Local Dimension of Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives: Shifting the Focus to the Receiving End of Global Governance Arrangements

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Abstract:

In a modern world multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) take a prominent place as a mechanism of global governance bringing together companies, civil society and state. While research on MSIs has widely discussed whether such arrangements can be considered as legitimate forums for democratic deliberation, little attention has been paid to how transnational regulative initiatives are becoming understood and implemented locally under the context of emerging and developing economies. We seek to bridge this gap through an inductive in-depth qualitative case study of multi-stakeholder arrangements unfolding in the cocoa sector of Cote d'Ivoire and aimed at advancement of human rights agenda in local cocoa growing communities (community development). Our research brings two-fold contribution to the discussion on local contextualization of MSIs. First, we show that despite the existence of governance voids in the emerging and developing economies, multi-stakeholder arrangements remain embedded in the local institutional context and therefore, their local impact is contingent upon successful "institutional bridging" – the process of linking the MSI to the local institutional context. Our research also brings new insights on how MSI can stimulate local agency through empowerment of local stakeholders, thus leading to their better inclusion in the governance processes at the local level.

Keywords: global governance, multi-stakeholder initiative, contextualization, local agency, local stakeholders

Résumé :

Dans le monde moderne, les initiatives multipartites (MSI) occupent une place prépondérante en tant que mécanisme de gouvernance mondiale réunissant les entreprises, la société civile et l'État. Alors que la recherche sur les MSI a largement débattu de la question de savoir si de tels arrangements peuvent être considérés comme légitimes pour la délibération démocratique, peu d'attention a été accordée à la manière dont les initiatives de régulation transnationales sont comprises et mises en œuvre localement dans le contexte des économies émergentes et en développement. Nous cherchons ici à combler cette lacune à travers une étude de cas qualitative inductive et approfondie sur les accords multipartites qui prennent place dans le secteur du cacao en Côte d'Ivoire et qui visent à faire progresser l'agenda des droits de l'homme dans les communautés locales de culture du cacao (développement communautaire). Notre recherche apporte une double contribution à la discussion sur la contextualisation locale des MSI. Premièrement, nous montrons qu'en dépit de l'existence de vides concernant la gouvernance dans les économies émergentes et en développement, les accords multipartites restent ancrés dans le contexte institutionnel local et, par conséquent, leur impact local est subordonné à un «institutional bridging» réussi - le processus de liaison du MSI au contexte institutionnel local. Notre recherche apporte également de nouvelles perspectives sur la manière dont les MSI peuvent stimuler l'agence locale grâce à l'autonomisation des parties prenantes locales, conduisant ainsi à leur meilleure inclusion dans les processus de gouvernance au niveau local.
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Mots-clés : gouvernance internationale, initiative multipartite, contextualisation, agence locale, acteurs locaux

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INTRODUCTION

In the modern globalized world, global companies operate through vast and complex cross-national networks involving multiple actors linked to the single value creation process. In this regard, the ability of nation states to regulate business activities through traditional instruments of "hard regulation" is decreasing (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011) leading to emergence of significant negative social and environmental externalities that remain disregarded by national institutional and regulatory system, particularly in the context of developing world. Accordingly, an increasing number of social and environmental problems occurring along complex globally spread production networks remain under- or unregulated (Kobrin, 2008) and often, it's the global companies that are being rightfully held responsible by the civil society. Under such context of limited regulatory authority, where the nation states are unable or unwilling to ensure enforceable governance mechanism, private actors have recently taken quite an active role on the global governance scene. In this regard, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has experienced its "governance turn" starting to be considered as an institutionally embedded phenomenon governing the business conduct or being even *"a mode of governance in itself"* (Arora et al., 2020, p.265). Seeking to bridge existing governance voids, more and more global companies start to engage in self-regulation, developing and implementing social and environmental standards applicable throughout the entire process of value creation (Mena & Palazzo, 2012). Increasingly, such self-regulation arrangements aimed at tackling social and environmental challenges associated with business activities (deforestation, child labour, human rights violation, etc.) take a form of multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) bringing together a range of various stakeholders including corporate actors, civil society organisations, state representatives and academic institutions.

