

RSA Events - Introducing the RSA Research Network on Green(ing) Global Value Chains for Sustainable Regional Development (GGVC4SRD)



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Report on the kick-off workshop, LSE Department of Geography and Environment, 12 November 2025

By Oliver Harman and Carolin Hulke, with Riccardo Crescenzi and Valentina De Marchi



Co-organisers

Riccardo Crescenzi, *London School of Economics and Political Science, UK*

Valentina De Marchi, *ESADE Business School, Spain*

Oliver Harman, *London School of Economics and Political Science, UK*

Carolyn Hulke, *London School of Economics and Political Science, UK*

Why this network, why now

The global green transition is reshaping the basis of international competitiveness, and with it, the structure of global value chains (GVCs). Lema and Perez (2025) frame this as a new techno-economic paradigm, one that reorients innovation, reshapes industrial policy, and redefines which tasks, products and segments generate value. Yet the political economy is moving in two directions at once. The EU's Green Deal, the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, carbon markets and a new generation of green industrial policies are pushing one way; competing fiscal pressures, geopolitical tensions and a partial roll-back of climate commitments in several major economies are pushing the other (Rodriguez-Pose and Bartalucci, 2024).

How these forces will reshape value chains, their governance, and their environmental and developmental outcomes — particularly at the subnational level — remains underexplored. The Regional Studies Association Research Network on Green(ing) Global Value Chains for Sustainable Regional

Development (GGVC4SRD) addresses this gap. Funded by the RSA for three years, the network advances an interdisciplinary research agenda on what we call Green Global Value Chains (GGVCs) and their actors — lead firms, suppliers, workers, regional governments and consumers — as central protagonists in shaping sustainable development across a fragmented spatial economy. Through workshops, RSA special sessions and digital events, the network creates a platform for sharing research from established scholars while fostering new voices, particularly early-career researchers and scholars from the Global South.

Conceptually, the network engages with a small but growing body of work on the environmental consequences of GVC integration (Bolwig et al., 2010; Campling and Havice, 2019; Ponte, 2019; De Marchi and Gereffi, 2023; Krishnan et al., 2023). A useful analytical move — developed across this literature — is to distinguish three closely related but importantly different ideas: *greening* (the reduction of environmental harm); *environmental upgrading* (a more sustainable and efficient use of natural capital in products, processes, functions or linkages, in the sense formalised by De Marchi and colleagues and recently extended by Krishnan et al., 2023); and *green upgrading* (the Pareto improvement in which environmental upgrading itself generates additional economic value extended by Crescenzi and Harman, forthcoming). The first is necessary but often fragile, easily reversed under price pressure or political rollback. The second is more durable but not always rewarded. The third is what underpins the developmental case for GGVCs: a self-reinforcing dynamic in which the protection of natural capital and the creation of economic value point in the same direction.

Where along the chain this alignment is most plausible, and through what policy levers it can be supported — whether through building new green activity, embedding it locally, or reshaping a region's functional role within the chain — are central empirical and theoretical questions the network takes up across regions in the Global North and South.

Network members

For the kick-off meeting on 12 November 2025, twelve scholars convened in person at the LSE Department of Geography and Environment, drawn from institutions across five countries: Lotte Thomsen (Copenhagen Business School), Aarti Krishnan (University of Manchester), Felipe Irarrázaval (University of Chile), Stefano Ponte (Copenhagen Business School), Matthew Alford (University

of Manchester), Roberta Rabellotti (University of Pavia), Juan Alvarez-Vilanova (LSE), Francisco Mango (University of Bristol), Oliver Harman (LSE), Riccardo Crescenzi (LSE), Valentina De Marchi (ESADE Business School) and Carolin Hulke (LSE). Soren Scholvin (Universidad Católica del Norte, Chile) and Dalila Ribaudó (Aston Business School, UK) unfortunately had to cancel at short notice.

The network is open. We warmly invite scholars working on the greening of value chains and sustainable regional development to get in touch — particularly early-career researchers and scholars based in the Global South.

The kick-off workshop

After an introduction by the co-organisers, the workshop opened with a series of two-slide mini-presentations in which each network member outlined their current research agenda in relation to the network's themes. This was followed by an invited mini-keynote from Stefano Ponte, and a closing discussion that ran through to the end of the day. The format was deliberately compressed: short, structured contributions designed to surface where intellectual overlap, friction and gaps lie across an unusually wide range of disciplinary and regional starting points.

