

Conflicting institutional logics in agricultural supply chain labour governance: the role of upstream agency

by Khan, M., Rogerson, M., Papadas, D., Behrendt, K. and Arnold, L.

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**Harper Adams
University**

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Conflicting institutional logics in agricultural supply chain labour governance: The role of upstream agency

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Response letter

Manuscript ID IJOPM-10-2025-0994.R4

Conflicting institutional logics in agricultural supply chain labour governance:

The role of upstream agency

Dear Professor Gold, Guest Editors-in-Chief, and Associate Editor,

Thank you very much once again for your thoughtful and constructive comments on our paper. As previously, for clarity, your comments are below in **bold** and our responses are in *blue italics*. All page references for our study contained within this response letter are for the Word document and may not correspond directly to the pdf proof produced by the journal's submissions portal.

27 May 2026

Dear [authors]

Manuscript ID IJOPM-10-2025-0994.R3 entitled "Conflicting institutional logics in agricultural supply chain labour governance: The role of upstream agency" which you submitted to the International Journal of Operations and Production Management, has been reviewed. The comments of the Associate Editor (AE) are included at the bottom of this letter.

The AE has suggested some minor revisions to your manuscript. Therefore, I invite you to respond to the AE's comments and revise your manuscript accordingly.

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Because we are trying to facilitate timely publication of manuscripts submitted to the International Journal of Operations and Production Management, your revised manuscript should be uploaded as soon as possible. If it is not possible for you to submit your revision in a reasonable amount of time (30 days from today), we may have to consider your paper as a new submission.

Once again, thank you for submitting your manuscript to the International Journal of Operations and Production Management and I look forward to receiving your revision.

Yours sincerely

Prof. Stefan Gold on behalf of the guest editorial team

Guest Editor, International Journal of Operations and Production Management
stefan.gold@tum.de

Associate Editor's Comments to Authors:

Most of the minor changes on R2 have been made, but one is outstanding and a new issue seems to have arisen as below.

Outstanding issue – numbered 2 in my comments on R2 – the sentence has been changed, but the ending of the sentence no longer makes sense. It ends : “.... workers’ agency modern slavery”. Please make sure the final sentence makes sense.

Thank you for catching this typo. We have removed ‘modern slavery’ from the end of this sentence so that it now reads (in context):

“Where worker agency is concerned, few researchers advance the idea that individuals in conditions of extreme labour exploitation retain some agency (e.g. Crane et al., 2022). Much of the OSCM and management literature assumes that this is not the case, either stating this openly or questioning the level of workers’ agency.”

New issue: I was surprised in section 3.5 to see that ‘Europe’ had been inserted twice to replace UK. Since the UK is not in Europe, why this change? Was it a typo before? Either way, the first sentence of section 3.5 says that all interviews took place in Pakistan, but this does not appear to be the case – as I see is confirmed by the table where Western Europe is mentioned as the location for some interviews. Please do a final check to ensure the description of the methodology is factually correct.

Thank you very much for catching this discrepancy. All interviews were conducted in Pakistan. The issue here arose because we wanted to be transparent about where the

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interviewee is based in the table of interviewees. As you rightly point out, this is not the aim of the final column in the table. We have therefore amended references to ‘Western Europe’ in the table to ‘online’.

Our sincere apologies for not signposting the change from “Europe” to “UK” in our previous response letter. We had considered that, because the focus of such agencies was development, and the UK has only one government agency with that specific focus, we might be in danger of de-anonymising our data in this case. As the UK has left the EU but not Europe, we believed that “Europe” would be an acceptable way of referring to this interviewee. On reflection, however, we are comfortable with the level of pseudonymisation that “UK” gives as the list of interviewees does not name the agency in question. Since these are the only visible alterations to the text (i.e. a change rather than a deletion, as in response to your previous comment), we have not used blue text to highlight this change. We hope this is okay.

We thank you once again for your helpful and constructive comments and your eye for detail in enabling us to improve our paper.

Very best wishes,

The authors.

Conflicting institutional logics in agricultural supply chain labour governance: The role of upstream agency

Abstract

Purpose: This article investigates the institutional logics affecting labour governance upstream in agrifood supply chains. It focuses on the lived experience of farming communities in Pakistan, their agency, and the implications for top-down governance of labour exploitation.

Design/methodology/approach: A qualitative approach comprising 48 interviews and 10 focus groups, with 73 total respondents, was employed. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to understand how governance efforts were understood and experienced.

Findings: The study identifies the logics at play. Conflicts were found both in the top-down governance and market logics imposed on farming communities and between those logics and factors informing a local 'social logic'. The complexity of these conflicts and resistance among farming communities induce what we term a 'messy paralysis' of governance. Communities exercised their agency to resist top-down governance efforts, which they see as imposed on them.

Research limitations/implications: Labour and wider governance efforts that are not co-designed with their subject communities are likely to conflict with local values, reducing their impact and failing to protect workers' wellbeing and corporate reputation.

Originality/value: The upstream approach taken, and its link with global labour governance approaches, is rare in the operations and supply chain management literature. The article provides rich insights which both build upon and problematize extant labour governance research.

Key words: labour governance, labour exploitation, modern slavery, supply chain governance, agriculture, Pakistan

1. Introduction

Labour abuses in supply chains under the term ‘modern slavery’ affect millions of people worldwide. Cases of forced labour, debt bondage, and child labour are estimated to number over 27 million (Walk Free Foundation, 2023). Practices such as illegally low pay, unlawful wage deductions, sexual harassment, and dangerously long working hours add to issues of labour exploitation (LeBaron, 2021). These praxes cause physical and psychological harm to individuals, negatively impact communities (Meehan and Pinnington, 2021), and pose increasing risks to supply chain management (Rogerson *et al.*, 2025).

A burgeoning empirical literature theorizing approaches to labour governance – “the public and private standards regulations, responses and forms of power... that surround labour standards in the global economy” (LeBaron, 2020, p.4) - has developed rich insights into organizational efforts to manage risks in supply chains (Rogerson *et al.*, 2025; Shirgholami *et al.*, 2024; Vanpoucke and Klassen, 2024; Wilhelm *et al.*, 2025). This research highlights the ineffectiveness of labour governance in supply chains and goes some way to explaining the persistence of labour exploitation (Karaosman and Marshall, 2023; LeBaron, 2021; Martin-Ortega *et al.*, 2024; Niforou, 2015). Broadly speaking, this literature finds that market pressures, prioritizing profitability, are sufficiently dominant that focal firms have rarely deployed the resources required to undertake the work required upstream to uphold labour standards (Pesterfield and Rogerson, 2024).

These factors contribute to ‘institutional logics’, which are the organizing principles through which firms attempt to gain or maintain legitimacy (Longoni *et al.*, 2024; Matos *et al.*, 2020; McLoughlin and Meehan, 2021; Rogerson *et al.*, 2025; Schumm and Niehm, 2024). Institutional logics have substantial explanatory power in uncovering and analyzing the factors guiding behaviours, their interplay, and their effects (Lounsbury *et al.*, 2021). In labour governance, this has enabled scholars to better understand how organizations downstream organize to address modern slavery risks. Focal firms collaborate through shared logics (Vanpoucke and Klassen, 2024), use their power to keep the market logic dominant (McLoughlin and Meehan, 2021), and hybridize logics to make anti-slavery efforts more efficient

(Rogerson *et al.*, 2025). This growing body of knowledge advances understanding of how and why such activities influence outcomes.

Much of the extant scholarship on labour governance, including that which uses institutional logics in operations and supply chain management (OSCM), is top-down, however. Research on labour governance has theorized problems that often occur thousands of miles from where the managers interviewed – and the scholars interviewing them – are based (Simpson *et al.*, 2021). This represents three limitations to the logics literature in OSCM. First, if logics represent what Longoni *et al.* (2024, p.1735) call “the rules of the game,” it is likely that upstream and downstream actors are ‘playing different games’ given their varying contexts. Second, therefore, we do not know the extent to which extant theorizing is applicable to upstream contexts. Third, agency is taken for granted in much of the logics literature. Research on downstream interactions between logics assume agency because the impacted organizations broadly possess the freedom to act. Worker agency upstream is assumed to be constrained (Fayezi *et al.*, 2025; Gutierrez-Huerter O *et al.*, 2023) despite the absence of a broad evidence base to support the assumption. The literature to date is therefore unbalanced, lacking appreciation of the logics informing action and outcomes upstream and how they are impacted by agency. This is an important gap in OSCM theorizing given that “the most questionable practices happen among distant suppliers multiple tiers away” (Kim and Davis, 2016, p.111). Understanding how logics are experienced and cognized upstream can therefore shed much-needed light on the barriers to effective labour governance.

