LABOUR IN GLOBAL VALUE CHAINS: THE CASE OF SOUTH AFRICAN FISH EXPORTING COMPANIES

By

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ABSTRACT

Global value chains have reconfigured the organization of production and distribution across the world. Such a transformation has led to production fragmentation across multiple locations and the specialization of firms some of which now produce only one component of a larger product. Transformation in international trade has enabled multinational corporations to outsource production and operations to low-cost locations, which are mainly found in the Global South. Global value chains research explores these dynamics. This research began with Hopkins and Wallerstein's work on world-systems analysis, which was concerned with the likelihood that these chains are characterized by inequality. However, later approaches, focused on Global Commodity Chains (GCCs), Global Value Chains (GVCs) and Global Production Networks (GPNs), suggested that participation in global value chains could advance development for Global South nations and result in "social upgrading" and decent work for those employed by companies that participate in these chains. This thesis explores the lived experiences of workers in South African fish exporting companies in the city of Gqeberha, to assess whether participation in global value chains does indeed mean workers experience decent working conditions. The findings of the research suggest that global value chains research needs to pay increased attention to workers. The study also emphasizes the importance of migrant labour, both internal migrant labour and international migrant labour in global value chains. By giving attention to both internal and international migrant labour, the complexity of the workforce is highlighted. Accordingly, the study calls for a comprehensive approach to the labour issue in global chains because the diverse locations and contexts shape workers' experiences with and outcomes from participation in global chains. The study concludes that the world-systems tradition remains relevant for understanding the contemporary issues of unequal exchange, hierarchy of occupational tasks and wages, and exploitation within these global chains, a stance that diverges from mainstream scholarship in which world-systems tradition is deemed as having limited contemporary applicability.

DEDICATION

To my brother, Tinashe Mufukari, your journey inspired me to better understand the complex issues of inequality and social justice. You have faced challenges that come with being neurodivergent in a society that often struggles to understand and accept difference. It has been beautiful to watch you defy the limitations set for you by people unwilling to embrace anything beyond their own cognitive boundaries. You demonstrate that potential knows no bounds, that the only true measure of capability is the one we set for ourselves. In your journey, I find inspiration to shatter imposed ceilings and design my own horizon.

This thesis and accomplishment are dedicated to you, a shining example of hope, courage, and the human capacity to thrive despite the odds.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

DAFF	Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
EC	Eastern Cape
GCC	Global Commodity Chain
GPC	Global Poverty Chains
GPN	Global Production Network
GVC	Global Value Chains
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISI	Import Substitution Industrialization
MLRA	Marine Living Resources Act
MNCs	Multinational Corporations
TESs	Temporary Employment Services

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1. CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Over the last century, production and international trade have undergone dramatic shifts as globalization reconstructed how countries, corporations, and workers compete in the global economy. Previously, firms used to manufacture and, in some cases, export finished products but in the contemporary era, instead of all production stages occurring in one geographical location, firms in different parts of the world specialize in distinct stages of the production process. Production processes are now often conducted in several countries with different components and parts crossing national borders numerous times (Wang et al., 2016:2). These connected activities combine to create what is known as a global value chain (GVC). The term refers to "the full range of activities that firms, farmers and workers carry out to bring a product or service from its conception to its end use, recycling or reuse" (Ponte et al., 2019:1). Such activities are inclusive of tasks such as design, production, assembly, distribution, and consumer services with the "global" aspect referring to the way these functions are distributed among various firms around the world (Ponte et al., 2019:1). Accordingly, globalization has enabled the increase of revenues for businesses by selling to larger markets internationally, allowing them to "take advantage of cheaper factors of production by manufacturing in optimal location economies" (Fish et al., 2014:128).

Much of the existing literature on global chains focuses on the positive impact these chains have on developing nations through the participation of firms in developing nations. This is mostly based on the assumption that lead firms, that is, the multinational corporations "driving" these chains, by and large, positively impact other participating firms by way of enabling them to upgrade and supply products and services to global markets (Gehl Sampath & Vallejo, 2018:482). This is described as "economic upgrading," which is understood to have a trickledown effect through positively impacting the labour force through "social upgrading." Social upgrading is "the process of improvement in the rights and entitlements of workers as social actors and the enhancement of the quality of their employment" and this encompasses access to better work, improved working conditions, protections and rights (Barrientos et al.; 2018:233). The assumption that participation in global chains benefits firms and workers in the developing world has been championed by international institutions like the World Economic

Forum which, in 2013, estimated that the reduction in GVC barriers such as border administration and non-tariff barriers to trade could mean a 5% increase in global GDP and a 15% increase in international trade (Kummritz, 2016:1). However, scholars like Kummritz (2016:1) argue that such positive effects for participating countries are not self-evident. It is against this backdrop that my research is situated, with a particular interest in the question of the benefits to be accrued by the labour force in such an environment with a lot of moving parts and dynamics. The focus of this study is on the experiences of workers in South African fish companies involved in global chains, that is, fish exporting companies.

1.2 RESEARCH GOALS

This project is rooted in a general concern about better understanding the experiences of labourers who work in global chains to see whether and how they benefit from being part of such chains. The study focuses on the case of labourers in South Africa's fish exporting companies in Gqeberha. The goals of the study are:

- To explore the experiences of labourers in fish export companies in Gqeberha, South Africa;
- To interrogate whether participation in global chains by South African fish exporting companies does indeed improve workers' lives; and
- To relate the experiences of South African fishery workers to debates about the benefits of global chains.

1.3 METHODOLOGY

This study made use of a qualitative methodological approach, an appropriate framework by which to gain participants' perceptions of the world through their lived experiences. Interviews and focus groups were the chosen data collection techniques. Gqeberha was the chosen case study because it is a city understood to be fundamental to the fishing industry's successes in the Eastern Cape (EC) (Bloom, 2013:23). The study is exploratory in nature and while the relatively small number of participants means that I cannot make firm conclusions about the lives of workers in global production networks or speak broadly to the issues of social upgrading, my study offers one striking example of

the lived experiences of the workers in the fisheries export industry. The findings also justify a bigger study to the analysis provided here and the conclusions I draw from it. The methodology will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

1.4 OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS:

This study is organized into five chapters with this chapter serving as the introductory chapter that lays the background and context, as well as the goals of the research. Chapter Two provides the theoretical background of the Global Value Chains discourse and conducts a literature review on the discourse, its emergence, evolution, and main tenets. Chapter Three unpacks the issue of development through the GVC notions of economic and social upgrading. It also discusses the criticisms that have been brought forward regarding this idea of upgrading. Chapter Four provides a brief examination of the general history of labour in South Africa and the current labour trends in the fisheries industry. It also offers a discussion of the South African context by looking at the fisheries industry and the dynamics thereof between businesses. Chapter Five will deal with the methodology, data collection, and findings. It will also analyse the findings and present them according to the emerging themes. This chapter will also answer questions as to whether the labour force in the South African fish exporting value chain does benefit as is championed by the GVC discourse. Chapter Six concludes the research.

2. CHAPTER TWO

GLOBAL VALUE CHAINS: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Taylor and Rioux (2018:48) posit that present-day capitalism is premised on an extremely complex organization of production. It is characterized by many diverse and geographically separated workforces drawn into a collective process of the production and distribution of goods and services (Taylor & Rioux, 2018:48). The contemporary integration of production activities across space and the development of an international division of labour have been crystallizing over centuries (Taylor & Rioux, 2018: 48). Britain and Western Europe's industrialization rested on the importation of a diverse array of goods from the colonies of Africa, Asia, and the Americas (Taylor & Rioux, 2018: 48). Prior to this, international trade had occurred in small quantities, but the colonial period ushered in an unprecedented increase in the scope and scale of such trade which in turn, required the creation of new labour forces in colonial zones to work in plantations and mines (Taylor & Rioux, 2018:49). Such economic integration led to the creation of a colonial division of labour in which colonized countries were exporters of raw materials and agricultural goods while colonizers focused on the production of manufactured goods (Rodney, 1982:243). This colonial division of labour evolved in the late twentieth century as numerous developing world countries began to produce a large number of industrial goods for exportation (Taylor & Rioux, 2018:49). Such transformation was driven by the shifting of facilities abroad to cut costs by companies in countries like the USA, and in doing so, highlighted the increasing importance of developing world countries "as expanding hubs for labour-intensive production," and as presently constituted, the global division of labour "reflects the continuation and deepening of such patterns" (Taylor & Rioux, 2018:49).

A significant characteristic of modern global production networks is that companies focus on specialization: the creation of component parts that are just one element of the final product. Specialization enables firms to locate specific aspects of the production process in regions deemed to have "desired labour regimes" as illustrated by the relocation of labour-intensive operations to Global South countries by electronic and textile industries (Taylor & Rioux,

2018:50). Accordingly, production can be stationed in locations where the local labour practices and policies generate workforces that can be organized or assembled for long periods of intensive work at relatively low costs, and these are understood as crucial dynamics of global production networks (Taylor & Rioux, 2018:50). It might, therefore, be suggested that the success of global chains is intrinsically tied to the way that the world has come to be ordered hierarchically such that certain regions are exploited by other regions for their "cheap labour." Moreover, scholars like Smith (2016:41) submit that the 1960s and 1970s were the decades in which the international outsourcing of manufacturing production began in earnest with the mass migration of production jobs in various industries such as clothing, shoes, and electronic assembly to low-wage countries.

To understand this phenomenon, we see the emergence of research geared towards understanding the changing global economy in the face of production fragmentation and outsourcing. This research can broadly be described as global chains research and includes different perspectives. Several schools of thought have emerged, such as those focused on Global Commodity Chains (GCCs), Global Value Chains (GVCs), and Global Production Networks (GPNs). The previously established perspectives on the global economy and development at the time, such as modernization theory, dependency theory, and the worldsystems tradition, set the stage for the emergence of these schools of thought. Modernization theory conceptualizes development as a social change process by which less developed states acquire traits similar to the developed (Nhema & Zinyama, 2016:152). Modernization theorists explain the development of the developing world as being possible through the facilitation of the West which is seen as a prototype the developing world ought to reproduce (Nhema & Zinyama, 2016:152). In contrast, dependency theory responds to modernization theory by pointing out the Eurocentric bias of the latter and its failure to acknowledge the ties and links between the former colonies and the West that created dependency even after independence (Harrison, 1988:76). It emphasises the potential of exploitation that results from increased contact between the "core" countries and the "periphery" within the global economy and highlights how dependency leads to underdevelopment (Gereffi, 2018:3). The world-systems tradition's depiction of development draws heavily from critical ideas of imperialism and exploitation and is premised on the global arrangements of inequality (Harrison, 1988:83). Early global chains research emerged as part

of the world-systems approach by Hopkins and Wallerstein (1977:128) with the general understanding that commodity chains would reproduce this hierarchical and stratified order.

2.2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: WORLD-SYSTEMS ANALYSIS

I situate my research in relation to world-systems analysis, which is influenced by Marxism. I make use of the world-systems analysis because it is concerned with exploitation and unequal exchange, issues that are also central to my research.

World-systems analysis, which emerged in 1974 as constructed by Immanuel Wallerstein as an amendment to the dependency theory, sets out to explain the global arrangements of inequality. Wallerstein (2012:x) argues that capitalism functions through an immensely unequal and asymmetrical hierarchical structure. This structure is in the form of a "tripartite division of the planet" in terms of a small nucleus of nations that are extremely wealthy, a similarly small intermediate zone otherwise known as the semi-periphery which constitutes nations that enjoy a moderate degree of wealth, and finally a vast poor and exploited periphery (Wallerstein et al., 2012:x). In saying this, the core is described as having "strong states that can enforce unequal exchange relations favourable to themselves; they appropriate surplus value from the periphery," making the periphery a region containing exploited nations dependent on the exportation of low-wage products (Harrison, 1988:86). The semi-periphery serves as a buffer between these two extreme zones in which it is also exploited by the core but in turn, exploits the periphery (Harrison, 1988:86). The periphery is understood as the capitalist system's foundation, supporting both the semi-periphery and core zones (Wallerstein et al., 2012:x).

