Ansari, 2016). MNCs have often been targeted by hostile campaigns because of what is often referred to as environmental and social 'misconduct' by suppliers (Hajmohammad & Vachon, 2016). For instance, in 2019, Greenpeace accused Unilever, Procter & Gamble (P&G), Nestlé and Mondelez of driving deforestation in the global South (Greenpeace, 2019). Many other similar examples exist, pointing to the responsibility of focal companies for the environmentally and socially damaging practices occurring in their complex, globally dispersed and fragmented supply chains (Hartmann, 2021; Meinschmidt et al., 2018).

In the sustainable supply chain management literature (SSCM), focal companies tend to have been held accountable for environmental and social malpractices as well as responsible for fostering the transition towards more sustainable practices in their upstream supply chain (Meinschmidt et al., 2018). This is in part because of the reputational implications of poor environmental and social practices, but primarily due to the power that these firms tend to exert over other players in their supply chain (Touboulic et al., 2014).

This stream of literature has explored sustainability practices primarily through the lens of these focal companies, often overlooking other actors in the supply chain (Montabon et al., 2016). Most research in this field shows how focal firms, exerting their power, dictate sustainability meanings and practices along their supply chain, implying linear and direct control of dominant focal companies over the sustainability agenda (Touboulic et al., 2018). In this context, the primacy of an 'instrumental logic' (Garriga & Melé, 2004) of the 'business case for sustainability' (Porter & Kramer, 2011) and of the 'win-win perspective' (Montabon et al., 2016) has been highlighted,

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whereby the pursuit of economic gains and the self-interest of focal firms prevail over true sustainability efforts.

Going beyond this dominant focal-firm-centric perspective, an emerging stream of work in SSCM explores the role of multiple, non-traditional stakeholders (e.g., not for-profit organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), social enterprises, regulators and collective initiatives) in the transition towards sustainable supply chain practices (Carmagnac, 2021; Gualandris et al., 2015; Touboulic et al., 2018). This work recognises that embracing the complexity of sustainability requires multi-stakeholder collective efforts (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2016). Such collaborative efforts attempt to address globally relevant and complex challenges, including poverty, deforestation, climate change and resource depletion, with examples to be found in various sectors including coffee, soy, cotton, timber and palm oil (Dentoni et al., 2018; Okereke & Stacewicz, 2018; Reinecke et al., 2012).

Within the literature on meta-organisations (MOs), one finds specific contributions that examine the relevance of collective actions in addressing sustainability challenges, and this body of knowledge complements the limited perspectives offered in SSCM on this topic. MOs facilitate cooperation amongst heterogeneous actors, promote informal collective learning and knowledge transfer, produce their own regulations, make decisions by consensus and function by 'heterarchy' rather than hierarchy (Dumez & Renou, 2020). Recent studies have shed light on multistakeholder meta-organisations (MS-MOs) as key actors in the governance of sustainability efforts across global supply chains (Berkowitz et al., 2017, 2020; Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019), given that they form interconnected networks of multiple and heterogeneous actors with diverse expertise. Examples of such MS-MOs include the Fair Labour Association, the Forest Stewardship Council, the Better Cotton Initiative and the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO).

Our work lies at the intersection of these areas of research and specifically considers whether the traditional hierarchical, control and power-based approach to SSCM is being challenged and replaced by the emergent, collective and collaboration-based perspective exemplified by MS-MOs. We, therefore, formulate the following question: *To what extent do MS-MOs reshape the ways in which the responsibility for sustainability is constructed and attributed in supply chains?*

To address this question, we adopt a discursive perspective, with a Foucauldian view of power at its core, which posits the inextricability of narrative and practice. In this view, discourse is taken to signify a collection of interrelated texts and practices that 'systematically form the object of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). We use the methods of multimodal critical discourse analysis (M-CDA) to investigate the case of the RSPO, a key MS-MO in the transformation of the palm oil supply chains towards sustainable practices.

Our work unpacks the narratives involved in the construction and attribution of responsibility for sustainability

associated with MS-MOs. In most current research, there seems to be excessive praise of MS-MOs: they are viewed as the optimal solution to tackle grand challenges (Dentoni et al., 2018). We offer a more critical perspective by exposing how, despite the shift in the responsibility discourse embodied by these organisations, their efforts to tackle sustainability challenges are still tainted with issues of imbalanced power dynamics highlighted in the SSCM literature. Hence, we contribute to the emerging body of work that seeks to bring to light the power-laden dimensions of the shift towards more sustainable supply chains (McCarthy et al., 2018).

Theoretical background

Our work connects several streams of literature, and this section presents the conceptual foundation of our work.

Responsibility for sustainability in global supply chains

The trend toward global sourcing and outsourcing has spawned more complex, dynamic, non-linear and fragmented supply chains (Mena et al., 2013), resulting in the acceleration of environmental and social damage, increasingly discussed as inter-organisational rather than solely intra-organisational issues (Hartmann, 2021). Along with SSCM scholars (Amaeshi et al., 2008; Hartmann & Moeller, 2014), researchers in the fields of political corporate responsibility (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011), global value chains (Gereffi et al., 2005) and strategic management (Kotabe & Murray, 2004) have focused on the extent to which MNCs are expected to be responsible not only for actions within their own boundaries but also for those of others with whom they are socially or commercially connected (Frigant, 2015).

In the SSCM literature, this question has been mainly investigated through the notions of 'boundaryless responsibility' (Amaeshi et al., 2008), 'responsibility attribution' (Hartmann & Moeller, 2014) and 'extended responsibility' (Spence & Bourlakis, 2009). Despite semantic differences, all these terms imply that focal companies control and dictate economic, environmental and social goals throughout their entire supply chain (Amaeshi et al., 2008; McCarthy et al., 2018). Yet, the meaning of the term 'responsibility' is contentious, and different perspectives evince its richness and ambiguity. For instance, assumptions underlying the notion of 'responsibility' are viewed as ascribing too much power and autonomy to corporations in setting the terms of their own conduct, without considering potential greenwashing or abuse towards weaker actors in the Global South (Banerjee, 2008, 2018; Newell, 2005). Concurrently, authors adopting a normative perspective on responsibility (Amaeshi et al., 2008) contend that the more powerful party in the relationship is morally accountable for its

actions and holds responsibility for the weaker ones (Amaeshi et al., 2008; Touboulic et al., 2014).

Within the SSCM literature, responsibility tends to be viewed from a rationalist perspective, suggesting that the more powerful party in a supplier-customer relationship is responsible for dictating the meanings and practices of sustainability and exerts control over the economically dependent partner in a top-down hierarchical manner (Amaeshi et al., 2008; Formentini & Taticchi, 2016; Grimm et al., 2016). Interestingly, whilst focal companies are considered responsible and tend to define sustainability meanings and practices for other supply chain actors, they simultaneously transfer the responsibility for implementation to others (Pizzetti et al., 2019; Touboulic et al., 2014, 2018). Some authors argue that this has led to wrongly blaming the weaker parties in the supply chain (e.g., farmers and workers) for environmental and social problems, rather than the MNCs upon which they are economically and operationally dependent (Banerjee, 2003; Glover & Touboulic, 2020).

