DiliCHANCE
successful due diligence in mineral supply chains

Deliverable D3.3: Business needs towards compliance with normative and legal requirements

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The DiliCHANCE project

The Challenge

The European Union perceives due diligence as crucial to its economic and sustainability goals. It is needed to secure critical raw materials, support the green and digital transition, and promote sustainable practices that reduce societal and environmental harm.

for more details please visit

www.DiliCHANCE.eu

Our Approach

DiliCHANCE improves due diligence in mineral value chains and responsible business conduct by (a) raising awareness and knowledge of human rights and environmental due diligence (HREDD) among corporate actors, (b) identifying gaps in HREDD implementation in policy and industry, (c) enhancing due diligence operations with better tools and new solutions, and (d) promoting multi-stakeholder engagement and capacity building.

Imprint

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Work package 3 (Improving Business DD Practices) | Deliverable Number 3.3

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Executive Summary

Background and Relation to Previous WP3 Work

Deliverable D3.3 "Business needs towards compliance with normative and legal requirements", builds on the preceding work conducted in WP3 on improving business due diligence practices. While D3.1 and D3.2 constitute project reports, D3.3 develops selected findings and empirical material from this work further into a scientific publication. Rather than repeating the practice-oriented assessment of business needs presented in D3.2, the scientific publication examines how corporate decision-makers construct central concepts of human rights and environmental due diligence, particularly risk, responsibility and success. The findings suggest that these are discursively constructed and interpretations shape organisational practices and strategic choices.

This analytical step is particularly relevant because the preceding work indicates that due diligence cannot be understood solely through formal policies, reported activities or compliance procedures. What companies disclose, what they do in practice and how decision-makers interpret their responsibilities may differ. Examining these interpretations therefore provides an opportunity to better understand why companies respond differently to similar normative and legal expectations.

Scientific Publication

The scientific publication applies a discursive perspective to human rights and environmental due diligence in sustainable supply chains. It investigates how concepts such as risk, responsibility and successful due diligence are constructed by corporate actors and whether and how these interpretations become consequential for organisational decision-making, governance and responsible sourcing practices.

The publication is being developed for the Journal of Supply Chain Management. The journal has launched the Special Issue "Toward novel ways of doing qualitative research in SCM: a developmental initiative". The call for proposals opened on 1 February 2026, while the deadline for full-paper submissions is 30 September 2027. During the period between the proposal stage and full-paper submission, a board of senior supply chain management scholars provides authors with advice and guidance.[1] Two of the authors of the publication presented the proposal as part of the Special Session and Ideas Development Workshop "Towards novel ways of doing qualitative research in SCM" at EurOMA 2026 in Vienna. Based on potential feedback from members of the Special Issue Advisory Board, the publication will now be further developed and submitted in accordance with the timeline and developmental process foreseen for the Special Issue.

Please find the submitted proposal for the publication in the next chapter, and the call for papers in the annex of this document.

[1] Special Issue Calls for Papers available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/pb-assets/assets/1745493X/cfp/Revised-CfP_JSCM-Qual-Initiative_Rosca-Seepma-Stephens-Grimm-1780423236870.pdf

Exploring Discursive Perspectives on Human Rights and Environmental Due Diligence

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Proposal for the Special Session

"Towards novel ways of doing qualitative research in supply chain management"

at the EurOMA 2026 Vienna

Abstract

Human rights and environmental due diligence (HREDD) has become a central mechanism through which firms are expected to govern sustainability risks in global supply chains. Yet, sustainable supply chain management research has largely examined due diligence as a material, regulatory, or managerial challenge, focusing on flows, contracts, supplier relationships, standards and compliance systems. This extended abstract develops a complementary discursive perspective. Drawing on discursive institutional theory and organisation studies, we argue that HREDD is not merely implemented through organisational routines but is also talked into being through narratives, categories and frames that define what counts as risk, who is assigned responsibility and when responsible sourcing is considered successful. The study is based on narrative expert interviews conducted in early 2026 with top-level decision makers from leading companies in electronics, mobility, energy and upstream mineral supply chains. Methodologically, we combine narrative interviewing with experimental qualitative research applying grounded theory logic enriched through human-AI collaboration. Initial (open) coding is developed from interview transcripts, qualitative content analysis, expert interpretation workshops and validation sessions with corporate participants; focused coding and theoretical integration will be elaborated in the next analytical phase. The expected contribution is threefold. First, the study responds to calls for novel qualitative approaches in supply chain management by applying discourse analysis in an empirically tractable way. Second, it advances supply chain management theory by showing how risk, responsibility and success are socially constructed categories with material organisational consequences. Third, it offers a nuanced understanding of HREDD as both a compliance requirement and a contested meaning system that may stabilise limited corporate responsibility or open space for more transformative responsible sourcing.

1. Background

1.1. Discursive perspectives

Discursive perspectives originate in the linguistic and interpretive turns in the social sciences and in the broader social constructionist claim that realities are not simply mirrored in language but constituted through language, texts, categories, artefacts and communicative practices. In organisation studies, this move displaced the view of discourse as a secondary layer of representation and treated it instead as a constitutive force through which actors define problems, authorise solutions, assign identities and stabilise practices. Institutions, from this perspective, are not external structures that discourse merely describes. They are discursive accomplishments: recurrent patterns of meaning that become taken for granted because they are repeatedly embedded in texts, conversations, routines and authoritative accounts (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004; Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004). Discursive institutionalism makes a similar move in political science by emphasising both the substantive content of ideas and the interactive processes through which actors coordinate, communicate and legitimate those ideas in institutional contexts (Schmidt, 2008, 2010). Across these traditions, discourse is therefore understood as consequential: it makes some interpretations appear natural, some actors appear responsible, some risks appear urgent, and some courses of action appear legitimate.