The tripartite division highlights what is and is not possible for any given nation and in this way, the core is understood as the region that will always pioneer innovative technologies and serve as the hub of prominent transnational monopolies (Wallerstein et al., 2012:x). It generates the highest income levels, consumption, and lifestyle, and pays the highest salaries compared to the other zones (Wallerstein et al., 2012:x). These indicators are the manifestations and results of the greater wealth that this core has accrued from its exploitation of the semiperiphery, and especially the periphery (Wallerstein et al., 2012:x). Wallerstein (2012:x) argues that over the course of the five centuries of capitalism, this structure has widened and deepened and the gap between the zones is far from being eradicated (Wallerstein et al.,

2012:xi). Wengraf (2018:63) attributes the contemporary exacerbation of these differences to globalization, specifically through neoliberalism as driven by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank which orchestrate the transformation of Global South economies into export-led economies. Wengraf (2018:63) argues that this meant a retreat from the national development model and an opportunity for the neoliberal era to be launched as a means to "sweep away barriers to free trade and economic growth in the capitalist centres of accumulation." This created a "straitjacket of single-commodity production," which is directed towards the benefit of the core countries and concretely situated the developing world in the peripheral contour of the global system (Wengraf, 2018: 75).

Harrison (1988:96) states that multinational corporations, regarded as the epitome of capitalism by world-systems theorists, control the transfer of surplus from the periphery, or semiperiphery, to the centre with this resulting in devastating effects on the development potential of the Global South. It follows then that internal development of the "developing nations" is outward-looking as all efforts are geared towards the satisfaction of the core zone through the export-led scheme. According to Rice (2009:216), other Marxist sociologists would agree that the continued and deepening character of this world-systems structure results from the "transnational tilt" in the treadmill of production. The treadmill of production finds its roots in the world-systems theoretical approach. Drawing on Schnaiberg (1980), Rice (2009:216) explains this treadmill of production as representing "the inner logic and institutional structures of post-Second World War capital accumulation… in which private capital, in tandem with state policies and labour acquiescence, converts ecosystem resources into profits through market exchange." The transnational tilt therefore highlights how such organization of economic production has increasingly become global (Rice, 2009: 216). This approach recognizes the structural interrelationships between the industrialized and peripheral countries and the centrality of unequal political-economic relations (Rice, 2009: 216). The transnational organization of production stratifies "a world economy structured by asymmetrical, hierarchical political-economic patterns reflected in the vastly divergent material throughput of human societies" (Rice, 2009: 216). It is also important in its illumination of how the negative costs of this capital accumulation system are externalized or imposed upon the semiperiphery and especially the peripheral areas (Rice, 2009:219).

Unequal exchange is therefore a central transfer mechanism that allows developed countries to launch and maintain uneven development and unequal "trading links in which they are the

senior partners” (Harrison, 1988:19). The argument therefore lies in the understanding that capital crosses international boundaries more easily than labour, resulting in glaring wage disparities between the Global South and the industrialized world (Harrison, 1988:19). This argument is supported by Wallerstein (2011:483) who states that the division of the world economy also includes the hierarchy of occupational tasks. Those occupational tasks demanding higher skill levels and immense capitalization are reserved for higher-ranking areas (core countries) (Wallerstein (2011:483). Such unequal distribution of economic tasks is largely a function of how work is socially organized in that it enhances and makes legitimate the capacities and abilities of some groups within the system to exploit the labour of others, thereby allowing some groups to acquire a larger share of surplus (Rice, 2009:220). This results in the inevitable and obvious geographical maldistribution of these occupational skills, because the capitalist world-economy “rewards accumulated capital, including human capital, at a higher rate than ‘raw’ labour power” (Wallerstein, 2011:483). It then follows that since products from the Global South are produced by people whose labour is undervalued in monetary terms, the products themselves are therefore relatively cheaper than those produced in the advanced capitalist nations (Harrison, 1988:19). Hickel et al. (2024:2) note that 90% of production labour in the global economy across all skill levels and sectors is performed in the Global South. However, in 2021, despite this 90% contribution of the total labour in global production, “the Global South received less half (44%) of global income, and Southern workers received 21% of global income in that year” (Hickel et al., 2024:2). This recent study shows how the global economy continues to benefit the Global North.

In light of the foregoing, scholars submit that development, and in turn, underdevelopment are interconnected because over time, peripheral nations reflect characteristics of underdevelopment “as development potential remains largely unrealized or is siphoned away” resulting from structured engagement with those countries that are economically and politically dominant (Rice, 2009:220). The world-systems theory therefore posits that the capitalist system began the moment Western nations developed trading connections with non-European nations which meant the gradual incorporation of the rest of the world in stages into a global system of exchange that was immensely unequal and continues to deepen. The system is also founded upon the creation of hierarchy in regards to occupational tasks in which labour from peripheral zones is undervalued and not as rewarded. Viewed in this way, it is difficult to see how global

chains can be of benefit to Global South nations, when unequal exchange is intrinsically linked to the structure of the capitalist world system.

2.3 WORLD-SYSTEMS AND COMMODITY CHAINS

More recent approaches to commodity chains (GCC, GVC, and GPN research) find their intellectual roots in the world-systems tradition through Hopkins and Wallerstein (1977:128) who first introduced the concept of commodity chains in 1977. It was an attempt to offer a practical explanation of the relationships between the actors and activities engaged in creating products and services within the global economy (Bair, 2009:2). This was described as links in a commodity chain (Bair, 2009:2). Accordingly, a chain is understood as "a network of labour and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity" (Bair, 2009:2). According to Gereffi (2018:14), Hopkins and Wallerstein also aimed at assessing how a stratified and hierarchical world-system is reproduced beyond the territorial borders of the nation-state. Such an analysis seeks to understand the asymmetrical administration of rewards among activities within a chain (Bair, 2009:8). The chain analogy was not so much about detailing a linear sequence of events that add value to particular goods, but rather about showing the array of relationships interwoven together through interconnected systems of production, distribution, and exchange (Bair, 2008:347). One of the major concerns of world-systems analysis is to highlight that a commodity chain is characterized and shaped by political power, and periods of growth and recession within the world economy (Bair, 2008:347). This is based on the argument of the tripartite division (core, semi-periphery, periphery) and world-systems theorists are therefore interested in how commodity chains recreate and reproduce it (Bair, 2009:156).

World-systems thinkers argue that wealth within a commodity chain is generally accrued by core states rather than peripheral ones because businesses and states in the core zone gain competitive advantages through innovations that transfer competitive pressures to the peripheral zones in the global economy (Gereffi et al., 1993:3). Accordingly, the world-systems commodity chain analysis is primarily state-centric and concerned with the international division of labour, a structure created by capitalism through processes like colonialism (Bair, 2005:156). It is, therefore, a framework overtly critical of the global economy that is argued to be structured to favour the Global North. Accordingly, the world-systems commodity chain

analysis is rooted in the belief that global trading negatively affects the less developed states due to this reproduction of global inequality through these commodity chains.

Such an analysis spurred the creation and implementation of the Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) policy by Latin-American states (Gereffi et al., 1993:96). This entailed more internal industrialization and less importation which saw a retreat from world trade (Gereffi et al., 1993:96). This was, however, short-lived, owing to the 1970s crises that left these nations in debt along with crushing economies (Gereffi et al., 1993:96). Simultaneously, there was the stark juxtaposition offered by the success of East-Asian states which had implemented an export-oriented policy as informed by modernization theory, advancing development through the cooperation between Western states and the rest of the world (Gereffi et al., 1993:97). Where the commodity chain analysis rooted in the world-systems approach had argued that capitalism reproduces hierarchy and inequality thus making development impossible, this "East-Asian miracle" challenged that argument and became a reference point for international institutions such as the IMF in arguing that global commodity chains were not necessarily creators or enhancers of inequality but could drive development.

Spurred by the world-systems commodity chain analysis, the discourse framing the research on global chains emerged. It emerged at a time that the international outsourcing of manufacturing production "began in earnest" as expressed by Smith (2016:41), that is in the 1960s and 1970s, at the turn of globalization. The discourse has evolved since its inauguration, primarily through three schools of thought: Global Commodity Chain (GCC) analysis, Global Value Chain (GVC) analysis, and Global Production Network (GPN) analysis, all of which aim to conceptualize the relationship between producers and suppliers in the global economy.

2.3.1 GLOBAL COMMODITY CHAINS (GCC)

Inspired by the world-systems approach, the GCC perspective, as pioneered by Gary Gereffi in the early 1990s, was focused on how contemporary global industries are organized and how the prospects for national development were affected by the power asymmetries of lead firms (Gereffi, 2018:14). For the GCC framework, the determining factor for how successful GCCs were in fostering development rested upon the organization of the multinational corporations

(MNCs) and their transnational production arrangements. It is this conceptualization that led to a breakaway from the traditional world-systems theory. World-systems theorists were sceptical about the possibility that countries could move between the three tiers of the worldsystem (core, semi-periphery, periphery) because to them, the hierarchical structure of the global capitalist economy just reproduced itself repeatedly (Gereffi, 2018:15). Conversely, the GCC approach is more optimistic than world-systems analysis about the benefits that countries in the Global South could gain from their firms' participation in global chains (Gereffi, 2018:15). The GCC framework assumed that power asymmetries are rooted in the way that global industries are organized (Gereffi, 2018:15). In this way, an understanding of the organization of MNCs and their transnational production arrangements would help to explain how export-oriented manufacturing nations like South Korea and Taiwan (within the East Asian economic miracle) could experience rapid economic growth while most other peripheral nations remain primarily exporting zones for simple labour-intensive technological goods made by unskilled workers (Smith & Mahutga, 2009:66).

A global commodity chain (GCC) is defined as a "set of interorganizational networks clustered around one commodity or product linking households, enterprises and states to one another within the world economy… [and involving] sequential stages of input acquisition, manufacturing, distribution, marketing and consumption" (Smith & Mahutga, 2009:66). The GCC framework comprises four key structures that shape these chains, namely: input-output, geographic, governance, and institutional, but I will focus on the governance structure as it is central to the framework (Sturgeon, 2009:114) This structure captured the differences in how firms organize their cross-border production arrangements and it contained an important distinction in that global chains are "driven" by two types of lead firms: buyers and producers (Sturgeon, 2009:115). Producer-driven global chains are those in which MNCs control the production system/process as is common in capital and technology-intensive production industries such as computers and automobiles (Gereffi, 1993:99). In contrast, buyer-driven global chains entail non-producing trading companies setting up decentralized production networks in numerous exporting nations usually located in the Global South (Gereffi 1993:97). This is most common in labour-intensive industries such as clothing and footwear industries (Gereffi 1993:97). In these chains, production occurs in independent factories in the Global South which supply buyers with products according to specifications determined by the buyers (Gereffi, 1993:97).

The buyer-driven analysis focused on the powerful role large retailers, such as Wal-Mart, and brand merchandizers like Nike play in the governance of commodity production and distribution (Sturgeon, 2009:115). Accordingly, Sturgeon (2009:115) argues that global buyers do not just place orders; they also actively assist in the creation, shaping, and coordination of the global chains that supply their goods. This means that even in the absence of having their own factories, the volume of their purchases gives them immense power over their suppliers (Sturgeon, 2009: 115). To this extent, power is used to "specify in great detail what, how, when, and by whom the goods they sell are produced" (Sturgeon, 2009: 115). Even in the absence of explicit coordination, acute market power gives them the license to extract price concessions from their main suppliers which in turn leads to suppliers moving their factories to low-cost locations and extracting price concessions from their own workers and upstream suppliers (Sturgeon, 2009: 115). The governance structure therefore explains two issues: the process in which control is exerted over other participants by certain players in the chain, and how lead firms or chain drivers "appropriate or distribute the value that is created along the chain" (Bair, 2009:9). The governance structure is therefore crucial in its ability to explain how GCCs can promote development or the lack thereof.