The construction and attribution of responsibility in the context of supply chains cannot be detached from the nature of the relationships in these chains, which are embedded in power dynamics, social norms and political discourse (Black, 2008; Moerman & van der Laan, 2015). Previous research has shown that responsibility can be constructed and attributed through both material and discursive practices (Etchanchu & Djelic, 2019; Glover & Touboulic, 2020) and is, therefore, a political and power-laden notion. Material practices include transactional and contractual mechanisms, such as audits, performance assessment and the inclusion of sustainability requirements in supplier contracts (Glover & Touboulic, 2020; Touboulic et al., 2014). Whilst the SSCM literature has largely focused on such material practices, recent studies have started to explore discursive practices around sustainability in the context of supply chains and inter-organisational networks, evidencing the power dynamics at play (Glover & Touboulic, 2020; McCarthy et al., 2018).

A discursive perspective on power

In recent decades, discursive approaches have been more widely adopted to explore power dynamics across various topics, including sustainability studies (see, for example, a special issue of *Forest Policy and Economics*, Giessen et al., 2009). Discourse not only contains linguistic components but also encompasses a wide variety of visual representations: images, videos, photographs, charts and graphs (Hardy & Thomas, 2014; Höllerer et al., 2018). From a Foucauldian perspective, discourse cannot be separated from power, since all power relations 'cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse' (Foucault, 1980, p. 93). Discourse can be considered as a 'subtle, but nonetheless pervasive' form

of exercising power or as manipulation (Hardy & Thomas, 2014, p. 322; Van Dijk, 2006). Focusing on discourse is an effective way to investigate power dynamics within and between organisations (Hardy & Phillips, 2004). Discourse is a central concept in the power literature, which investigates how actors using 'texts as weapons' have the potential to skew the power relations to benefit their own interests (Hardy & Phillips, 2004). Considering the growing political role played by corporate actors on the global stage (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011), it makes sense to take a close look at their discursive practices. Arguably, the discursive power of MNCs allows them to define the rules of the game (Banerjee, 2018; Courpasson & Golsorkhi, 2011). In the supply chain literature, Western focal firms are constructed as the primary change agents for sustainability, and the dominant narrative around responsibility gives primacy to their interests and role (Banerjee 2003, 2008; McCarthy et al., 2018). The dominant narrative centred on the actions and interests of large corporations simultaneously makes these actors the villains and heroes of sustainability in global supply chains (McCarthy et al., 2018). Critical scholars have drawn our attention to the instrumentality of corporate-led sustainability initiatives and the disconnect between talk and action, e.g., greenwashing and corporate hypocrisy (Glover & Touboulic, 2020). The disconnect between what is said, i.e., sustainability narratives and discourse, and what is done is well researched in the corporate sustainability literature (Pretorius, 2016). It has been argued that such greenwashing serves as a mechanism through which corporations can maintain their authority and legitimacy (O'Sullivan, 2005; Whelan et al., 2019; Zott & Huy, 2007), often at the expense of less powerful players (Banerjee, 2008). MNCs exercise their power through the deployment of emancipatory sustainability narratives, as well as discourses of risk mitigation, assigning responsibility to other parties, as a means to protect their corporate image and enhance their legitimacy whilst undertaking relatively few actions themselves. This highlights the symbolic rather than substantive nature of corporate sustainability claims (Amaeshi et al., 2008; Banerjee, 2008; Gao & Bansal, 2013; Garriga & Melé, 2004) and shows that it is not possible to detach the construction and attribution of responsibility for sustainability in supply chains from the power dynamics at play.

The performative character of corporations' sustainability discourses is well researched (Banerjee, 2018; Carlos & Lewis, 2018; Christensen et al., 2013; Glover & Touboulic, 2020). These discourses serve to construct and enact socio-environmental practices, i.e., self-regulation, that can be passed onto others, such as large buying firms imposing sustainability requirements on their suppliers (Grimm et al., 2016). Several examples of self-regulation can be found in the SSCM literature, including the increasing number of codes of conduct, through which focal companies establish and enforce their own environmental and social standards on suppliers

(Egels-Zandén, 2014; Gualandris et al., 2015). Etchanchu and Djelic (2019) show how Tesco (a major retailer) explicitly uses discursive power to force its suppliers (farmers) to adhere to the company's standards of responsible behaviour. In another study, Spencer and Bourlakis (2009) have shown how Waitrose, another UK retailer, defines sustainability standards and expectations for their suppliers. These studies illustrate how the construction and attribution of responsibility for sustainability in the supply chain through the discursive strategies of leading actors is a manifestation of their power which translates into unilaterally imposed practices. Suppliers find themselves with limited agency with regard to environmental and social practices and are obliged to comply with the norms defined by the focal companies.

MS-MOs as an alternative: Towards collective forms of responsibility

The growing importance of corporate-led sustainability practices and self-regulation identified earlier is evidence of the growing political role of MNCs in the globalised economy (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Most self-regulation mechanisms operate through collective organisations, such as industry unions (Marques, 2017), trade associations (Lawton et al., 2018), multi-stakeholder initiatives (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011; Whelan et al., 2019) and standards organisations (Berkowitz & Soucaud, 2019), all of which can be classified as MOs, i.e., organisations whose members are other organisations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005). The MO concept has emerged to distinguish the diverse dynamics of collective versus individual organisations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005).

Proponents of MOs argue that collective action is not only necessary but also critical in order to address societal grand challenges, which call for the participation of a wide range of actors (Berkowitz et al., 2017). Whilst most of the literature to date has been focused on MOs composed of a single type of member, e.g., organisations in the same sector with some notable exceptions (Berkowitz et al., 2017, 2020; Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019; Laurent et al., 2020), there is growing evidence that societal grand challenges call for a MS-MO approach integrating a wide-range of heterogeneous actors, such as businesses, NGOs, and public and scientific institutions (Berkowitz et al., 2017, 2020). Bringing together diverse expertise and capabilities has been shown to be more effective than solo strategies to address sustainability challenges on a global scale (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2016). Recent studies have highlighted how MS-MOs can create and sustain an innovative space to tackle sustainability challenges related to oceans and to the energy and palm oil sectors (Berkowitz et al., 2017, 2020; Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019).

Considering the emphasis placed on MS-MOs as central actors striving for global sustainability, one may assume that

they have a key role in reshaping not only the attribution of responsibility for sustainability but also the power dynamics between the different actors involved and the shift toward collective and collaborative approaches. For instance, it has been argued that responsibility attribution is socially constructed and, thus, more likely to be discussed and collectively negotiated within a multi-actor entity that is invested with a societal mission (Moerman & van der Laan, 2015; Reinecke & Ansari, 2016). In a space where heterarchy prevails and decisions are made by consensus, hierarchical power has little strength (Berkowitz et al., 2020). As consensus-based deliberation formally attributes an equal voice to all MS-MO members, they would have a comparable contribution to the construction and attribution of responsibility for sustainability; they would become the co-authors of such collective responsibility.

Despite the growing body of work on MS-MOs' role in tackling sustainability issues (Berkowitz et al., 2017, 2020; Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019), there is still a dearth of research looking to unveil subtle forms of influence and power within these MS-MOs. In this study, we are interested in challenging the prevailing assumption that MS-MOs should be considered as the best way to achieve the sustainability transformation. We need to unpack MS-MOs' discursive practices in order to fully understand the political and power dimensions at play in shaping the construction and attribution of responsibility for sustainability on a global scale.