This understanding also directs attention to power. Discourses do not circulate in neutral spaces; they are produced, authorised and contested by actors who have unequal capacities to speak, define and classify. A discursive perspective therefore asks which vocabularies dominate a field, which texts travel across contexts, whose claims acquire authority, and which alternative meanings are marginalised or rendered unsayable. In institutional theory, Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy (2004) showed how discourse connects local communicative events to wider institutional arrangements: texts are generated in interaction, taken up by other actors, and, through repeated circulation, contribute to the production and reproduction of institutions. Maguire and Hardy's work on deinstitutionalisation similarly demonstrates how rhetorical strategies, issue framing and authority claims can delegitimise established practices and open space for institutional change (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). Discursive approaches thus combine a micro-sensitivity to talk and text with a macro-interest in fields, rules and legitimacy.

This perspective has been applied across a wide range of organisational research domains. In leadership research, it shifts attention from leaders as individuals with stable traits to leadership as a relational and communicative accomplishment constituted through framing, storytelling and sensemaking (Fairhurst, 2007). In organisational change, discursive studies show that transformations are not simply implemented but narrated, justified and contested; change depends on whether new meanings can be made plausible and whether existing organisational conversations can be disrupted (Grant & Marshak, 2011). In studies of culture and identity, discourse is treated as a repertoire of meanings through which members position themselves, reproduce control and negotiate belonging (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Strategy research has used discursive lenses to show how strategic options gain or lose legitimacy in framing contests, and how participation, expertise and authority are constructed in strategy work (Kaplan, 2008; Mantere & Vaara, 2008). Entrepreneurship and innovation studies, finally, have shown how opportunities, categories and market identities are talked into being through stories that mobilise resources and legitimacy (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Munir & Phillips, 2005).

The relevance for sustainable supply chain management and responsible sourcing is substantial because supply chains are simultaneously material, organisational and discursive phenomena. They

consist of flows of minerals, components, money and data, but also of names, classifications, standards, audit reports, supplier codes, risk maps, sustainability narratives and due diligence statements. These texts define what the supply chain is, where its boundaries lie, who belongs to it, and which harms count as supply chain issues. Human rights and environmental due diligence is particularly discourse-intensive: it transforms dispersed ecological and social harms into categories such as "salient risk", "leverage", "mitigation", "remediation", "responsibility" and "success". A discursive perspective can therefore reveal how due diligence practices do more than implement legal or managerial requirements. They construct the objects to which companies respond and shape the moral and organisational imagination through which response becomes possible.

In supply chain management, however, the adoption of discourse approaches remains comparatively recent. Hardy, Bhakoo and Maguire (2020) explicitly call for methodological diversification and theory development within the field by introducing discourse analysis as a way to problematise taken-for-granted assumptions in supply chain management. Their central argument is that discourse analysis can broaden conceptualisations of the supply chain beyond focal firms, suppliers and customers to include actors often overlooked in mainstream models: employees, workers, NGOs, regulators, consumers and the media. By analysing the discourses of lean, sustainability, modern slavery and big data, they show that apparently technical supply chain management concepts are saturated with meanings that reproduce particular power relations. For sustainable supply chain management, this insight is crucial. The meaning of "sustainability" is not fixed; it is struggled over, often subordinated to profitability, compliance or efficiency, but also capable of being re-articulated in ways that give greater weight to ecological integrity, worker voice and human rights.

Wieland's (2021) call for transformative supply chain management reinforces this point from a complementary angle. He argues that dominant supply chain management theories have tended to be reductionist and static, supporting a global search for cheap labour and resources while neglecting the embeddedness of supply chains in political-economic and planetary systems. Reinterpreting supply chains as social-ecological systems makes visible their vulnerability and harmfulness, but a discursive perspective adds a further question: which narratives make such systems appear inevitable, manageable or responsible? The familiar language of resilience, efficiency and risk control may stabilise the very arrangements that generate human rights and environmental harm. Conversely, alternative discourses of care, repair, justice, responsibility and transformation may make different forms of sourcing, collaboration and accountability thinkable. Wieland, Tate and Yan (2024) similarly argue that supply chain management needs a broader qualitative repertoire beyond conventional realist case-study templates. Their "qualitative research city" explicitly includes discourse analysis and narrative research as approaches that can illuminate complex global supply chain phenomena that cannot be captured by variable-based or purely operational models.

Recent empirical work indicates what such a move can contribute. Else, Choudhary and Genovese (2022) use critical discourse analysis to show how sustainability storylines in the UK dairy supply chain are propagated or suppressed through discourse coalitions and cultural hegemony. Schilling, Pournader and Seuring (2026) use critical discourse analysis to examine blockchain narratives and reveal how technological promises can reproduce rather than resolve power asymmetries in supply chains. These studies suggest that discourse analysis is not merely a methodological add-on; it changes the theoretical object of supply chain management. It enables researchers to study how risks are "riskified", how responsibilities are allocated or displaced, and how success is defined through reports, metrics and stories. For the present study on human rights and environmental due diligence, this perspective offers a distinctive contribution: it allows risk, responsibility and success to be analysed as discursive

constructions that shape corporate practice, institutional legitimacy and the possibilities of more transformative responsible sourcing.

1.2. Human rights and environmental due diligence in sustainable supply chains

Human rights and environmental due diligence (HREDD) is the operational core of responsible business conduct in global supply chains. The OECD Guidelines define due diligence as the process through which enterprises identify, prevent, mitigate and account for how they address actual and potential adverse impacts as part of business decision-making and risk management (OECD, 2023). The OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business Conduct clarifies that this is a preventative, risk-based and continuous process covering operations, supply chains and other business relationships, and that "risk" is outward-facing: it refers to risks to people, the environment and society, not merely risks to the firm (OECD, 2018). For minerals from conflict-affected and high-risk areas, the OECD translates this logic into a five-step responsible sourcing framework aimed at respecting human rights and avoiding contributions to conflict through purchasing decisions (OECD, 2016).