Despite being originally conceptualised as a promising forum for democratic deliberation (Mena & Palazzo, 2012; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011), MSIs as a global governance

mechanism have attracted quite significant criticism due to its inherent hegemonic dynamics and power imbalances (Fougère & Solitander, 2020) resulting in the lack of inclusion and marginalisation of local stakeholders (Banerjee, 2008, 2018) and consequently, lack of democratic deliberation. In line with this criticism current research on MSIs leaves understudied the question of how sustainability-driven MSIs play out in the context of developing and emerging economies (Arora et al., 2020; Rasche, 2012). While the majority of existing studies on MSIs are focused on deliberative processes occurring at the global level within relevant initiatives (De Bakker et al., 2019), Alamgir and Banerjee (2019) call for more academic attention to be paid to the perspectives of target population while studying the effectiveness of regulatory solutions provided through multi-stakeholder deliberation. Indeed, prevailing focus on deliberative dynamics occurring majorly in Western context limits our understanding of MSIs as a global governance mechanism leaving the actors on the receiving end of North-South relations out of the scope of the analysis (Draude, 2017). In the same vein, the literature on MSIs leaves largely unexplored how the global solutions for social and environmental problems are being bridged with local practices in a particular context (Rasche, 2012).

We seek to bridge this gap by analysing how global cocoa & chocolate companies tackle the issues of human rights in the cocoa growing communities in Cote d'Ivoire through various multi-stakeholder arrangements. In our research we strive to pay greater attention to the other side of North-South global governance processes and following the call of Arora et al. (2020) we want to find out how the regulative initiatives emerged through global multi-stakeholder deliberation are becoming understood and implemented in a local context of developing countries and what is the role of local stakeholders in this process. Such a focus on developing countries plays an important role in our research as it is in developing and emerging economies that CSR majorly plays out as a mode of governance being aimed at bridging existing institutional and regulatory voids (Arora et al., 2020). Despite the fact that majority of multi-stakeholder arrangements are being initiated at the transnational level or in the Western context of developed countries, the issues that they seek to resolve as well as the affected people are located not in the Western context but in the developing world.

We build our argument on the inductive in-depth qualitative case study of sustainability-driven multi-stakeholder arrangements unfolding in the cocoa sector in Cote d'Ivoire and aimed at advancement of human rights agenda in local cocoa growing communities. As far as cocoa production in West Africa is undertaken by smallholder farmers living in the remote

communities and cultivating cocoa on relatively small individual plots of land (Barrientos, 2014; McCarthy, 2015), majority of human rights abuses (i.e., child labour, gender-based discrimination, lack of access to education, primary care) emerge and are treated at the community level via community development initiatives. Thus, in our research we look at various multi-stakeholder arrangements that seek to advance the human rights agenda in the cocoa sector of Côte d'Ivoire via community development initiatives. We draw on extensive qualitative dataset generated through 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews held with various relevant actors (representatives of industry-wide multi-stakeholder initiatives, global cocoa trading companies, global chocolate producing companies, small & medium chocolate producing companies, international philanthropic foundation, global NGOs, representatives of international organisations, independent industry experts), 15 hours of participant observation (the first author has participated in the most prominent annual industry-wide conference dedicated to cocoa sustainability) and numerous documents (corporate & NGO reports, policy documents, website content). In our data analysis we have followed the abductive iteration moving back and forth among data and literature throughout the entire data generation process.