Methodology

There is clearly an interplay between power and discourse in global supply chains, whereby an actor can influence policies, issues, other actors, norms and procedures (Lukes, 2005). The responsibility for sustainability in this context is constructed and attributed through both discursive and material strategies, which echoes Foucauldian perspectives on power relations that link language and action (McCarthy et al., 2018). We are interested in how this plays out in the context of an MS-MO and specifically in understanding the extent to which the MS-MO shapes and attributes responsibility for sustainability in the supply chain and the challenges underlying these power dynamics.

Approach: M-CDA

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary methodology used to critically investigate the linguistic aspects of social phenomena and expose power implications (Balogun et al., 2014). CDA problematises discourse as an instrument and effect of power: 'discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it' (Foucault, 1978, p. 101). This approach prioritises social relations over individual actions or entities, making it highly appropriate for our study. CDA consists of the systematic

unpacking of often opaque relationships between (1) discursive strategies, events and text, and (2) the broader social structure, relations and processes. In line with Phillips et al. (2008), we argue that a discursive strategy is a struggle for power within and between organisations, with the capacity to define concepts and subject positions and to control how the objects are perceived and handled. Like McCarthy et al. (2018), we adopt a multimodal approach to CDA (M-CDA) to include multiple types of sources and expand the analysis beyond text to language, images, sound and gestures (Höllerer et al., 2018). With this approach, we explore the interactions, relationships and contradictions between these elements in order to unravel the narratives and counter-narratives associated with different stakeholders.

Research context

We focus on a single MS-MO, the RSPO, which is conducive to rich data collection for greater depth of analysis and increased precision, revealing unique insights that other collective arrangements would not have provided (Siggelkow, 2007). In this field, the production, processing and trading of palm oil have all sparked controversies related to intertwined negative environmental and social impacts (Schouten & Glasbergen, 2011). The RSPO is a voluntary membership organisation, whose aim is to tackle the sustainability challenges in palm oil supply chains through a single certification scheme. It is the most established and successful MS-MO in the sector (De Man & German, 2017) and one of the fastest-growing MS-MOs when compared to similar initiatives developed in other commodity sectors (De Man & German, 2017). In its 13 years of existence, the RSPO has certified a 19% share of the total global palm oil market and

brought more than 5000 heterogeneous members together. As shown in Figure 1, its membership comprises three categories: associate members (organisations that purchase less than 500 metric tons of palm oil products annually), affiliate members (universities, research centres and sponsors) and ordinary members (retailers, manufacturers, traders, growers, financial institutions, environmental and social NGOs) (RSPO, 2021). The RSPO's governance structure consists of a General Assembly, an Executive Board and several working groups and task forces. The General Assembly is the highest decision-making authority. The General Assembly meetings are held annually, and the decisions are made by a simple majority vote of only the ordinary members. As manufacturers are the most numerous amongst RSPO ordinary members, they easily outvote the others and dominate the decisions in the General Assembly (De Man & German, 2017; Schouten & Glasbergen, 2011). The executive board is composed of 16 representatives of the ordinary members. The formation of working groups and task forces is designed to address specific, emergent issues. Decision-making within the board of governors, working groups and task forces is based on consensus, which has been widely explored in the literature and criticised by some RSPO members. On the one hand, consensus is viewed as a strength of the RSPO, as it gives equal voice to all members. On the other hand, to meet the expectations of all the different stakeholders, decision-making based on consensus often becomes a long process. This leads to lowest common denominator decisions, which result in less strict standards (Schouten & Glasbergen, 2011). This MS-MO constitutes a fascinating context to explore subtle forms of power, where discourse can shape roles and attribute different degrees of responsibility to the actors involved.

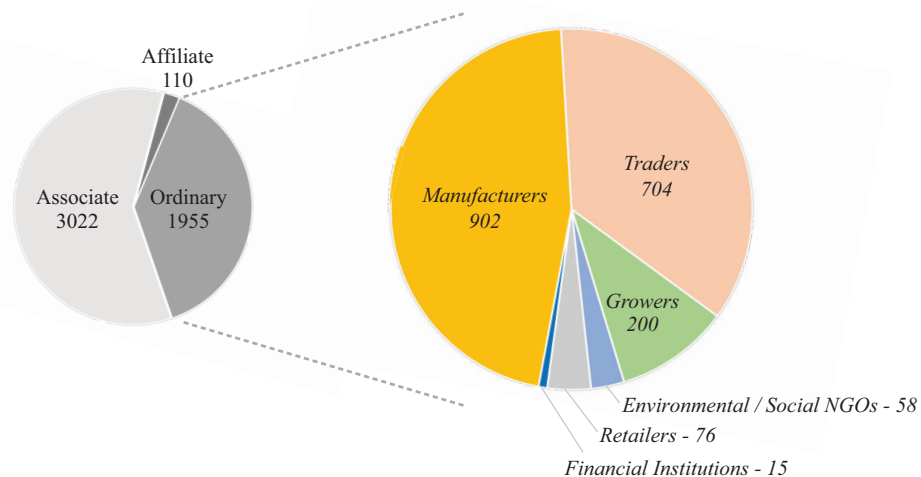


Figure 1. RSPO members in numbers (RSPO, 2021)
RSPO, Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil; NGOs, non-governmental organisations.

Table 1. Data sources

Type of source	Data source	Total	Detail	N	Further information
Primary	Interviews	22	Oil palm growers	4	Malaysian and Brazilian companies
			Traders	5	American and French companies
			Manufacturers	9	Food, cosmetic and consumer goods MNCs
			RSPO staff	4	Located in Indonesia
Secondary	Videos	69	Interviews (VW)	39	Interviews conducted with RSPO members during annual meetings (2014–2017)
			Institutional (VC)	18	Videos that explain the RSPO's operating mode in order to engage and recruit new members
			Smallholders (VS)	12	Testimonials of smallholders located in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand

MNCs, multinational companies; RSPO, roundtable on sustainable palm oil.

Data sources

Our analysis relies on two main sources of data: 69 videos and 22 interviews (Table 1). The videos represent the main source of empirical evidence, comprising interview (VW), institutional (VC) and smallholder (VS) videos. Interview videos are produced during RSPO meetings and showcase RSPO members' opinions about the achievements and challenges of the MS-MO. Institutional videos promote the RSPO's activities, by presenting the organisation's operating mode, raising awareness about palm oil, engaging stakeholders and recruiting new members. Smallholder videos are a set of short testimonials by RSPO smallholders, demonstrating the importance of their engagement in the sustainable palm oil supply chain.

In addition, 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted with RSPO staff and members from 2017 to 2019. Each interview lasted approximately 90 min. The interview protocol covered questions that explore informants' perceptions regarding the role of the MS-MO in addressing sustainability issues. The selection criteria for interviewees attempted to reflect the diversity of members.

