

**“...Thinking about the people who make the products”:
Conversations for Sustainable Futures**

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Introduction

...They don't understand. We are like insects to them. We are not supposed to have any feelings...No one considers us....Our truth is also lie for them. They are always right. There is no use of saying anything. We are wrong if we speak. And even if we are silent, then also we are only wrong...

- Shama (name changed), garment factory worker

Shama is a part of the global supply chain of the fashion industry. She is engaged in manufacturing garments for 'leading brands' – multinational firms with retail outlets all over the world who are increasingly expected to consider impacts of their decisions and actions on people and the planet. Consequently, managers in firms are increasingly expected to integrate social and environmental performance related considerations into their everyday decisions. One way of pursuing such aspirations of corporate responsibility in the context of global production operations has been the development and adoption of Codes of Conduct (CoC). Also referred to as voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) these are documents that specify ethical norms and values that buyers hold and apply to their trading partners and vendors with an intention to ensure that their supply chains adhere to basic social and environmental standards. But do such codes make a difference?

Describing her everyday life of working in a manufacturing facility that prides itself for adhering to several internationally recognised CoC, Shama calls into question

what such efforts really deliver and for who. She sums up how workers, whose rights are allegedly a central concern for sustainability codes, feel misunderstood, dehumanised, unheard, and disillusioned. In doing so Shama illuminates the experiences of marginalised actors in designing and negotiating practices of responsible and ethical production. Her sentiments, as research has continually shown, intriguingly echo not only experiences of several farm and factory workers but also of other actors across supply chains including factory managers, owners, union representatives, not-for-profit organisations and even staff at the local brand offices in manufacturing locations. Stakeholder disillusionment with the codes and standards, arguably developed by several societal actors under multi-stakeholder initiatives, is growing. From palm oil to fashion manufacturing, cocoa to cotton farming, questions are continually raised about what difference these initiatives are really making, at what cost and for who. So, what should managers do? Should they continue to rely on CoC as no approach can ever be perfect or should they abandon them altogether? Or might there be some other way forward?

In this article, drawing on my research and practice work over the last fifteen years, we first reflect on why, despite arguably being developed with the best of intentions with inputs from multiple stakeholders, do limitations of sustainability codes and standards persist. We then explore whether a reflexive dialogic approach might be a way to possibly overcome the inherent limitations and identify six key tenets for adopting such a dialogic approach. The article concludes with some reflections on the emotional burdens of brokering multi-stakeholder dialogues.

The Responsibility Conundrum and the Limits of Codes of Conduct

The advent of globalisation has manifested as a double-edged sword. While on the one hand it has expanded the reach of the firm to labour and markets, on the other hand it has posed, what can be referred to as the 'responsibility conundrum' (discussed as the governance gap in the academic literature). As supply chains become increasingly complex and transcend geographical borders who is responsible for ensuring that the people involved in production networks are not exploited, earn at least the minimum wages and are not working excessive hours? Is it the responsibility of the local government where the production site is located? Or of the government where the sourcing firm, the multinational company, is registered? Embroiled with geopolitical dynamics and arguments of an unwilling state which is driven by competitiveness, or an absent state lacking in resources and competence, this debate remains inconclusive. A stalemate which has been accompanied by the question, should such a governance gap then be bridged by the firm itself?

Multinational corporations are large resourceful organisations often with turnovers exceeding the gross domestic product of countries. With technical and financial resources at their disposal, and the power to make decisions which have significant implications for supply chain operations worldwide, the expectation that corporations ensure ethical and responsible production is perhaps unsurprising. However, in what has traditionally been the domain of the state, do firms have the legitimacy, authority and most critically the knowledge to develop and enforce specific workplace practices and behaviours? CoC and VSS have emerged as an approach to deal with this conundrum. The objective is that in absence of state-led regulation or the enforcement of such regulations where present, other societal actors agree on the

rules that should be followed as products and commodities are produced/manufactured across geographical boundaries.