Responding to the call of de Bakker et al. (2019) and Fougère and Solitander (2020) we seek to take a systemic view on the cocoa industry of Cote d'Ivoire and instead of focusing exclusively on one particular MSI, which embraces a large variety of issue areas (e.g., United Nations Global Compact), and the deliberative dynamics occurring *within* it, we strive to understand how the problem of community development is being tackled through *various* industry-specific multi-stakeholder arrangements and how these arrangements are jointly playing out in the particular national context. By so doing, we bring two-fold contribution to the discussion on MSIs. First, we show that despite the existence of governance voids in the emerging and developing economies, multi-stakeholder arrangements are embedded in the local institutional context and therefore, their impactful local functioning is contingent upon successful "institutional bridging" – linking the MSI to the existing institutional context and infrastructures – the process underpinned by the top-down dynamics. Second, in line with the idea of "agency of governed" (Draude, 2017) we mobilize the concept of "empowerment" (Mena et al., 2010; Sen & Mukherjee, 2014) to make sense of our empirical evidence. We show that instead of establishing the compliance regimes in regards to local groups of stakeholders, the MSIs in cocoa seek to "empower" local stakeholders through capacity building, reflexivity development and goal-setting facilitation. We inductively develop these three elements that drive the bottom-up dynamics underpinning the establishment of local agency.

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 GLOBAL GOVERNANCE AND MSIS

The discussion on the role of global business actors in the process of global governance has recently gained significant attention. The increasing power of global business players operating through complex production networks spanning across the globe and going beyond the regulatory power of any nation-state authority (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011) has raised a lot of questions and has led to the increased pressure exerted on the global companies by civil society as well as by other external and internal stakeholders (Andersen & Skjoett-Larsen, 2009). Seeking to bridge the regulatory gaps existing in the emerging and developing economies, global business actors started to contribute to the emergence of private and hybrid forms of regulation co-existing with the complex system of various national and international regulations (de Bakker et al., 2019). Seeking to address multiple negative social and environmental externalities that have emerged throughout the global production processes spanning across national and organisational borders, companies start to develop and implement various regulatory instruments as a part of their CSR programmes (standards, codes of conducts, etc.). In this regard, the CSR activities and engagements of global companies have been increasingly considered as an institutionally embedded phenomenon leading to the "governance turn" in the CSR research (Arora et al., 2020). Within this "governance turn" political CSR (PCSR) stream took a prominent position having emerged over a decade ago and seeking to theorize an extended political role of business in modern globalized world (e.g., Matten and Crane, 2005; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011) particularly under the context of weak states. In this regard, Arora and colleagues contend that *"CSR has emerged as an important part of a wider field of institutions governing the corporation and the economy, perhaps even as a mode of governance in itself"* (Arora et al., 2020, p.265).

Indeed, seeking to respond to the regulatory challenges as well as to increasing societal demands and public scrutiny, business actors have increasingly started to engage in private regulatory initiatives cooperating with governmental actors and civil society organisations leading to the mushrooming of different types of multi-stakeholder initiatives. Mena and

Palazzo (2012, p.528) define MSI as *"private governance mechanisms involving corporations, civil society organizations, and sometimes other actors, such as governments, academia or unions, to cope with social and environmental challenges across industries and on a global scale"*. Vast literature has emerged around MSIs covering principally three thematic areas – the *input* into creation and governance of MSIs, the *institutionalization* of MSIs and the *impact* of MSIs regarded in terms of its outputs and outcomes (de Bakker et al., 2019). Regarding the input thematic area, significant attention has been paid towards the questions of democratic legitimacy of MSIs (Haack et al., 2014; Mena & Palazzo, 2012) and how it is being impacted by the level of inclusiveness of a MSI (Ponte, 2014). The literature on institutionalization of MSIs focuses on the diffusion process seeking to theorize firms' motivation to join the initiative, the dynamics of MSIs development and diffusion (Rasche, 2012) as well as coexistence of various MSIs (de Bakker et al., 2019). Another stream of research on MSIs is dedicated to studying the resulting impact of MSIs measured in both operational outputs of MSI functioning (such as number of adherents or certified products/producers) and outcomes for final beneficiaries that are largely doubted and debated in literature (Wijen, 2014).