Data analysis

Our analysis followed an iterative process, looking into the differences, similarities and complementarities present throughout the different materials (Höllerer et al., 2018). We conducted our analysis in three stages (Elliott & Stead, 2018). First, all interviews and videos were carefully recorded and transcribed. Second, we carried out an open coding process to familiarise ourselves with the data. Working individually, each researcher coded 46 videos and 14 interviews, with each video and interview being coded by two people independently to ensure greater reliability. In this stage, we took notes on the main discourse features, including the context, e.g., main characters and the positioning of the audience, as well as the content such as the recurring themes and narrative patterns present in the discourse of both the RSPO and its members.

In the third stage, we discussed our individual coding as a group before agreeing on and coding the recurrent themes considered to be relevant. Four categories of themes emerged in this stage: (1) the construction of sustainability discourse; (2) the main actors identified as responsible for sustainable practices; (3) the initiatives/mechanisms adopted by the RSPO to manage such practices; (4) the RSPO's outcomes and promises. In order to adequately explore the visual and kinetic aspects of the videos, we also included six other categories of analysis: (1) video format/forms, e.g., cartoon, documentary and whiteboard animation; (2) sound, e.g., soft background music, noise and people talking; (3) landscape and settings, e.g., exterior/interior, countryside/city and private/commercial; (4) people's appearance, e.g. female/male, young/old and clothing; (5) postures and gestures, e.g. eye contact and physical distances; (6) who is speaking. During this analysis, we carefully observed how imagery may reflect social patterns and reaffirm power dynamics. As Elliott and Stead (2018) argue, the position of an individual in the image may imply/indicate specific power imbalances or suggest a relative social position, power, reputation and renown. In this stage, we also paid special attention to latent elements in the discourse that were not evident at first glance. To detect these elements, we looked for expected and unexpected 'absences' in the discourse using questions, such as who is speaking to whom, in the name of whom, and about what (Van Dijk, 2006). Table 2 provides an illustration of the complete coding scheme adopted.

Findings

Bringing textual and visual elements together, our findings are structured around two interrelated sections: the construction of subject and object positions ('who' and 'what') and their implications for the discursive construction and attribution of (collective) responsibility for sustainability in supply chains.

Here, we explain the subject and object positions that constitute the main elements of the RSPO discourse (Hardy & Phillips,

Table 2. Coding scheme

Coding columns	Visual and kinetics aspects					
	Forms	Sound	Landscape	People's appearance	Posture	Who talks?
Coding columns (cont.)	Discourse around sustainability issues					
	How is the unsustainable issue framed?			How is the sustainable issue framed?		
Coding columns (cont.)	Main actors' representation					
	Construction of smallholders	Construction of RSPO	Construction of consumers	Construction of supply chain (traders, manufacturers and retailers)	Construction of other stakeholders	
Coding columns (cont.)	Mechanisms and outcomes					
	Which practices (initiatives, tools and projects) do they show?	Justification of practices in relation to sustainability	Mechanisms for implementing practices	Expected or achieved outcomes	Illustrated outcomes/results /achievements	

RSPO, roundtable on sustainable palm oil.

2004). Subject positions are associated with different rights to engage in discursive strategies, i.e., to produce new texts, with some actors having a voice and others none at all. Identifying these subject positions reveals novel and rich insights into both the power dynamics at play and the object positions (concepts and ideas) produced by the discourse. We describe how the subject positions are constructed (smallholders, consumers and traditional SC actors) and the object positions (sustainability issues) associated with each type of actor. It is important to highlight that, whilst some data also included the participation of other types of actors such as environmental and social NGOs, research centres and financial institutions as informants, the representation of these actors in the data analysis was absent.

Discursive construction of smallholders and associated sustainability issues

Smallholders are small-scale farmers with less than 50 hectares who rely on family labour and depend on the oil palm crop as a source of subsistence (RSPO, 2021). They account for approximately 40% of global palm oil production, making them 'significant contributors towards a sustainable oil palm industry' (RSPO, 2021).

Smallholders appear in three different roles in our data: (1) as the main characters in a series of videos showcasing personal life-stories of smallholders (VS videos); (2) as the target audience for several institutional videos (e.g., 'Certification for Smallholder'); (3) as the primary subject of the narratives in videos and interviews, being positioned as the central element of the discourse and the main actor to which the responsibility for sustainability is attributed.


Overall, smallholders are characterised in text and imagery as poor and uneducated, conveying their dependence on the RSPO certification, and as a remote and exotic group of isolated actors,

located far from all other supply chain actors (Table 3). The data show how these associations are crafted, and how the videos have been carefully edited to reinforce such representations. For instance, the representation of smallholders as poor and uneducated is recurrent throughout all smallholder series videos (VS). Most of these videos emphasise the improvements that joining the MO has brought to smallholders' lives. The videos depict a dichotomy of *before* and *after* the RSPO. The narrative reinforces the idea that smallholders had insufficient income, information and knowledge; improper housing and inadequate educational resources for their families prior to joining (e.g., 'Before, my house didn't have walls and I only had a bicycle', 'Before joining RSPO, it was very difficult for us to sell fruit', 'Before, our income was modest'. VS_01; VS_05; VS_09). In contrast to the 'before' narrative, the images portray the 'after RSPO', showing smallholders getting training, new houses, education for their families and new vehicles. Interestingly, these videos are an illustration of how reality is artificially crafted by the RSPO; even though each one is supposed to feature the story of a specific smallholder; many videos contain identical footage: same home, same children, same school and same training (Figure 2).

Representations of smallholders as exotic and remote are also recurrent. Abstract terms such as 'on the ground' (VW_01, VC_03, interviews with traders) or the 'rest of the world' (VW_16) are frequently employed to convey 'remoteness'. The representation of smallholder exoticism clearly emerges from the video 'Sabah commits the entire state to sustainable palm oil practices by 2025' (VC_15), in which a multi-stakeholder group is seen crossing a narrow bridge to visit a palm oil plantation in a 4WD vehicle, implying that the plantation is remote and difficult to access. In the video, the group 'exploring' the field is portrayed as 'tourists', wearing backpacks and taking pictures, like on a safari.

The sustainability topics associated with smallholders are constructed through references to negative phenomena, such

Table 3. Main representations of the smallholder subject position

	Visual representation	Usual context	Illustrative quotes
Exotic/remote	<p>VC_04: RSPO Smallholder Support Fund VC_02: RSPO Certification for Smallholder</p> 	<p>VC_02 and VC_04: Farmers are homogeneously represented, all wearing the same work uniform (blue overalls and black boots). Moreover, they are represented inside a box or circle (which conveys that they are separated from the rest of the world or from the other actors).</p>	<p>VC_02: 'currently they are millions of smallholders around the world who depend on palm oil for their livelihood'. They are farmers with less than 50 hectares of oil palm, their principal source of income. And their family is the main source of labour'.</p>
Poor and uneducated	<p>VS_03: RSPO Smallholder Series - The Story of Darus</p>  <p>VS_04: RSPO Smallholder Series - The Story of Namo</p> 	<p>VS_03: The smallholder, called Darus, is sitting on a carpet on the floor somewhere that seems to be his house. The house is very simple (it looks unfinished, a broom can be seen in the background). He is barefoot and wearing a sweaty shirt. His wife is sitting directly on the floor behind him.</p> <p>VS_04: Smallholders are being trained by a member of RSPO staff. The RSPO staff member is wearing a polo with the RSPO logo and a big wristwatch. He is the only person who is not wearing a security helmet in the PO field. Smallholders, wearing white security helmets, look concentrated and are paying attention to what is being said by the RSPO staff member.</p>	<p>VS_03: 'From working in these plantations, I can fulfil my family's daily needs, renovate my house'...</p> <p>VS_04: 'When independent smallholders get financial support and coaching by RSPO they are able to implement environmentally friendly practices'.</p>

as deforestation, fire, biodiversity destruction, use of chemicals, poverty and human exploitation. Such associations implicitly convey a relationship between smallholders and poor social and environmental practices in the supply chain (e.g., 'today it is mainly because of smallholders that we have deforestation... they represent 40% of production' – Interview with a trader). This construction of (un)sustainability in relation to smallholders is strongly reinforced by the images used (Table 4).