Where workers are included in scholarship, research finds that they can be key in identifying labour abuses (Hasle and Vang, 2021) and understanding upstream dynamics (Benstead *et al.*, 2021). In rare cases, workers have been shown to be able to resist local management practices which undermine their wellbeing (Le *et al.*, 2025). Local norms and conditions – key contributors to institutional logics – may therefore be important for theorizing labour governance (Razak *et al.*, 2025). There remains a substantial gap in theorizing upstream responses to labour governance in supply chains, highlighted by Wilhelm *et al.* (2025), given the persistence of modern slavery.

Insights from other disciplines offer an appreciation for how small-scale farmers and informal labourers often operate under exploitative and precarious conditions that undermine not only their livelihoods but also broader efforts toward sustainable development (Khan *et al.*, 2025a). This body of knowledge has created a foundational understanding of how such conditions are not merely the result of economic pressures or market dynamics. Rather, they are reinforced by deeply rooted local informal power structures such as sociocultural hierarchies, religious norms, and feudal political systems that shape everyday labour relations and access to resources (Ponte *et al.*, 2023). Informal power structures within communities may not align with corporate attempts to enforce standards even when sufficient supply chain visibility at the primary industry level is gained (Benstead *et al.*, 2018). Local factors can delegitimize such interventions by framing them as culturally intrusive and incompatible with local values (Alamgir *et al.*, 2022; Khan *et al.*, 2025b). Locally rooted challenges may therefore have far-reaching consequences for labour governance in supply chains (de Lima *et al.*, 2025) – challenges which OSCM theorization has yet to fully appreciate. We therefore pose the research question: *How do upstream agrifood supply chain actors experience labour governance and what is the role of agency in their response to labour governance mechanisms?*

This paper responds to the need for more research upstream in supply chains (Wilhelm *et al.*, 2025) and for calls for developing detailed accounts of the foundations of upstream logics (Diebel *et al.*, 2024) and how they influence practice (McLoughlin and Meehan, 2021). Drawing on the theory of institutional logics and using the concept of agency as a lens to answer these questions, we conducted a research project in the agriculture sector in Pakistan, a particularly salient context for investigation. The world's fifth most populous country and a leading agri-exporter, Pakistan is a critical node in global agricultural supply chains, a sector known to be high-risk for modern slavery (Wilhelm *et al.*, 2025). The labour governance observed in the country structures remains informal, hierarchical, and under-theorized by OSCM scholars. Based on a qualitative methodology, the study unpacks the interplay between the logics informing top-down governance models and those influencing how that governance is experienced. The aim of the study, therefore, is to understand top-down and local logics and how their interplay informs labour outcomes. Our analysis highlights how specific socio-economic factors at the local

level conflict with global, top-down logics, preventing the embedding of labour governance and leaving its goals unmet.

This article makes two important theoretical contributions. First, we demonstrate the complex interaction of three logics. While extant research has generally studied the interplay of two different logics, we contribute to theory by theorizing interactions between top-down governance and market logics and a social logic in communities. In highlighting the role of worker agency in this conflict, we problematize the conceptualization of people as the passive ‘victims’ of modern slavery often characterized in the literature (Benstead *et al.*, 2018; Meehan and Pinnington, 2021; Rogerson *et al.*, 2025; Simpson *et al.*, 2021) and in practice (e.g. Supply Chain Sustainability School, 2026). We posit that this contributes to a ‘messy paralysis’ resulting from the conflicts between these logics and how agency, largely taken for granted in institutional logics research, plays an important role. Second, in speaking to the literature on labour governance, we parse the various local factors which impact attempts to implement global labour standards. In doing so, we show the inherent complexity of attempting to impose labour standards on communities with different values and beliefs and reveal the consequences for labour governance in supply chain management (SCM). Finally, we provide implications for managers and researchers on supply chain governance for labour exploitation and broader sustainability issues.

2. Literature review

2.1 Labour governance in global supply chains

The intensification of globalization in the late-20th and early-21st centuries has led to enhanced awareness of labour exploitation in global supply chains (LeBaron, 2021; Stephens *et al.*, 2025). Business, government, and civil society efforts to reduce such risks have guided the development of both legislation and a variety of labour standards known as ‘private governance’ (Soundararajan *et al.*, 2025).

Where regulation has failed to motivate substantive action, private governance initiatives that have stimulated more work on labour in supply chains have been accused of being ‘top-down’ (Hasle and Vang, 2021; Wilhelm *et al.*, 2025). Research

has found that this mode of governance is largely ineffective because focal firms fail to manage stakeholders in ways which create a shared vision of the need for addressing labour issues and shared ways of undertaking the necessary work (Soundararajan *et al.*, 2018).

Often using codes of conduct reinforced by checks through social audits, top-down governance imposes contractual rules on suppliers and then attempts to ensure compliance (Wilhelm, 2024). As a result, focal firms' attempts to 'cascade' codes of conduct down supply chains can be viewed as overly controlling of suppliers (Fontana and Egels-Zandén, 2019) or of passing responsibility onto smaller, less powerful firms in their supply chains (Uddin *et al.*, 2023). In practical terms, research suggests that audits provide only a snapshot of conditions (Wilhelm *et al.*, 2025) at a fraction of the relevant production sites (Egels-Zandén, 2017), and are methodologically flawed (Zeitler and Schwarzkopf, 2025). Audits rarely involve workers (Karaosman and Marshall, 2023; Shivji, 2024; Soundararajan *et al.*, 2025), though various 'worker voice' mechanisms - through which workers can communicate and be represented (Stephens *et al.*, 2025) - have attempted to bridge this gap (Benstead *et al.*, 2021; Lund-Thomsen and Coe, 2015).

While research and practice have therefore begun to better understand how labour governance can positively influence conditions on the ground, three issues remain. First, this research is often focused on factory settings (Ahmed and Uddin, 2022; Karaosman and Marshall, 2023; Siddika *et al.*, 2024; Wilhelm, 2024). Findings from factories may not be applicable in other contexts, such as farms, where remoteness, lack of materials traceability, and less concentrated workforces can hinder governance efforts (Razak *et al.*, 2025; Wilhelm *et al.*, 2025).

Second, even where labour governance involves workers, processes remain top-down. Focal firms impose standards designed for their own contexts without giving due consideration to the cultural setting of the target workplace (Benstead *et al.*, 2021; Razak *et al.*, 2025; Wilhelm, 2024). Research has found that this can lead to suppliers decoupling their real actions from those they report to focal firms (Soundararajan *et al.*, 2018; Xiao *et al.*, 2019).

Third, and linked to this imposition of Western standards, is the issue of worker agency in supply chains. The power imbalances that necessitate worker involvement

in labour governance mean that workers do not have, or feel they do not have, the ability to raise concerns and achieve what Stephens *et al.* (2025) term 'recognition justice'. Governance is thus done *to* workers and communities, who rarely have a say in what that governance consists of (Simpson *et al.*, 2021; Wilhelm *et al.*, 2025). Workers are therefore treated as passive victims of the exploitation that governance intends to rectify. It is these power imbalances which have led to the conclusion that labour governance in supply chains actively contributes to inequality and the perpetuation of abuses (Ponte *et al.*, 2023). Recognizing worker agency is therefore a key aspect of labour governance approaches (Soundararajan *et al.*, 2025).

Just as labour governance in supply chains has largely been top-down, so has research into it. Much of this literature finds that focal firms are not undertaking the work necessary to identify and remediate labour abuses (McLoughlin and Meehan, 2021; Meehan and Pinnington, 2021; Rogerson *et al.*, 2025; Shirgholami *et al.*, 2024; Simpson *et al.*, 2021; Vanpoucke and Klassen, 2024), sometimes because intermediaries or suppliers prove to be a limiting factor (Soundararajan *et al.*, 2018). As Wilhelm *et al.* (2025, p.1098) put it, responsibility broadly lies with "the 'top-down' approach taken by global brands that impose Western standards on suppliers in developing countries that are operating in different cultural and socio-economic conditions." The relative lack of upstream research on labour governance at the point of materials extraction (farms, mines, etc.) means that we know little about how individual workers and communities experience and impact top-down labour governance in supply chains.