However, little is known about the local dimension of implementation of global multi-stakeholder governance arrangements in the context of developing and emerging economies, where CSR usually plays out as a mode of governance (Arora et al., 2020). Indeed, the critical management studies have raised a range of concerns towards the concept of global governance and MSIs doubting its capacity to reach democratic deliberation due to the power imbalances and hegemonic dynamics emerging within MSIs (Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019; Banerjee, 2018; Fougère & Solitander, 2020). How is transnational regulation understood and implemented locally? How this process is affected by local insights? All these questions remain unanswered and call for more research on local dimension of global governance (Arora et al., 2020). In the same vein, de Bakker and colleagues (2019) highlight that current research on MSIs tends to consider and analyse a MSI as an isolated entity neglecting the fact that deliberative dynamics occurring *within* particular MSI are shaped by broader context in which the initiative is embedded. We seek to address these limitations by shifting the research focus from deliberative dynamics occurring *within* a particular MSI at the global level towards the interaction and co-functioning of various multi-stakeholder arrangements dedicated to the same issue area in a particular local context of emerging and developing economy.

2.2 AGENCY OF GOVERNED AND EMPOWERMENT

The major concern raised by the critical studies towards MSIs as global governance mechanisms is lack of representation and participation of local – and often marginalized – stakeholders in the deliberation processes (Banerjee, 2018; Khan et al., 2007). Indeed, the research of Khan and colleagues (Khan et al., 2007; Khan & Lund-Thomsen, 2011) urges to pay greater attention to the implementation of global governance initiatives and to study the effects of these initiatives on local stakeholders directly impacted by these initiatives. In this regard, rather than treating local stakeholders as *"passive recipients"* of social norms issued through the MSIs somewhere in *"a consolidated centre of the world"* (Draude, 2017, p. 577), we make sense of our empirical evidence through the lens of local agency, a concept contending that local actors on the receiving end of global governance arrangements are also likely to shape the institutional change. The concept of agency, being one of the fundamental concepts of institutional theory refers to the ability of actors to break away from scripted patterns of behaviour driven by motivation and creativity (Dorado, 2005; Emirbayer &Mische, 1998). One of the main outcome of the "agentic turn" in intuitional theory is the concept of institutional work underpinning the bottom-up dynamics of institutional change and depicting institutional actors as reflexive, goal-oriented and capable (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

Agency is proven to play an important role in local communities' development being *"a key indicator of a group's ability to respond and identify cohesive solutions to sustainable development challenges"* (Newman & Dale, 2005, p.481). Thus, the concept of empowerment emerged within the developmental studies referring to enabling people to exercise agency (Mena et al., 2010; Sen & Mukherjee, 2014; Ruebottom & Auster, 2018). Considering agency as a force behind social action, empowerment can be regarded as an important element in raising the voice of local stakeholders (Newman & Dale, 2005). However, being widely used in the human rights research, empowerment remains a multidimensional concept quite vaguely defined in organisational theory (Dykstra-DeVette & Canary, 2019).

METHODS

3.1 CASE DESCRIPTION

In order to study how the sustainability-driven MSIs play out in the local context of emerging and developing economies, we conduct an inductive in-depth qualitative case study of sustainability-driven multi-stakeholder arrangements unfolding in the cocoa sector in Cote