Discursive construction of consumers and associated sustainability issues

Whilst we have smallholders at one end of the supply chain, consumers constitute the other extreme. Consumers comprise all individuals who, consciously or not, buy products containing palm oil. Despite the share of responsibility attributed to consumers as subjects, their voices are completely absent. These actors consistently appear in two different forms: either as the target audience for a set of institutional videos (VC_05, 06, 07, 13 and 14) or as the object of the discourse created by both the RSPO and its members. They are visually and textually portrayed uniformly as greedy, unaware and naïve (Table 5).

The 'greedy' representation is apparent in text associating consumers with increasing demand and consumption of products containing palm oil and strongly reinforced by a range of visual elements. For instance, in a series of over-simplified cartoon videos (VC_05, 06, 07), products containing palm oil (noodles, ice cream and cookies) disappear from the plate, suggesting that they had been consumed regardless of whether or not they were truly sustainable. Consumers are also represented as unaware and naïve, especially in their lack of knowledge of the power they hold through consumption. Subtitles in the cartoon video 'Episode 5 – Palm Oil What Can You Do' explicitly address consumers: 'Did you know that with every swipe and tap comes great power? Your everyday choices can have a positive impact on the planet and reduce deforestation and climate change. Choosing sustainable palm oil is an easy way to make a big difference', VC_18).

In line with the naïve and unaware characterisation, the sustainability topics associated with these actors are framed around products with 'bad' palm oil or non-certified palm oil products (Figure 3). Some parts of the narrative suggest that consumers will avoid spending more for 'good' sustainable products even after becoming aware of these issues (e.g.,



Figure 2. Screenshot of four different videos illustrating the same training (VS_03,VS_05,VS_01 and VS_04)

'Consumers are still not willing to pay for the RSPO premium' – interview with a trader). Similarly, the representation of 'bad' palm oil products is often constructed using a mix of complementary and contradictory messages in text and images. Whilst the images of one set of videos simply show everyday products that contain palm oil, the accompanying texts question whether these products come from a 'good'/certified source, leaving the audience, i.e., consumers of these products, in doubt (e.g., 'how can you be sure that the palm oil product sold as RSPO certified comes from RSPO certified sources?', VC_10). The video 'Episode 3 – Let's Transform the Palm Oil Sector' (VC_16) also illustrates this dialectical link between text and imagery. Whereas the image presents a variety of familiar products (bread, soap and ice cream) that contain bad palm oil, the text suggests that reducing the consumption of such products may not be a good solution: 'You are probably thinking 'I should just boycott palm oil'. Not so fast. Boycotting seems like a quick fix, but it could actually lead to a worse outcome' (VC_16).

Discursive construction of traditional supply chain actors and associated sustainability issues













Here, 'traditional SC actors' refers to large-scale growers, traders, manufacturers and retailers that commercialise more than 500 metric tonnes of oil per year. Examples include Unilever; one of the co-founders of the RSPO, which is recognised as the largest palm oil manufacturer, consuming approximately 3% of global supply (Von Geibler, 2013) and five Indonesian traders, which together control about 90% of the palm oil trade market (Pacheco et al., 2020). These actors, as explained before, are the only players with the right to vote and to hold

seats on the board of governors. Moreover, due to their over-representation (see Figure 1), they outvote other categories of members (e.g., financial institutions and environmental and social NGOs) in the General Assembly Meetings (Carmagnac & Carbone, 2019; Schouten & Glasbergen, 2011). This clearly creates an imbalance of power amongst RSPO members. Indeed, several studies have criticised the RSPO, saying that despite its international scope, it is still recognised as a European initiative to address the demands of Western MNCs and does not attend to the needs of the smallholders (Pacheco et al., 2020; Schouten & Glasbergen, 2011).

Traditional SC actors are the main characters in the interview videos. However, they rarely talk about themselves or about their own responsibility in addressing sustainability issues (e.g., 'sustainability is always long-term commitment, but it is essential that the demand comes from the consumer' – interview with a food manufacturer). The only exception is when they refer to their active role in purchasing RSPO certified PO, highlighting a positive association between these traditional actors and the RSPO certification as the main solution for a sustainable transition.

Beyond their 'endorsement' responsibility in growing the RSPO certified market, they are not explicitly represented in the RSPO's sustainability narrative. An example of this occurs in the video 'United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and RSPO partner to raise profile of Sustainable Palm Oil', where SC actors are not even alluded to: the RSPO brings together 'producers, consumers, environmental NGOs, and also national governments' and '[the RSPO] allows consumers and producers to be rewarded for a more sustainable consumption and production pattern' (VC_03). We refer to them as hidden actors, or actors in the shadows, seemingly shielding

Table 4. (Un)sustainable topics associated with smallholders

Unsustainable element	Visual representation	
Deforestation	 VC_03	 VC_15
Fire	 VC_03	 VC_03
Poverty	 VC_03	 VC_09
Biodiversity destruction	 VC_11	 VC_11
Use of chemicals	 VC_15	 VC_07
Human exploitation	 VC_15	 VC_15

themselves behind the RSPO 'black-box'. These actors are depicted in the text and imagery as a simple link between the two extremes of the supply chain (Table 6). Despite their specific role in the supply chain (as refiners, traders, manufacturers and retailers), they are often referred to as an undifferentiated group of entities, i.e., 'organisations along the supply chain'

(VC_17), 'brands that are buying palm oil' (interview with RSPO staff) and 'the whole supply chain' (VW_14).

The complexity of the supply chain is used rhetorically to reduce these traditional actors' involvement to 'a simple link'. This is well-exemplified by a trader, who states 'We are all suppliers, customers, and growers. It is a very spider [web-like]