Responding to societal expectations to assume responsibility, firms got together with other firms and stakeholders such as charities, research organisations, unions and governments to access relevant knowledge and experience. These joint efforts including conversations and meetings resulted in documents specifying ethical standards that firms commit to uphold and apply to their trading partners by outlining specific behaviours and characteristics to be followed. Some CoC are commodity/industry specific like Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil, Ethical Tea Partnership and others which encompass a range of industries like Rainforest Alliance and the Ethical Trading Initiative. Developed primarily with an intent to remediate poor working conditions in international production, govern employment relationships, and prevent adverse impact on the environment, these CoC and VSS specify behaviour and actions that must either be adhered to or avoided. These behaviours and practices are generally enforced through use of third-party auditors. Much like financial auditors, social auditors visit a facility and assess if the requirements outlined in CoC documents are being upheld or not.

Given their underlying intentions, the multi-stakeholder inputs adopted to develop them, and the resources deployed in implementation (the social audit industry has emerged as a growing billion-dollar industry), one would expect CoC to be able to deliver their promise. However, as Shama's experiences highlight, to what extent practices are altered in the farms and factories remains questionable. Academic and policy research has repeatedly highlighted a range of reasons for the limited effectiveness of CoC. Among others, these include challenges with processes of development (who is included in setting the codes and standards and who is

excluded), implementation (behaviours of trading partners and their ability to adopt standards, cost of compliance, buyer-supplier relationships, conflict between the production and sustainability departments in corporations) and enforcement (auditor training, competencies, buyer commitment to the business relationship and dangers of a tick-box approach).

A key reason for these persisting limitations, which is relatively underdiscussed, is that CoC do not and perhaps cannot redress the power-imbalance in relationships, whether it be between regulators and the business firms, buyers and suppliers or employers and employees. Even when representatives of these stakeholders convene, often in the global west, to agree on a set of 'universal standards', they are unable to account for the politics, vested interests, and the situational and context specific considerations that underpin organisational life and in turn global supply chains. Who sets the rules and whose norms guide and shape the 'standard' is contentious. The supply chain actors (factory owners/managers) who are meant to follow the standards agreed through 'multi-stakeholder' deliberations, often refer to the implementation of CoC as an 'imposition' and feel that the expectations are 'foreign' and do not reflect their reality. And this is by no means limited to the geographical distance between where CoC are developed (generally Europe, USA) and implemented (South and East Asia, Africa). Factory owners and managers I have worked and researched with, both in South Asia and in Leicester in the UK feel the same - unheard and powerless.

Lack of inclusion of supplier perspectives and realities is perhaps a consequence of the prevalent view that ethical and responsible production in global supply chains requires a technical solution – more training, more resources, more documents and excel sheets and more sophisticated software systems – find a way

to capture information, measure it, document it and management practices will improve. The underlying assumption is that ethical production requires, improvement in, and upgradation of, management practices. Documents, software programmes and biometric time stamps capture but snapshots – they do not capture interpersonal interactions and cannot address inherent power imbalances. During my time studying with and in factories, I observed how systems and processes continually fall short. CoC in their text outline that unfair deduction of pay is prohibited. A worker upsets their manager – they make a mistake while stitching garments or are caught chewing a gum while working - and they are asked to go home and not come back for a period ranging between half a day to two weeks. The attendance system simply shows them as absent – it cannot capture that they were asked not to come into work, that their identity card is taken away so that they will be stopped at the gate and cannot enter until the security guards receive approval from a member of the managerial staff. Similarly, CoC in text prohibit discrimination. But no system captures women being consistently discriminated against in hiring due to suspected pregnancy. Inquiring the date of the last menstrual cycle constitutes a part of the medical screening activity, a key component of the factory's recruitment process. That the women who have skipped a cycle are often the ones who also fail the technical screening for lack of adequate skill cannot be established.

Such practices have been repeatedly shown to persist by researchers, activists and journalists. But amidst the workers' need for a livelihood - *better have some job than none*, and employers' need of *doing what is necessary to respond to the demands of 'lowest possible' prices*, these practices remain hidden. Unless the inherent politics and underlying power differentials in the marketplace are integrated and included in the approaches to address the responsibility conundrum that the multi-stakeholder

initiatives, CoC and sustainability standards aim to address, their prospects will remain questionable. But how might prospects for such an integration be explored? We turn to this next.