d'Ivoire and aimed at advancement of human rights agenda in local cocoa growing communities. As it was stated before, in West Africa the cocoa is being grown by smallholder farmers cultivating cocoa on relatively small plots of land and living in remote communities. In this regard, the human rights abuses occurring in the cocoa value chain are usually related to community's living conditions and touch upon such issues as child labour, gender based discrimination, lack of access to primary care, to education and other basic services. In this regard, the initiatives aimed at advancement of human rights agenda are being implemented at the community level via the programmes of community development. Thus, in our research we look at various multi-stakeholder arrangements that seek to advance the human rights agenda in the cocoa sector of Côte d'Ivoire via community development initiatives. Drawing on the existing literature, we follow the call of de Bakker et al. (2019) and Fougère and Solitander (2020) and take a systemic view on the cocoa industry of Cote d'Ivoire in order to understand how the human rights issues are being tackled through *various* industry-specific multi-stakeholder arrangements and how these arrangements are jointly playing out in a particular national context. Such aspiration has determined some of our key decisions in terms of research design, leading us to enlarge our sample by including in our analysis multiple organisations (by organisations we mean multi-stakeholder arrangements as well as companies) contributing to the development & advancement of human rights agenda in the cocoa growing communities in Côte d'Ivoire. We find such choice of case suitable as the issues of human rights abuses, such as gender-based power imbalances (McCarthy & Moon, 2018) and child labour (Nelson & Phillips, 2018) represent a significant regulatory challenge for global cocoa industry and a lot of efforts have been given by various public and private entities to tackle this issue.

3.1 DATA GENERATION

In our research we draw on extensive qualitative dataset generated from multiple data sources – 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews, 15 h of participant observation and document data. Seeking to capture a systemic view, we started our data-collection process with defining a particular issue area rather than a particular MSI. We implemented purposeful sampling technique that was further enriched by snowball sampling. During the period of May 2019 to October 2020 we have conducted 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with various relevant stakeholders directly or indirectly involved in the governance of defined issue area in the Ivorian context - global cocoa trading companies, global chocolate producing companies, small & medium chocolate producing companies, representatives of MSIs, international philanthropic

foundation, global NGOs, representatives of international organisations, independent industry experts. All interviews were held in English or French, lasted from 30 minutes to 2,5 hours, were recorded, transcribed and systematically analysed (Gioia et al., 2012). The first author has participated in the most prominent annual industry-wide conference dedicated to cocoa sustainability (held by an industry-wide MSI) that enabled us to generate rich data from 15 hours of participant observation. This conference gathered 405 private sector sustainability leaders, farmers, government officials, civil society representatives, and researchers from 30 countries enabling rich and insightful discussions that enriched our dataset. We equally studied numerous documents (corporate & NGO reports, policy documents, website content) that help us to capture some missing elements.

Seeking to build a grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) we iteratively analysed our data throughout the ongoing process of data generation. Such strategy helped us to refine our interview guide in order to get focused rich dataset providing a thick description of the research phenomenon. It should be noted that this research is still in progress and second round of data collection is planned to be held during the first author's research visit to Cote d'Ivoire organized in the aftermath of Covid-19 pandemic. The second round of data collection would play an essentially important role as it would enable us to fully capture the local understanding of global governance processes and their implementation in the context of Cote d'Ivoire.