Research agendas across the network

Several of the mini-presentations explored governance and the political economy of value. Roberta Rabellotti, with Rasmus Lema, Dalila Ribaudó and Brian Vera, presented work-in-progress on the European fashion industry, using Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) across 38 European clothing MNEs to examine the conditions under which lead firms move beyond symbolic greenwashing toward substantive greening — and whether being embedded in a specialised cluster makes a difference, drawing on cases including Ethiopia's Hawassa Industrial Park (Gentile et al., 2023). Matthew Alford framed his agenda around bringing the state more centrally into GVC analysis through a neo-Gramscian reading of governance, with empirical depth in agri-food and garments across Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, and a deliberate shift of attention from Northern lead firms to Southern actors operating as lead firms within their own producer countries. Carolin Hulke opened a research agenda on decarbonisation schemes as instruments for de-polluting GVCs, with particular attention to carbon trading as a site of firm-state and state-state bargaining, and to the discrepancy in

bargaining power between smallholder farmers and the institutional intermediaries that structure carbon markets above them.

Other contributions advanced new measurement and methodological strategies. Juan Alvarez-Vilanova, with Riccardo Crescenzi and Lee Mager, introduced a new atlas of green Foreign Direct Investment (GFDI) beyond renewables, combining the EU Taxonomy of Sustainable Activities with a large language model to identify green activities across virtually every sector in over 100,000 geo-located inward FDI projects into Europe (2013-2024) — capturing, for example, low-carbon investments embedded in high-CO2 sectors such as electric arc furnaces in steel. Francisco Mango presented work on regional diversification into circular economies, using patent abstracts and a Neural Network Language Model to map circular economies and match them with EU patents at NUTS-2 level, drawing on the Economics of Relatedness and Complexity framework with QCA (building on Mango, 2025). Aarti Krishnan outlined a methodological agenda combining remote sensing and satellite measurements of high carbon stocks and biodiversity, NLP and machine learning, and digital ethnography (“photo voice”), and flagged green imaginaries and futures as a question of growing importance — including whether actors talk about circularity and sustainability in commensurable ways.

Still others foregrounded value, association and place. Lotte Thomsen presented two related lines of work: the first revisiting geographies of dissociation and sustainability (Thomsen and Hess, 2022) — how brands actively avoid being associated with negative social or environmental aspects of their chains in order to protect reputational value, with current empirical focus on gemstones in Thailand’s border regions; the second, with Kean Fan Lim, considering the role of illicit activities in GPNs under conditions of geopolitical tension, what Thomsen termed the “trinity” of the green transition, the gold rush and the AI chip battle, all of which intensify extraction. Felipe Irrázaval shared early-stage work on greening Chilean copper supply chains across 28 mines and associated SMEs, raising the sharp question of what incentive structure exists for greening beyond freshwater and carbon reduction in the absence of product differentiation in commoditised mineral markets. Valentina De Marchi introduced the forthcoming Encyclopedia of Global Value Chains (Edward Elgar, edited with Lang, Rabellotti and van Assche), bringing together over 90 founding and emerging scholars across international economics, GVC theory, international business, sociology,

political economy and economic geography. And Oliver Harman presented across three pieces of joint work: the forthcoming volume with Riccardo Crescenzi, the work-in-progress on the geography of GFDI in developing countries (with Alvarez-Vilanova, Crescenzi, Hayward, Lippitsch and Meissner), and a mixed-method study of green SME integration into Unilever's value chains via its TRANSFORM programme (with Nasir and Shukla, work in progress).

Mini-keynote: Green Global Value Chains – Past, Present and Future

Stefano Ponte's mini-keynote provided a generous mapping of the field and a sharp set of provocations on where to go next. He opened by framing the "(de)green/greening" of GVCs as a non-ending process in which environmental issues cannot be cleanly disassociated from social ones, and where one should not be so preoccupied with the de-greening side as to lose sight of the constructive work of greening itself. A recurring thread was the political economy of value: where there is a business case for greening, the case ultimately concerns who appropriates the value created — and who is dispossessed in the process. Ponte introduced the notion of a "sustainability supplier squeeze", in which the costs of sustainability are pushed down the chain and any environmental value created is lost again to the price squeeze.

From this opening, Ponte mapped five interlocking domains where the literature remains comparatively thin: environmental upgrading and its necessary and sufficient conditions (process versus outcome, single node versus chain-wide); sustainability standards and certifications as governance instruments that often function as entry points to value chains while doing less than is sometimes claimed to enhance environmental performance; green FDI and greening FDI, including links to clusters and districts; green industrial policies, increasingly with a regional flavour and especially around strategic materials for the green transition; and GVCs and climate change, encompassing adaptation, mitigation, carbon accounting, and the existential implications for some agri-food value chains — with English sparkling wine offered as a vivid example of a regional value chain being made by, and possibly unmade by, climate change.

He closed on a set of horizon questions: how 'green' elements underpin different forms of bargaining and institutional power and, in turn, how those tensions

shape what counts as green; the value(s) of nature and place and what one might call a (green) spirit of capitalism; the case for more comparative and large-N work alongside the existing case-study tradition; the space for green industrial policy as a green entry point into broader debates; serious engagement with intersectionality (gender, race and labour) in green GVCs; and Anthropocene versus Capitalocene framings, including the possibility of utopian work on better and beyond-capitalism GVCs.