A Reflexive Dialogic Approach for Sustainable Supply Chains

Supply chains are a complex interplay of objects, processes, people, places, practices. A product has numerous footprints across the globe. Let us take for example a pair of denim. The cotton is grown, harvested and packed into bales. Those bales are cleaned, carded, combed and processed into yarns. The yarn is dyed and woven into fabric. The fabric is then processed, printed or embroidered, washed and treated. The ready fabric is then cut according to a pattern developed to produce the garment. The pieces are then stitched together. The stitched denim is processed and washed for the desired 'run down' or 'faded' look. It is then embellished with zips, buttons, labels and accessories which each have their own supply chains. The ready denim is then washed, ironed and packed to be shipped to various locations where it is finally available to a consumer. All these processes can take place under the same roof, or each process can be spread across various parts of the globe. Ensuring that the final product is manufactured according to specified guidelines entails that all actors, all people involved in the multiple processes act in a particular defined manner. While outlining, controlling, and enforcing product quality guidelines that deal with the visible and tangible product aspects (size, colour, feel), is possible and arguably simpler, the considerations encapsulated in the sustainability codes and standards pose a different challenge. As they intend to shape, influence, and govern *the doing* by the actors, they deal with the behaviours and practices guided by the intangible ever-changing values and beliefs.

Managing such a complex tapestry of values, norms and associated practices encapsulated in supply chains is not easy. It is also understandable that acknowledging such plurality and diversity would be overwhelming. This is even more challenging in the face of the existing tensions of integrating long-term sustainability considerations alongside short-term profitability goals that managers are confronted with. In the face of paradoxes associated with thinking about future generations when performance is measured through weekly, monthly and quarterly targets, also trying to account for diverse value systems in decision-making would be formidable. This challenge is amplified by the fact that the very act of managing, the organising impulse is driven by the intent to arrive at a coherent unity – even if temporary, tentative and artificial. Producing a document outlining expected behaviours across global supply chains is arguably an attempt to impose such a unity. But the reality is plural – multiple values, beliefs, norms, behaviours, objectives, practices and indeed lives underlie the production of a single pair of denim or a cup of coffee. Is it possible to acknowledge plurality and integrate multiple aspirations when managing supply chains, to recognise that there are multiple worlds, possibilities and futures as the meaning of sustainable development is negotiated across a firm's operations?

Might it be then that a reflexive managerial practice grounded in a dialogic process could offer an approach to working with and through the plurality of beliefs, values and practices? Instead of being driven by the *managerial impulse to control* which operates by abstracting the particulars to arrive at a unilateral and rational stakeholder 'management' strategy document, a reflexive *dialogic process* would acknowledge the messiness of multiple beliefs, norms and interests with an aim to construct shared meanings. Instead of striving for control through achieving *consensus*, arguably, often 'imposed', it could perhaps *integrate dissensus* in meaning

making. If multiple voices and perspectives are considered, included, integrated and learning is shared, perhaps experiences of Shama and her peers and of several other workers like her could be different? Perhaps factory owners and managers and other supply chain actors might have a higher degree of relatability instead of feeling that the norms they have to work in accordance to are 'foreign' to them?

Such a prospect is worth exploring. But what would it entail for managers to establish and perform a reflexive practice grounded in a dialogic process? In what follows, drawing on literature as well as my direct involvement in enabling multistakeholder dialogues including establishing an international dialogue forum on CoC and VSS, I offer six key tenets for what might constitute such a practice. These are meant to serve as provocations for managers interested in setting up a reflexive dialogic space, in brokering multistakeholder conversations with a range of actors on issues pertaining to sustainable development. The thoughts below are not meant as a template or a model to be applied. Instead, the suggestion is to view them as intersecting and overlapping flows of activity which amalgamate to generate a space – literal and metaphorical - where messiness and complexity of issues is acknowledged and meaning can be jointly created. That which might emerge cannot be pre-determined or necessarily predicted.

Sketching the Circle

Initiating a conversation around an issue of concern involves identifying who are the actors (the people and organisations) implicated in the issue – who has the ability to affect and who are the ones affected. For instance, if the question of overtime in the manufacturing facility is to be considered, such an identification exercise would include among others, the workers themselves, factory owners, the local government

representatives, the union/worker representative organisations in the region and the representatives of the factory customers (brands). However, it is not simply enough to develop a list. It is vital to gather insights on roles of the actors, where are they based, what they do, what are their interests and their challenges. Such information can be collated using information available through one's own interactions, from colleagues, through observations and analysis of information available in the public domain. The rationale for gathering these insights is to widen the horizon pertaining to the 'issue'.

