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LEGITIMIDADE NA MULTIPOLARIDADE: NORMAS DE SUSTENTABILIDADE NAS CADEIAS DE VALOR CHINA-BRASIL

LEGITIMACY IN MULTIPOLARITY: SUSTAINABILITY NORMS IN CHINA–BRAZIL VALUE CHAINS

Changkun Liu

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1762-8489>

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China

E-mail: Changkun.Liu22@student.xjtlu.edu.cn

Niklas Werner Weins

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1345-6720>

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China

E-mail: niklas.weins@xjtlu.edu.cn

Gho Jhony Gozaly

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5495-8572>

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China

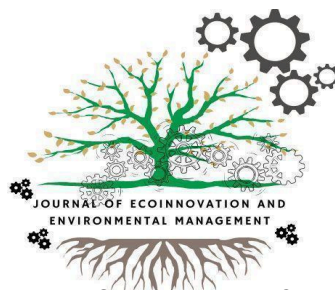
E-mail: jhonygozaly@icloud.com

Yuanrui Zhao

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4559-5767>

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China

E-mail: hsyzh264@liverpool.ac.uk



RESUMO

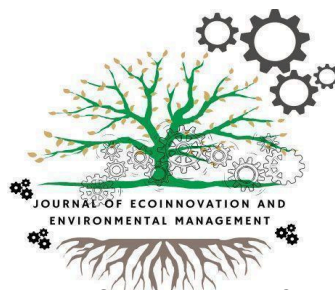
Este artigo analisa como as normas de sustentabilidade emergem e se transformam nas cadeias de valor entre China e Brasil, com foco nos setores de soja e celulose. Ao deslocar a atenção das análises centradas no Norte Global, o estudo investiga dinâmicas Sul–Sul nas quais China e Brasil coproduzem padrões de governança ambiental. Com base na teoria das Cadeias Globais de Valor, na literatura sobre difusão de normas, na Cooperação Sul–Sul e nos debates de RI sobre multipolaridade, argumenta-se que as normas de sustentabilidade nesses setores seguem caminhos de hibridização e replicação, em vez de simples transferências hierárquicas. Metodologicamente, o trabalho utiliza estudos de caso comparativos com process tracing para examinar como padrões são incorporados por meio de interações entre mercados, certificações e atores estatais e corporativos. Os resultados mostram que a governança da soja expressa hibridização negociada, moldada por lobby transnacional, acordos bilaterais e pela crescente “demanda verde” chinesa, enquanto o setor de celulose opera via replicação padronizada conduzida por certificações exigidas por compradores internacionais. As conclusões contribuem para os debates sobre a agência de potências emergentes e demonstram que a governança da sustentabilidade é um espaço estratégico de construção de legitimidade na ordem multipolar.

Palavras-chave: Cadeias Globais de Valor; Difusão de Normas; Cooperação Sul–Sul; Legitimidade; Multipolaridade.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how sustainability norms emerge and evolve within China–Brazil value chains, focusing on the soybean and pulp sectors. Moving beyond Global North–centric analyses of norm diffusion, it investigates South–South dynamics where China and Brazil collaboratively construct environmental governance standards. Drawing on Global Value Chain theory, norm diffusion scholarship, South–South Cooperation literature, and IR debates on multipolarity, the study argues that sustainability norms in these sectors follow pathways of hybridization and replication rather than hierarchical transfer. Methodologically, it applies comparative case studies supported by process tracing to analyze how standards are embedded through market, certification, and state–corporate interactions. The results show that soy governance reflects negotiated hybridization shaped by transnational lobbying, bilateral agreements, and China’s growing “green demand,” whereas the pulp sector operates through highly concentrated, certification-driven replication aligned with international buyers’ requirements. These findings contribute to theoretical debates on the agency of emerging powers and illustrate how sustainability governance becomes a strategic arena where legitimacy is constructed in a multipolar global order. Ultimately, the paper shows that China–Brazil sustainability interactions reshape environmental norms while remaining conditioned by structural features of global capitalism.