In sustainable supply chain management (SSCM), HREDD specifies what it means to integrate environmental, social and economic objectives into inter-organisational processes. SSCM is commonly understood as the strategic and transparent integration of sustainability goals into the coordination of material, information and capital flows across the supply chain (Carter & Rogers, 2008; Seuring & Müller, 2008). HREDD sharpens this agenda by shifting attention from broad sustainability claims to concrete adverse impacts. Responsible sourcing therefore does not simply mean buying certified materials or asking suppliers to sign a code. It requires firms to examine how sourcing decisions, price pressure, specifications, delivery schedules and supplier relationships may be connected to environmental degradation, unsafe labour conditions, forced labour or community-rights infringements.

This creates substantial challenges for companies as HREDD extends responsibility beyond contractual and first-tier relationships. Many severe risks occur in upstream, informal or opaque parts of the chain where focal firms have limited visibility and authority. Multi-tier SSCM research shows that first-tier suppliers often become intermediaries expected to transmit focal-firm requirements to lower tiers while coping with their own commercial constraints and institutional pressures (Wilhelm, Blome, Bhakoo, & Paulraj, 2016). The resulting leverage problem is practical and political: companies must decide how far responsibility extends, which risks to prioritise, which suppliers to support or disengage from, and how to avoid shifting costs and accountability onto weaker actors. Furthermore, HREDD challenges established organisational routines. It cannot be reduced to episodic auditing, compliance documentation or supplier scorecards. The OECD framework requires embedding responsible business conduct in policies and management systems, assessing impacts, ceasing or mitigating harm, tracking effectiveness, communicating results and enabling remediation (OECD, 2018, 2023). This makes due diligence a cross-functional practice involving procurement, legal, sustainability, risk management, product development and senior leadership. It also exposes tensions between sustainability commitments and conventional procurement logics: lead-time compression, aggressive price negotiation and unstable forecasts may themselves contribute to labour and environmental harms. Companies must therefore monitor suppliers and scrutinise their own buying practices.

A discursive perspective treats HREDD not only as a regulatory or managerial process but as a field of meaning in which categories such as "risk", "responsibility", "traceability", "leverage" and "success" are constructed, stabilised and contested. The same practice can be framed as legal compliance, risk management, moral accountability, stakeholder dialogue, supply security or competitive differentiation. These framings shape what becomes visible, whose knowledge is authoritative, which remedies appear

feasible and which trade-offs are accepted. If risk is narrated as reputational exposure, rightsholders may become sources of information for corporate protection. If risk is narrated as harm to affected people and ecosystems, due diligence becomes a practice of accountability and prevention.

This is where discourse analysis is valuable for supply chain management research. Hardy, Bhakoo and Maguire (2020) argue that it can problematise taken-for-granted meanings in supply chains and reveal how language reproduces power relations. Their discussion of sustainability shows how a discourse of harm reduction can be constrained by profitability assumptions, while their discussion of modern slavery illustrates how risks to individuals can be translated into organisational and reputational risks that reconfigure supply-chain power. Wieland (2021) similarly calls for transformative supply chain management that understands supply chains as embedded in political-economic and planetary dynamics rather than as isolated, engineerable systems, while Cornelissen, Stephens, and Matthews (2024) advocate for more pluralism in theorising styles in supply chain research. Empirical discourse studies show how dominant sustainability storylines become legitimised and suppress alternatives (Else et al., 2022), and how apparently technical solutions may reproduce assumptions about power and control (Schilling et al., 2026).

For the present study, a discursive perspective on HREDD means examining how corporate actors talk due diligence into being: how they define salient risks, assign responsibility across organisational boundaries, justify prioritisation, construct suppliers and rightsholders, and describe successful responsible sourcing. Such an approach can show whether due diligence becomes another compliance discourse that legitimises limited change, or whether it opens space for more transformative understandings of sustainable supply chains in which environmental integrity and human rights are constitutive purposes of supply chain management.

2. Research project

The purpose of our research project is to explore which aspects of human rights and environmental due diligence are discursively constructed and how these constructions become consequential for material organisational phenomena such as strategy, governance, routines and competitive advantage. We therefore do not treat HREDD merely as a compliance procedure, but as an emergent meaning system through which corporate actors define risk, responsibility and success. The empirical design is qualitative, interpretive and inductive, drawing on expert interviews conducted in early 2026 with top-level decision makers from 21 large European companies in the electronics, mobility, and energy sectors, as well as upstream mineral supply chains.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour following a guide informed by narrative interviewing. This design fits the study because our interest is not primarily in measuring predefined attitudes, but in reconstructing how organisational actors make sense of due diligence and render it narratively intelligible. Narrative interviews are well suited to eliciting temporality, causality and agency: interviewees connect past disruptions, current regulatory pressures and anticipated strategic options into accounts that explain why particular practices appear necessary, legitimate or successful (Czarniawska, 2004; Riessman, 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). As expert interviews, they also provide access to field-specific interpretive knowledge, because senior managers articulate the categories, distinctions and evaluative criteria through which due diligence is enacted (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009; Meuser & Nagel, 2009).