Comparative to the initial commodity chain framework, the GCC framework is not concerned with the overall structure of the global economy from a solely state-centric perspective but is rather concerned with how contemporary global industries are organized (Bair, 2008:348). Emphasis is therefore placed on the organizational scope of these transnational production arrangements; that is, "the linkages between various economic agents… in order to understand their sources of stability and change" (Gereffi, 2018:44). This witnessed a shift from a statecentric approach to focus on the interrelationships between various actors in a chain and the power some firms can utilize to influence the actions of other actors within the chain. Such a shift proved important for both policymakers and researchers "because it reflected and helped to explain several of the most novel features of the global economy" (Sturgeon, 2009:116). Such an analysis would help to better explain the various national development outcomes.

2.3.2 GLOBAL VALUE CHAINS (GVC)

While the GCC framework had gained traction and was widely influential in the 1990s, the early 2000s ushered in scholars critical of it on various grounds (Bair, 2008:351). One such criticism was its oversimplification of the global economy through a producer-driven vs buyer-driven typology (Bair, 2008:351). Another concern related to the need for a shift in terminology from "commodity" chain to "value" chain as the term commodity had connotations of very basic, undifferentiated products (Bair, 2008:351). It was argued that the GCC approach misses a lot of variables and other important features of global chains and their governance. According to Talbot (2009:99), Gereffi's recent work acknowledges how the producer-driven/buyer-driven typology does not account for recent advancements in network governance. For GVC scholars, the typology was "based on a static, empirically situated" perspective of technology and restrictions to entry when in fact, both are dynamic because of constant technology changes, and firm and industry-level learning (Sturgeon, 2009: 117). The GVC framework was therefore established with the aim of constructing a "dynamic, operational theory that could account for observed changes and anticipate future developments" (Sturgeon, 2009:118). The need to understand the power of global lead firms to coordinate and structure these networks is one of the core elements of this approach (Nadvi, 2008:331). It is founded on the recognition of the disproportionate power exercised by lead firms and the outcomes this implied for local producers who wanted to plug into these chains. Accordingly, the governance dynamics of interfirm ties within these chains are viewed as crucial in understanding the forms of power exercised by lead firms (Nadvi, 2008:331).

The GVC framework identifies a number of governance linkages between value chain activities, that is, market linkages, modular linkages, relational linkages, captive linkages, and hierarchical linkages (Sturgeon, 2009:119). The specific governance linkage experienced within a specific chain is thus determined by how complex the transaction is, the capabilities of the supplier, and how codifiable the information being shared is (Gereffi et al., 2018:114). Captive value chains highlight how power is directly exerted by lead firms on suppliers because the suppliers' capabilities are low even when product specifications can be codified (Gereffi et al., 2018:117). Such control explains the intense power asymmetry with the dominant party being the lead firm. In contrast, the power balance between firms in relational global value chains is more symmetrical because both parties contribute key competencies (Gereffi et al., 2018:117). Coordination is, therefore, clearer within relational chains because of close interactions between somewhat equal partners, unlike with the more "unidirectional flow of

information and control between unequal partners as in captive global value chains and within hierarchies" (Gereffi et al., 2018:117). Some industries can also witness the evolution of governance, as illustrated by the bicycle industry in the twentieth century, which witnessed a move from hierarchy to market-based coordination (Gereffi et al., 2018:119). In this way, the type of governance regulating inter-firm relations is crucial in its determination of development outcomes.

The GVC framework thus better explains the nuances within these chains as opposed to the "static" producer vs buyer chain typology offered by the GCC school of thought. It also makes clearer the significance of governance in characterizing a chain and the extent to which development can be possible as explained by the development possibilities offered by a relational value chain as opposed to one that is captive. The GVC framework thus makes it clear that the forms of power global lead firms have to coordinate and structure these networks is crucial to understanding the value chain outcomes.

2.3.3 GLOBAL PRODUCTION NETWORKS (GPN)

The GPN approach developed in the 1990s as "a relational and specifically geographic approach to the study of the global space-economy" (Hess & Yeung cited in Bair, 2009:4). The framework evolved in conversation with and also as a critique of the GCC framework, arguing that the GCC framework sometimes ignored the geographical or multifaceted nature of these chains (Bair, 2009:4). According to Nadvi (2008:331), it was also later critical of the GVC framework on the basis that the governance model was "highly stylized and representing only ideal forms." The GPN approach argued that at any given point in a chain, different forms of governance can be experienced and yet also still have an overall governance mode (Nadvi, 2008:331). For Nadvi (2008:331), the GVC analysis only addressed inter-firm governance and ignored intra-firm governance, or institutional and political governance that has the potential to impact on intra and inter-firm governance.

A global production network (GPN) can be defined as "an organizational arrangement, comprising interconnected firm and non-firm actors, coordinated by a lead firm, and producing goods or services across multiple geographical locations for worldwide markets" (Coe, 2021:1) In this way, a lead firm is described by scholars like Coe (2021:1) as a "necessary prerequisite"

for a GPN. It is therefore viewed as a powerful global company which exercises tight control over other actors within the network through the power wielded from its dominant position in either intermediate or final consumer markets (Coe, 2021:1). Coe (2021:1) submits that GPNs are a reflection of the intersection of two crucial processes: economic globalization and production fragmentation, that is, the processes of offshoring and outsourcing, and either process can individually lead to their formation. Accordingly, the framework aims to balance the way globalization is multifaceted with a "close analysis of specific networks in situ, and specifically the extent to which global networks are also local in the sense that they are embedded in different kinds of social or institutional contexts" (Bair, 2009:4). The GPN approach pays attention to non-firm actors such as supranational organizations, trade unions, government agencies, consumer groups, non-governmental organizations, and employer associations (Coe, 2021:10). By doing this, it offers a comprehensive understanding of the shifting arrangements of global networks according to various geographical and organizational structures by considering various analytical registers: value, power, and embeddedness (Coe, 2021:11).

According to Kaplinsky (cited in Coe, 2021:10), value derives from the profits of different kinds that corporations can "extract from their position within the wider global production network." Profits are therefore created when a corporation has access to limited resources which can shield it from competition by establishing entry barriers for competing firms (Coe & Yeung, 2015:16). Profits are also generated from, but not limited to, disproportionate access to crucial product and process technologies (technological rents), specific expertise of their labour force (human resource rents), and so forth (Coe & Yeung, 2015:16). Value and the processes of its creation, enhancement, and capture, is therefore a crucial analytical register in informing the characteristics of these chains (Coe, 2021:10). Once value characteristics in a particular GPN have been determined, it also then becomes possible to consider issues of value enhancement "through firm-to-firm processes of knowledge and technology transfer, and industrial upgrading" (Coe & Yeung, 2015:17). Value directly leads to the second analytical register: power, and Coe (2021:11) makes use of Yeung's understanding of it as a "relational, transactions specific, and always coexisting with relations of dependency." By this token, power varies in relation to the kind of participants in that particular chain, the assets at their disposal, and how they are mobilized (Coe & Yeung, 2015:17). This makes power relations transaction specific and highlights how they can influence a network member's ability to

capture value (Coe & Yeung, 2015:17). The GPN approach also believes that the mobilization of power within GPNs is not just limited to firm actors but can also be mobilized by non-firm actors like the state as well as collective actors such as labour (Coe, 2021:11). This helps to explain how other sources of power may shape GPNs.

The third and final analytical register investigates how GPNs are embedded, that is, the ways in which they interact with ongoing economic, social, and political dynamics of their specific locales (Coe, 2021:11). Societal, network, and territorial embeddedness are interrelated values that make up this register. Societal embeddedness relates to the social and cultural characteristics of a firm in its home base and how they are transferred into the new space it is investing in (Coe and Yeung, 2015:17). Network embeddedness on the other hand, refers to the structure or organization of the network itself, that is, the extent to which a GPN is functional and how socially connected it is (Coe and Yeung, 2015:17). It therefore relates to "the stability of its agents' relations, and the importance of the network for its participants" while also accounting for the roles of agents external to the chain such as trade unions (Coe and Yeung, 2015:17). Territorial embeddedness explains "how firms and related organizations are anchored in different places" (Coe and Yeung, 2015:18). This means the absorptions and constraints of GPNs by the economic enterprises and social dynamics they find already existing in a particular place (Coe and Yeung, 2015:18). Coe and Yeung (2015:18) thus believe that these three forms of embeddedness will directly affect the potential for economic and social development in given locations, both individually and together.

In light of the above-mentioned, the GPN framework places emphasis on the "complex firm networks and territorial institutions involved in globalized economic activity, and how these are structured both organizationally and geographically" (Coe, 2021:11). This allows for a comprehensive understanding of the generation and distribution of value, the operation of production systems, and the changing arrangements within these networks (Coe, 2021:11). It also aids in the explanation of the varying development prospects and outcomes of various firms, nations, and regions, something that was not as clear in the previous global chains approaches. The GPN approach understands development as a "dynamic outcome of the complex interaction between region-specific networks and global production networks within the context of changing regional governance structures," informed by issues of value creation, distribution, enhancement, power, and embeddedness (Coe and Yeung, 2015:19). Since its

emergence, the approach has garnered interest and has been applied in various sectors in a bid to better understand the global economy and the development outcomes.

2.4 CONCLUSION

Overall, research on global chains (including the world-systems commodity chains, GCC, GVC, GPN approaches) has evolved from a world-systems state-centric approach to an analysis of the organizational arrangements of firm and non-firm actors in the production of goods and services across multiple locations. The world-systems commodity chain approach was viewed as having failed to account for and explain the successes of the East-Asian nations, which seemed to contradict their argument that commodity chains reproduce inequality and prevent development. The GCC framework was in turn criticized for its static and narrow buyer vs producer chains typology and this ushered in the GVC framework which had argued that chain governance by MNCs was the imperative element to understanding development outcomes. Finally, the emergence of the GPN framework called attention to the limitations of focusing too much on MNCs when they do not operate in isolation and have other external influences to navigate. In this way, the GPN approach calls for the need to look beyond MNCs because there are many exogenous elements that also influence production networks. The next chapter will unpack the issue of development through the GVC notions of economic and social upgrading. It also discusses the criticisms that have been brought forward regarding this idea of upgrading.

3. CHAPTER THREE

GLOBAL VALUE CHAINS RESEARCH (GCC, GVC,GPN) AND THE QUESTION OF DEVELOPMENT: ECONOMIC UPGRADING AND SOCIAL UPGRADING

3.1 INTRODUCTION

As far as development outcomes are concerned, upgrading has always been a central feature of global chain research. Upgrading can be conceptualized as a process of repositioning by firms within a chain when they look to change how they are plugged into global chains so as to increase the rewards they get from participating in them (Bair, 2009:29). The global chains scholarship advances upgrading from both an economic and a social standpoint although initially, there was the advancement of industrial upgrading through the GCC approach. Economic upgrading focuses on improvements by firms while social upgrading focuses on benefits that can be experienced by workers.

3.2 INDUSTRIAL UPGRADING

The GCC approach focuses on the role of lead firms as potential instruments for upgrading and development, but the concept is largely discussed in terms of the export roles that states or regions execute in the global economy (Bair, 2009:29). This was understood in relation to industrial upgrading, which "involves organizational learning to improve the position of firms or nations in international trade networks" (Gereffi, 2018:73). Comparative research examining the development trajectories in the apparel commodity chain in East Asia and Latin America highlighted that the successes of the East-Asia buyer-driven chains lay in the move from the sole assemblage of goods to a "more domestically integrated and higher value-added form of export known alternatively as full-package supply" (Gereffi, 2018:73). Some firms moved beyond that role as well into manufacturing brand-name products and the GCC perspective explains these successes as emanating from the ability of East Asia to create close relations with a wide range of lead firms in buyer-driven chains (Gereffi, 2018:73). In saying this, the lead firm is seen as crucial to the realization of industrial upgrading because they are the

"primary sources of material inputs, technology transfer, and knowledge in these organizational networks" (Gereffi, 2018:73).