What upstream OSCM research has found when conducted bottom-up is that involving workers in anti-slavery processes empowers them and enhances information gathering (Benstead *et al.*, 2021), improving performance (Hasle and Vang, 2021). While this body of work has begun to shine a light on how workers engage with labour governance, the buyer-centric nature of much of the literature has led to calls for more people-centric (Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025) and labour-focused research (Marques *et al.*, 2025).

2.2 Institutional logics and labour governance in supply chains

Among the problems underpinning focal firm attempts to cascade standards through their supply chains is the complex web of trade-offs and varying priorities of supply

chain actors (McLoughlin and Meehan, 2021; Storsjö *et al.*, 2026). Often theorized as 'institutional logics' (Rogerson *et al.*, 2025), the factors underpinning these decisions can be interpreted differently in similar contexts. Institutional logics are "the socially constructed, historical pattern of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality" (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999, p.804). That is, organizations seek to meet the expectations of the logics which exert pressure upon them to build or maintain legitimacy (Diebel *et al.*, 2024; Schumm and Niehm, 2024). Logics, described by Longoni *et al.* (2024, p.1735) as "the rules of the game", are interpreted by the relevant actors (*assumptions*), impacted by (and impacting on) existing *values* and *beliefs*, and produce *practices*. Rather than acting in isolation, logics are dynamic, often operating in competition with one another, creating trade-offs in decision making for managers (McLoughlin and Meehan, 2021).

The multi-site, often international nature of SCM, with its multiple, potentially conflicting priorities, has made institutional logics a popular theory and one with substantial explanatory and analytical power both in OSCM journals (Diebel *et al.*, 2024; McLoughlin and Meehan, 2021; Pullman *et al.*, 2018; Rogerson *et al.*, 2025; Schumm and Niehm, 2024) and supply chain contexts (Egels-Zandén *et al.*, 2015; Nicholls and Huybrechts, 2016). Research has found that logics can complement one another by producing similar responses (Nath and Eweje, 2021), hybridizing to strengthen one another (Rogerson *et al.*, 2025), or creating conflict, forcing actors to weigh the benefits of different behaviours and practices (Diebel *et al.*, 2024). In the latter cases, institutional theorists posit that a 'dominant' logic is identified, the demands of which actors feel must be met and which relegates other logics to secondary considerations (McLoughlin and Meehan, 2021; Schumm and Niehm, 2024; Thornton and Ocasio, 1999). Between linked organizations, logics are often managed to create a foundation of stability from which decisions can be made but even this requires continuous (re)negotiation (Nicholls and Huybrechts, 2016).

While a rich literature exists on the results of conflicts between institutional logics in the OSCM literature, much of this research has been top-down and dyadic.

Respondents in such studies are often situated 'inside the buying firm' (Xiao *et al.*, 2019). Research has sought to understand how logics are interpreted within firms

and how inter-firm interactions are impacted by differing interpretation or by logics which are in some way incompatible (Matos *et al.*, 2020; Nath and Eweje, 2021; Vanpoucke and Klassen, 2024). While such theorizations are important for understanding how focal firms interpret logics, the risks being managed may be to the focal firm itself rather than the vulnerable labour producing goods in its supply chains (Rogerson *et al.*, 2025). This is a serious shortcoming of labour governance and the literature which studies it. Labour risks are much higher in geographies in which primary sector activities take place (Walk Free Foundation, 2023) and “the most serious environmental and social breaches are caused by sub-suppliers rather than direct suppliers” (Wilhelm *et al.*, 2016, p.43). The building and maintenance of legitimacy, which logics direct, is therefore complicated in supply chains by the fact that upstream and downstream actors are subject to different logics. The concentration of logics research upstream has yet to shed light on how logics at different tiers interact.

Implicit in downstream views of governance is the role of agency. Since pressures acting on firms are interpreted as logics and responses flow from that understanding, institutional logics rely on embedded agency (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999). In dealing with logics in supply chains through inter-firm relations, research to date largely assumes a level of agency in its subjects. That is, scholarly work is often predicated on the assumption that firms can internalize and act on logics because they have sufficient freedom and ability to respond.

Where worker agency is concerned, few researchers advance the idea that individuals in conditions of extreme labour exploitation retain some agency (e.g. Crane *et al.*, 2022). Much of the OSCM and management literature assumes that this is not the case, either stating this openly or questioning the level of workers’ agency. While Emberson *et al.* (2022) hold that agency is key for workers to advance their cause, Fayezi *et al.* (2025) posit that worker agency in supply chains is necessarily limited by the opacity of demands from downstream. The limiting of worker agency upstream is often implicit, for example where Gutierrez-Huerter O *et al.* (2023) suggest the need to ‘reinstate’ agency to limit individual vulnerability. In large part the view that vulnerable workers lack agency comes from the view of people living in modern slavery as victims. Shivji (2024) and Uddin *et al.* (2023), for example, see workers as excluded from processes designed to protect them. This

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view follows logically from the ‘top-down’ view of governance in which focal firms impose standards on suppliers (Ponte *et al.*, 2023). While institutional logics researchers suggest that tensions exist between priorities in supply chains (Storsjö *et al.*, 2026), little empirical research on modern slavery deals with workers directly, particularly in marginalized communities (Bianchi *et al.*, 2025). Workers’ agency, and how it shapes upstream responses to labour governance, is similarly sparse in OSCM research. We know little, therefore, of how workers respond to labour governance efforts in upstream agricultural settings.

3. Methods

3.1 Research context

The setting for this study is Pakistan. Specifically, the research was conducted in the majority Muslim provinces of Punjab and Sindh, the latter also containing a substantial Hindu population. Pakistan is a major exporter of crops, including rice and cotton (Khan *et al.*, 2025b), though the agricultural sector remains underdeveloped. The range of social factors affecting agriculture in emerging economies (Gold *et al.*, 2026) marginalizes the smallholder farming communities which make up most of the sector (Khan *et al.*, 2025a). These factors not only prevent farmers from accessing the resources required to become more productive and profitable, but also limit farmers’ involvement in decision-making, including through coercion and/or systems of social obligation (Khan *et al.*, 2025b). These ‘affective ties’ are also prevalent across diverse regions, including China, Russia, Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, the Middle East (Jha and Yeros, 2023; Nadeem and Kayani, 2019; Razak *et al.*, 2025), suggesting that their impact on issues such as labour governance may be similarly widespread.

3.2 Research design

To investigate how people at the farm-level experience and respond to labour governance, we adopted an interpretive qualitative approach informed by a social constructivist philosophy (Le *et al.*, 2025; Rogerson *et al.*, 2025; Santos *et al.*, 2023). Interpretivism is rooted in understanding that the social world is subjective and that actors understand the world around them in ways informed by that world and their

own consideration of it (Santos *et al.*, 2023). Given the exploratory nature of deepening our appreciation of upstream experiences (Le *et al.*, 2025), we took a field-level approach that goes beyond survey- and case study-based approaches (Karaosman and Marshall, 2023). The need to put people at the centre of SCM research (Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025) and include non-traditional actors in research (Wieland *et al.*, 2024) necessitates broader methodological thinking. Rather than seeking generalizability, interpretivism encourages thick description that offers an authenticity (Wieland *et al.*, 2024) which is key to understanding the highly contextual nature of social challenges (Le *et al.*, 2025). The relative rarity of worker-centric research in OSCM, particularly in non-factory contexts, therefore led us to conduct an interview- and focus group-based research project with a focus on understanding the subjective experiences of our respondents.

3.3 Preliminary research

We began the project with an initial phase of understanding local actors, their positions in society, and their role in labour governance. This stage, which lasted from February to April 2023, involved extensive engagement with the Human Resources Development (HRD) arm of Pakistan's National Rural Support Programme (NRSP), a World Bank-supported poverty alleviation programme. We critically examined NRSP's classification of farmers, categorizing them into three groups. To further contextualize the study, various local revenue departments and regional NRSP offices across Punjab and Sindh were visited to understand landholding patterns, institutional dynamics, and the administrative structure influencing agricultural development. This foundational engagement enabled the authors to develop culturally sensitive data collection tools and identify key informants for the primary data collection phase.