Keywords: Global Value Chains; Norm Diffusion; South–South Cooperation; Legitimacy; Multipolarity.



1. INTRODUCTION

Most studies of sustainability norms originate in, and primarily address research questions concerning the Global North and its normative power in this field (SCHLEIFER; SUN, 2018). This paper shifts the focus to South–South dynamics, where China and Brazil co-produce norms with significant implications for global governance. In this way, the study moves beyond the traditional North–South model of externally imposed standards toward South–South negotiation and co-production, where norms are collaboratively developed between emerging economies (SUN, 2022). This paper argues that sustainability norms in South–South value chains do not emerge as passive copies of Northern models but as hybrid and replicated forms.

These pathways simultaneously expand the agency of emerging powers and reveal their structural limits under global capitalism, speaking directly to international relations (IR) debates on how legitimacy and authority are constructed in a multipolar order.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative case study design of the soy and pulp chains—central to Brazil’s economy and its trade with China—which, unlike hard commodities such as iron ore and oil, present greater potential for sustainability interventions (AMIGO MEDEIROS, 2024). The analysis draws exclusively on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed scholarship, government agreements, corporate and NGO reports, and international certification standards. Using process-tracing within each case and cross-case comparison, the study identifies how sustainability norms are embedded through distinct governance mechanisms. This design is rigorous yet practical, enabling the tracing of norm dynamics and the development of theoretical insights across the two commodity sectors.



Theoretical Frameworks

This study draws on Global Value Chain (GVC), norm diffusion, South–South Cooperation (SSC) and IR global governance theoretical frameworks to analyze how sustainability norms are embedded in China–Brazil trade. First, GVC theory, which examines how production and trade are organized across borders. Gereffi et al. (2005) propose that governance models within value chains—market, modular, relational, captive, or hierarchical—emerge from the interaction of three factors: transaction complexity, the codifiability of information, and supplier capabilities. The introduction of technical and process standards affects codifiability and transaction complexity, thereby influencing which governance structure is likely to prevail. Building on this, Ponte (2019) demonstrates that sustainability standards are not simply external constraints but governance instruments embedded within value chains. This insight applies to the China–Brazil soybean and pulp sectors, where the joint construction of sustainability rules by multinational corporations and state actors ultimately advances the agendas of lobbyists, revealing how formal standards can reinforce existing power asymmetries.

Alternatively, the norm diffusion theory sheds light on how such standards travel and evolve across contexts (FINNEMORE; SIKKINK, 1998). Acharya (2004) builds on the theory by introducing the notion of localization, showing how global norms are reinterpreted by local actors to fit domestic identities and institutions, thereby underscoring the agency of Southern states in adapting sustainability standards. Pu (2012) further advances this perspective with the idea of two-way socialization, arguing that emerging powers are not simply passive recipients but active shapers of international norms. Earlier work (RIO; FIRZA, 2021; SCHMIDT-TRAUB et al., 2020; SUN; YU, 2023; WEINS et al., 2020) has similarly applied the Finnemore and Sikkink framework to analyze Brazil’s and China’s role in environmental agenda-setting and national norm formation, further illustrating the potential of emerging powers to redefine the global environmental order.

The third strand of literature concerning SSC emphasizes solidarity, equality, and mutual learning while generating new standards that are often less stringent but more pragmatic and context-sensitive. Amanor (2013) adds a critical perspective, however, noting that while SSC is discursively framed around solidarity and noninterference, in practice it often becomes intertwined with market liberalization and capital accumulation, distracting from the original intent.