For instance, persisting overtime, among others is connected with wage rates, alternative employment options, product design, technical abilities, delivery schedules, shelf-life of the product, consumer demand, local laws and their enforcement. Workers are often in need of overtime to supplement their low incomes. Lack of suitable alternative employment choices can limit the negotiating ability of workers. Design changes by brands interrupt the production timelines planned by the factory managers, and making up production through overtime is often the only option for factory managers as the delivery schedules by brands may not be flexible owing to the seasonality of the product. Factory managers may also face limited availability of workers with required skills and in such an instance, overtime might be the only way to complete production on-time. The local government sets the legal limits and pay scales of overtime and also enforces the regulations which influence how overtime would be enacted in workplaces. Trade unions and worker representative organisations draw attention to the violations of overtime regulations and underpayment and play a critical role in highlighting challenges across the sector.

This preparatory step of insight gathering is intended to serve as an exercise in knowledge and consciousness raising with the objective of entering the dialogue space with two key realisations. The first is to recognise that the phenomena of

concern does not exist in isolation - what manifests as the 'issue' is perhaps a consequence or a culmination of a range of factors and one must remain open-minded about what may emerge as the dialogue progresses. Consequently, one must remember that any hurried, 'reductionist' approach would perhaps only be deceitfully simple and therefore must be avoided. One must therefore be wary of outlining 'simple' and 'measurable' objectives – to be mindful that the dialogue will need space and time. And the insights gathered should be captured and recorded in a manner that they can be brought into the intersubjective conversational space as necessary to be shared with various actors to inform their understanding, to encourage patience if and where necessary, and to also be further developed in a commitment to expand understanding of the issue alongside the voices constituting the circle.

A key aspect also is to recognise that the dialogue circle is being sketched, that it is always tentative, never closed or complete – there is always scope for it to be extended, modified and adapted. And in addition to identifying the actors directly implicated, also identifying those who offer knowledge about the situation because of their association with the actors might also be useful – for instance, research organisations, charity organisations serving the community, training institutions and media. Mapping such an extended circle of those who are affected, have the ability to effect, and have knowledge of the effects and relationships aids the development of a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Starting with acknowledging the diversity aids the intent of collective meaning-making and also helps one to be mindful as to why imposing a unity would be limiting. Recognising limits of existing, even if popular and widespread ways of working, is a key aspect of a reflexive approach which also includes myth-busting which we turn to next.

Myth-busting

Presumptions and opinions persist as likely explanations for why things are the way they are. Supply chain relationships are no exception – *‘they’ are solely focused on profit, it is a cultural practice, ‘they’ always do this, ‘they’ do not really care, nothing will change, first impressions count and it did not seem they took this seriously.* I have repeatedly heard numerous expressions like these in various meetings, exchanges and interactions. Our impressions influence our views and stance, our decision-making and also determine how we participate in a conversation. Engaging in a reflexive dialogue requires that we recognise our own assumptions and make them explicit.

In the first instance, the initiator or facilitator of the dialogue space could begin by articulating their own assumptions, not necessarily for everyone to see and read, but to become self-aware. This entails outlining the assumptions and beliefs about the various actors and the situation. The list should then be subjected to an analysis to identify the source of the assumptions/beliefs – is it based on hearsay, one’s own experience or mere speculation. This will likely expose most beliefs in need for more evidence and the next exercise should be collating evidence in support of a belief, while being mindful of the origin/author of the evidence. Where managers find they are dealing with a situation, geography and people they know little about or have never experienced, efforts should be made to familiarise oneself directly with the phenomenon. For instance, if the issue pertains to child labour in Uzbekistan cotton farms, one could travel to the country, meet various stakeholders and maintain a journal of the travel and meetings. The effort is to avoid non-reflexively adopting prevalent narratives and to steer clear of imposing abstractions for the sake of unity and simplicity.