3.4 Sampling

To ensure that the research engaged as many relevant groups in the labour governance ecosystem in the provinces in which the research was conducted, we adopted a mixed sampling approach. First, we used stratified sampling, which divides potential respondents by characteristics, enabling the collection of data from a broader range of stakeholders. We were assisted in using this method by the access NRSP provided, which allowed us to connect with farmers, local, national,

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and transnational government agencies, as well as other stakeholders. Within each group in which we conducted multiple interviews, we used purposive sampling with the assistance of NRSP. A full breakdown of our interviewees can be seen in Table I, below.

[insert table I around here]

3.5 Data collection and analysis

The first author conducted all interviews in Pakistan between June 2023 and May 2024. Interviews were conducted with four broad categories of participants: (1) seasonal workers; (2) farmers; (3) representatives of government agencies in Pakistan, the UK, a transnational sustainable food programme, and a regional development bank; (4) private companies in Pakistan, UK, and Qatar (where the company which participated in the research is a key intermediary in rice supply chains); and (5) community representatives, including *Mufti* (local religious leaders). Seeking to better understand community-level responses to labour governance, this sample offered both direct input from a variety of community stakeholders and the experience of actors dealing with those communities. In total, we conducted 48 interviews with 46 respondents of between 45- and 120-minutes’ duration. The interview protocols we used can be seen in Appendix A.

Once initial analysis of the interviews had taken place, the first author conducted focus groups with interviewees in Sindh and Punjab. Focus groups were structured both to validate interview findings and to gain further insights through open discussions of the dynamic interactions between logics identified at interview stage. The focus groups consisted of (1) male seasonal labourers and small-scale farmers; (2) female seasonal labourers and small-scale farmers; (3) mid-scale farmers; (4) large-scale landowners; and (5) *Mufti*. One focus group was conducted for each of these categories in Punjab and one in Sindh. A focus group discussion was organized exclusively with female small-scale farmers and female seasonal labourers from both provinces to capture diverse and first-hand perspectives on gender roles and their governance in farming. Owing to cultural and religious

sensitivities surrounding women's participation, these sessions were facilitated with the support of a family of medium-scale farmers in Punjab and a large-scale landlord's family in Sindh, who assisted in arranging and hosting the discussion. All interviewees from these groups were involved in the focus groups and were supplemented using a snowballing technique in which interviewees and community leaders recommended additional focus group participants. Seasonal workers and small-scale farmers were grouped together, reflecting their shared structural positioning within local hierarchies of labour and land ownership. Mixing them with wealthier farmers or religious authorities was avoided, as such power and sociocultural differentials could undermine the openness and integrity of discussion. For instance, less well-educated and poorer participants may not have felt comfortable sharing their experiences in the presence of wealthier or better-educated participants or religious leaders. The ten focus groups each lasted approximately one hour. The questions used to motivate focus group discussions can be seen in Appendix B. These revolved around initial themes and commonalities identified during the interviews. A total of 73 respondents were interviewed or participated in the focus groups.

Where possible, data collection was conducted in person and recorded and transcribed. Those interviews not held in person were recorded using video conferencing software and transcribed. Interviews with seasonal workers, farmers, and community representatives and other local stakeholders in Pakistan were not recorded, in line with cultural and religious sensitivities. Extensive notes, including verbatim quotes, were taken during these interviews. All interviews were conducted in the preferred language of the interviewees (i.e. Sindhi, Saraiki, Punjabi, and Urdu). Community influencers were recruited to explain the purpose of the interviews and focus groups. Their role was to ensure that participants were aware that they did not have to answer questions and could withdraw at any time. Community influencers were available if participants wanted to speak to them but were not present in the room when data were collected to protect participant anonymity. All data were securely stored during fieldwork, digitized into password-protected files, and original hard copies were destroyed following secure transfer.

We used inductive analysis to develop codes from our interview transcripts and field notes (Brandenburg *et al.*, 2025; Hanisch *et al.*, 2025). To do so, we analyzed our

data using Braun and Clarke’s (2021) method for thematic analysis. This method, which has become popular in OSCM (e.g. Nath and Eweje, 2021; Rogerson *et al.*, 2025), enables the researcher to theorize from their qualitative data holistically because it allows for the identification of concepts common within the dataset (Nath and Eweje, 2021). Braun and Clarke’s (2021) method offers an iterative six-step guide to thematic analysis which provides a framework for analysis which retains the flexibility required for theorizing (Rogerson *et al.*, 2025).

First, all data were translated into Urdu, then into English. The authors repeatedly read the translated data to familiarize themselves with the material. Second, they read through the data using theory as their reference point, so that ideas around the understanding factors informing logics related to labour governance came to the fore. Third, these ideas began to come together as first-order codes, where the data contained similar statements by different interviewees. In the fourth stage, we grouped these first-order codes into second-order codes which were similar as collections of codes. Fifth, we created themes consisting of second-order codes which represented concepts and ideas common across the dataset. Finally, we read through the themes, the second- and first-order codes and important theory papers to ensure that our themes were sufficiently theoretically informed. The authors conducted inter-coder reliability checks to ensure consistency in interpretation of the data to enhance internal validity. That is, first- and second-order codes and then themes were checked to ensure coherence between and within these generated concepts. Where we discovered that codes were insufficiently supported within the data, we looked for further evidence to support those codes, combined them with other codes to make new groupings where coherent, or removed them where we decided that they did not fit. In this way, the first two authors agreed on the final analysis having discussed and resolved all disagreements (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The results of our analysis can be seen in the coding tree in Figure 1, below.

[insert figure 1 around here]

4. Findings

The article's findings are arranged in line with the analysis laid out in Figure 1. The three themes generated in this analysis are conflicting priorities, conflicting values, and conflicting mechanisms. They speak to the conflicting logics within and between labour governance in global supply chains and the communities in which upstream work takes place. Our study did not seek to track stakeholder responses to a single programme of labour governance but to theorize how labour governance efforts more broadly were experienced by community members. Our respondents spoke of "policies", "audits", "standards", "traceability", "development projects", "documents", "aid cycles", "partnerships", "training manuals", "certification", "paperwork", "templates", "reporting", "CSR compliance", "reforms", "metrics", "programmes", "frameworks", "data", and "consultants". It is therefore clear that a wide range of labour governance mechanisms had been experienced by our respondents and that, across respondent groups, governance conversations were commonplace and nuanced. These labour governance efforts represent a top-down governance logic rooted in focal firm needs to manage modern slavery risks in their supply chains.

Additional quotes supporting the generation of these themes can be seen in Table II.

[insert table II around here]

4.1 Conflicting priorities

The first theme we generated from our data – conflicting priorities – comprises (1) transactionality and (2) ethical friction. These tensions, the second-order codes from our analysis, speak to the conflicts between demands for enhanced productivity and improved working conditions on farms.

4.1.1 Transactionality

We found conflict between a top-down governance logic and a market logic which both come from downstream. Focal firms are attempting to manage labour risks while also driving efficiencies to create higher agricultural yields to produce greater financial returns. Complicating this top-down logic are community demands for improved working practices, which we term a social logic. This social logic is in

conflict with the two top-down logics we identify. The top-down governance logic, understood by respondents as “policies coming from corporate offices” (FCI1), also has a market logic with it - “supply chains prioritize efficiency” (NEO1) - but it is the gap between top-down and local priorities that is the site of conflict. That conflict is, then, between a governance logic, which seeks to address labour exploitation top-down, and a social logic, represented by the lived experience of subjects of those governance efforts. A smallholder farmer highlighted this conflict between communities’ own improvement efforts and those of external governance demands:

“For outsiders, productivity is yield per acre. For us, productivity includes honour, dignity, and survival of the household.” (SSF2)

The tension between local ideas of productivity, which are not measured in purely financial terms, and those dictated by downstream actors creates a problem of priorities which lies at the heart of responses to logics. By treating farms as units to be overseen, even with the best of intentions, actors governing labour conditions in supply chains ignore how communities work. This imperils efforts to enhance labour standards both through bringing conflicting priorities and by creating them on the ground. The ability of individual farmers to implement practices which might guard against labour exploitation is therefore constrained both by local structures which rely on mutuality and efforts to understand how conflicting external priorities can be operationalized. The relationship between the two top-down logics, and the transactional result of their conflict which is experienced by communities, is no more starkly observed than by a medium-scale farmer:

“If production falls, support disappears. Worker protection is conditional on performance, not focused on their wellbeing.” (MSF2)

Allied to the nature of the conflicting priorities is the speed with which communities are expected to implement labour governance measures. Our respondents told us that external demands necessitate rapid results, an approach which jars with how their communities operate. A development agency manager asserted this tension:

“Top-down aid cycles demand speed, whereas community transformation—especially when rooted in centuries-old sociocultural and religious structures—requires sustained, gradual engagement. Reconciling this contradiction is our greatest task.” (IDAM1)

The top-down rationale of global labour governance systems conflicts with local, communal structures in important ways. Centralized governance, in both requiring and expecting a pace to which deliberative decision-making cannot accede, fails to partner with important actors in local contexts. As a Mufti highlighted, "Partnership means involving elders, religious scholars, and local influencers - not bypassing them in the name of efficiency" (R5). "Bypassing" local ways calls into question the real priorities of external actors, particularly when their goals also include "efficiency". As an international agency manager put it, "institutional standards must bend to cultural soil. If they remain rigid, they will break before the first harvest." (TGAM1).