3.3 ECONOMIC UPGRADING

The foregoing highlights how the concept of upgrading was initially used to examine the trajectories of national or regional economies. However, it gradually came to be used to "describe the position and capabilities of developing-country firms in particular global value chains" (Bair, 2009:30). The GVC approach defined economic upgrading as "a move to higher value activities in production, to improved technology, knowledge and skills, and to increased benefits or profits deriving from participation in GVCs" (Gereffi & Lee, 2016:29). The argument here is that through participation in global chains, a firm is likely to improve its current production processes to become more efficient. In some cases, firms may also improve the scope of their activities to include new functions they had never undertaken before, thereby improving their position within the chain (Dindial et al., 2020:476). The economic upgrading model is characterized by four segments according to Barrientos et al. (2018:232-233):

- Process upgrading: upgrading the processes by which a product is made in a bid to make the process more efficient. This can mean the substitution of capital for labour, for example "higher productivity through automation" which would mean the reduction of skilled or unskilled labour.
- Product upgrading: the introduction of more sophisticated types of products, which in most instances, means the need for more skilled jobs.
- Functional upgrading: firms acquiring new higher value-added functions or tasks within the chain such as design, logistics. This also means the introduction of "new workforce skill sets linked to expanded firm capabilities."
- Chain upgrading: firms entering a more technologically advanced chain or industry using knowledge acquired through products they were already making. This can be exemplified by how textile competence can move a firm from traditional fabrics to speciality nanofibers or similar materials to be used in the medical or defence industries.

Accordingly, each economic upgrading segment has a capital and labour angle that it comes with as the former refers to the use of new equipment or advanced technology while the latter

points to new skills acquisition or increased capabilities and productivity (Barrientos, 2018:233).

Global value chains, as reflected above, can be argued to be vehicles for economic upgrading as there is a need for supplier firms to transform certain aspects of their processes to meet the standards of the market they are tapping into. Moreover, these benefits are a lot easier to accrue when these chains are governed by MNCs as exemplified by issues such as market access because even when developed countries forego trade barriers, suppliers will not "automatically gain market access, because the chains which producers feed into are often governed by a limited number of buyers" (Humphrey & Schmitz, 2001:20). As such, before any sort of economic upgrading can be experienced, there is the need to firstly tap into a specific market successfully and governance matters to the extent that the particular governing lead firm can pave way for market access. Economic upgrading and prospects for global chains as opportunities for development are also advanced by international institutions like the World Bank through its World Development indicators and reports (Selwyn & Leyden, 2021:174). They advance the idea of Global South suppliers being able to economically upgrade if they coordinate trade in ways that allow for MNC governance so as to facilitate development (Selwyn & Leyden, 2021:174). By deploying a "mutual gains/comparative-advantage" conceptualization, GVC participation is argued to facilitate economic upgrading for Global South suppliers (Selwyn & Leyden, 2021:176). Without these trading relations, the development of developing countries is deemed nearly impossible (Selwyn & Leyden, 2021:176).

3.4 SOCIAL UPGRADING

Social upgrading is defined as "the process of improvement in the rights and entitlements of workers as social actors and the enhancement of the quality of their employment" and this encompasses access to better work, improved working conditions, protections and rights (Barrientos et al., 2018:233). Social upgrading as a concept emanates from the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Decent Work Agenda which is based on four pillars: employment, standards and rights at work, social protection, and social dialogue (Marcato & Baltar, 2017:19). Indicators of social upgrading are separated into two categories: measurable rights and enabling rights (Barrientos et al., 2018:234). Measurable rights are those quantifiable aspects of worker life such as working hours, wages, gender divisions and subscription to

unions (Barrientos et al., 2018:234). Enabling rights on the other hand, speak to concepts that are difficult to quantify, such as rights to collective bargaining, freedom of association, and non-discrimination (Barrientos et al., 2018:234). The ILO looks at each of these aspects and how they can help the realization of social upgrading of workers if its policies are implemented (Marcato & Baltar, 2017:19). The Decent Work Agenda is argued to promote work that is carried out under conditions where there is human dignity, equity, freedom, and security in which there is adequate remuneration, provision for social coverage and overall protection of rights (Barrientos et al., 2018:233). Social upgrading is thus seen as a possible outcome for workers within GPNs if there is adherence to these pillars of the Decent Work Agenda. To this extent, poor working conditions are explained as the product of governance dissonance, that is the failure of coordination between the three governance pillars (lead firms, the state and local actors, and international institutions).

The point of departure in terms of social upgrading is in the acknowledgment that trading chains or networks, through neoliberalization, globalization, and capitalism, have "engendered the rise of a new, international division of labour in which vast brand and retail companies coordinate production across a panoply of sub-contracted suppliers located all over the Global South" (LeBaron et al., 2018:16). This is a reflection of how globalization can explain the rise of supply chains because lead firms have thrived on the interconnectedness of countries by outsourcing production factories to smaller firms (LeBaron et al., 2018:17). This is done in an attempt to expand profits while reducing legal liability as evidenced by Nestle which "has almost 165,000 direct suppliers and 695,000 individual farmers worldwide" (LeBaron et al., 2018:17). Globalization has also meant multiple supply chains cut across transnational borders as lead firms attempt to take advantage of lower costs of labour and weaker labour protections in other countries, with few remaining concentrated within national borders (LeBaron et al., 2018:17). The result of that is a growing global labour market yet the global chains discourse has been, for the most part, argued to be firm-centric, with little to no comprehensive analysis of workers. Initially, social upgrading, understood as the process of improvement for workers and their working conditions and rights, was viewed as a direct by-product of economic upgrading (Dünhaupt et al., 2022:21). This trickle-down theory assumed that economic upgrading automatically led to social upgrading, and it informed the IMF, World Bank, and the US Treasury's economic policy action in the 1980s as guided by the Washington Consensus (Dünhaupt et al., 2022:21). However, such an assumption was challenged by research centred

on labour which yielded disparate outcomes of economic upgrading in global chains (Marslev et al., 2022:830).

In its original formation, the GCC framework lacked a comprehensive understanding of labour as a constitutive factor of global chains. Its core conceptual innovations, governance and upgrading, were firm-centric such that workers were only present as "passive victims as capital seeks cheap labour" (Selwyn, 2013:77). This perspective has continued within the two frameworks (GCCs and GVCs) as it developed (Selwyn, 2013:77). Labour force analysis is primarily seen in the GPN framework which strives to incorporate various kinds of network configurations and multiple sets of actors and relationships in an attempt to include workers and trade unions into its framework (Selwyn, 2013:77). The GPN framework conceptualizes social upgrading through the hybrid governance model premised on the notion of private, public, and social governance (Smith, 2016:34). This entails governance by MNCs and local big businesses, international institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, and local actors (Smith, 2016:34).

3.5 CHALLENGING THE MAINSTREAM NARRATIVE: GLOBAL VALUE CHAINS AS GLOBAL POVERTY CHAINS

3.5.1 ECONOMIC IMPERIALISM

Global chains discourse (within world-systems analysis and within the GCC, GVC, and GPN approaches), has, since globalization, offered valuable research into contemporary global capitalism. However, even in the face of its evolution, recent years have witnessed multiple scholars, focusing on the Global South, criticizing the research in general. The focus of their criticism has primarily related to assumptions by scholars writing on value chains, that participation in these chains will result in development whether from an economic or social standpoint. Global chains discourse tends to make development, through economic upgrading, seem somewhat of a final and inevitable outcome. However, there has been evidence suggesting that sometimes participation in these chains does not result in economic upgrading at all or worse, may result in economic downgrading (Marcato & Baltar, 2017:15). As far as

social upgrading goes, scholars like Suwandi (2019) are not convinced that benefits can be guaranteed for those working for firms participating in these chains or networks.

Moreover, scholars have challenged these assumptions of upgrade and development as they also question the role of powerful international institutions such as the World Bank in advancing these mainstream assumptions. Scholars like Selwyn and Leyden (2021:176) argue that such assumptions, backed by international institutions, obscure the realities within the global chains such as the inequalities brought about by these chains, therefore perpetuating the core-periphery status quo. In light of the foregoing, scholars like Suwandi (2019:16) argue that "the global capital-labour relations inherent in these chains are still imperialistic in their configurations." Citing Lenin, Suwandi (2019:16), defines imperialism as "the complex intermingling of economic and political interests, related to the efforts of large capital to control economic territory." Suwandi (2019:16) further goes on to identify the numerous interrelated aspects of imperialism which, among others, include global exploitation and expropriation or the appropriation of labour in capitalist production specifically through the domination of MNCs that primarily emanate from the core zone. By this token, the enabling nature of governance is only for a select few, who are the local elites or big businesses, but the greater scope sees the exploitation and further underdevelopment of these nations because of the imperialistic nature of capitalism and neoliberalism (Suwandi, 2019:20). Accordingly, capital accumulation means exploitative value-chains with unequal exchange being central and based on a global wage hierarchy in which value from the South is captured by global capital (MNCs) (Suwandi, 2019:20).

MNCs are therefore viewed as deploying oligopolistic development. This means that they engage in surface-level development by allowing market access to local big businesses so as to then freely exploit the rest of the market (Humphrey & Schmitz, 2001:20). It is for this reason that global chains are seen as inhibiting development because lead firms' decisions more often than not, lead to certain types of producers and traders losing out (Humphrey & Schmitz, 2001:20). This is exemplified by the UK-Africa horticulture chain which illustrates the marginalization of small-scale growers, not because of the advantageous efficiency that largescale farmers offer but as a result of the sourcing strategies of lead firms which are influenced by consumer expectations, among others (Humphrey & Schmitz, 2001:20). Moreover, within economic upgrading itself, facilitation for acquiring capabilities can be met with barriers because at the end of the day, MNCs and the elitist capitalist agenda are not trying

to create competition (Humphrey & Schmitz, 2001:20). To this end, development is minimal and monitored so as not to create competition for MNCs (Humphrey & Schmitz, 2001:20). Accordingly, there is economic imperialism in the way that the entire value chain is a top-down project meant to partially develop Global South suppliers within the chain whilst exploiting labour value and economic potential because of the race to the bottom (Dindial et al., 2020:490). This leads to some scholars viewing these chains as contemporary pipelines of extraction and arguing that mainstream assumptions about global value chains "fail to make a distinction between value-added creation and its appropriation" (Dindial et al., 2020:490). This is made concrete by the argument that the occurrence of product and process upgrading in Global South firms does not directly mean that the share of value added in these production chains changes to the benefit of firms in the Global South (Dünhaupt et al., 2022:18).

3.5.2 SOCIAL UPGRADING AS A NARROW CONCEPTION OF LABOUR RELATIONS

According to Suwandi (2019:35), workers generally bear the burden that results from the strategies used by MNCs to get their dependent suppliers to provide flexibility in production. Suwandi's assertion implies that social upgrading is unlikely under such circumstances and how current global chains are configured. The concept of social upgrading along with the Decent Work Agenda, are criticized for their expectation that improvements for workers can only delivered by elite agents such as firms, national states, and global organizations because it represents a top-down understanding of social upgrading (Selwyn, 2013:76). Selwyn (2013:82) therefore argues that the Decent Work Agenda, as the framework for social upgrading, has a weak understanding of class because of its "inability to identify the systemic processes of exploitation" which characterize social relations within a capitalist system. Mosley (2017:155) also argues that the mere ability of firms to relocate their production/sourcing or threaten to do so, to other jurisdictions paves the way for firms to capitalize on gaps in regulatory systems by firms so as to bypass disadvantageous regulations (regulatory arbitrage). Accordingly, the moment a state insists on implementing higher labour standards than its counterparts, that state runs the risk of losing investment, jobs, and orders to other foreign markets (Mosley, 2017:155). Such pressures tempt governments to "enter into 'races to the bottom'" and in saying that, time and cost pressures can give rise to violations of workers' rights, particularly in labour-intensive industries (Mosley, 2017:155). Such an environment is viewed as potentially leading to workers working excessive overtime without

compensation (Mosley, 2017:154). Additionally, because allowing workers the right to organize or protest may lead to demands for higher wages and slow down production thus affecting deadlines, employers are likely to prefer drawing from a large pool of surplus labour (Mosley, 2017:154). Surplus labour means fewer reasons for them to protect the rights of their labour force. As such, a sole focus on horizontal relations neglects the power dynamics between MNCs and supplier firms as it is more than a question of implementation. There is pressure from lead firms to have supplier firms deliver products within set time frames and at certain low costs to the extent that negotiation (if we are talking about cooperative governance) is only in theory. Moreover, conceptualizing decent work as a question of implementation within the local spheres neglects the issues of class, the North/South relations, and systemic exploitative processes within the chains/networks.