In carrying out such a three-pronged examination of underlying assumptions (articulating the belief, identifying the source of the belief, and verifying the source and confirming the belief), those assumptions which are 'myths' perpetuating because *it happened with someone* or *someone read it somewhere* will be busted. However, it is important to recognise that myth busting is not an easy activity. Undertaking such an exercise is not only time consuming but also requires a certain degree of courage to be ready to confront one's own beliefs and to recognise that perhaps what we have held so dear, might be an opinion that can be challenged. It requires being open and honest with one's own self. It may indeed also trigger deeper reflections about one self which may have therapeutic implications . Keeping a journal might be helpful but one should also be open to seeking support and guidance to recognise, accept and challenge one's belief systems. Unless the dialogue facilitator is able to be exercise such reflexivity, setting up a space which invites others to do so would be hard to realise.

As the dialogues proceed, all actors could be encouraged to recognise their own assumptions and to be reflexive about them. And this could be supported in the intersubjective space by agreeing on norms of interaction and engagement – for instance, requiring to reference a source of an experience or doubt that is raised. Perhaps time could be set aside for exercises, activities, reflections that attune one to a self-aware and reflexive state of being before entering the dialogue space – this might enable everyone to *really listen*, instead of listening to confirm what they know or what they expected to hear. We discuss this listening next.

'Really listening'

Listening is perhaps where the dialogue begins. Having sketched the circle identifying the relevant actors, and having developed a degree of self-awareness, one is ready to *receive the other*, to initiate the conversations. Whether all actors are invited in the same moment or the facilitator holds individual conversations first with identified actors and then invites everyone together after having established a basic understanding, depends on the facilitator's relationships, the issue requiring deliberation and the practical considerations of organising. Irrespective of how the interactive space is practically initiated, and how the conversations are organised, through which mode and at what intervals, the key element is to be able to really listen when the other is expressing and sharing. In the context of issues that are being discussed here, staying with the example of overtime, really listening to factory managers, for instance, would entail making an effort to understand the challenges factories face when juggling cost pressures, regulatory expectations and skills related workforce challenges. It would entail, without necessarily attributing blame or responsibility, listening to each actor's perspective and their experience.

Such listening entails exercising empathy – to be able to step away from one's own position with its associated interests, needs and constraints, and to make an effort to see the world from the point of view of the other. Listening in the space of a reflexive dialogue requires suspending both the urge to accomplish something for one self or to be able to do something for the other. It requires being present and attentive, through all sensory perceptions to listen to simply understand. In so doing not only the words, but also the silences might become visible and can possibly aid understanding. Offering *the other* a space to be heard expands the intersubjective space by allowing us and them *to be*.

One may wonder why is such an ability relevant in the workplace? Why is such an approach which some may consider as resembling an open therapeutic space being proposed for accomplishing an organisational objective or for discussing a challenge in supply chains? The answer is because supply chains deal with people as much as products and processes. Often in the pursuit of deadlines, delivery times and cost targets, 'excel sheets' take over and people are forgotten, sidelined, marginalised. Or as Shama puts it, treated akin to 'insects', dehumanised. As a senior management representative of a factory expressed to me, *"80-90% of time we spend concentrating on the product. How much time do we spend thinking about the people who make the product...If you take care of people, product will take care of itself!"*. The perceptions of 'foreignness' of standards, and feelings expressed by Shama directly point to the ability to be heard, to be understood. If certain actors continue to feel ignored, overlooked and marginalised, and their perspectives are not integrated and they do not feel included, what sustainability codes and standards or similar approaches can accomplish will remain suspect. The inherent power dynamics of the market place relationships will continue to persist and voices will continue to be silenced. Listening, really listening, is a first step – if we are unable to even try that, then the aims of equitable and sustainable futures will continue to get co-opted and be subservient to only certain groups of people with specific interests.

Setting up a space where at least an attempt is made to not be defined in our interactions by the societal and organisational positions/designations one holds is perhaps only an initial step. And indeed this would not be without its challenges – for instance, how does one navigate the language challenge in the context of a globalised supply chain? And more critically perhaps, how does one instil the confidence in oneself and others to express and share? Such confidence might be

aided by agreeing interpersonal and group interaction norms, for instance, not interrupting another when talking, avoiding use of accusatory language, not indulging in personal remarks, waiting for one's turn to speak, taking silent breaks to just be in each other's presence. The idea being that a mutually respectful space would enable expressing and listening. And that would help forge respectful relationships and cultivate trust, trust that one will be heard, irrespective of whether an agreement is necessarily accomplished or not. But cultivating such trust requires one to feel 'safe' – we reflect on this next.