4.1.2 Ethical friction

Our data repeatedly highlight that at the heart of the disconnection between governance efforts and life in rice-farming areas of Pakistan lie different belief systems. Though there is a religious element to this, faith is only one part of such considerations. Ultimately, actors responsible for labour governance in the supply chains from which we collected data have different expectations to communities upstream around issues such as fairness. Our data suggest that this conflict remains because labour governance efforts do not attempt to bridge this gap. The widespread feeling among our respondents was that downstream actors want some evidence, however flimsy, that their efforts have had a positive impact, while communities want real impact. An agricultural products exporter explained this tension:

"Global buyers want traceability in reports, while farmers seek dignity in recognition. Both claim ethics, but they diverge in meaning." (APE3)

The conflict between ethical systems was highlighted by a large landowner, who told us that,

"Global buyers imagine contracts will enforce equity, yet fairness in our context comes from negotiated relationships. Formal rules appear neutral, maybe for the corporate offices, but without local cultural recognition they remain hollow" (LSL5).

Within this comment is the implication that rice-farming communities do not feel that their priorities are acknowledged. A *Mufti* in a farming community was much blunter

in his assessment of how these top-down systems fail to consider communities' lived experiences:

"In our traditions and beliefs, fairness to labour and stewardship of land are central values. Business models strip these away and call it modernization. Bypassing someone's beliefs, do you think, is modernization? It's strange." (R1)

Implicit in this sentiment is that, by its nature, top-down governance is conducted through the imposition of standards in ways which fail to find common ground between local and external priorities. Several of our respondents saw this as evidence of the top-down belief that focal firms know the right way to ensure labour exploitation is being uncovered and remediated, while communities do not. The failure of a top-down governance logic to be embedded in farming communities follows from this because of its in-built assumption that farms need governing. In fact, a collective form of agency exists in such communities. A mid-sized farmer emphasized that,

In our culture, we act through elders, through family decisions, through collective community approaches. Their models collapse because they build on individual autonomy that does not exist in collectivist societies." (MSF3)

A development bank manager highlighted communities' supposed lack of governance structures as a key driver of difference here, telling us that "global policy often views informality as a barrier. But in South Asia, informality is the lifeblood. Remove it, and the body collapses" (DBR1). The conceptualization of top-down governance as imposed, therefore, speaks more to a feeling that rice-farming communities are not heard rather than implying that force is used.

4.2 Conflicting values

The second theme we generated from our data – conflicting values – comprises (1) hypocrisy, (2) dehumanization, and (3) gender. These frictions, the 2nd-order codes drawn from our analysis, speak to conflicts around who is governing and *what is* governed.

4.2.1 Hypocrisy

The disconnection between labour governance methods and farmers' experiences in our data were seen by some of our respondents as hypocritical. An exporter working with European buyers told us that their clients "demand traceability [of goods] but refuse to trace their own exploitation," concluding that this "is the contradiction of modern supply chains" (APE1).

This feeling that governance actors make demands which are unreasonable or detached from their own actions was common in our data. A buyer put this approach and its outcomes bluntly: "Foreign clients demand CSR compliance yet resist investing in farmer wellbeing. This contradiction undermines sustainability" (LBE2).

The view that established methods of labour governance may be destined to fail because they do not obtain buy-in from the communities they are designed to serve was also acknowledged by international actors. A Europe-based buyer asserted that "We once thought codes of conduct were enough. But without cultural grounding... they became codes of hypocrisy" (IB2).

Part of the hypocrisy reflects in the conflicting priorities focal firms drive upstream. While much of this contradiction lies in the gap between the standards focal firms impose and realities on the ground, there are also inconsistencies between different expectations that come from downstream. As an import company executive stated,

"Global buyers preach climate responsibility but ignore social sustainability. You cannot save the planet while ignoring the very needs of the communities." (MEIC1)

4.2.2 Dehumanization

The gap between governance actors and farmers demonstrated by *hypocrisy* is not simply a managerialization of governance processes. Respondents reported that interventions with a stated intention to help workers felt imposed; treating farms and workers as numbers. A development officer explained that,

"Applying one template, for example, across Sindh and KP (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa) provinces is cultural blindness. Both cultures are totally different, so how do they relate? One more thing, which is very important, is that religion, in terms of the *Bralvi* and *Deobandi* sects [of Islam], and

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3 culture are different [between these provinces]. So, bear in mind, we live
4 here, and we understand how culture, religion, and community shape
5 behaviour.” (DDO2)
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9 Respondents told us that imported governance methods treated communities as
10 subjects to be told how to operate. A large-scale landowner explained that top-down
11 governance efforts “say partnership, but they arrive with dictates [sic]. True
12 partnership means respecting our leadership in the community, not replacing it with
13 distant boards” (LSL2).
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18 Communities felt that governance structures were being imposed on, rather than
19 created in partnership with, them. A small-scale farmer highlighted this with very
20 direct reference to conflicting values:
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24 “Foreign agencies always assume that poverty means ignorance. But in
25 our villages through our communities and ancestors, survival has taught
26 us intelligence. Their reports talk of efficiency, while our *baradari*
27 [immediate and extended families] teaches resilience. The contradiction is
28 clear: they measure with numbers; we live with values.” (SSF1)
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34 Respondents working with communities in which we collected our data agreed that
35 the labour governance approaches experienced by farmers in south and east
36 Pakistan had not treated communities in ways that engendered cooperation. A
37 national development organization representative told us bluntly that “Our challenge
38 has been to unlearn the arrogance of universal metrics. Real reform listens before it
39 measures” (ISA1).
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45 Those actors designing and managing labour governance structures have done so in
46 ways that do governance to communities, failing to see farmers as participants and
47 imposing rules in a way that negates the agency and value of local communities in
48 supply chains. The clash between top-down and on-the-ground logics is implicit in
49 what an agricultural supplier told us on how farmers are seen by those who seek to
50 govern labour in supply chains:
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55 “Foreign companies treat farmers as numbers, but we see them as
56 survivors of systemic neglect. Until this mindset changes, trust will never
57 be built.” (AS1)
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4.2.3 Gender

Part of the lack of recognition that our respondents felt in conflicting values is derived from the role of women. The lack of understanding of women's position in communities means that policies are poorly designed, liable to failure or even damaging to female participation. A female community influencer reflected that,

"Women are told to attend trainings designed by head offices and delivered by strangers. We have certain values and *purdah* [veil] system. Most of the females are also uneducated and our learning is oral, through faith, tradition, and cultural practices. Institutional programmes impose alien models, ignoring our lived ways of teaching." (FCI1)

This conflict between how the role of women is seen in rice-farming communities is exemplified by what several respondents told us about the relationship between religion and rights and how these factors are seen externally versus lived reality. In the words of a religious scholar, efforts to impose a Western view of rights in supply chains "ignores that religion already gives women, children, and workers' rights. Their imposed rights often duplicate, distort, or even erase our own structures of care" (R2). Indeed, as a female community influencer explained, "their logic assumes participation is visible. But the most critical work women do is invisible—without it, farming collapses" (FCI2). The stark contrast between logics here is epitomized by this respondent's statement that top-down labour governance represents "*their*" logic – an alien reasoning that does not seek to understand but to impose.

4.3 Conflicting mechanisms

The third and final theme we generated from our data – conflicting mechanisms – comprises (1) bureaucratization, (2) contractualization, and (3) certification. These 2nd-order codes speak to conflicts in *how* governance is undertaken.