MAIN FINDINGS

As it was stated this research project is ongoing, however the collected empirical data enables us to present the preliminary findings. Our empirical evidence shows that the issues of human rights, particularly related to gender equality and elimination of child labour, are being tackled in cocoa sector through multiple multi-stakeholder arrangements forming a complex network of linkages reuniting various actors – companies, NGOs, philanthropic foundations, local authorities (as well as multiple MSIs) – each having different role and fulfilling different functions (Figure 1).
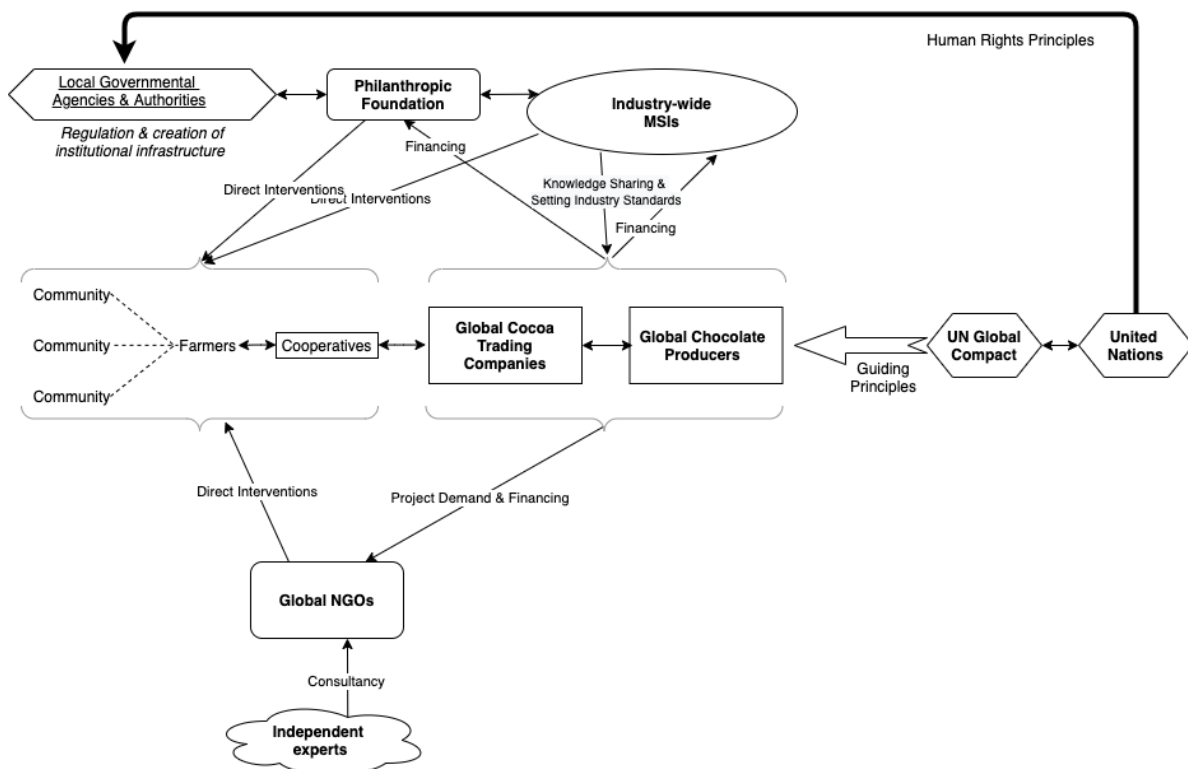
Figure 1: The structure of local multi-stakeholder arrangements operating in cocoa sector in Cote d'Ivoire

Despite the fact that analysed multi-stakeholder arrangements are independent from state authorities and are leaded by private actors, their functioning and field implementation is contingent upon the alignment with local institutional infrastructure as well as with government's priorities in order to avoid redundancy and increase synergetic dynamics – the process that we are calling "institutional bridging":

> *"Well, let's think about a bold initiative…that works through the government systems and infrastructures so working through the education ministry to provide education and not building parallel infrastructures and aligning on that agenda and also bringing the government on board. The government defining what the key priorities and objectives are for the education system and the companies coming in to support that and then making sure that we actually have the necessary funding to scale something across the cocoa growing areas in Cote d'Ivoire." (Interviewee 15, philanthropic foundation)*

Such findings show that in a particular nation-state context (even in emerging and developing economies where the governance voids do exist), MSIs are being embedded in the local institutional environment that constrain and enable its functioning representing *top-down dynamics*.

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Considering the role that local stakeholders play in the process of development and implementation of industry norms and regulative initiatives, our research shows that the global actors seek to engage in constructive dialogue with local stakeholders in order to draw on the knowledge and expertise of local stakeholders – the process underlying the *bottom-up dynamics*:

> *"Top-down approach doesn't work because you cannot tell people what they need, people are the experts of what they need, what they live, what they like, what they want and how they could do it. Maybe they would lack the expertize of framing it in a more workable way but they know better than you do. Even if you are trained and experienced development worker, you have to sit down with them, work with them using a battery of various tools to really gather the accurate information, have it properly analysed with them, and then derive the right conclusions and at the end get possible solutions and opportunities to transform the situation that they are living in a better common future in which they will recognize themselves and their role that they can play in reaching this kind of future. This is the essence of the bottom up approach compared to the top down, which is totally disconnected from what we really want." (Interviewee 22, industry-driven MSI)*