Cross-cutting questions for the network agenda

The mini-presentations and keynote together opened a rich discussion that organised itself around four interlocking question sets. We sketch them here both as the themes the network leaves the workshop committed to, and as openings for the wider regional studies community.

Conceptualising “(de)green/ing” in value chains

Can and should we analytically separate environmental dimensions — upgrading, governance, value — from economic and social outcomes in greening processes? Within environmental upgrading itself, how do we treat the differences between, say, emissions reductions and biodiversity outcomes, and do we have the data to measure such outcomes rather than only processes? Do we need concepts that move beyond the established focus on upgrading and governance, theorised back from comparative case work, given the particularities, shifting dynamics, spatial-temporal characteristics and variegated institutions of greening (Krishnan, 2025)? And what is the relationship between the greening of GVCs and the greening of GPNs — analytically and empirically distinct framings that the network will need to keep in productive tension.

Governance, the state and new regulatory landscapes

How do we theorise the role of the state within greener value chains — facilitator, regulator, and increasingly a market actor through carbon trading and green industrial policy? How do we connect concepts and empirical analyses of new regulatory instruments (carbon taxes, due diligence laws, sustainability standards, carbon markets), and what kinds of theorisation are needed to capture

their effects across scales? What is the relationship between global standards and place-specific natures, and is there scope for distinct Southern standards to emerge from producer regions? These questions speak directly to a regional studies agenda that has long been attentive to the territorial unevenness of regulatory power.

Actors, agency and demand in green transitions

How can GVC frameworks help us capture the roles of diverse, multilayered actors — including firms, states, workers and consumers, and including Southern lead firms operating within their own producer countries? What is the role of consumers and demand-side dynamics in driving or constraining greening processes? Where in the chain does environmental power actually sit, and how does the firm-versus-place distinction play out as power asymmetries — for example between smallholder farmers and the institutional intermediaries that structure carbon markets above them?

Methods and comparative approaches for policy-relevant research

How can we generate policy-relevant insights through comparative regional approaches and attention to local-global linkages that blur conventional territorial boundaries? What do we mean by “regional”, and what do we mean by “local”? What methodological operationalisations — counterfactuals, designs beyond single case studies, QCA, sentiment analysis, remote sensing, NLP — are needed to speak convincingly to policy makers? And what alliances at the methodological level might enable the network to draw productively on other disciplines while preserving the contextual depth on which much of this work depends?

Contribution to the regional studies community

Taken together, these threads sit squarely within the regional studies tradition and speak to several active debates in RSA-affiliated journals — from the geography of FDI and lead firm strategies in *Regional Studies*, to the political economy of climate transitions and green industrial policy in *Territory, Politics and Governance*, to the policy mechanics of sub-national green investment in *Area*

Development and Policy. The network's working proposition is that greening, environmental upgrading and green upgrading are most fruitfully studied where they meet: in the regions where mobile capital, lead firms and place-specific natural capital combine.

Two practical commitments follow. The first is to keep the empirical conversation policy-relevant: the network's agenda explicitly takes up the regional policy gap between subnational responsibility for delivering climate and developmental outcomes and subnational capacity to shape green investment (Crescenzi and Harman, forthcoming; Gentile et al., 2023). The second is to keep the conversation open across career stages and regions. The kick-off workshop deliberately built a programme that mixed network founders with early-career researchers, and an explicit ambition for the years ahead is to expand the network's voices from the Global South — both in the workshops and in the special sessions the network will run at SASE Bordeaux 2026 and the RSA Annual Conference in Gothenburg.

Future events

- **RSA Annual Conference, Gothenburg** — special session, June 2026
- **SASE 2026, Network O (Global Value Chains)** — 1-3 July 2026, Sciences Po Bordeaux. The network will run organised sessions on GGVC4SRD
- **Online Winter Workshop** — January 2027
- **ESADE Workshop (TBC)** — c. 2027
- **LSE Winter Workshop** — December 2027, alongside the RSA Winter Conference

In parallel, the network is developing a blog with a special series as an ongoing public-facing output and is building out the network webpages to profile members and their work.

For more information, visit: <https://www.regionalstudies.org/network/ggvc4srd/>

About the authors

Oliver Harman is a Research Officer in Economic Geography and Spatial Economics at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His research

interests centre on the sub-national dimensions of green global value chains, green foreign direct investment and sustainable urban development in low- and middle-income countries.

Carolyn Hulke is an Assistant Professor of Economic Geography at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research interests include the political economy of decarbonisation, carbon trading, and the implications of green transitions for producer regions in the Global South.

Riccardo Crescenzi is Professor of Economic Geography at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His research covers regional economic development, foreign direct investment, global value chains and the green transition.

Valentina De Marchi is an Associate Professor at ESADE Business School. Her research focuses on environmental upgrading, sustainability in global value chains, and the role of innovation and inter-organisational tensions in greening multinational enterprises.

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