Crafting 'safe spaces'

Stepping away from one's own assumptions to be able to really listen allows *the other* to be heard and leads to generation of an intersubjective space where one can *be* and *express*, where one begins to feel that they can articulate and share without being penalised, shamed or attracting any adverse consequences in the short or even the long term . It requires enabling spaces where multiple actors, with divergent points of view and interests, at times with underlying historical interpersonal dynamics and adversarial positionalities, can all feel they can express themselves and be heard. Such spaces do not and perhaps cannot easily exist in our day to day lives. They have to be crafted. And crafting such a space is not easy. It requires the dialogue facilitator to set up the physical as well as the psychological space and then to play the role of a broker, acting as a conduit, enabling flow of conversations and through those exchanges enabling the space to be held together.

The facilitator would need to consider the physical and material layout for setting up the space in the first instance. Once who is being invited has been considered, it entails thinking about the place and location, the seating

arrangements, the tentative flexible agenda with planned breaks along with resourcing for unplanned breaks (to respond to any silences, disagreements, difficult moments) . It also requires thinking about whether the space is temporary or not - for instance will it also exist in a virtual mode and if so how might that be set up and organised. These considerations appear operational but they are significant and have consequences. Material conditions and physical organisation of space has an emotional and psychological impact and when the intention is to craft a safe-space, due thinking becomes necessary.

While the facilitator will draw on knowledge and insights of burdens, interests, challenges when crafting the material specifics of the space, it is indeed not possible for a single person to know, predict or even fathom several experiences and interests. Moreover, the role of a facilitator is to be a conduit to let conversations evolve – however, being aware and sensitive to tensions and incorporating them when setting up the space can be vital.

When inviting others to join the reflexive dialogic space, the facilitator would have to act as a broker at several points of the dialogue journey. This would entail, if necessary, having initial conversations to better understand perspectives, explaining the rationale and purpose of the dialogue space, being mindful in the initial conversations as the actors become familiar with each other and being ready to step in when there is a breakdown or conflicts arise. In many ways they will become the confidante and will have to bear witness to various experiences. They will have to exercise reflexivity so that knowledge, which can feel too much, does not generate biases. Therefore, in crafting the safe spaces, it is vital to balance the need to keep up the momentum alongside offering enough time for all involved to prepare and ease into the dialogic space. In the modern world driven by hyper productivity, this

can be challenging. It is here that marking moments of significance in the dialogue process can be useful. We discuss this next.

Marking moments

As the explorations, debates and conversations proceed, there will be moments which would feel tenuous and others which will feel like either a shared meaning or understanding is emerging or two distinct positions are clarified. Such moments of clarity need to be captured and marked. Whether it be through paper records and formal memos or a more informal visual manner of recognition (a visual or physical white board list or a pin board), the objective is to capture the clarity of joint meaning or differences. Both are useful as one (shared meaning) offers steering towards considering actions and the other outlines the path to be traversed by offering two divergent perspectives which need further reflection and discussion. Marking such the moments would also be useful for situations when people in the dialogue circle leave and/or new people join in.

A couple of points are to be noted here. First, one must be wary of artificial and fragile consensus. It is possible for an 'agreement' to be the view of the powerful actors, masquerading as inclusive. This can be a consequence of the lack of reflexive dialogic spaces as well as lack of sufficient time. Which leads us to the second point – it is vital to keep enough time for conversations and reflections. In many ways, one may argue to have an anti-meeting agenda – to simply convene and *be* and to reflect on issues.

Organising a reflexive safe space which facilitates listening without an imposed agenda but captures moments of significance is likely to be conducive to collective meaning-making. Such an effort for understanding a phenomenon

together, identifying its various, often conflicting aspects, however, requires patience and the ability to trust the unknown, which we discuss next.