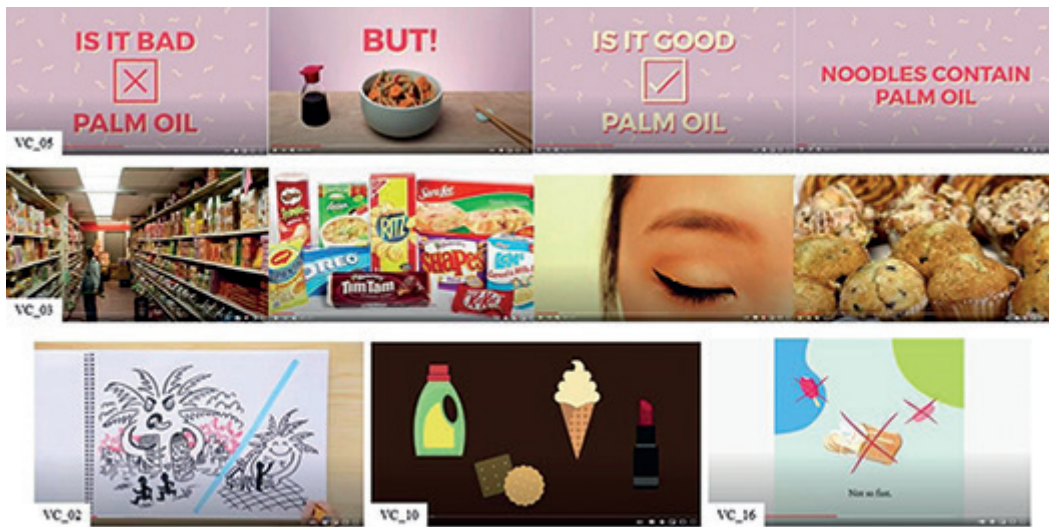


Figure 3. (Un)sustainable topics associated with consumers

Table 5. Main representations of the consumer subject position

	Visual representation	Usual context	Illustrative quotes
Naive and unaware	<p>VC_09: RSPO Trademark App</p>	<p>VC_09: The protagonist of this video is a young Asian female consumer wearing a yellow sweater, jeans and a Pokémon face mask. She is using her cell phone to verify which products have the RSPO label in a supermarket (where all products and signs are written in English). She demonstrates surprise when she finds a certified PO product. All other young Asian clients in the supermarket are holding cell phones and searching for Pokémon. At the end of the video, two messages are directly addressed to these unaware consumers: 'download the app' and 'always choose RSPO-certified goods'.</p>	<p>VC_09: 'Cool'; 'Hey did you catch any Pokemons? Actually, I'm catching something else'.</p>
Greedy	<p>VC_06: Ice cream contains palm oil</p>	<p>VC_06: The video has very funny background music, similar to a video game, and informs the audience that ice cream contains palm oil before asking whether this is good or bad. In the video, we can see on the table a glass of juice, a spoon, two bottles of sauce and the ice cream. Interestingly, everything is real, except the ice cream, which is shown as balls of wool and is the only object that disappears. This may suggest that, whether the ice cream is made from a good or bad palm oil, the product is consumed.</p>	

market...And it is complicated for people who are not part of the business to understand the supply chain behind that'. There is an interesting contrast between their conspicuous absence from the RSPO discourse and the fact that these actors not only fill most seats on the board of governors but also outvote other members and dominate the decision-making process

(Schouten & Glasbergen, 2011). We can infer that traditional SC actors behind the RSPO black-box are the key players who create the rules for the other members, mainly smallholders, to follow (e.g., 'the aim [of RSPO certification] is to ensure smallholders improve their practices by complying with the RSPO P&Cs [principles and criteria]', VC_02).

Table 6. (Un)sustainable topics associated to traditional supply chain actors

Unsustainable element	Visual representation	
Climate change		
Ecosystem degradation		

Sustainability topics associated with traditional SC actors highlight global challenges, such as climate change and ecosystem degradation. Interestingly, a closer look at the visual elements reveals that the construction of these global environmental challenges is associated exclusively with upstream actors of the supply chain, i.e., millers and refineries (Table 7). There are no images or texts linking these issues to the large focal firms in the supply chain, i.e., manufacturers and retailers.

Discursive construction of the RSPO’s responsibility for sustainability

In exposing the ways in which subject and object positions are textually and visually framed in relation to each other, we are able to tease out the implications of responsibility construction and attribution for sustainability concerning the MS-MO itself (Table 8). We show that the RSPO as a subject position is constructed around two main representations, which, in turn, relate to several promises and practical solutions.

First, to remedy smallholder ‘poverty’ and exploitation, the RSPO promises fair working conditions and economic prosperity by providing funds and price premiums to smallholders. According to the RSPO, these mechanisms help smallholders by increasing their incomes, hence giving them the opportunity to expand their plantation areas, build homes and educate their children. Next, the RPSO addresses the question of ‘uneducated’ smallholders by promoting sustainable agricultural


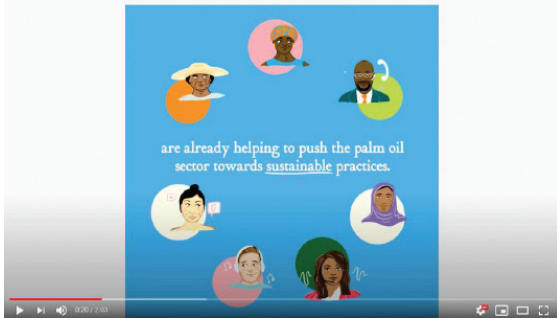
practices and professionalisation through control and management systems and technical training. Finally, despite their ‘remoteness’, smallholders’ access to the market is ensured through their participation in the RSPO’s certification scheme.

In order to tackle the (un)sustainability of ‘bad’ palm oil products at the other end of the supply chain, where consumers are depicted as ‘unaware’, ‘naïve’ and/or ‘greedy’, the RSPO promotes increased sustainability awareness and stimulates demand for sustainable products. This is done by providing education on responsible decision-making (‘the right thing to do’), empowering consumers through mobile applications and creating an easily identifiable ‘sustainable palm oil’ label to facilitate sustainable purchases.

Finally, the RSPO is constructed as erasing the complexity of the supply chain, representing traditional members as a ‘simple link’ or ‘hidden actors’ in the chain, by providing them with tools to ensure the traceability of PO products and different types of certification schemes. Moreover, the RSPO addresses the hidden facets of traditional supply chain actors by protecting their reputational image, addressing risks and aligning with the companies’ identities.

The RSPO’s subject position is carefully crafted, notably around promises and solutions to tackle the (un)sustainable issues related to different actors in the supply chain. In all text and visual elements, the MS-MO is constructed as ‘the only practical and legitimate solution’, as a credible, global standard and as an ‘all powerful’ entity (Table 9).

Table 7. Main representations of the traditional supply chain actor subject position

	Visual representation	Usual context	Illustrative quotes
A simple link	<p>VC_10: RSPO PalmTrace</p> 	<p>VC_10: The video details the Palm Oil Trace, a tool that enables certified palm oil traceability from mills to retailers. The video shows the role of each supply chain actor in inputting data to enable PO traceability. Focal companies are not especially highlighted, but described as a link between other players in a linear chain.</p>	<p>VC_10: 'Manufacturers and retailers purchase certified sustainable oil palm products, manufacturers then produce goods containing certified sustainable oil palm products, manufacturers and retailers can purchase RSPO credits in RSPO palm trace and thereby directly incentivize the production of certified sustainable oil palm products'.</p>
Hidden	<p>VC_17: Episode 4 - What Is Sustainable Palm Oil</p> 	<p>VC_17: A cartoon video with soft music in the background. In this video, focal firms (manufacturers and retailers) are described as 'companies along the supply chain'. Emphasis is given to NGOs and financial institutions. All the characters in the video are of different ethnicities and from different professions (e.g., a tan Asian man wearing a farming hat and a Black businessman wearing a suit and tie and using a phone)</p>	<p>VC_17: 'companies along the supply chain... they have teamed up under the RSPO'</p>