Marslev et al. (2022:828) submit that workers are not merely victims and passive recipients of exploitative and oppressive working conditions within the global economy but that they have agency. However, this agency is limited by the nuanced relationships within global chains and the constraints they face. This is exemplified by the Bangladesh textile industry wherein the female workforce is seen by employers as dispensable labour for ruthless exploitation because they can be replaced by the supposed unlimited supply of young women outsourced from the countryside (Selwyn, 2016:18). This idea of surplus labour breeds an environment conducive for driving wage levels below subsistence costs (Selwyn, 2016:18). Smith (2016:10) then argues that the "starvation wages, death-trap factories, and fetid slums" found in Bangladesh are representative of working conditions of much of the labour force throughout the Global South as the region has become the source for surplus value which has helped in sustaining profits and serving "unsustainable overconsumption in imperialist nations." Similarly, supplier firms in Bangladesh report that worker exploitation is a result of the pressures from the lead firms (Selwyn, 2016:18). By this token, global chain discourse (GCC, GVC, GPN) is accused of missing the vertical dimension of transnational relations that speak to the imperialistic nature, predatory purchasing power, and pricing of the MNCs which act as ripple effects for supplier firms to squeeze profits by cutting costs mainly through the labour force.

This establishes a picture of a global economy driven by elite interests where ideas of benefits for the labour force highlight a lack of consideration of the history of the North/South relations and their continued reflections. LeBaron et al. (2018:18) therefore argue that the "spread of

neoliberal models of market and social governance has been neither an organic nor an even development" but has occurred as a result of powerful elite actors pushing through changes in favour and interest of financial capital, big business, and the wealthy. To this effect, such development is and has always been an inherently unequal project which, through global chains, deepens inequality more than distributing gains or advancing substantial development. This rising inequality has subsequently resulted in throwing onto the global labour market scene, "a vast army of people so poor and lacking in state protections that they epitomize the inability to say no to exploitation" (LeBaron et al., 2018:18). Selwyn (2019:72) would then argue that given this structure of the global economy, there needs to be a reconceptualization of some of these chains as global poverty chains (GPCs).

3.6 CONCLUSION

It is within the above discussion that I situate my examination of workers' experiences in the fish exporting companies in Gqeberha, South Africa. The East Asian success may enable us to believe that perhaps these chains can indeed result in development. Questions still arise, though, as to the kind of development that is experienced and whether it trickles down to the workers as well. The historical context of the North/South relations also implies the continuation of exploitation both at firm level and human level (workers). Accordingly, I set out to find out if in the case of South Africa, global chains can be seen as positive for the workers or ought to be seen as poverty-inducing chains, as has been argued by multiple scholars in this field. The succeeding chapter provides a brief examination of the general history of labour in South Africa and the current labour trends in the fisheries industry. It also offers a discussion of the South African context by looking at the fisheries industry and the dynamics thereof between businesses.

4. CHAPTER FOUR

THE SOUTH AFRICAN FISHERY CONTEXT: FISH VALUE CHAIN

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the global annual consumption of fish per capita reached 20kg with the expectation that it would increase (SADC-EU report, 2017:4). This shows that fish is fast becoming one of the most traded food commodities in the world and more than half of the fish originates from developing states (SADC-EU report, 2017:4). In South Africa, the fish sector contributes less than 1% to total GDP but nonetheless remains an extremely important strategic sector (SADCEU report, 2017:4). The fisheries sector is, according to the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF), worth an estimated R8 billion a year (SADC-EU report, 2017:4). In the commercial sector, it is estimated to directly employ 28 000 people with thousands more relying on fisheries resources for consumption and as a source of income (SADC-EU report, 2017:4). The South African fisheries industry has always been characterized by tensions between different races regarding access to resources, rights, and quotas (Hauck et al., 2002:467). The local dynamics alone raise questions about the kind of environment experienced by workers in this industry. Moreover, the idea of international pressures informing the experiences of workers in exporting companies that are plugged into global chains brings a whole new set of questions that I hope this research can shed light on.

4.2 THE SOUTH AFRICAN LABOUR LANDSCAPE

Within the global chains discourse, Barrientos et al. (2018:228) submit that while there are employment opportunities that come with GPNs, for many workers, "GPN employment is insecure and unprotected, and ensuring decent work for more vulnerable workers poses significant problems." Moreover, working conditions, wages, and other social outcomes for workers in these networks can be poor, leading to concerns about exploitation and inequality (LeBaron et al., 2018:18). This is particularly important in South Africa's context as the fisheries industry has a long history of discrimination and marginalization of certain groups of

people along class and racial lines (Isaacs et al., 2007:302). The labour dynamics and structure in South Africa are of extreme importance to this research in order to then answer the question of whether there are benefits to be accrued by workers in the exporting industry.

4.2.1 A HISTORY OF SYSTEMATIC RACISM AND EXPLOITATION OF THE WORKFORCE

To begin with, labour, citizenship, and society in South Africa, are linked in complex ways as a result of a long history of the exploitation of black labour. The apartheid government deliberately weakened the position of black capitalists and labourers through the maintenance of structural under-employment in a bid to strengthen the socio-economic standing of all whites (Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw, 2009:885). Simultaneously, it also provided white capitalists with a cheap black labour force which was drawn from an extremely poor reserve army of labour (Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw, 2009:885). In this way, the labour market was used as a "mechanism to segregate society" (Festus et al., 2015:1). Racially segregated and extremely unequal labour rights were central to the apartheid political regime (Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw, 2009:885). This can be exemplified by the 1953 Bantu Education Act which ensured that nonwhites received substandard quality of education in contrast to their white counterparts, which successfully placed limitations on their potential to be substantively productive within the labour market and in turn, stunted their capacity to improve their living standards (Festus et al., 2015:2). Additionally, legislation like the Black Labour Act of 1964 created extreme limitations on the kind of employment that blacks could engage in and the conditions of this employment (Festus et al., 2015:2). Beyond employment opportunities, white workers had a wide range of rights they benefited from such as, but not limited to, union rights, medical insurance and access to labour courts, all of which were a stark contrast to the state's efforts to weaken African workers either through directly attacking them or destabilizing their organizations (Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw, 2009:886).

Migrant labour, both within South Africa and from neighbouring countries was crucial to the development of the South African economy. The movement of people between the rural and urban areas in South Africa became an established element of the economic system by means of systematic state interventions to organize and control labour. This was supplemented by various measures which made permanently settling in the urban areas impossible for these migrants (Posel, 2004:278). Furthermore, the policy on African labour stipulated that at least

every two years, African contract workers were to go back to their home countries (Posel, 2004:278). Like many internal migrants from rural areas or Bantustans, foreign contract workers were also not allowed to bring their spouses or families with them (Posel, 2004:278). One of the key issues when assessing the South African labour market is therefore the emergence of a working class that was multinational and multiracial due to workers being drawn from all over southern Africa, the British Empire and beyond (Bonner et al., 2007:149). This historical understanding of the labour landscape and the centrality of migrant labour in South Africa is important to understand contemporary labour trends.

South African capitalism during the apartheid era was embedded in a regional political economy, and in regional, as well as transcontinental labour markets (Bonner et al., 2007:149). This was prevalent within the nation's extractive industry whose exploitation of labour has been the foundation of the modern industrial economy. Unlocking the potential of minerals such as gold was predicated on black labour: "cheap, disposable, and exploitable" (Crush & Tshitereke, 2001:50). In saying this, there was a recruiting apparatus that drafted labour from the rural countryside as well as outside of South Africa (Crush & Tshitereke, 2001:50). The argument was that South Africans were not suited to work in mines and that foreign labour was crucial or else the county would collapse. In the early twentieth century, there were attempts to recruit cheap labour from as far as China for this cheap labour, but this yielded little success which led to focusing on the subcontinent (Crush & Tshitereke, 2001:50). Neighbouring colonial governments were submissive to such claims and "entered into bilateral agreements to entrench the contract labour system in their own interests" and later on, independent African governments would follow suit (Crush & Tshitereke, 2001:50). By the 1970s, almost eighty percent of South Africa's labour in the mines was foreign (Crush & Tshitereke, 2001:51).

4.2.2 POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA AND THE LABOUR QUESTION

Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw (2009:886) argue that the transition into a democratic South Africa has had a significant effect on workers without improving their situations as had been hoped. The democratic government's desire to reconstruct a discriminatory and exploitative labour system has been manifest in changes to the law but has not been translated into a concrete reality in the workplace (Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw, 2009:886). It has been accompanied by a casualization of labourers' status and conditions because economic coercion, made possible by

the high unemployment in both South Africa and the region, was how employers adjusted to this transition (Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw, 2009:886). Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw (2009:886) argue that the protective laws that were adopted by the new post-apartheid government did not prevent the continuation of worker exploitation and oppression. Indeed, a crucial feature of the post-apartheid labour market has been the conscious adoption of strategies to avoid labour law protection by many employers (Dickinson, 2017:791).

In the immediate post-apartheid period, a prominent strategy for depriving employees of labour law protection was the practice of camouflaging employment by turning employees into independent contractors through contractual stipulations (Benjamin, 2008:1582). In later years, employers shifted to the use of triangular employment relationships involving labour brokering, or temporary employment services (TESs) (Dickinson, 2017:791). This created informal employer-employee relationships, which meant that the workers lacked bargaining power due to obscured employer relationships (Dickinson, 2017:791). Employers also used the Cooperatives Act to employ workers without adhering to the provisions of labour legislation (Benjamin, 2008:1582). The new government's liberation of the economy while opening it to the international economy led to various stakeholders and sectors responding in ways that did not all mean better conditions for the labour force (Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw, 2009:896). The private sector, for example, responded with labour automation: replacement of human labour with technology, machinery or automated systems, along with the creation of temporary enterprises. Most importantly, the sector resigned itself to massive outsourcing which allowed for the reduction of costs and made working arrangements highly flexible (Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw, 2009:896). This meant "a rapid casualization of work and conditions" made possible by the increased use of casual labour, temporary contracts and task-based payment practices (Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw, 2009:896).

Benjamin (2008:1584) submits that changes in work in the country can be conceptualised in terms of two interconnected processes: casualization and externalization. They both highlight "shifts from the norm of the standard employment relationship which is understood as being indefinite (permanent) and full-time employment, usually at a workplace controlled by the employer" (Benjamin, 2008:1585). Casualization denotes the replacement of standard employment with part-time or temporary employment, and in some cases, both (Benjamin, 2008:1584). Externalization, on the other hand, pertains to economic restructuring that sees

employment being regulated by a commercial contract instead of a contract of employment (Benjamin, 2008:1585). Both of these processes are argued to have led to the informalization of work because employment is becoming more unregulated. At the same time, workers do not have protection through labour law because they either are unable to enforce their rights or they do not have the legal status of an employee (Benjamin, 2008:1585). The excessive increase in labour brokering – temporary employment services (TESs) has been the foundation upon which externalization has developed, and the wages in such practices are remarkably lower (Dickinson, 2017:791).

In other countries, crises have often led to a change in wage relations leading to new production relations and management practices of the workforce. However, in South Africa, the new forms of employment that have emerged after the end of apartheid are a "continuation of racial subordination without reconfiguring the apartheid wage relations" (Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw, 2009:897). The new employment forms and increasing labour precariousness have promoted the circumvention of labour policies by employers and limited the concrete transformation of labour relations in South Africa (Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw, 2009:897). The new system of industrial relations has concretized the power of capital through the weakening of trade unions, the inability of collective bargaining to protect workers, and the limited direct state intervention in the labour market (Di Paola & Pons-Vignon, 2013:632). The high unemployment rates in South Africa also make it a conducive environment for the exploitation of workers and the violation of their rights in these industries because there is a large reserve of surplus labour, which further spotlights the questions around whether worker benefits in these exporting industries in a context such as this are tangible. At the end of 2022, official unemployment stood at 32.7%, the lowest it had been in two years, while the unofficial unemployment rate, which includes people who have become discouraged and are not looking for employment, stood at 42.6% (McKeever, 2023:2).

