

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability are often defined in relation to the triple bottom line (TBL), that is economic, environmental and social performance (Elkington, 1997). In recent years, responsibility issues concerning the environmental and social dimensions in supply chains have been gaining attention (Fassin and Van Rossem, 2009; Aguinis and Glavas, 2012) alongside the “classic” economic dimension (Winter and Knemeyer, 2013). The field is multidisciplinary and in many ways hard to delimit and understand. Two challenges that can be included are the complexity of global supply chains and how responsibility for the TBL should be assigned.

Starting with the complexity of the supply chain, Miemczyk *et al.* (2012) distinguish three levels of analysis: the dyad, the supply chain and the industrial network. Eriksson and Svensson (2015) took a similar approach when investigating social responsibility, separating elements that affect social responsibility into company-specific, supply chain-specific and those external to the supply chain. One measure to improve the TBL is to consider the end-of-life and how resources can be efficiently recovered once a product is no longer used. As a result, the scope of activities considered may include several consecutive supply chains, where the product in one supply chain enters a new one for value recovery (Svensson, 2007).

Continuing into assignment of responsibility, it is important to acknowledge that the supply chain consists of multiple, globally dispersed, actors. Companies close to the consumer are often expected to accept responsibility for events that take place at a supplier level in the supply chain (Reuter *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, companies operate in a landscape that is bigger than their area of formal influence (Faruk *et al.*, 2002). Modern supply chains can also be understood as interconnected webs, where one company can have a supply base consisting of hundreds and even thousands of companies. As such, it is necessary to prioritize where to take responsibility (Egels-Zandén, 2015).

Prioritization of responsibility leads the discussion into ethical discussions on what can be expected of companies. Young (2004) outlines two viewpoints. The first is based on liability, that is to take responsibility for the damage caused. The second is called political responsibility and is instead based on taking responsibility where it is possible to achieve a difference. There is also research focusing on moral responsibility, that is the responsibility of the individual (Eriksson *et al.*, 2013a, 2013b; Eriksson and Svensson, 2016).

As can be seen in the brief discussion above, responsibility in supply chains is a broad field, which is reflected by the breadth of research being conducted. In this special issue, this is reflected. The special issue is outlined next.

The special issue starts with Abbasi (2017), who presents a systematic literature review of themes and challenges toward socially sustainable supply chains. The special issue then continues into empirical research. Fontana (2017) investigates strategic CSR in the Bangladeshi ready-made garment supply chain with a case study; Steinfeld *et al.* (2017) study job tasks, social responsibility and professionalism using quantitative research methods; and Fu *et al.* (2017) also use quantitative methods aiming to identify factors that influence integration of the agriculture supply chain. The issue is then



concluded with two conceptual papers. Eriksson and Hilletoft (2017) use a line of thinking found in transportation research, so as to illustrate connections of moral responsibility in a supply chain; and Brunninge and Fridriksson (2017) draw from the literature on corporate heritage and social memory in organizations to discuss how referencing to the past can affect how companies manage their supply chains.

The papers included in this issue show some of the different research approaches that can be seen in the field of responsibility in supply chains. The papers focus on CSR, sustainability and moral responsibility and cover different methods and data types. We can conclude that the field is heterogeneous, which is important to embrace, so as to tackle the many challenges still remaining for practitioners and researchers.

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