Discussion

Through our M-CDA approach, we reveal the strategies of an MS-MO in the discursive construction of the main actors and issues within its remit as well as its role. This, in turn, enables us to infer implications in terms of the articulation of responsibility for sustainability in the supply chain. This paper contributes to both the SSCM and MO literature in several ways. The insights from the study are also valuable to the broader field of corporate sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

Whose responsibility? Challenging the shift towards a collective narrative in SSCM

Research in SSCM is predominantly based on assumptions of linearity, hierarchy and power exerted by focal firms over their direct and indirect suppliers (Rauer & Kaufmann, 2015; Touboulis et al., 2018). However, recent studies have highlighted how collective bodies such as MS-MOs can assume an orchestrating and pivotal role in driving sustainability along the supply chain (Carmagnac, 2021). We focus on this under-explored level of analysis in the SSCM literature and show how, rather counter-intuitively, the long-standing

assumptions of linearity, hierarchy, control and power-led dynamics persist and are even exacerbated by the presence of an MS-MO. Our findings shed light on subtler forms of power, influence and persuasion, based on the discursive construction of responsibility for some actors (i.e., smallholders and consumers) paired with the concealment of others, i.e., the powerful SC actors (Etchanchu & Djelic, 2019).

Our findings enrich our understanding of the notions of 'boundaryless responsibility' (Amaeshi et al., 2008) or 'extended responsibility' (Spence & Bourlakis, 2009) for focal firms, which translate into attempts to control the entire supply chain and to define and impose mechanisms to transfer the responsibility for sustainability onto their suppliers (Amaeshi et al., 2008; Formentini & Taticchi, 2016; Grimm et al., 2016). Our results suggest that joining an MS-MO reinforces the control of focal firms over sustainability issues in supply chains, especially in the context where the MS-MO uses market logic and presents a business case to construct the meaning and practices of sustainability.




Our work also connects to the emergent stream of SSCM literature on voiceless actors in global supply chains (McCarthy et al., 2018). We show that although MS-MOs

Table 8. Promises and solutions of the RSPO in relation to other subject positions

Smallholders		
Promises of the RSPO	Associated solutions/practices	Discursive evidence
Economic prosperity and access to the market	Cut out the middleman	'We can now sell directly without relying on a middleman' (VS_11)
	Funds	'Now there is a good news for the smallholders who need financial help to get RSPO certification. In line with that commitment to support smallholders, RSPO has created a special fund for them' (VC_04)
	Price premium	'As global demand for SPO increases, certified SPO can be sold for a premium price' (VC_15)
	Higher incomes	'RSPO certification can support smallholders in ... raising levels of income among poor farmers' (VC_02)
Improvement of smallholder living and working conditions	Economic gains	'It generates income, it generates employment, and it is how economic growth has been established' – interview with a manufacturer
	Land ownership	'The benefits are that we have doubled our plantation from two to four hectares, and we are rebuilding our house as a permanent structure' (VS_06)
	University/house	'From working in these plantations, I can fulfil my family's daily needs, renovate my house and send my daughter to university in Pekan Baru' (VS_03)
	Wellbeing	'Wilmar ensures the wellbeing of workers are taken care of. An example of this is providing a safe hold for workers' passports' (VC_15)
	Protect work	'So a certified mill or a certified plantation should not have child labour or slave labour' – interview with a manufacturer
Managerial and environmental training for smallholders	PPE	'Those of us who have had training understand more and so we always use PPE (Proper use of Personal Protective Equipment)' (VS_07)
	Technical training	'When independent smallholders get support and coaching... they are able to preserve the environment, and implement sustainable and environmentally friendly practices in their farming methods' (VS_04)
	Proper use of pesticides/fertiliser	'Since joining Amanah, I apply fertilizer more regularly, and I'm also well informed about the appropriate dosage' (VS_01)
	Higher yields	'I think that our RSPO members have a higher rate of production' – interview with a trader
	Methods of work	'After we joined the RSPO, we learned the best practices to manage our plantation.' (VS_09)
Stimulated SPO demand	Control and management systems	'If you look at the P&C, at the RSPO P&C standards, it is in principle no more than management systems standards' – interview with a manufacturer
Consumers		
Promises of the RSPO	Associated solutions/practices	Discursive evidence
Increased sustainability awareness	Education for responsible choices	'Is it good palm oil or is it bad palm oil? Click to find out more' (VC_05,06,07)
	Empowerment through an app	'Supporting brands that use sustainable palm oil helps to protect wildlife, people, the environment... Tell your favourite brands and retailers that you only want to see sustainable palm oil in your favourites products' (VC_18)
	Creating a label	'I'm using this RSPO trademark app to snap and add RSPO certified products' (VC_09)
Stimulated SPO demand	Pushing actors towards demand for SPO	'Make the RSPO certifications more robust for the consumers who are the ones demanding sustainable palm oil' (VW_39)
	Right thing to do	'How we can convince consumers it is only the right thing to do, and that is where NGOs, buyers, producers need to join hands, it is the only way to go forward' (VW_02)
Supply chain actors		
Promises of the RSPO	Associated solutions/practices	Discursive evidence
Traceability	E-trace tools	'The RSPO certification is a way to ensure traceability because, otherwise, you have no control over the source' – interview with a manufacturer
	Four types de certification	'Now we have RSPO mass balance, RSPO Segregated, RSPO Identity preserved, ISCC, so you are almost decommoditising the market, by creating actually different products, we are almost splitting the number of products' – interview with a trader
Reputation	Addressing risks	'I think many people join RSPO to manage their risks' – interview with a grower
	Alignment with the identity of the company	'The intentions of the RSPO were aligned with what the company believes' – interview with a trader

RSPO, roundtable on sustainable palm oil; SPO, sustainable palm oil; PPE, Personal Protective Equipment; P&C, principles and criteria; ISCC, International Sustainability and Carbon Certification; NGOs, non-governmental organisations.

Table 9. Main representations of the RSPO subject position

	Visual representation	Usual context	Illustrative quotes
The only practical solution	<p>VC_03 UNEP and RSPO partner to raise profile of Sustainable Palm Oil</p> 	<p>VC_03: This video is made to promote the 'strategic partnership' between UNEP and RSPO.</p> <p>The video starts by showing a set of images of palm oil trees, products, forests and orang-utans. At one point, the UNEP Executive Director, seen in a suit and tie standing in front of the UNEP flag, explains that the UNEP has decided to sign a 'memorandum of understanding' with the RSPO due to its 'great success stories'. After another sequence of images related to deforestation and climate change, the RSPO Chief Executive Officer (CEO) appears, wearing a suit with an RSPO pin, and affirms that the RSPO has significant experience that can help the UNEP achieve its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).</p>	<p>VC_03: 'One of the great success stories of trying to bring together... It is indeed one of the great success stories with today over 1,000 members'</p>
All-powerful	<p>VC_04 RSPO Smallholder Support Fund</p> 	<p>VC_04: This video is a whiteboard animation explaining how smallholders can access RSPO funds. Whilst the narrator explains that the fund is destined to help smallholders obtain the certification (by covering the costs of audits, training and other assessments), the fund is represented as a chest full of gold bars or as a happy smallholder holding gold bars in his hands. This representation conveys the idea that the fund may enrich smallholders.</p>	<p>VC_04: The RSSF can provide support to cover your audit costs. Not only that, RSSF can also be applied for capacity building programs, ..., training on agricultural best practices, improving your market access, and so much more'</p>
	<p>VS 02 Smallholders in Thailand</p> 		

are meant to empower voiceless actors (smallholders in our case) by providing them with a platform and through consensus-based deliberative processes, these actors are still objectified and remain in a position of limited agency where they have to accept and follow rules imposed by a minority of powerful players (Banerjee, 2018; Carlos & Lewis, 2018). This means that despite the MS-MO discourse of

inclusiveness, 'every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization' (Mouffe, 1999, p. 756). MS-MOs tend to reproduce and even exacerbate domination and paternalistic patterns (Etchanchu & Djelic, 2019) and, in so doing, continue to give primacy to the interests and role of focal firms, exerting control over marginalised stakeholders.