These insights suggest that the norms arising from SSC are both innovative and constrained: they can generate feasible results but remain partly constrained by broader political economy structures. Lastly, this study engages IR debates on global governance and norm politics, situating sectoral dynamics of soy and pulp within wider struggles over legitimacy in a multipolar order. Keohane and Nye's (2012 [1977]) theory of complex interdependence underscores that, as the utility of military force declines, issues such as economics and the environment become central arenas of power and governance. Hurrell (2006) further shows that aspiring great powers, including China and Brazil, seek not only material capacity but also normative recognition, which includes embedding themselves in institutions, advancing alternative narratives, and constructing South–South platforms. These insights provide the foundation for this paper's central argument: that sustainability norms in soy and pulp are not merely sectoral arrangements but strategic practices through which emerging powers pursue legitimacy and authority in a multipolar order.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the soybean sector, sustainability governance has evolved through a series of negotiations across state, corporate, and civil society actors. Oliveira (2018) documents the 2004 soybean crisis as a turning point in bilateral negotiations, highlighting interactions between governmental and corporate stakeholders in China and Brazil. Parallel to state-level engagement, Chinese firms have also entered direct negotiations with Brazilian local governments and agribusinesses, shaping production and investment practices. These dynamics continued through repeated governmental discussions, including bilateral agreements (OLIVEIRA, 2015; OLIVEIRA; SCHNEIDER, 2015) and high-level visits such as the Brazilian president's 2011 trip to China (WILKINSON; WESZ JÚNIOR; LOPANE, 2016).

At the farm level, Brazilian producers voluntarily complied with sustainability requirements to secure market access (GARRETT ; RAUSCH, 2015), while zero-deforestation campaigns encouraged the adoption of sectoral measures (MIER Y TERÁN GIMÉNEZ CACHO, 2015). Corporate actors also intervened: members of the Round Table on Responsible Soy (RTRS) actively lobbied to influence Brazil's regulatory framework (WESZ JÚNIOR, 2016). More recently, China's "green demand" has emerged as a central driver of sustainability embedding, with COFCO



expanding its influence through barter-like arrangements with local producers (WESZ JÚNIOR et al., 2021) and delivering the first shipment of deforestation-free soy from Brazil to China (COFCO INTERNATIONAL, 2024). These developments are increasingly tied to South–South initiatives such as the Tropical Forests Forever Fund (MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE, 2025; SANTI, 2025), suggesting that soy governance reflects a hybrid model where international pressures, domestic lobbying, and bilateral cooperation converge.

By contrast, the pulp sector reveals a more centralized and standardized mode of governance. Both the Brazilian and the global pulp industry are highly concentrated, with a few large corporations monopolizing production and market share due to high barriers to entry (COELHO JÚNIOR et al., 2023; LIMA-TOIVANEN, 2012). Within this structure, certification functions as the primary channel for embedding sustainability. Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification in Brazil’s eucalyptus-based pulp industry has become a de facto market entry requirement, due to buyers’ demand for certification. This prompts corporations to shift some of their activities to more sustainable land use and reinforce environmental compliance despite not being widely monitored or even regulated by the government in some areas (FELIPE et al., 2019). In this case, certification operates as a market-oriented instrument that facilitates the global diffusion of norms in Brazil’s pulp sector (ZHANG et al., 2022), resulting in the application of international standards across Brazilian corporations.



4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper makes three contributions. First, it refines GVC and norm diffusion theories by showing that sustainability norms in South–South trade emerge not through hierarchical transfer but through hybridization and replication pathways. Second, it provides an empirical comparison of soy and pulp, demonstrating how sectoral dynamics generate distinct governance mechanisms of negotiated hybridization and certification-driven replication. Third, it advances debates on South–South cooperation by highlighting its dual character: it enables emerging powers to co-produce pragmatic sustainability standards while remaining conditioned by global capitalist structures. This paper thus suggests that sustainability governance is an arena where multipolarity is being actively constructed. By embedding norms in value chains, emerging powers are not simply adjusting to the global order but shaping the legitimacy architecture of governance itself. This highlights how the study of South– South trade can recast IR debates on authority, legitimacy, and order.

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