In this study, we adopt an experimental qualitative research design that leverages AI-augmented analysis, using QInsight, an AI-based software for qualitative text analysis, to explore supply chain phenomena in an innovative and computationally augmented way. Moving beyond established Gioia-

based structuring approaches, we instead draw on a grounded theory logic enriched through human-AI collaboration. The analytical process is abductive and distributed: AI systems generate a broad range of interpretive possibilities from the data, while human researchers curate, interpret, select, and validate these emergent patterns. This creates a form of distributed interpretive analysis in which meaning-making is co-produced between algorithmic and human reasoning rather than solely constructed through manual coding hierarchies. Methodological judgment remains with the authors of the publication, including qualitative research experts, who ensure theoretical sensitivity and interpretive rigour throughout the process. The resulting insights are further subjected to validation within an expert practitioners community, ensuring the credibility and robustness of the results.

Analytical work follows a grounded theory logic and proceeds through iterative cycles of initial (open) coding, focused coding, and theoretical integration, supported by constant comparison and abductive reasoning. Rather than relying on predefined coding architectures, results emerge inductively through progressive refinement of empirical categories and their relationships. The distributed analytical setting mentioned above creates a human-AI abductive workflow in which emerging categories are continuously compared against the data and refined through memo-writing and iterative interpretation. We have so far conducted three stages of analyses:

1. the full interview transcripts were subjected to human-AI augmented qualitative content analysis to identify recurrent meanings, categories and argumentative patterns (Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2012).
2. three half-day virtual interpretation workshops were organised in May 2026, involving ten thematic experts from academia, consulting and civil society organisations. These workshops served as collective interpretive sessions in which preliminary codes were challenged, extended and compared across professional perspectives.
3. the emerging interpretations will be presented and discussed with the corporate interviewees in three one-hour virtual sessions in mid-June 2026. This step introduces respondent validation and helps assess whether the analysis resonates with, extends or productively contests practitioners' own understandings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The next analytical phase, planned for the second half of 2026, will move from initial (open) coding to focused coding, and theoretical integration. Through iterative comparison, memo-writing and abductive movement between data and theory, we aim to develop a typology or framework that explains how HREDD is discursively constituted and how such constructions shape organisational consequences.

3. Novelty, contribution, and feasibility

3.1. Novelty of the methodological approach

The methodological novelty lies in applying a discursive perspective to supply chain management, specifically to human rights and environmental due diligence in sustainable supply chains. While supply chain management has a strong tradition of modelling, survey research and realist case-based inquiry, this study treats supply chains as discursively constituted social worlds. It responds to recent calls for transformative supply chain management (Wieland, 2021), for broader qualitative, nominalist and anti-positivist approaches in supply chain management (Wieland, Tate, & Yan, 2024), for more pluralist theorising (Cornelissen, Stephens, & Matthews, 2024), and for novel qualitative research in supply chain management (Rosca, Seepma, & Stephens, 2026). Most directly, it operationalises Hardy, Bhakoo

and Maguire's (2020) agenda, which argues that discourse analysis can advance supply chain management theory by problematising taken-for-granted meanings and revealing power relations among supply-chain actors. The study engages in perspectival theorising by actively reframing existing supply chain phenomena through alternative interpretive lenses, thereby generating new ways of understanding established empirical realities.

The empirical design is novel not because it uses interviews, but because it treats interviews with top decision makers as sites of narrative construction. In due diligence, senior managers do not merely report on risk, responsibility, compliance or success; they articulate narrative frames through which these matters become organisationally actionable. Organisational research shows that leaders engage in sensemaking and sensegiving: they interpret ambiguity and seek to shape how others understand it (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Narrative research further shows that organisational stories stabilise identities, justify action and enable change (Czarniawska, 2004; Vaara, Sonenshein, & Boje, 2016). Narrative interviews are therefore appropriate because they elicit temporal plots, causal attributions and moral positioning rather than predefined variables (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000; Riessman, 2008).

At the same time, the analytical approach is novel and experimental, as it leverages AI-augmented qualitative analysis. While based on a grounded theory logic, the approach is enriched through a structured human-AI collaboration. This abductive process enables methodological experimentation in which, with the support of QInsight software, we generate a wide range of initial codes capturing how corporate actors speak about vulnerability, partnership, responsibility, and competitiveness. These AI-generated coding possibilities are not treated as outputs in themselves but as analytical prompts that are critically curated, selected, and refined by the research team. These initial codes are then iteratively refined into focused codes that allow us to theorise broader discursive patterns through which these meanings are organised and stabilised across contexts.

Thus, the study combines methodological novelty with disciplinary continuity. Prior research in supply chain management and SSCM has widely drawn on inductive qualitative approaches associated with Gioia-inspired structuring to examine paradoxical tensions inside buying firms (Xiao, Wilhelm, van der Vaart, & van Donk, 2019), transparency and supply chain finance (Gelsomino, Sardesai, Pirttilä, & Henke, 2023), data-driven capability building for resilience (Chenger & Pettigrew, 2023), and tensions in adopting digital innovation for SSCM (Bag, 2025). Our study extends prior work by applying a grounded theory logic to narrative-discursive data and by shifting the analytical focus towards how human rights and environmental due diligence is actively talked into organisational reality. The methodological value of the article therefore lies in making discourse empirically tractable while retaining transparency, traceability and conceptual rigour.

3.2. Significant contribution to supply chain management theory

The project's significant contribution to supply chain management theory lies in extending the field's dominant understanding of supply chains beyond material, financial and contractual phenomena. Much supply chain management research has focused on the design and coordination of flows, supplier relationships, inter-organisational governance, quality, availability, resilience and network performance (Lambert, Cooper, & Pagh, 1998; Mentzer et al., 2001). SSCM has broadened this agenda by integrating environmental and social objectives, yet it has often continued to frame sustainability challenges as problems of measurement, compliance, control or multi-tier coordination (Carter & Rogers, 2008; Seuring & Müller, 2008; Wilhelm, Blome, Bhakoo, & Paulraj, 2016). These perspectives are

indispensable, but they offer limited insight into how actors define what counts as risk, who is assigned responsibility and when due diligence is interpreted as successful.