The emergence of new employment forms that continue the cycle of racial subordination and wage relations of the apartheid era means that firms have a massive pool of cheap labour at their disposal. The new industrial relations system has witnessed local firms bypassing labour policies without much consequence, thereby entrenching the power of capital through diminished collective labour bargaining and limited state intervention. This adds to the question of whether there are benefits that the labour force stands to accrue in the exporting industries,

where it is clear that the dynamics and politics are structured to favour the MNCs who outsource for the purpose of finding the cheapest materials and labour. Such motivations also mean that various supplying firms have to try their best to be the cheapest if they want to be in partnership with these MNCs and gain access to international markets. Labour can, therefore, be seen as a constantly precarious part of the chain/network because changes can take place anytime as suppliers race to meet buyer demands. These changes could range from labour casualization to labour automation which would mean unemployment for some workers. This proposition, coupled with the historical and contemporary labour dynamics in South Africa, makes the South African labour force within these chains an interesting case study.

4.3 HISTORY OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN FISHERY INDUSTRY

South Africa's fisheries industry is one of the oldest sectors of the country's economy. Its export orientation can be dated back to the mid-20th century when fish output was systematically redirected into international markets (Crosoer et al., 2006:19). This was a result of the domestic market being too small to absorb the production of fish products due partly to the impoverishment of the majority of the population because of apartheid's discriminatory policies (Crosoer et al., 2006:19). Historically, South Africa's industrial fisheries have been dominated by a few large companies whose development and successes were premised on the favourable policies and support from the successive white governments (Nielsen & Hara, 2006:44). Export production reinforced ownership concentration through the creation of state approved "producer cartels" who vehemently opposed granting access rights to new entrants with little capital (Crosoer et al., 2006:19). This is exemplified by the deep-sea hake fishery, the most valuable fishery in South Africa. It is a highly capital and labour-intensive industry in which success in the industry means adding value to the products and creating brand names that can be globally competitive, whilst also organizing local and international distribution and marketing networks (Nielsen & Hara, 2006:44). It was effectively controlled by a small number of large companies with the two largest being Irvin & Johnson and the Sea Harvest Corporation who, between themselves, held 75% of the fish quotas (Nielsen & Martin, 1996:155).

Such a position was further exacerbated by the fact that companies like Irvin and Johnson, Sea Harvest, Marine Products, and Oceana were dominant in multiple types of fisheries, such as

the anchovy and pilchard fishery and the abalone fishery (Hersoug & Holm, 2000:224). In this way, "it is hard to escape the impression of an oligopolistic structure" (Hersoug & Holm, 2000:224). Such domination is further amplified by the way quotas were generally granted to companies that are vertically integrated (Hersoug & Holm, 2000:224). Given that big business is predominantly white, this also implies the existence of racial barriers (Hersoug & Holm, 2000:224). The monopoly enjoyed by these companies in terms of fishing rights led to the development of the industrial fisheries as extremely vertically integrated systems that combined harvesting, processing, and marketing (Nielsen & Hara, 2006:44). This created a difficult environment for new entrants both in the historical context and in the post-apartheid era where most of them resorted to entering into joint ventures with the established actors (Nielsen & Hara, 2006:44). The post-apartheid fisheries industry has been able to trade as a non-pariah in the global economy because of a neo-liberal post-apartheid economic policy which reduced state intervention (Crosoer et al., 2006:21).

However, in the post-apartheid era, historical ownership concentration patterns have remained with few new black entrants (Yakob et al., 2006:2). The South African fisheries industry being vertically integrated has meant limited market access for new players. Vilakazi and Ponte (2020:14) submit that companies like Irvin & Johnson and the Sea Harvest Corporation are still dominant players who control the entire value chain because of their continued vertical integration. Accordingly, they exercise dominant control of both the domestic and export markets for the South African hake fishery (Vilakazi & Ponte, 2020:14). While new entrants are meant to be integrated formally in processes of decision-making, the existing decision-making processes, structures, and institutions have remained the same (Nielsen & Hara, 2006:49). Post-apartheid South Africa aimed to establish a new policy and legislation which would allow the redistribution of fishing rights to previously marginalized racial groups and this led to the Marine Living Resources Act (MLRA) promulgated in 1998 (Isaacs & Hara, 2015: 10). However, such ambitions were taking place at a time that the government was also pursuing the maintenance of a globally competitive industry to the extent that quotas and permits did not become easier to acquire, just more institutionalized (Isaacs & Hara, 2015: 10). As a way to meet the MLRA requirements, the industry recruited black individuals who were highly politically connected to the new government to serve on the boards of fishing companies and entered into different kinds of partnerships and joint venture agreements (Menon et al., 2018:4).

The aforementioned indicate the continued concentration of rights in the hands of the few. More than that, was the coalescence of local elites within various communities in possession of the necessary social and political capital in an attempt to maximise quota access (Isaacs & Hara, 2015: 10). This resulted in the establishment of gatekeeping within the industry as most of the poor and marginalized fishers were left without fishing rights and in turn, access to the sea (Isaacs & Hara, 2015: 10). Some of the poor and marginalized fishers managed to exist within it strictly as labour for those already established rights holders (Isaacs & Hara, 2015: 10). This proved to be an advantageous environment for the elites whose success was also augmented by their abilities to "buy out poor fishers from their newly privatised companies" (Isaacs & Hara, 2015: 10). Accordingly, the reforms in this sector generated opportunities for the elite to gain fishing rights to the detriment of small new entrants. This marginalized them even further and they did not have the protection of legislation as it was the same legislation (MLRA) that had created these marginalizations (Isaacs & Hara, 2015: 10). These power dynamics reflect the South African political history such that ownership is still concentrated in the hands of whites with fishermen (those doing the actual fishing and processing the fish, and thus constituting labour) being mostly black (Nielsen & Martin, 1996:156). Apartheid legislation manipulated the fair distribution of access rights to natural resources which resulted in black South Africans being denied land, water, mineral, and marine resources (Nielsen & Martin, 1996:156).

Vilakazi and Ponte (2020:23) argue that even in the wake of fisheries reform, the same industries as before, continue to occupy a dominant position. Transformation of the fishery industry was expected to lead to equitable wealth distribution within the broader society but "the MLRA framework favoured, privileged, and mainstreamed economic competitiveness and establishment of private companies" which meant little to no substantive transformation (Isaacs & Hara, 2015: 10). While there was wider access to marine resources, all areas of the fishery value chain remained rooted in the hands of big business because of their capital, purchasing power, established processing facilities and strong connections to local and international markets (Menon et al., 2018:4). The foregoing highlights the racial issues that characterize the industry even when the black entrants have some capacity to venture into it owing to the exclusionary policies that made the industry what it is. Such an environment makes it extremely interesting to examine the demography that make up the labour force within the local companies that export fish. Moreover, the existence of these power dynamics and tensions on

the local scene between businesses, begs the question of the kind of environment the labour force experiences especially in the context of the global economy where demands are higher and a lot more forces are at play. It is in this context that questions arise about the experiences of labourers working in these exporting industries. The upcoming chapter deals with the methodology, data collection, and findings. It will analyse the findings and present them according to the emerging themes. The chapter will also answer questions as to whether the labour force in the South African fish exporting value chain does benefit as is championed by the GVC discourse.

5. CHAPTER FIVE: DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This study explores the experiences of labourers and their position within global chains by focusing on a small group of employees from four companies in Gqeberha. The relatively small number of participants I had for this research means that I cannot make firm conclusions about the lives of workers in global production networks or speak broadly to the issues of social upgrading. However, my study offers one striking example of the lived experiences of the workers in the fisheries export industry. The findings also justify a bigger study to the analysis provided here and the conclusions I draw from it.

Within the commodity chain discourse (world-systems, GCC, GVC, GPN), the dynamic between lead firms and supplier firms has often been at the forefront, but there is also increasing interest in labour dynamics related to commodity chains. This study seeks to contribute to this growing literature on labour dynamics by exploring the experiences of labourers working in the South African fisheries industry in Gqeberha in the light of Barrientos et al.'s (2018:228) submission that employment in value chains does not always lead to new opportunities and that for many workers, employment is unprotected, insecure with overall outcomes being poor. As discussed above, the South African fishery industry is geared more towards exportation due to the belief that this will lead to better returns. Adding to that, given that MNCs typically govern global chains and prioritize cost-cutting measures, concerns arise regarding the working conditions of labour within this industry. These interrogations are also within the social upgrading context, primarily through the Decent Work Agenda, in which I hope to assess the worker's social wellbeing and standing. The assumption, in some literature on global chains, that participation in these chains will almost automatically result in social upgrading, does not pay enough attention to issues like labour commodification and casualization as well as the displacement of labourers in situations where machinery is favoured for efficiency and meeting buyer demands, among other things. This study therefore aims to ameliorate the labour analysis gap by moving beyond the assumptions and making the personal experiences of labourers a central feature. I focus my research on companies in Gqeberha, a city in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa.

5.1 RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY, AND STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Research design, according to Bryman et al. (2022:145), provides for the collection and analysis of the data needed to answer the questions posed by a researcher and this involves the specific methods and strategies of enquiry. This section unpacks the chosen methodology, the location of the study, methods of data collection, data processing and analysis. Some of the limitations of the study are discussed along with the efforts implemented to overcome them.

A qualitative methodological approach was used as an appropriate framework for this research because it is concerned with individuals' perceptions of the world with the aim of "seeing through the eyes of the people under study" (Bryman et al., 2022:103). This approach is imperative to the research insofar as understanding the lived experiences of the workers. The research methodology used was a case study. A case study approach entails an in-depth and intensive analysis of a single case (workers working in the fisheries industry in Gqeberha) so as to understand a larger class of similar units (Bryman et al., 2022:159). The case study was conducted in Gqeberha, a city deemed central to the industry's successes in the Eastern Cape (EC), with the majority of the fishing infrastructure in the province being concentrated in the Port Elizabeth Harbour (Gqeberha) where cold storage and export facilities exist (Bloom, 2013:23). The EC fisheries industry is estimated to generate revenues of over R400-million per year with Italy, Spain, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong making up some of the export markets (Bloom, 2013:23). The revenues of the Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing sector for EC were estimated to be R6,5 billion in 2009 with R522 million coming from the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipal area of which Gqeberha forms part (Bloom, 2013:23). There are many companies in Gqeberha engaged in global chains making this a suitable case study for my research.

I adopted purposive and snowball sampling methods because of the exploratory nature of the research. Purposive sampling is a form of non-probability sampling in which decisions about the participants to be included in the sample are taken by the researcher based on certain criteria which may include specialist knowledge of the issue or capacity to participate (Berg, 2004:36). I made use of this method by approaching specific men who I knew had several years of experience within the industry initially as small-scale fishers and now employees for private fish exporting companies. I had met these men before through fieldwork conducted during a previous study. Snowball sampling involves initial participant selection according to their relevance to the research whilst further participants are gathered through the recommendations

of prior participants (Berg, 2004:36). In this case, I approached people who I already knew were employees of some private fish exporting companies from previous research and through them, I then received recommendations for where I could get more people who are also employed in other fish exporting companies and could possibly be research participants for my study.