Our empirical evidence shows that MSIs in cocoa seek to develop the capacities of local stakeholders rather than establish compliance regimes. Seeking to tackle the issues of human rights on the field and shift the existing patterns of conduct, MSIs seek to promote the agency of local stakeholder striving to increase their reflexivity (via personal narratives), to build necessary capacities (via training and creation of necessary infrastructure) and to facilitate the process of goal-setting (via participatory processes). These three elements being determined as principle attributes of institutional actors (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) contribute to the development of local agency and thus, lead to the empowerment of local stakeholders:

> *"...if I have selected the relevant set of skills to be taught, I have allocated enough time to teach them one after another having enough time in between to digest and have a good uptake and people get really confident in their own ability to conduct that process, then I can confidently consider to phase out as they would be able to take over. And an example of that is seeing community development members being able to reach out to partners and secure funding or attracting a project in their community without any support of the company. If you can start to see similar things, it means that you are going in the right*

direction. If you see a community development committee that has been able to fund its own functioning, I mean, the meeting costs and things like that, etc., it means that you are going in the right direction." (Interviewee 22, industry-driven MSI)

DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTION

In our research we sought to shift the focus from assessing the deliberative capacity of a particular MSI towards more systemic view studying how a specific issue area (human rights) is becoming regulated in a particular context of emerging economy through complex interactions between various actors (including MSIs). Such approach enables us to bring two-fold contribution to the discussion on MSIs. First, in line with recent research on MSIs (de Bakker et al., 2019; Fougère & Solitander, 2020) we show that considering a MSI as an isolated arrangement may bring only limited insights on its deliberative capacity or its inclusive dynamics. Our research has shown that MSIs operate in a complex network of linkages with various actors including the state. We also show that the field implementation of private regulatory initiatives derived through the deliberative processes within MSIs is contingent upon its alignment with broader institutional context, where MSI is embedded, that constrains and enables its functioning in a top-down way (Figure 2). Thus, our research shows the importance of "institutional bridging" (in line with "contextual bridging" in van Wijk et al., 2020) in order to ensure the fit with constantly evolving local context.
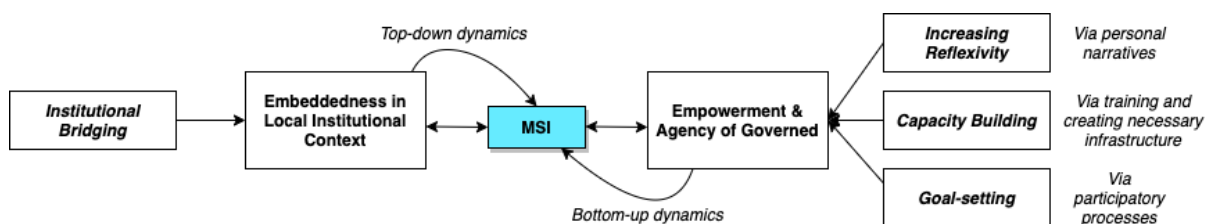

Figure 2: Dual dynamics impacting the MSI functioning in a local context

Secondly, our research contributes to the discussion on the inclusiveness of MSIs. Our research shows that local stakeholders play an important agentic role in the implementation and diffusion of industry norm/regulation in the sphere of human rights. Our study contributes to nascent field of "agency of governed" (Draude, 2017) showing how MSIs strive to develop local agency through reflexivity (Ruebottom & Auster, 2018), capacity building and goal-setting. In doing so, MSIs seek to develop the bottom-up dynamics engaging local stakeholders in the process of development and implementation of private governance initiatives. Finally, our research

contributes to more fine-grained conceptualisation of empowerment (Mena et al., 2010) by empirically defining its elements.

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