A discursive perspective does not merely add a communicative layer to otherwise objective supply-chain realities. Rather, it starts from the premise that some supply chain management phenomena are socially constructed: they are stabilised, contested and made actionable through language, narratives, categories and institutionalised meanings. In this sense, supply-chain realities can be 'talked into being'. Discourse is not simply a reflection of material conditions, but a constitutive mechanism through which fields define legitimate problems, allocate agency and authorise intervention (Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). This shift is central to Hardy, Bhakoo and Maguire's (2020) argument that discourse analysis can advance supply chain management theory by revealing meanings and power relations hidden in more positivist approaches. It also aligns with Wieland's (2021) call for transformative supply chain management and with efforts to broaden qualitative supply chain management research beyond conventional realist assumptions (Wieland, Tate, & Yan, 2024).

The proposed study contributes by identifying those dimensions of human rights and environmental due diligence that possess such constructivist qualities. Narrative interviews with senior corporate decision makers are valuable because these actors are not only informants about organisational practice; they are also sources and carriers of narrative frames. Through their accounts, they define uncertainty as manageable or systemic, construct responsibility as legal obligation, moral duty or strategic opportunity, and evaluate success as compliance, learning, collaboration or competitive differentiation. The initial (open) coding suggests that risk, responsibility and success are not simply given variables in sustainable supply chains, but discursively constituted.

The article aims to offer a more nuanced theory of how discourse matters in supply chain management. It will show how due diligence becomes embedded in organisational routines and strategic choices through interpretive frames, and how these frames influence material outcomes such as resource allocation, supplier engagement, governance structures and competitive advantage. The theoretical contribution is therefore threefold: it introduces discourse as a constitutive mechanism in supply chain management theory, it demonstrates how discursive constructions become consequential for the material organisation of sustainable and responsible supply chains, and it offers a nuanced understanding of HREDD as both a compliance requirement and a contested meaning system.

3.3. Feasibility of the proposed work

The feasibility of the proposed study depends less on the availability of formal corporate information than on gaining access to the interpretive worlds of senior decision makers. Human rights and environmental due diligence is already widely documented in sustainability reports, audit procedures, supplier codes and public commitments. However, such documents usually present carefully edited accounts of corporate responsibility. A discursive study requires a different kind of empirical access: it must capture how decision makers themselves narrate due diligence, how they frame risk and responsibility, and how they connect these frames to strategy, organisation and competitive positioning. From a qualitative research perspective, this makes elite access, trust and openness central conditions of feasibility rather than merely logistical requirements.

This central challenge has already been substantially addressed. The research is embedded in DiliCHANCE.eu, a multi-annual EU-funded project on successful due diligence in mineral supply chains. Through long-standing relationships with companies and their senior representatives, the project team was able to conduct interviews with top-level decision makers in leading firms across relevant sectors. These interviews go beyond public-relations statements and provide rich accounts of how due

diligence is made meaningful inside organisations. They offer empirical material on the discursive construction of risk, responsibility and success in the context of responsible sourcing, SSCM and human rights and environmental due diligence. This already available dataset constitutes the most important feasibility asset of the proposed article.

The current task is therefore not data generation but analytic development. In methodological terms, the project has moved from access and fieldwork to interpretation, theorisation and validation. This phase is well aligned with the grounded theory approach, which is designed to preserve informants' initial meanings while developing theoretically informed focused coding and theoretical integration. The main analytical challenge will be to avoid reducing the narratives to descriptive issue categories and instead identify the underlying discursive patterns through which due diligence is constructed as a strategic, organisational and competitive phenomenon. The research design is strengthened by established criteria for qualitative credibility, including triangulation, iterative interpretation and member-oriented validation.

Several steps have already been taken to support this process. In May and June 2026, the project team organised interpretation workshops with thematic experts from academia, consulting and civil society. These workshops generated additional interpretive perspectives on the interview material and helped test the plausibility of emerging initial codes derived from the data. Their results provide a strong basis for the next phase of analysis in summer and autumn 2026, which follows a grounded theory logic of focused coding, and theoretical integration through constant comparison and abductive reasoning. This phase is further supported by an experimental AI-augmented analytical design using QInsight software, which expands the range of possible initial codes and interpretive patterns, while the research team critically curates, refines, and validates these outputs through iterative memo-writing and comparison to develop a typology or framework suitable for submission to the special issue. The team can also build on prior experience with similar qualitative, discursive and typology-oriented work, particularly the study by Ivanova et al. (2023), which developed a typology of institutionalising responsible innovation in business contexts on the basis of comparative qualitative research.

The feasibility of the article is further reinforced by the composition of the research team and its scholarly network. Two doctoral researchers at WU Vienna are directly involved, and their publication-oriented research trajectories create strong incentives for timely completion. In addition, the team has access to friendly reviewers and experts in discursive organisation studies and qualitative methodology:

- Steve Maguire, Nelson Phillips, David Grant, Linda Putnam, Vivien Schmidt and other experts in discursive institutional theory and discursive organisation studies were collaborating with the research team in several events at the Academy of Management Annual Meetings and in publishing an edited volume at Emerald Publishing and are willing to provide feedback on the planned journal publication.
- Katharina Miko-Schefzig (head of the Competence Center for Empirical Research Methods at WU Vienna) and Susanne Friese (founder of QInsight and expert in qualitative social science) will support the research team in applying human-AI-augmented qualitative content analysis.
- Due diligence experts from the World Resource Forum, EIT Raw Materials, KPMG, Levin Sources, BRGM, Solidaridad and WWF have already been involved in the first steps of analysis and will contribute to the next rounds as well.

Taken together, the secured access to rich interview data, interpretation workshops, prior methodological experience and available expert support make a submission in late 2026 or early 2027 realistic.