Trusting the unknown

Setting up a space or joining a space only for the purpose of a reflexive dialogue, without clearly defined objectives or agenda perhaps sounds counter-intuitive. And indeed, it is. However, at a time when despite efforts (arguably worth billions of dollars), experiences that Shama highlights continue to persist and several scholars and thinkers are calling for the underlying assumptions of existing approaches to be challenged, it is perhaps neither possible nor advisable to follow the status quo. There is a need to things differently – but what that ‘different’ looks like remains unclear. The provocation to establish a reflexive dialogic space is one proposal to tackle the complex, multifaceted, ‘wicked’ phenomenon or grand challenge of sustainable development we are confronted with today, particularly in context of global supply chains. Indeed, such dialogues can be organised in any context where values, norms, life experiences, assumptions and interests collide. But the question remains – how does one deal with the anxiety that arises in going against the grain and doing things differently?

The proposal here is to be comfortable with the tentative, the unknown. To have faith in the process and to remember it is a journey, a becoming. To accept that what ‘success’ means or looks like or indeed even means is unclear. The dialogue broker and all others joining the conversations would have to develop comfort with the unknown and yet continue with commitment. The danger is indeed that closure would never be reached and some suggest that a boundary must be defined. However, if the purpose is collective meaning-making, then the process should determine the point of

closure – hence trusting the unknown. Having such a trust also means consistently showing up and remaining reflexive.

So, what does it mean to bring the six tenets together? In the anonymised vignette below, I describe my experiences of initiating a conversation in the tea industry on a ‘controversial’ topic.

“But isn’t living wage a controversial topic?”

Around 2018-2020, the condition of workers on tea plantations in an Asian city attracted a lot of attention. Exposés of working conditions by media and researchers resulted in demands for holding leading international tea companies accountable, and for stronger laws to be enacted and enforced. Various actors wanted to do something, but it was not possible to have a conversation without one actor blaming the other. Brands blamed tea estate owners for poor labour management practices. Tea processors and estate owners, in turn, questioned brands’ purchasing practices and blamed ‘other’ processors with questionable sub-contracting practices. International NGOs blamed local government and local government alleged that international organisations had a hidden agenda to sabotage the city’s and in turn the country’s competitiveness. And so on. In such an environment, rife with distrust and scepticism, how does one even begin to bring the actors together?

In the first instance, it was important to identify an issue around which stakeholders could be convened – an issue which was provocative but not prohibitive. In wake of the vulnerability of workers exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, studies calling for ‘living wage’ had been published and there were many murmurs and

rumours, but no conversation. At this time, while pursuing my doctoral studies, I was associated with an organisation working to further sustainable development in supply chains and I was asked to help organise a meeting. As a part of my researcher training, I had only recently finished writing up a document outlining my 'assumptions' about corporate social responsibility in supply chains. With sufficient awareness of the context and yet an appropriate distance, my colleagues felt I might be able to support crafting a conversation space and invite stakeholders.

The first task was to identify the relevant actors – government representatives, industry association, worker representatives, international organisations and researchers. We then had to identify a pertinent topic/issue around which the actors could convene. We agreed on an issue which had a moral calling but was not necessarily the established norm in the tea plantations - the payment of living wages. In a city where even minimum wages are hard to come by, the talk of living wages was arguably questionable from the perspective of employers but undeniably necessary from the perspective of the workers. And so began the journey of organising a roundtable titled, "Is Living Wage 'Relevant' and 'Urgent' in the Wake of COVID-19?".

We conducted our own research and study about the topic and identified the key organisations and people, and their motivations and fears. We met with the people working in and with the tea industry and understood their views and worries. The insights we gathered allowed us to 'bust' prevalent myths, for instance, plantation owners do not wish to pay higher wages. Instead, we tried to understand their challenges in implementing a living wage. As we met up with the different actors, we focused on listening to them and understanding their narratives and worldviews. I kept audio and written notes or sometimes had conversations with a colleague to capture my own views and emotions. I did this with an intent to ensure that when I was in a

conversation, I was more attuned and not imposing my own judgements – that I was really listening . Having established a relationship with the different stakeholders where they felt assured that we wanted to listen and that we understood their perspective, we proposed the idea of the virtual roundtable (as the situation with the pandemic was still unclear) and extended an invitation to everyone. We reassured various stakeholders of our role as facilitators and discussed about what they would and would not be comfortable talking about in a group setting.