Revealing the dark side of MOs

Our research acknowledges the role of discourse in constructing responsibility relationships, and therefore in (re)shaping the meaning and practices of sustainability in global supply chains. We show how the MS-MO is engaging in a particular responsibility attribution discourse (Black, 2008) when constructing the different positions of its members. This is particularly relevant in the context of a voluntary multistakeholder body where there is a 'democratic' decision-making process and where responsibility attribution is, at least in theory, collectively negotiated (Banerjee, 2018; Carlos & Lewis, 2018). In contrast with such assumptions and nuancing previous studies portraying MS-MOs as the optimal solution in transitioning towards sustainability (Berkowitz et al., 2017, 2020; Chaudhury et al., 2016), our findings reveal a possible dark side. MS-MOs may be a 'strategic device used by organisations to manipulate perceptions of their activities and performance' (Black, 2008, p. 151). Our results suggest that attributing responsibility to specific stakeholders may easily turn into a blame game that could effectively shield the MS-MO from assuming its collective responsibility (Messner, 2009). In our case, the MS-MO's discursive strategies shift the responsibility for addressing sustainability issues to the actors at the two ends of the chain. Several studies have adopted a discursive approach to investigate blaming strategies and responsibility (Coombs, 2007) and highlight that shifting responsibility onto other actors mainly happens in ambiguous situations where audiences struggle to clearly attribute responsibility due to complexity or uncertainty (Roulet & Pichler, 2020). This is also the case here, where the MS-MO is engaged in coping with several 'grand challenges' such as deforestation, climate change and poverty, characterised by their complexity, uncertainty and essentially contested nature (Dentoni et al., 2018; Ferraro et al., 2015). Further research should be done to deepen our understanding of the enablers and determinants of similar discursive strategies aimed at selectively attributing responsibility at the intra-organisational level of MS-MOs. Another distinctive feature of our study is that the palm oil unsustainability problem is constructed from a supply chain perspective. All the actors convening at the 'round table' are linked by transactional relationships across the supply chain, which may exacerbate conflicts, tensions and power dynamics amongst them. It would be interesting to see to what extent our results can be confirmed in other settings. Specifically, it would be interesting to discover whether local and regional MS-MOs, characterised by better balanced, established and trust-based relationships amongst actors (Berkowitz et al., 2020), exhibit weaker power dynamics in their discursive strategies.

We also contribute to the debates around the symbolic rather than substantive nature of corporate sustainability claims (Carlos & Lewis, 2018; Christensen et al., 2013) by

showing how the presence of an MS-MO may allow focal companies to further dilute their responsibility for taking action without losing their legitimacy. In fact, their legitimacy seems even stronger and better protected, thanks to their participation in the MS-MO. Shifting responsibility through the MS-MO's discursive strategies means that large corporations effectively leave the stage, and voiceless actors are placed in the limelight. As the notion of (un)sustainable palm oil is mainly crafted with reference to smallholders and consumers, they suddenly become the 'new villains' and are exhorted to become the 'new heroes' of sustainability, without being given any actual agency, whilst veiling the role of focal companies (McCarthy et al., 2018). We contend that this shift in the responsibility discourse instrumentally enables focal corporations to maintain their authority and control over the meanings and practices of sustainability in their supply chains and thus nurture their legitimacy. Accordingly, the MS-MO's actorhood (Grothe-Hammer, 2019) and its presumed collective responsibility for action and commitment (Berkowitz et al., 2020) suffer from the same power-laden dynamics characterising linear and traditional sustainability governance, paving the way for discrepancies between claims and responsibility. Shifting the responsibility onto weaker actors is a comfortable defence strategy for powerful actors whose legitimacy may be threatened by the very enactment of their boundaryless responsibility (Glover & Touboulic, 2020). Our results suggest that when focal firms join an MS-MO, they may have instrumental and opportunistic motivations. In supporting and adhering to a collective entity, focal firms implicitly contribute to recognising the entity's independent decision-making capabilities and collective 'actorhood'. This also implies allocating responsibility to that entity because 'if decisions can be attributed to an organisation as an actor, it can be held responsible for these actions' (Grothe-Hammer, 2019, p. 326). Powerful actors can then hide behind the responsible collective body, thus reducing their own exposure to blame or contestation.

Conclusion

Overall, our work offers counter-intuitive insights into the role of MS-MOs, showing that they do not reshape the traditional approaches to the management of and responsibility for sustainability in global supply chains. Instead, they tend to increase opacity and power plays. Through the construction and deployment of a discourse that allocates responsibility for sustainable practices to the two extremes of the supply chain, the MS-MO provides a shield for focal firms who have been traditionally held responsible for ensuring sustainability along the supply chain. In doing so, the MS-MO reproduces and even exacerbates the imbalance of power in supply chains, thus veiling the role, the responsibility and almost the very existence of

the traditional focal actors – manufacturers, retailers and industrial suppliers – now in the shadows.

Methodologically, we show that M-CDA is a powerful approach because it enables us to explore the underlying power structures and dynamics at play in the transition to sustainability. We echo Boxenbaum et al. (2018) in considering the multimodal approach as an 'exciting opportunity' to include 'a material and visual turn' (e.g., videos or images) to obtain different perspectives of the same object of inquiry. Power dynamics emerge, change and are negotiated in content (the *what* of communication). It is, therefore, crucial to unpack the manner in which complementary multimodal sources may create different versions of the social reality, which are not neutral *per se*, serving the interests of some actors whilst marginalising others (Boxenbaum et al., 2018).

Several promising research avenues emerge from our work. Whilst MOs and SSCM scholars are increasingly devoting their attention to the importance of collective mechanisms for sustainability transitions, less is known about the discursive strategies employed by these organisations. Longitudinal as well as historical studies in particular could bring new insights into the dynamics of sustainability narratives in global supply chains. Methodologically, we align with the work of McCarthy et al. (2018) and demonstrate the power of visuals. Hence, this study encourages other scholars to embrace visual as well textual elements in order to investigate the deployment of sustainability narratives in varied contexts. Finally, and this is quite important, we call for the true inclusion of the voices of traditionally marginalised and weaker actors (smallholders and consumers) within collective initiatives. This would entail challenging existing assumptions about global collective initiatives and a fundamental rethink of the scope of action of MS-MOs. Spaces would have to be created for critical reflexivity, to reshape the sustainability narrative and the attribution of responsibility for the actors involved.

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