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Disclaimer: During the preparation of this work the authors used AI in order to improve the readability and wording of specific sentences. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and they take full responsibility for the content.

ANNEX

Journal of Supply Chain Management

Journal of Supply Chain Management (JSCM) was launched as the *International Journal of Purchasing and Materials Management* in 1965. Like its title, the Journal's mission has adapted to the changing nature of the discipline. Our global economic system is facing an unprecedented transformation and supply chains play a key role in this journey. JSCM is the journal of choice among supply chain management scholars, attracting high-quality, high-impact empirical research focusing on theory building and empirical methodologies. As a global journal, JSCM welcomes submissions from researchers with a diversity of demographic (i.e. gender, nationality, etc.) and professional (i.e. university, academic discipline, research methodologies, etc.) backgrounds. JSCM welcomes inter-disciplinary studies that push the boundaries of knowledge by focusing on emerging phenomena and/or using novel approaches to examine established phenomena.

Over the past decade, JCSM has often been ranked first or second among supply chain and operations management journals, based on its Clarivate Impact Factor. It is one of only four empirical OSCM journals included in the SCM Journal List (http://www.scmlist.com/). JSCM is also ranked as a 4 ("top journal") in the British ABS/AJG list.

Title of the special issue

Toward novel ways of doing qualitative research in SCM: a developmental initiative

Guest Editors

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Deadlines for submission

Open for submission of proposals from: **February 1, 2026**
Final deadline for submissions of proposals: **September 30, 2026**
Submission of full papers: **September 30, 2027** (submissions will be handled on a rolling basis)

Advisory Board

A board of senior SCM scholars will provide author(s) of selected proposals with additional advice and guidance regarding crafting novel and relevant theoretical contributions for Supply Chain Management.

Vikram Bhakoo, University of Melbourne, Australia
Dirk Pieter van Donk, University of Groningen, the Netherlands
Melanie Kreye, University of York, United Kingdom
Annachiara Longoni, Ramon Llull University, Spain

Journal of
Supply Chain Management

Lee Matthews, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom
Madeleine Pullman, Portland State University, USA
Evelyne Vanpoucke, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

Background

The supply chain management (SCM) field originally centered on understanding the coordination of industrial and business organizations' supply chains for the benefit of the long-term performance of companies (Giunipero and Denslow, 2022; Mentzer et al., 2001). Recently, the focus of SCM research has shifted. This is exemplified by increasing calls for more research on physical and psychological damage to workers in fashion supply chains (Karaosman and Marshall, 2023), poverty of farmers in agri-food supply chains (Rosca et al., 2025), well-being of workers in operational contexts (Corbett, 2024) or the role of SCM in addressing the refugee crisis (Storsjö et al., 2025). These developments challenge the widely held assumptions in the SCM community on what constitutes a relevant SCM phenomena and what ought to be the focus and role of SCM research.

Take for instance, the issue of workers' well-being. Traditionally, it has been studied by psychologists within the broader context of individual well-being (e.g., Dolan et al., 2008) or labor economists within the context of work and job satisfaction (e.g., Nikolova and Cnossen, 2020). Immersing oneself in a manufacturing plant and observing the work of operators and their experiences has been documented by anthropologists (Corbett, 2024). These areas of research have not been the traditional remit of SCM researchers. However, there is increasing recognition in our community that these issues affect and are significantly affected by the management of operations and supply chains, directly or indirectly (see Corbett, 2024; Karaosman and Marshall, 2023; Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025). We now understand that interlinkages between workers' well-being and operational processes and outcomes are of relevance to SCM and ought to be of interest to the SCM research community. There is also increasing recognition that our role as researchers should go beyond explaining supply chain phenomena and extend to designing approaches to tackle grand societal challenges (e.g. Touboulic, McCarthy and Matthews., 2020). In doing so, we have to revisit "the foundational thinking underpinning SCM research and practice" (Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025, p.83), and reflect carefully on shifts of an ontological (i.e., what we consider 'relevant' SCM phenomena to be) and axiological nature (i.e., what we consider to be the purpose of SCM research). Such shifts necessarily prompt us to also re-think and re-imagine the methodological toolkit available to SCM researchers.

Ontological assumptions: What constitutes a relevant SCM phenomenon?

Emerging SCM phenomena demand shifts in ontological assumptions that are usefully articulated in terms of three dimensions: *'people', 'processes',* and *'systems'.* In terms of *people*, it has recently been acknowledged that SCM research has been largely people-blind (Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025) and should acknowledge and recognize the humanity of the *people* and communities that infuse and construct all supply chain organizations (Soundararajan et al., 2021), aid in effective and just transitions towards regenerative supply chains (Gualandris et al., 2024), contribute to improving operating conditions (Corbett, 2024; Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025), and distribute decision-making power across supply chain stakeholders (Luzzini et al., 2024). These calls raise new questions for SCM, such as how can we give more voice and decision making power to socially-, culturally- and economically- marginalized actors across the supply chain? Addressing such questions requires a richer array of non-positivist qualitative approaches and methods that can deepen understanding of such human experiences.

In terms of *processes,* Grimm et al. (2024) advocate that supply chain *processes* should be viewed as temporally evolving and relationally constituted. They highlight the need for research that engages

seriously with time, change, and becoming as central features of supply chain life—phenomena that cannot be fully understood through traditional, variance-based or snapshot approaches. Process research methodologies capable of capturing the unfolding, messy, and often uncertain nature of SCM practice over time are needed.

In terms of *'systems'* (and despite the discipline's roots in systems thinking of industrial engineering [i.e., Forrester, 1961]), SCM research has been largely characterized by static, linear assumptions of causality, and controllability (Wieland et al., 2024). Recent work, however, reframes supply chains as complex adaptive systems and even as ecosystems, marked by non-linearity, interdependence, and emergence (Wieland et al., 2024). Studying supply chains as systems requires methodological approaches attuned to complexity, non-linearity, and multi-level interactions, including qualitative methods that can illuminate systemic interdependencies and transformations over time.