The techniques that I used for this research included semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups. Where face-to face interviews provide more privacy and create a better sense of safety, focus groups are extremely useful in encouraging a collaborative exchange of ideas, where each participant's response can inspire and inform others. In this way, focus groups provide for "dimensions and nuances of the original problem that any one individual might not have thought of" (Berg, 2004:127). Some interviews took place at two private companies in Gqeberha and the rest of the interviews and focus groups took place at a central place close to the workers' homes. Details of the participants are included in the table below. Using more than one data collection method proved helpful in gathering as much information as possible in different ways. Lastly, participants were not comfortable with being recorded. Their precarious employment situation made them reluctant to have their voices recorded and so, in line with their wishes, I relied on detailed notes. The findings section is therefore a reconstruction of these detailed notes that are presented in a descriptive format. Pseudonyms will be used in this chapter throughout the descriptions of the workers' experiences and in relation to the companies that they work for. The workers interviewed work for four different fish exporting companies in Gqeberha. The names of these companies will not be mentioned so as to protect the identities of the workers.

COMPANY	NAME	NATIONALITY	AGE RANGE	WORK STATUS	INTERVIEW TYPE
1	Mr Johnson	South African	above 45	Company owner	Interview
	Miss Dlamini	South African	under 25	Part-time	Focus group
	Mrs Mhlangu	South African	under 30	Seasonal	Focus group
	Mrs Pararai	Zimbabwean	35-40	Part-time	Focus group
2	Mrs Matiza	Zimbabwean	30-35	Part-time	Focus group
	Mr Gumede	South African	45-50	Permanent	Focus group
3	Mr Bila	Mozambican	35-40	Part-time	Focus group
	Mr Chigudu	Zimbabwean	under 30	Seasonal	Focus group & interview
	Mr Mwale	Zambian	40-45	Seasonal	Focus group & interview
	Mr Lungu	Zambian	under 30	Part-time	Focus group
4	Mr Kurt	South African	above 40	Company owner	Interview
	Mr Tembe	Mozambican	30-35	Permanent	Interview
	Mr Makeba	South African	30-35	Seasonal	Interview
	Mr Ndlovu	South African	35-40	Seasonal	Interview
	Mrs Chemambo	Zimbabwean	30-35	Seasonal	Interview
	Mrs Mzamane	South African	under 30	Permanent	Interview
	Mrs Mussa	Mozambican	30-35	Seasonal	Interview

5.1.1 DATA PROCESSING AND ANALYSIS

Bryman et al. (2022:301) submit that qualitative data analysis is inductive and iterative by nature; that is, it moves from specific observations about a particular phenomenon to broader generalizations. Bryman et al. (2022:301) also state that coding is the starting point of qualitative data analysis in which the researcher goes through a process of "labelling, categorising, and organizing data collected in order to facilitate analysis." Accordingly, coding, editing, and data classification were the data analysis methods that I used for a systematic categorization of the themes coming out of the data. In this way, the categorization process combined participants' statements under corresponding topics or themes. This created room to compare participants' responses in order to generate the frequent, dominant, or significant themes. Data was summarised in a narrative format with quotations used to highlight statements that were said directly by the participant. Interviews with South African participants were conducted in English and isiXhosa. In the latter case, an assistant provided translation. Interviews with foreign nationals were conducted in English or Shona, in the case of Zimbabwean workers. In the latter case, I provide the translations myself as I speak Shona. My positionality as a Zimbabwean may have made some workers from Zimbabwe more

comfortable with me during interviews as my ability to speak Shona proved helpful. Literature relevant to the study complements the analysis of the study.

5.1.2 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Language was a limitation experienced in the process of conducting interviews. However, as indicated above, an isiXhosa-speaking assistant provided translation where required. Another limitation is the relatively small number of participants I had for this research. As such, my study cannot make firm conclusions about the lives of workers in global production networks or speak broadly to the issues of social upgrading on the basis of this small study. The study does, however, provide a detailed picture of the experiences of some workers, which was the purpose. This study can and should be complemented by larger qualitative and quantitative studies which can help assess how widespread the experiences of these workers may be.

The rest of the chapter presents the findings of the study. The major themes that came out from these findings relate to firm-level asymmetries (Section 5.2); labour precariousness, exploitation and casualization of work (Section 5.3); and migrant labour (Section 5.4).

5.2 FIRM-LEVEL POWER ASYMMETRIES

Firm-level power inequalities was a theme generated from the data collection. This was not a surprise because the GVC school of thought was established with the aim of, among others, better understanding the disproportionate power exercised by lead firms and the outcomes this implied for local producers who wanted to plug into these chains (Nadvi, 2008:331). As such, the inequalities between supplier firms and lead firms was a theme picked up from this data collection. While this study focuses on the experiences of workers in the fisheries industry, other stakeholders in this industry were also interviewed to provide some context to the workers' experiences. Mr Johnson and Mr Kurt, individual owners of two of the fish exporting companies in Gqeberha, were interviewed on different occasions.[1] One of the questions they were asked was who their market is, to which Mr Johnson replied that he supplies to various countries including the United States of America, Italy, France, Japan, and China while Mr Kurt said he supplies to Spain, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Dubai, and Singapore.

[1] Interview with Mr Johnson, owner of Company 1, 13 October 2023; interview with Mr Kurt, the owner of Company 4, 13 October 2023.

Responding to the question about quota allocation and access to rights, Mr Johnson stated that quota allocation and access rights are easier issues to navigate when you are a company involved in the global market because the rationale is that you are putting South Africa on the international map within the global economy. When asked about whether they primarily export or if they also supply local markets, Mr Kurt responded by saying that the fish value chain is mostly export-oriented because there is more business and better profits outside of the local landscape. He explained that only a small percentage of people in South Africa eat seafood in a way that would be lucrative and sustainable for small private companies like his. He reported that his trading network is governed by multinational corporations who have a stronghold in the markets his company supplies which means they are usually the ones with more negotiating power in terms of the selling price. While Mr Kurt reported that his company does not have much negotiating power regarding prices, he indicated that participating in global chains is still more profitable for his company than focusing on the local market. Mr Johnson echoed similar sentiments, stating that it takes time to settle into the exporting industry and for the first two to three years, the supplying company is in a precarious position because as much as MNCs need its products and services, if the local company is not willing to compromise, there is always the sense that the buyers can easily find new exporters. He reported that it is the local company's burden to find ways to alter its production mechanisms or other parts of the entire process in order to adjust to the new price and make sure that they are still making a profit.

Both Mr Kurt and Mr Johnson emphasized that fish is a delicate commodity with numerous factors that must be accounted for. These include correct temperatures during packaging and storage, the correct fish processing techniques and procedures, and shelf life as it is transported to its destination market. They also spoke about keeping the consumer in mind as well because consumers in varying nations have specific ways they expect a specific fish species to be packaged and so forth. Mr Johnson and Mr Kurt similarly expressed that, collectively, these factors make it somewhat difficult for MNCs to switch from one supplier to the next. This is because it would require a lot of time and investment to get the new supplier to the kind of standards they expect and energy into fostering that synergy between supplier and lead firm. It then makes for a less hostile environment when negotiating issues such as pricing.

The foregoing highlights how, initially, the supplier has little power and must adjust to the buyer, but once there is the establishment of a relationship and the supplier has adapted, there is some power that the supplier can leverage mainly due to the inconvenience that can come from switching suppliers for the buyer. This can also make it difficult for new suppliers to break into the market. However, the supplier's power in such a situation is contingent upon the buyer's perceived costs of switching, illustrating an asymmetric dependence rather than genuine autonomy of having inherent bargaining power. These power dynamics speak to the earlier chapter in this study that dealt with the theoretical background through the worldsystems analysis where Rice (2009:216) submits that the post-Second World War economic system is characterized by systemic interrelations between the industrialized nations and the peripheral nations in which uneven political-economic interactions are central. Supplier firms are, therefore, victims to unequal power dynamics that operate within the unequal globally structured political-economic patterns. The very idea of supplier firms finding ways to alter their production mechanisms or other parts of the entire process in order to adjust to the new price and make sure they are still making a profit, points to the power dynamics that supplier firms are confronted with and subjected to when they enter into chains. It also raises serious concerns for the workers and what is at stake for them during these processes of alterations. This raises concerns about the kind of environment these workers find themselves in, marked by asymmetrical power relations between lead and supplier firms and the high probability of supplier firms constantly changing their labour regimes to meet schedules.

5.3 LABOUR PRECARIOUSNESS AND EXPLOITATION AND CASUALIZATION OF WORK

The workers interviewed for this study provide us with a picture of way in which labour exploitation and casualization affects the local fisheries industry. This is evidenced by the use of casual labour, temporary or seasonal contracts, and task-based remuneration practices. This finding comes out of both the focus group and interviews. One of the questions posed to the participants was whether they feel that their work is valued and in the focus group, this question was met with deafening silence before Mr Gumede,[2] an elderly South African man, softly

[2] Focus group: Mr Gumede, a South African man working for Company 2, 13 October 2023.

responded with a no, leading to others echoing the same sentiments. To give context to this moment and its significance, six of the participants in this focus group were foreign nationals with three being South African.[3] Having a South African open up the discussion with a negative yet honest sentiment that was shared by the rest of the group, allowed the other participants, especially the foreign nationals, to also freely share their sentiments more freely, as much as a focus group allows. Of the eight individually interviewed participants, five also answered in the negative, with Mr Tembe,[4] one of the few permanent workers participating in the discussion, the only one to respond positively.

Mrs Matiza chimed in by asking me, “looking at us, do you yourself think we are the sort of workforce that is valued?” When presented with this question, Mrs Chemambo laughed first (as had a good number of other participants), before saying no and adding: *“handifungi kuti tisu vashandi vanobvunzwa mibvunzo yakadaro inechekuita nevalue, mabasa aya ndeekungoti tiwane kurarama.”* In English, this translates to “I don’t think we are the sort of workers you ask about value; these are the kind of jobs you do for survival’s sake.”[5] The next question centred on their working conditions, and Miss Dlamini quickly stated that they work extremely laborious long hours, “especially us who do the fish processing.”[6] The other women groaned in agreement which led to a discussion of the distribution of tasks. Mrs Mahlangu explained that the men are the ones who go out to sea for any time frame between two weeks and a month at a time while the women stay and process the batch of fish that had already arrived that week. According to Mrs Mahlangu, the women are left to process the huge loads of fish the entire day from cleaning, sorting, packing in various packages, and storing.[7]

Returning to the conversation about working conditions, Mrs Pararai explained that in the fish industry, there are peak seasons and during those seasons the workers sometimes arrive at the company before 5am and only end their day between 11pm and 1am. She added that in the previous year towards the end of November or beginning of December, they were working

[3] Focus group: Miss Dlamini and Mrs Mahlangu from Company 1 and Mr Gumede from Company 2, 13 October 2023.
[4] Interview with Mr Tembe, a Mozambican working at Company 4, 1 April, 2024.
[5] Interview with Mrs Chemambo, a Zimbabwean woman working at Company 4, 1 April, 2024.
[6] Focus group: Miss Dlamini, a South African woman working at Company 1, 13 October 2023.
[7] Focus group: Mrs Mahlangu, a South African woman working at Company 1, 13 October 2023.

12to-14-hour day shifts every day, while she reported that the money they earned might be enough to feed a family of five but not to pay for anything else besides food. For example, she said they could not afford to pay their children's school fees while most of those who work in these companies do have children.[8] On that same issue, Mr Lungu detailed how the working hours and amount of work they put in during peak seasons without tangible salaries makes working in this kind of industry a challenge sometimes. This is only made worse when the company starts supplying a new market meaning that the workers have to consider product specifications for the particular consumers.[9] Describing his work conditions, Mr Bila reported: "You spend a month away from your family at sea and you come back without enough money to justify that kind of sacrifice and maybe upon return, you are also told that they will call you back if the need arises."[10] Further enquiries led him to explain that he is not a permanent worker or formally contracted. As such, depending on the season and the amount of work that needs to be done, he is called in to work as and when he is needed, and this is usually during peak seasons. He went on to express that he was, however, not complaining because at least he is one of the main people the boss relies on for that.[11]

Speaking on the issues of contracts, Mr Makeba divulged that he is not a permanent worker but rather, a seasonal worker and as such, he can be working for six to seven months for the company and not work the other six or five months and then be contracted the next six or seven months in the following year. He desperately aspired to secure a permanent or contract position, noting that contracted workers, although fewer in number, enjoyed greater stability than seasonal employees like himself. Nevertheless, he still expressed gratitude for his current status, acknowledging that other people were called in randomly for brief periods (two to three weeks at a time) and compensated daily based on tasks completed.[12] When questioned about the criteria for determining a worker's status, Mrs Mzamane explained that permanent workers were usually the most experienced and skilled, these are people who have been at the company for a long time and possess in-depth knowledge of procedures and customer dynamics, but in saying all that, these positions are limited to a small number. The rest of the workers are either seasonal or part-time workers, primarily from foreign countries, the township areas of

[8] Focus group: Mrs Pararai, a Zimbabwean woman working at Company 1, 13 October 2023.
[9] Focus group: Mr Lungu, a Zambian man working at Company 3, 13 October 2023.
[10] Focus group: Mr Bila, a Mozambican man working at Company 3, 13 October 2023.
[11] Focus group: Mr Bila, a Mozambican man working at Company 3, 13 October 2023.
[12] Interview with Mr Makeba, a South African man working at Company 4, 29 March 2024.