With all the preparatory work set, we organised the meeting, which was in and of itself, a moment to be marked. And it was encouraging, though not entirely surprising given the efforts in the run up to the meeting, that every stakeholder invited not only showed up but also participated in the conversations and expressed their views candidly. To ensure no single voice dominated the conversation, we set aside fixed time for everyone to respond and politely interjected as necessary. Instead of arguing that living wage must be implemented right away, we debated its urgency, relevance and associated challenges. We drafted an agenda for the conversation, but it was flexible, and we adapted it to make time and space for what the participants wanted to share. We also invited an independent expert, an international academic to listen in and share views and reflections towards the end – this was much appreciated. Over the 90 minutes of the meeting itself there was no major decision, no concrete outcome was achieved, and no unified single view was arrived at. But a simple agreement was secured - to meet again, alongside a joint commitment - to place the trust in the unknown.

In other instances, with other sectors such meetings have eventually resulted in establishment of multi-actor initiatives and working groups, for instance in the case

of palm oil or water stewardship national level groups were set up to discuss what the respective global standards would mean for the local country context. While there has indeed been some success, there is no model, template or framework that can be readily offered for swift implementation. One could indeed draw on experiences of those who have done such work, but how the dialogue space is crafted, initiated and held depends significantly on the convenor, the initiator of the reflexive dialogue. This is itself not without its challenges – a reflection which is discussed next.

Carrying the Burdens: Brokering Multistakeholder Dialogues

We have outlined the possibility of a reflexive multi-stakeholder dialogic space by assuming the presence of an enabler/initiator/broker. The assumption is that to set up a space as we have discussed there is a willing individual, a manager, a professional who is fed up with the status quo and wants to explore alternatives. And there are indeed such people. I have met several managers operating at the periphery of the business firm, most often in sustainability and corporate social responsibility departments (CSR) who are driven by a passion, tired of the limitations of existing approaches and looking for inspiration. The provocations here are for such managers and all others who would like to take the leap of faith in themselves and in possibilities. But the leap is not without its risks. The provocations are offered with a caution.

Being at the centre of setting up and organising the reflexive dialogic space is exhausting and tiring. The process has a beginning but no defined end – this itself can feel daunting. But in many ways, it is like an exploration, a journey. However, such journeys can take both an emotional and a physical toll. While the physical well-being can perhaps be managed more easily by being flexible on time and intensity, and

spacing conversations, the emotional exhaustion of bearing witness to the 'truths' of various actors, exercising reflexivity and constantly brokering takes its toll. One has to constantly grapple with feelings of frustration, disillusionment and helplessness.

Then there is also the consideration of the career plans. Managers, particularly in business firms, are under ambitious targets and the constant gaze of the 'performance plan'. Straddling budget targets, reporting targets, key performance indicators to carve out space for a reflexive dialogue needs courage and commitment. It is possible to start with conviction and zealous proclamations. But avoiding succumbing to the 'corporate performance' gaze and its demands is the hardest part. From those who embarked on journeys similar to the one which is required for a reflexive dialogic space, I have seen some get frustrated and quitting and others have been co-opted. Both are perhaps understandable. But whether what others have done should be a deterrent or an invitation for exploration, I leave it to the reader to decide.

Summary and Conclusion

We have considered in this article the prospect of a dialogue with a difference. Challenged by the stalemate of existing approaches of multistakeholder initiatives, we have explored possibilities for carving a safe, reflexive dialogic space, and for brokering multistakeholder dialogues on 'wicked' problems within such safe spaces. Indeed the dialogic space would be limited to those joining in and may not necessarily be 'representative' of all the actor groups, but it could mark a beginning. And if managers were to adopt such an approach when thinking about stakeholder engagements and addressing sustainability related issues, it would not be an isolated occurrence – there is potential for the dialogic approach to become a widespread practice, which may then work with and for people like Shama and

indeed all the supply chain actors. This is at least the hope that keeps me going and has been the inspiration in presenting this provocation. Hopefully, it offers you some hope and stimulation.

Selected Readings

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