Axiological assumptions: What constitutes a (desirable) purpose of SCM research?
SCM research is increasingly acknowledged as central to driving the change required to address grand societal challenges (Touboulic et al., 2020). This requires that supply chains are transformed rather than merely tweaked, tackling ambitious new goals for SCM research and practice such as regeneration (Gualandris et al., 2024) or alternatives to growth (Luzzini et al., 2024). SCM research must therefore enable the creation of knowledge about these new types of supply chains. This implies not simply observing and describing what is already happening, but rather to actively construct and intervene in what is, and what could or should be happening in SCM practice (Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025). Scholars have therefore endorsed engaged forms of SCM research which strive to not simply know at a distance, but rather to make a difference (see e.g., Touboulic and Walker, 2016; Touboulic et al., 2020; Touboulic et al., 2022; Hasle and Vang, 2021). More recently, SCM scholars have also explicitly called for forward-looking approaches to theorizing, such as creative (e.g., Gruner and Power, 2023) and prescriptive styles of theorizing (Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025; see also Cornelissen, Stephens and Matthews, 2024) which strive to imagine and create alternative, more desirable futures. We believe new methodological approaches which legitimize new ways of doing research and knowing supply chains go hand in hand with such calls.

The developmental approach adopted in this special issue aims to operationalize these calls by supporting the development of an enhanced repertoire of qualitative methodological approaches in SCM which can meet the needs of these recent ontological and axiological shifts, and thus sustain and enhance the relevance of SCM research for wider societal, academic and managerial communities.

The need for a developmental approach
We acknowledge that existing discussions have already helpfully begun to promote methodological innovation, for example around action research (e.g., Touboulic et al., 2020), ethnography (e.g., Wieland et al., 2024), metaphorical imagination (e.g., Stephens et al., 2022), discourse analysis (e.g., Hardy et al., 2020) or abductive case study research (e.g., Moshtari and Seepma, 2025; Rosca et al., 2025). However, despite these important contributions, we have yet to observe significant shifts in methodological trends—especially when measured by the number of published studies using these alternative methods compared to those relying on more traditional SCM approaches.

In order to build expertise in our community for engaging in novel qualitative methodologies, a traditional peer-review process is not sufficient. Adopting novel methods implies five sources of problems which we articulate as: *knowing*, *contextualizing*, *assessing*, *accepting*, and *experimenting*.

- **Problems of knowing** involve the procedures, steps and insights on how to actually employ the method, collect and synthesize different sources of data, as well as maintain a chain of

evidence. For novel methodologies, such guidance is often dispersed across disciplines or hidden in tacit know-how, leaving SCM scholars without clear guidance.

- **Problems of contextualizing** involve making any relevant adaptations to the new methodologies to suit the unique particularities of the supply chain and operations context. Methods developed in, e.g., anthropology, sociology, or organization studies may require tailoring to fit the multi-actor, networked, and operationally complex realities of SCM. Without precedents, scholars may struggle to judge what constitutes appropriate adaptation versus methodological dilution.
- **Problems of assessing** related to editors and reviewers' abilities to evaluate the rigor in the way the method is applied and the empirical insights generated. The meaning of rigor in itself might differ for methods under different ontological and epistemological stances. When evaluative criteria are unclear or inconsistent, authors face unpredictable review outcomes, and reviewers may default to positivist standards unsuited to the methodology at hand. This discourages experimentation and risks high-quality work being rejected simply because it does not conform to dominant paradigms.
- **Problems of accepting** refer to acceptance in the broader community for the methodology as a scientific tool, understanding when it can be used, and value its strengths. If methods are not yet widely recognized as legitimate within SCM, researchers risk investing years in work that struggles to find an audience. Broader acceptance requires visible examples, training, and repeated demonstration of the method's potential to generate valuable SCM insights.
- **Problems of experimenting** cuts across the previous four challenges and refers to the intellectual and professional risks researchers have to take when departing from conventional methods and employing unfamiliar methods. For PhDs, this may mean diverging from expectations and dissertation standards set by supervisors or dissertation committees. For mid-career scholars, it may endanger publication output or promotion timeliness. In both cases, the uncertainty about whether innovative work will be publishable can discourage experimentation, especially in a field where methodological norms remain tightly held.

In order to address these problems, we adopt a developmental approach where we engage in a process that emphasizes deep, formative engagement and learning throughout, rather than a single stage of evaluative review. *Methodological interdisciplinarity* acts as a guiding approach for our development call and it helps us leverage expertise from other disciplines. That means, we reach out to experts from different disciplines and leverage their expertise to support the process of transforming novel proposals into full papers. Our underlying assumption is that when methods are predominantly used in certain disciplines, there is clear guidance regarding the application of the method, its assessment but also broader acceptance from the community, both for the method and the insights generated through it.

Aims, scope and developmental process

This Special Call for Proposals (and papers) aims to develop expertise among authors, reviewers and the SCM community for engaging in novel ways of doing qualitative research, beyond the positivistic templates which are predominant currently. This initiative would serve both as a *capacity-building* effort for SCM scholars and a *community-building* one—it would normalize rigorous, non-traditional approaches and help reviewers, authors, and editors develop shared understandings of what "good" looks like.