4.3.1 Bureaucratization

'Bureaucratization' speaks to how labour governance mechanisms arrive at farms in Pakistan. Our respondents experience those mechanisms as "blueprints," "metrics," "templates," and similar – i.e. as bureaucracy rather than as engaged efforts to help workers. A development bank representative highlighted the conflict between those two approaches:

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3 “Global blueprints emphasize uniform metrics, while success here
4 depends on flexible adaptation to kinship networks.” (DBR1)
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7 Within these kinship networks lies further evidence of the social logic which informs
8 internal care for the community. As an executive at a large agricultural buyer told us,
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11 “Buyers abroad want documents that prove sustainability. But
12 sustainability is proven in the dignity of families who grow with the seeds
13 and crops for generations, not in certificates signed in London or New
14 York” (LBE1)
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19 Among the conflicting mechanisms that undermine global labour governance that we
20 found in our data, bureaucratization was a major driver of the separation between the
21 avowed intention of labour governance and how rice-farming communities
22 experience those systems. A high-level view was explained by a manager at an
23 industry body: “Global buyers see farming as an industry; we see it as a way of life.
24 Their codes miss this truth, so their impact remains fragile” (NEO1). This quote
25 encapsulates what many of our respondents shared with us: that there is a
26 disconnection between how labour governance is intended to operate and how it is
27 lived on the ground. The conflict between these values reduces the power of labour
28 governance to make meaningful change for workers. A national development agency
29 officer put this conflict succinctly in a way that highlights both the high-level tensions
30 and micro-localized contextual differences:
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40 “Templates reduce diversity into neat categories, yet every community
41 operates by its own rhythm of kinship and culture.” (NDA2)
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45 One way in which this disconnection becomes material is the creation and
46 dissemination of documentation for governance. While the information required for
47 farm-level governance is generally translated into a local language, no provision is
48 made beyond that for conditions in communities. A development officer shared that,
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52 “Training manuals from abroad are filled with jargon that even educated staff
53 struggle with. Development built on incomprehension is not development—it is
54 alienation.” (NDA1)
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58 This “alienation” highlights that the focus on the reproducible, repeatable processes
59 of labour governance creates a set of bureaucratized structures which may meet the
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needs of focal firms but conflicts with the intended subjects of that governance. This distance creates, rather than partnerships which nurture conditions to the benefit of all, a feeling of othering through being ignored. Intermediaries who could play a key part in bridging conflicting mechanisms recognized this conflict just as farmers did. A buyer was of the view that "audits capture procedures, but not the lived struggles of growers balancing family honour with survival" (IB3).

4.3.2 Contractualization

'Contractualization' speaks to how labour governance actors approach governance in ways that are intended to embed good practice through codes of conduct. This model, which underpins legal and regulatory approaches in post-industrial economies, differs from local approaches in our data, which prioritize compliance based on customs. A warehousing intermediary with customers in Europe and North America described how the gap between approaches to foundational issues such as compliance and trust explains why top-down governance models have not succeeded. He stated that these "systems assume trust is written on paper. In our markets, trust is written on relationships. That is why global models fail" (PWC1). An industry organization representative asserted similar, stating that "institutional programmes replace dialogue with documentation. Our people recognize respect, not paperwork" (NIO1).

The idea that governance efforts largely fail in the contexts we studied was echoed by a development bank representative who works with South Asian farmers: "[Governance systems] measure stability in numbers. We see it in relationships. That's why global blueprints so often fail to take root" (DBR1). Attempts by global actors to govern through legal agreements, this line of argument posits, challenge local approaches and are, in turn, challenged by local influences. A large-scale landowner told us that,

"Western models imagine harmony through contracts. Our harmony comes from collectivism through shared values. Any approach that ignores this balance is doomed to resistance." (LSL6)

Within this assertion is a key warning against attempts to impose governance on, rather than develop governance with, communities. This landowner believed that

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3 “any approach” – not just ‘Western’ approaches – that fails to account for local
4 customs and culture will create friction.
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7 The conflicting approaches underpinning the failure of labour governance in our
8 contexts were put frankly by a development officer in Pakistan, who described the
9 contractualization approach as being “obsessed with control”:
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13 “Trust grows when communities lead and prosper. The contradiction is
14 between managing people and empowering them.” (DDO2)
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17 4.3.3 Certification 18

19 Many of our respondents were keen to explain that contractualization is partly driven
20 by the distance between ‘governors’ and ‘governed.’ In some cases, this gap was
21 evidenced in the physical distances between those who design labour governance
22 systems and those working in the communities with which focal firms attempt to
23 work. Indeed, a transnational government representative told us that workers in
24 some areas were leaving farms because top-down governance methods were
25 imposing unworkable conditions:
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32 “Certifications designed in Geneva collapse in Gujranwala if they ignore
33 faith, tradition and cultural practices. Farmers leave not because they
34 oppose sustainability, but because sustainability opposed them.” (TGAM1)
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38 For some of our respondents, the distance between organizations designing and
39 delivering labour governance and farmers was represented more by layers of
40 governance rather than physical distance. A female small-scale farmer highlighted
41 the conflict in managing this distance and the reductive results experienced by
42 communities:
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47 “Compliance systems reward paperwork; our communities reward trust. I
48 ask you, which one truly sustains trade?” (FSSF3)
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52 We were told that the lack of direct focal firm contact with farming communities in our
53 contexts has set back governance efforts. A district development officer explained
54 that the use of third parties to bring governance to farming communities created
55 conflict between the approaches taken globally and locally:
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"Legitimacy cannot be outsourced to consultants. It is earned on the ground, through elders and religious voices." (DDO3)

In part, the failure of approaches which use third parties rather than building more direct relationships with communities is the result of a lack of cultural appreciation that runs throughout our data. The owner of a medium-sized farm told us that "compliance officers look for individual accountability, but decisions in our village are negotiated collectively. Their approach sees hierarchy as inefficiency, while for us it ensures harmony" (MSF5). This comment contains both the conflicting approaches between local trust and the outsourcing of compliance systems; the hypocrisy our respondents see in hierarchical labour governance systems not trusting local practices; and the conflicting philosophies of individual versus collective responsibility.

5. Discussion

This study problematizes the view of logics as being between various binaries. While the literature accepts the complexity of supply chains (Matos *et al.*, 2020; Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025), OSCM research rarely reflects the multiple tensions in such contexts (e.g. McLoughlin and Meehan, 2021; Rogerson *et al.*, 2025; Schumm and Niehm, 2024; Vanpoucke and Klassen, 2024). Our first contribution is therefore to how multiple logics can interact. We identified three logics in our data. A top-down governance logic reflects in codes capturing prescriptive rules, audits, and external demands; a market logic highlights efficiency, profit-driven decision-making, and commercial priorities; and a social logic, which relates to local norms, community hierarchies, and collective values that guide labour relations. Where two logics compete, the literature suggests three potential outcomes: (1) one of the logics – usually the commercial logic – will dominate despite efforts to engage with a subsidiary – often the sustainability – logic (McLoughlin and Meehan, 2021); (2) the logics can be hybridized, delivering on the commercial logic while making the sustainability logic stronger (Rogerson *et al.*, 2025); (3) an “uneasy truce” will occur in which neither logic can dominate (Reay and Hinings, 2005).

We build on Reay and Hinings' (2005) uneasy truce by theorizing that such outcomes are not limited to powerful actors operationalizing strong logics. Our findings suggest that the result of this truce can materialize as a messy paralysis. We show that competing logics can be experienced from one source (in this study's case, downstream) and be met by resistance from less powerful but more present actors mobilizing upstream logics which conflict with and neutralize their counterparts. Where McLoughlin and Meehan (2021) and Rogerson *et al.* (2025) have shown sustainability logics in competition with a commercial logic, we find that both are experienced upstream as top-down demands. The social logic in farming communities is informed by deep-rooted and long-standing community values. The messy paralysis occurs as logics mobilized by different actors come into conflict not because their underpinning requirements are different but because their contexts demand different legitimacy approaches. If logics are understood as the "rules of the game" (Longoni *et al.*, 2024, p.1735), this paralysis occurs in part because upstream and downstream actors are 'playing different games'. Conflict arises because the behaviours that flow from the logics we find are those which seek legitimacy in their own contexts.

Rather than a truce between actors of equal standing, therefore, we posit that deadlock can emerge from situations in which power, diluted by geographical and supply chain distance, is met with resistance from more immediate sources at the site of contention. Unlike Reay and Hinings' (2005) truce, which occurred between two sets of powerful actors and resulted in both performing as their logics demand, our paralysis is just that – the inability of either logic to build or maintain legitimacy. Key to the messy paralysis we conceptualize is the similarity of the governance and social logics at play. The top-down and on-the-ground logics meet but are operationalized in ways which exacerbate conflict between what are seemingly analogous logics. These logics therefore co-exist without legitimacy-seeking actions being undertaken (Chawana *et al.*, 2025).

Second, we contribute to agency in labour governance. Research often finds that complexity is an antecedent of the failure of anti-slavery measures in supply chains (LeBaron, 2021; Meehan and Pinnington, 2021; Pinnington and Meehan, 2023; Simpson *et al.*, 2021). While this is undoubtedly the case, we posit another reason why labour efforts may prove insufficient. Governance literature describes how

standards are cascaded down supply chains at the behest of large focal firms. The inability of these efforts to deliver change in supply chains is portrayed as the result of this complexity. Our findings demonstrate that this is not the whole story, however. Upstream communities, which are the subjects of governance in this cascading narrative, have agency. They possess sufficient ability to act and defend their interests to resist top-down efforts that do not acquiesce to their own beliefs and ways. Where Fayezi *et al.* (2025) assert that opacity necessarily limits agency, we find this agency undimmed. The communities in our sample are not simply 'victims' of supply chains, despite their exclusion from governance choices. We therefore theorize that top-down efforts have not failed to bring about substantive changes to labour conditions simply because the distance between focal firms and suppliers, geographically and in number of tiers, is too great. Workers and their communities can actively resist and even reject efforts that do not align with their own values. The agency that Gutierrez-Huerter O *et al.* (2023) suggest needs to be reinstated remains, though it may be latent or invisible to supply chain actors not sufficiently engaging upstream.

Empirically, our study contributes to the literature by suggesting that even the implications of recent research on labour governance may not go far enough. An emerging body of research asserts that worker voice, the involvement of workers in human rights due diligence and social audit efforts can enhance labour governance outcomes. While a step in the right direction, worker voice may still be insufficient as a labour governance approach. We find that even logics with similar goals can conflict in anti-slavery efforts in supply chains. Therefore, aligning labour governance efforts with local conditions is likely to lead to a more positive reception for governance upstream, thereby increasing the chances of success.

6. Conclusions

We set out to answer the research questions, *How do upstream agrifood supply chain actors experience labour governance and what is the role of agency in their response to labour governance mechanisms?* Through a qualitative study of Pakistan's rice-farming regions, we show that labour governance is experienced upstream as contradictory and in conflict with local understanding of workers' rights. The communities in our sample have exercised an agency that is rarely considered

in resisting these top-down governance efforts, which reductively tie improved working conditions to productivity levels.

6.1 Practical implications

Our findings have important implications for managers and policymakers. Recent moves towards involving workers in labour governance in supply chains under the heading 'worker voice' have made workers heard in governance. Yet, such processes are likely to be insufficient as a method of improving working conditions if they simply involve workers in ascertaining the results of top-down processes. Enabling workers to communicate and be represented are positive steps in labour governance, but involving workers in governance design may stand a better chance of obtaining the necessary buy-in.

People and organizations downstream where governance is designed should understand that those governance efforts are for the benefit of communities like those in our study. The risks of labour exploitation in supply chains are, first and foremost, risks to individuals upstream and not to corporate reputations. Working with those communities rather than imposing actions *on* them may feel like it creates potential conflicts of interest, but it could reduce the kind of resistance that we find in our data and enable more successful governance. Governance that fails to account for the values of local communities, and that takes approaches upstream actors find objectionable or alien, risks failure. This may mean that other intermediaries – rather than, or as well as, consultants and auditors – are required to bridge gaps with communities and understand specific contexts and meet farmers and other communities where they are. Building the relationships that would enable such efforts would also likely facilitate much wider conversations around other governance topics such as environmental sustainability and farm productivity, thereby benefiting farmers, communities, and downstream actors.

6.2 Limitations and future research

As with all research, this article has limitations. The most substantial is that we do not have the specific details of the particular labour standards used at the farms in our contexts. We therefore cannot link community responses to specific anti-slavery efforts. Future research could seek to understand how particular labour governance

efforts are received and to measure their impacts quantitatively. Researchers could also test our theorization in other geographies. Finally, future research could seek to understand how more inclusive governance models are received in upstream contexts such as ours, and how this influences their embeddedness.

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Interviewee ID	Respondent position	Interview length/mins	Location
SW1	Seasonal worker	50	Punjab
SW2	Seasonal worker	45 & focus group	Punjab
SW3	Seasonal worker	45 & focus group	Punjab
SW4	Seasonal worker	45 & focus group	Sindh
SW5	Seasonal worker	45	Sindh
SW6	Seasonal worker	focus group	Punjab
SW7	Seasonal worker	focus group	Sindh
SW8	Seasonal worker	focus group	Sindh
FSW1	Female seasonal worker	focus group	Sindh
FSW2	Female seasonal worker	focus group	Sindh
FSW3	Female seasonal worker	focus group	Punjab
FSW4	Female seasonal worker	focus group	Punjab
SSF1	Small-scale farmer	122	Punjab
SSF2	Small-scale farmer	119	Punjab
SSF3	Small-scale farmer	109	Sindh
SSF4	Small-scale farmer	117	Sindh
SSF5	Small-scale farmer	focus group	Punjab
SSF6	Small-scale farmer	focus group	Punjab
SSF7	Small-scale farmer	focus group	Sindh
SSF8	Small-scale farmer	focus group	Sindh
FSSF1	Female small-scale farmer	focus group	Sindh
FSSF2	Female small-scale farmer	focus group	Sindh
FSSF3	Female small-scale farmer	focus group	Punjab
FSSF4	Female small-scale farmer	focus group	Punjab
MSF1	Medium-scale farmer	118 & focus group	Punjab
MSF2	Medium-scale farmer	113 & focus group	Punjab
MSF3	Medium-scale farmer	114 & focus group	Sindh
MSF4	Medium-scale farmer	114 & focus group	Sindh
MSF5	Medium-scale farmer	focus group	Punjab
MSF6	Medium-scale farmer	focus group	Punjab
MSF7	Medium-scale farmer	focus group	Sindh
MSF8	Medium-scale farmer	focus group	Sindh
LSL1	Large-scale landowner	117 & focus group	Punjab
LSL2	Large-scale landowner	115 & focus group	Punjab
LSL3	Large-scale landowner	120 & focus group	Sindh
LSL4	Large-scale landowner	111 & focus group	Sindh

LSL5	Large-scale landowner	focus group	Punjab
LSL6	Large-scale landowner	focus group	Punjab
LSL7	Large-scale landowner	focus group	Sindh
LSL8	Large-scale landowner	focus group	Sindh
R1	Religious scholar	118 & focus group	Punjab
R2	Religious scholar	114 & focus group	Sindh
R3	Religious scholar	focus group	Punjab
R4	Religious scholar	focus group	Punjab
R5	Religious scholar	focus group	Sindh
R6	Religious scholar	focus group	Sindh
FCI1	Female community influencer	67	Punjab
FCI2	Female community influencer	72	Sindh
NDA1	National development agency officer	70	Islamabad
NDA2	National development agency officer	70	Islamabad
NDAM1	National development agency microfinance manager	65	Punjab
NDAM2	National development agency microfinance manager	69	Online
LBE1	Large buyer executive	111	Punjab & online
LBM1	Large buyer manager	114	Punjab & online
DDO1	District development officer	68	Sindh
DDO2	District development officer	71	Punjab
DDO3	District development officer	76	Sindh
DBR1	International development bank representative	70	online
IB1	International buyer	66	online
IB2	International buyer	72	online
IB3	International buyer	73	online
APE1	Agricultural products exporter	69	online
APE2	Agricultural products exporter	63	online
APE3	Agricultural products exporter	66	Lahore
APE4	Agricultural products exporter	67	Lahore
IDAM1	International development agency manager	45	online
TGAM1	Transnational government agency manager	56	online
NIO1	National industry organization executive	57	Lahore
NEO1	National export organization executive	52	Karachi
FS1	Fertilizer supplier executive	63	online

AS1	Agriculture supplier executive	61	online
MEIC1	Middle Eastern import company executive	58	online
PWC1	Pakistan warehousing company manager	65	online