We do not have specific expectations regarding the topics of the manuscripts. Rather, we invite authors to propose empirical studies that apply novel qualitative methodologies in the context of supply chain management. Examples of novel qualitative methods can include (but not limited to):

- Discourse and frame analysis to capture how media texts construct meaning and how audiences interpret them, in the context of supply chain management.
- Critical analysis of secondary data to stimulate debates on underlying assumptions present in the existing supply chain practices. For instance, historical analyses of colonialism in sourcing countries can help us to better understand existing supplier practices, buyer responsibilities, and imagine better future possibilities.
- Ethnography and participant observations, life histories, cultural immersion that can provide deep, contextualized understanding of cultural practices and social worlds, both in the context of workers and suppliers.
- Films and media methods to capture embodied, visual, and sensory dimensions of culture and engages participants as co-creators of meaning, especially to uncover views and perspectives from marginalized stakeholders.

Submissions may be grounded in different ontological and epistemological traditions. We also welcome case study designs, provided that the research design and approach itself demonstrate a clear element of methodological novelty (e.g., unconventional data sources, longitudinal process designs, participatory or interventionist approaches, visual approaches).

It is important that the novel methodology is applied to a SCM context, with contributions directed both to advancing SCM theory and to enriching qualitative methodological repertoires in the field. However, we would like to emphasize that we do not aim for methodological contributions. The novel methodological approach should first and foremost have clear theoretical implications for the SCM domain. Proposals should address topics that require further empirical investigation and have the potential to yield original insights into supply chain phenomena. Ideally, they will also engage with current debates, for example, addressing grand societal challenges, foregrounding human actors and experiences in supply chains, or exploring the systemic and processual dynamics that shape SCM practice.

Please note: This initiative is intended to support empirical work involving the application of qualitative methods. Proposals for conceptual papers or literature reviews will not be considered.

The call for proposals - Idea development and expert knowledge sharing
The call for proposal invites proposals for research projects/papers that use innovative qualitative research methods, rather than full papers. Proposals (between 2000-4000 words) may be at different stages of empirical development, however as this is a developmental initiative it is expected that proposals will reflect projects that have not yet been started, or are not yet completed, in order to maximize the benefit gained from the methodological guidance and development provided. Authors are naturally, therefore, not required to have fully collected data but must demonstrate a well-developed data collection plan. Strong proposals will provide evidence of access to the required data (e.g., permissions, organizational support), and where possible, include pilot data or proof of feasibility. We are open to accommodate different methodological approaches, as there may be differing conceptualizations of 'data' and 'data collection'.

The proposals will be evaluated by the team of guest editors, methodological experts and EICs. The evaluation will be based on two main criteria: the novelty and feasibility of the proposed methodological approach, and intended theoretical contribution for SCM theory.

To foster learning and exchange, several webinars and paper development workshops (PDWs) will be organized during the development process. We aim to organize a series of online webinars / workshop series where researchers can get familiar with different types of new methods. For example, having dedicated sessions with methodological experts "an ask-the-expert-anything"-hour / speed-dating with methods.

The call for full papers - Co-creation with methodological experts and the guest editors
A selected number of proposals will be chosen for further development through PDWs which is expected to last about 1 year. Relevant scholars from other disciplines will be invited not only to serve as reviewers but also to take on more engaged roles. Depending on their involvement, these scholars may serve as methodological mentors, co-creators, associate editors, or even co-authors of the final editorial or research papers. This role goes beyond reactive feedback, aiming instead for a co-creative, mentorship-based engagement. Throughout the developmental process, authors will receive structured support from (guest) editors and methodological collaborators. Projects will culminate in full paper submissions, which will undergo standard double-blind peer review to ensure rigor and quality. However, unlike traditional special issues, this process emphasizes deep, formative engagement and learning throughout, rather than a single stage of evaluative review. In brief, the development process described above is unique to this initiative: particularly focused upon enabling the co-creation process, the method development process, and fostering in-between moments of learning where participants can share lessons learned, identify useful practices, surface common struggles across different types of methods, and collaboratively explore how to address and overcome these challenges. Through this engaging process, we aim to provide inspiration for contributing authors and to facilitate community learning regarding novel qualitative methodologies in SCM.

Please note that only full papers which have been developed on the basis of an accepted proposal will be considered for the special issue. Any full papers submitted which are not related to previously submitted and accepted proposals will not be considered.

Submission deadlines and timeline

Deadlines for final submission and timing of activities:

- Online webinars to develop the qualitative toolbox and inspiration, in ***Spring and Summer 2026.***
- Ideas development workshops at major conferences and online in ***Spring to Summer 2026*** (open to authors of accepted proposals but also to other interested researchers).
- Final submission deadline of proposals: ***September 30, 2026*** (submissions made before this deadline will be assessed on a rolling basis).
- Paper Development Workshops (PDW) and co-creation sessions with selected proposals: throughout ***2026 and 2027***
- Submission deadline for full papers: ***September 30, 2027***

We will also organize several PDWs at major conferences (including EurOMA sustainability forum 2026 in Porto, EurOMA 2026 in Vienna) and at several locations (University of Groningen, University of Manchester). These events aim to provide inspiration for potential authors, incubate ideas and also invite methodological speakers from other disciplines to give short talks for inspiration (e.g., how to conduct discourse analysis).

Note: Attendance at workshops and conference special sessions is not mandatory, nor does it guarantee acceptance of the manuscript in the special issue. However, participating in this process is strongly

suggested, to engage with the editorial team, collect early feedback and thus maximize the chances of making a strong contribution.

Please submit your proposal via email to all four guest editors: Eugenia Rosca (e.rosca@rug.nl), Aline Seepma (a.p.seepma@rug.nl), Victoria Stephens (victoria.stephens@manchester.ac.uk), Julia Grimm (julia.grimm@sbs.su.se). Please indicate in the email subject line the name of the Special Issue ***"Toward novel ways of doing qualitative research in SCM: a developmental initiative"***.

Submissions of full papers will be handled later through https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/jscm, with the final approval of the guest editors.

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