Table 1: List of interviewees

2 nd order codes	Supporting quotes
Theme 1 – Conflicting priorities	
<i>Transactionality</i>	“For the company, only the crop matters. The labourer appears in the <i>hisāb-kitāb</i> (accounts) as a cost line, not as a human responsibility.” (FSW1) “They ask whether we comply with labour standards, but it feels like another condition for market access — a transactional requirement, not a commitment to workers’ lives.” (LBM1) “As long as targets are met, no one questions how workers endure daily <i>mushaḡat</i> (hard physical labour).” (NDAM1)
<i>Ethical friction</i>	“There is constant talk of rights, yet on the ground workers remain dependent on landlords. Here, a <i>kami</i> (hereditary bonded servant) is still regarded as a <i>kami</i> across generations.” (SW4) “Their ethics exist in files and frameworks; our reality is labouring in 50-degree heat in the fields without even basic livelihoods. (FSSF3)” “We are asked to sign declarations of protection, yet the workers themselves have never been part of any <i>mashwara</i> (consultation).” (MSF6)
Theme 2 – Conflicting values	
<i>Hypocrisy</i>	“They want quality without investment, compliance without compassion. This logic is unsustainable for both people and business.” (APE1) “They demand compliance from us with international standards, yet no investment appears to enable those standards. Companies also want the highest quality of our rice but always manipulate us on the rates. They never ask what is happening in the real grounds. I’d say responsibility travels downward, but resources do not.” (LSL7) “They claim to fight exploitation, yet protecting buyers’ margins always comes before workers’ dignity.” (APE4)
<i>Dehumanization</i>	“They see us as producers of crops, not as human beings with families who cannot easily exit this system. Farm labour becomes another input in the supply chain.” (FSW2) “What does ‘sustainability’ mean when we lack food?” (SSF6) “We have been told that beggars can’t be choosers and we have been positioned as beggars for centuries.” (R4)
<i>Gender</i>	“They assume men make all decisions. But in truth, women hold the household economy. Ignoring this truth is the failure of every [top-down] plan.” (FSW2) “Gender equality is written as statistics, but in villages, women’s contribution is measured in quiet endurance—seed saving, food preparation, caring for livestock.” (FCI2) “Women start work before sunrise in the <i>khet</i> (fields) and continue late into the evening, yet their labour disappears in

2 nd order codes	Supporting quotes
	official statistics. If it is not recorded, it is treated as if it does not exist." (NDAM2)
Theme 3 – <i>Conflicting mechanisms</i>	
<i>Bureaucratization</i>	• "Headquarters demand quick results and measurable outputs, but in the field, trust takes years. Standardised reporting misses the invisible work that sustains cooperation." (NDA1) • "Labour conditions disappear behind aggregated numbers and performance statistics." (DDO1) • "We spend more time completing forms than transforming working conditions." (LSL5)
<i>Contractualization</i>	• "Institutional frameworks assume contracts are the backbone of markets. Here, kinship and honour are the real contracts. Dismissing them is economic arrogance." (DBR1) • "Contracts tightly bind the farmer, yet they contain no enforceable protections for the daily-wage labourer. It is one-sided <i>razāmandi</i> (consent)." (SSF4) • "If we fail to meet standards, penalties are immediate. When workers suffer, there is no upward accountability — their hardship has persisted for generations." (LSL7)
<i>Certification</i>	• "Consultants think progress means breaking caste or baradari. But in reality, these ties are the channels through which resources flow. You cannot dismantle the system and still expect it to deliver." (MSF1) • "Once certified, the company assumes ethical compliance — as if a stamp can substitute for justice." (MEIC1) • "Certification demonstrates procedural compliance, but fairness cannot be reduced to a checklist." (NEO1)

Table II: Supporting quotes

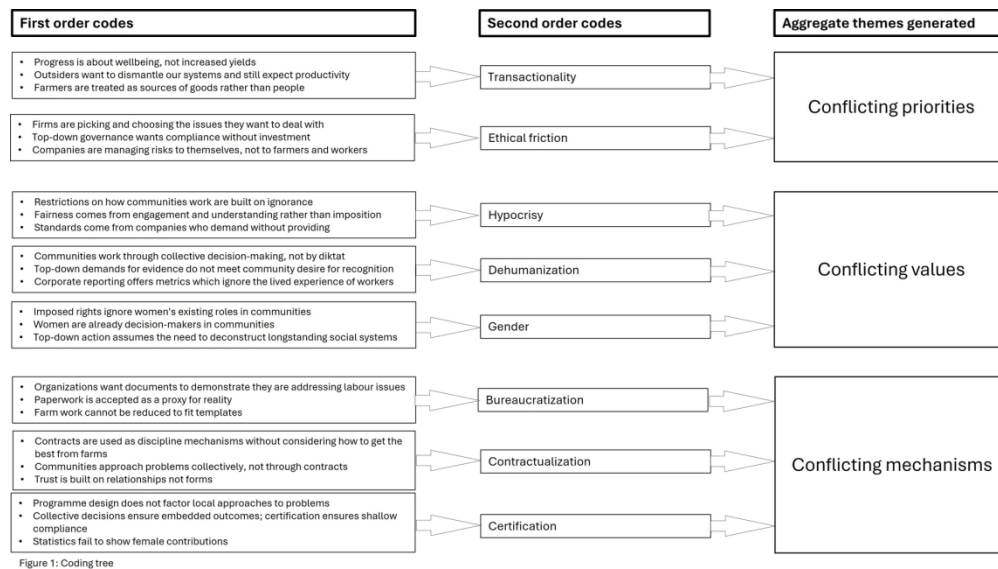


Figure 1: Coding tree

332x188mm (150 x 150 DPI)

Appendix A – interview protocols

Preamble questions were asked of all respondents to ascertain their role and experience and, at the end of interviews, if there were any topics that had not been mentioned about which they would like to talk.

Seasonal workers

1. What is your understanding of sustainable farming?
2. What challenges do you face in farming?
3. How do health and safety work at the farms?
4. Does anyone come to the farms to make sure workers are safe?
5. What is your relationship with local farmers?
6. Can you explain how farming has changed in the years you have been working on farms?
7. What are your hopes and expectations for the future in terms of farming and overall living conditions?

Farmers

1. What is your understanding of sustainable farming?
2. What socio-economic challenges do you face in farming?
3. How do health and safety work at the farms?
4. How does the traditional family structure influence decision-making in farming?
5. What kind of support or resources do you think would help improve your situation as farmers?
6. What are your hopes and expectations for the future in terms of farming and overall living conditions?
7. How have [national agencies] impacted farming?
8. How do you engage with and support unemployed youth in your community to involve them in agriculture?
9. What external organizations are involved in checking standards on farms and how do they do this?

Government and intergovernmental agencies

1. What are the main activities that your organization undertakes in each region?
2. How do you assess the needs of stakeholders?
3. What are the main challenges you face in working with farmers and their communities?
4. How do farmers feel about your involvement?
5. How do you measure your impact in working with farmers?
6. What is the role of other organizations that you have come across in labour governance in rice farming?

Private companies

1. Can you describe your role in the buying firm and how it connects to the agricultural supply chain?

2. How do you ensure that farmers and seasonal workers are paid fairly for their produce?
3. What are the key criteria you consider when selecting suppliers and sourcing agricultural products?
4. What role do sustainability and environmental concerns play in your sourcing decisions?
5. What are the challenges you face when dealing with farmers?
6. Do you provide any training to farmers or seasonal workers?
7. What is the role of other organizations that you have come across in labour governance in rice farming?

Community leaders

1. Can you describe your role as a local leader and the key responsibilities you have?
2. How did you become involved in this field and what are the challenges?
3. How do you organize community groups for education and empowerment?
4. What is your role in protecting workers and how do you undertake this responsibility?
5. How does [national agency's] involvement help with worker protection?
6. What other organizations have been involved in this work and how are they involved?
7. How is communication with farmers managed?
8. What other stakeholders in rice supply chains are you involved with?
9. What are your long-term goals as a social mobiliser in agriculture?

Appendix B – focus group questions

Preamble questions were asked of all participants to ensure that they understood the purpose of the exercise and that they could withdraw from the study and/or leave the focus group at any time. All focus groups were asked the same questions as motivating points for discussion.

1. What demands are made of you by buyers?
2. How are these demands made?
3. How do you go about fulfilling those demands?
4. Whose responsibility is it to fulfil those demands?
5. What problems do you have in doing so?
6. How have buyers tried to resolve problems that you have?