Gqeberha, the rural areas of the Eastern Cape, with a few from beyond the province. Despite the challenges of their precariousness, these workers find the urban environment more favourable than their rural origins and they therefore adapt to seasonal employment across multiple companies as a way to make ends meet.[13]

Mr Ndlovu, a seasonal worker, noted that his circumstances left little room to complain as he knows multiple individuals in his community desperate for any employment opportunity to put food on the table for their families. The reality of readily available unemployed people at the company's disposal, serves as a constant reminder that any dissent on his part, could result in his replacement.[14] In a related context, Mrs Mussa highlighted that South Africa's high unemployment rate, combined with the push factors that led her to leave her home country, makes her grateful for her current employment despite receiving inadequate remuneration. She emphasized the precarity of working in the exporting industry, even as a permanent worker. Initially a permanent employee, Mrs Mussa experienced firsthand the company's restructuring, which relegated her to seasonal work. Speaking to the details and implications of this change, she stated that it allows the company to leverage her knowledge of systems, seasons, and delivery schedules while reducing salary costs, making it cheaper for the company.[15]

In response to the question about the relative ease or difficulty of working in the exporting industry, Mr Mwale noted that labour-intensive companies typically have systems accommodating temporary or part-time workers and that such an arrangement suits young people seeking employment while waiting to go to university or the next point in their life. He added that such an arrangement is, however, less ideal for individuals like himself, in his forties with family responsibilities. Having been a seasonal worker since his late twenties with no

change in his position underscores the vulnerabilities of temporary work arrangements for mature individuals. For many, this is a permanent state, with the risk of being relegated to parttime work during less busy seasons. Becoming a part-time worker, even if it is presented as a short-term move, opens seasonal workers up to the risk of being excluded altogether from seasonal work even if the following seasons or years are good for the company.[15]

[13] Interview with Mrs Mzamane, a South African woman working at Company 4, 30 March 2024.
[14] Interview with Mr Ndlovu, a South African man working at Company 4, 29 March 2024. [15] Interview with Mrs Mussa, a Mozambican man working at Company 4, 30 March 2024.
[15] Focus group: Mr Mwale, a Zambian man working at Company 3, 13 October 2023.

Mr Tembe, a black foreign national, is the only one of the labour force who I interviewed who is in a position of responsibility and power relative to the positions of the other worker participants in this study. I managed to interview him while having a tour of one of the companies during a field trip. He also stood out as the only participant who affirmed that his work is valued and added, “I have been working for this company for the last sixteen years now. I came to South Africa as an illegal migrant and I immediately found work in the mines and a year and half later I was let go and then I came to work for this company.” He expressed how challenging it is to integrate into the workforce as a foreigner, especially at the time he started working for the company, and this prompted him to focus on his tasks and impress his superiors. He believes that his dedication yielded results as he highlights how sixteen years later, after starting off as a part-time worker, he is now in a managerial position with a permanent resident status guaranteeing him the right to stay in South Africa. He emphasized how much he loves working for the company, noting that the pressures to meet deadlines no longer affect him as much as they did when he was starting out. He added that he takes pride in contributing to the company’s success.[16]

When asked about the potential tensions between himself and South African nationals under his management, he replied that conflicts among permanent workers are rare. He stated that the job does not require qualifications and that the company comprises individuals from diverse backgrounds, with permanent workers who are grateful for stable employment. Mr Tembe observed that seasonal and part-time workers share this sentiment, recognizing the scarcity of job opportunities, with each of them knowing at least ten individuals seeking employment.[17] Responding to the necessity of various worker types, he expressed that the ideal situation would be for all the workers to be permanent workers, but recognized that the reality differs. He explained that while temporary workers may feel undervalued, their contributions are crucial, particularly during peak seasons or when there are tight schedules from the buyers. He also acknowledged the financial benefits for the company in using temporary workers, citing reduced payroll expenses compared to maintaining a large, consistently paid workforce.[18]

[16] Interview with Mr Tembe, a Mozambican man working at Company 4, 1 April 2024.
[17] Interview with Mr Tembe, a Mozambican man working at Company 4, 1 April 2024.
[18] Interview with Mr Tembe, a Mozambican man working at Company 4, 1 April 2024.

The foregoing highlights several imperative issues: labour precarity and exploitation, the casualization of work conditions, with an overall lack of labour and social protections. As Broad (1995:69) states, casualization indicates an increase in a labour force that "is intimately tied to the process of global restructuring." As a means to keep up with globalization, companies pursue lower overhead costs by contracting out much of the work that used to be done in-house. This system has directly resulted in the "rapid growth of peripheral workers employed on a part-time or seasonal basis" (Broad, 1995: 69). Casual and part-time workers provide companies with financial flexibility. In saying that, the structure of the emerging market is one that is characterized by the displacement and informalization of those positioned as low-skilled workers within the value chain. Global value chain pressures can therefore be linked with greater labour casualization and extreme working hours as companies reduce their recruitment of permanent workers as a way to reduce wage costs and avoid legal and social protections and benefits enjoyed by permanent workers. Companies are, therefore, in search of more cost-effective and flexible labour arrangements and this has manifested in the increasing casualization of work itself. This trend corroborates Pons-Vignon and Anseeuw's (2009:896) observation that South Africa's economic liberalization prompted the private sector to massively outsource labour, resulting in precarious work arrangements through the increased use of casual labour, temporary contracts, and task-based payment practices.

The casualization of work helps employers to adapt to seasonal fluctuations and meet the buyer's delivery schedules while lowering wage bills and not needing to bother with social protections such as maternity leave, pensions, and sick leave. However, for the workers, casual "employment" means that work is unstable leaving them vulnerable to being laid off completely without due process. There is also a sense that it is easy to exploit them because their position is very precarious. During the focus groups and interviews, participants would raise a point about being exploited, but then sometimes end with a statement about how they are not complaining because they could be entirely unemployed. As discussed earlier, South Africa has very high unemployment levels: at the end of 2022, South Africa's official

unemployed rate was 32.7% with an unofficial rate of 42.6% when including discouraged workers (McKeever, 2023:2). This means that there is a large pool of surplus labour at fishery companies' disposal. Insecure labour makes these workers extremely vulnerable to poverty.

The findings described above support Selwyn's (2019:72) submission that such chains need to be "renamed and re-theorized as global poverty chains (GPCs)." The findings also align with LeBaron et al.'s (2018:18) argument that global economic development, driven by the interests of the powerful elite, has led to extreme inequality and exploitation through global chains, rendering workers susceptible to exploitation.

The argument by LeBaron et al. (2018:18) is rooted in the understanding that economic globalization and the pressures that come out of it make it an unlikely outcome that workers in low-skilled production activities accrue benefits and witness improvements in working conditions as is exemplified by Mrs Mussa[19] who was at some point, a permanent worker but is now seasonal. To this end, this research augments Barrientos et al.'s (2018:228) submission that employment in value chains can bring new opportunities for workers but for most of the workers, "GPN employment is insecure and unprotected, and ensuring decent work for more vulnerable workers poses significant problems." Some of the problems may be rooted in the way that the vulnerable positions these workers find themselves in are part of what makes the system function as discussed in the earlier chapters of this research through Wallerstein's (2011:483) idea of how a hierarchy of occupational tasks is one of the central elements of the division of the world-economy which creates an unequal distribution of economic tasks. This leads to the inevitable and obvious geographical maldistribution of these occupational skills and the maintenance of that maldistribution because, as explained earlier, the capitalist world economy "rewards accumulated capital, including human capital, at a higher rate than 'raw' labour power" (Wallerstein, 2011:483). The unequal distribution of economic tasks, as a function of how work is socially organized, enhances and makes legitimate the capacities and abilities of some groups within the system to exploit the labour of others thereby receiving a larger share of surplus (Rice, 2009:220). The successes of the system therefore rest upon unequal distributions of gains for the extraction of surplus value to the core zone and by this token, unequal exchange is extremely important. That is because the production of goods by people whose labour is undervalued in monetary terms means the products themselves are therefore relatively cheaper than those produced in the advanced capitalist nations (Harrison,

[19] Interview with Mrs Mussa, a Mozambican man working at Company 4, 30 March 2024

1988:19). This claim is still relevant as Hickel et al (2024:8) express that firms in the Global North choose to use Global South labour "not only because wages are cheaper per hour, but because wages are cheaper per unit of physical output." In this way, undervalued work is "essential," thereby explaining why "ensuring decent work for more vulnerable workers poses significant problems" (Barrientos et al., 2018:228).

The foregoing highlights the problem with the concept of social upgrading. Through the Decent Work Agenda, social upgrading is viewed as a possible outcome for workers if there is adherence to those pillars it has set out as previously discussed based upon the collaborative governance of lead firms, state and local actors, and international institutions. To this extent, poor working conditions are thereby explained as the product of governance dissonance. This is a shallow and narrow understanding of the GVC dynamics which disregards the lived experiences of workers and denies their exploitation. This is because governance coordination itself is a flawed conception when one factors in the immense power lead firms have to relocate their production/sourcing or threaten to do so, to other jurisdictions. It leads to supplier firms altering their production mechanisms or other parts of the entire process, as expressed by Mr Johnson, [20] or capitalizing on gaps in regulatory systems by firms so as to bypass disadvantageous regulations (regulatory arbitrage) (Mosley, 2017:155). This means that if governments decide to implement higher labour standards, they run the risk of losing investment, jobs and orders to other foreign markets (Mosley, 2017:155). Such pressures tempt some governments to "enter into 'races to the bottom'" and in saying that, time and cost pressures can give rise to violations of workers' rights, particularly in industries that focus on products whose productions intensively rely on labour (Mosley, 2017:155). This can lead to workers working excessive overtime without compensation and, because allowing workers the right to organize or protest may lead to demands for higher wages and slow down production thus affecting deadlines, employers are likely to prefer drawing from a large pool of surplus labour (Mosley, 2017:154).

As such, I reiterate that focusing on the governance organization of the state, international organizations, and lead firms, neglects the power dynamics between MNCs and supplier firms.

[20] Interview with Mr Johnson, the owner of Company 1, 13 October 2023.

Moreover, as I stated in earlier chapters, conceptualizing decent work as a question of implementation within the local spheres neglects the issues of class, the North/South divide

relations, and systemic exploitative processes within the global chains. Accordingly, this research supports Selwyn's (2013) assertion that the conception of social upgrading denies and silences the reality of the exploitation labour faces from capital and the generation of indecent work.

5.4 MIGRANT LABOUR

Nine of the research participants in this study were foreign nationals. However, given that this was a small study, it is unclear if this represents the overall situation regarding the fisheries workers in Gqeberha. A firm conclusion cannot be made that foreign nationals make up such a high proportion of fisheries workers in Gqeberha. However, given that around 9% of the overall workforce in South Africa today is from outside South Africa, an increase from 6% in 2012, it is likely that the fisheries industry also employs many foreign nationals (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Owing to the nature of focus groups, the foreign participants did not divulge much information about how they came to South Africa and their current status within that setting but I managed to have subsequent interviews with them after the focus group in relation to this topic. Findings in this section are mostly taken from these individual interviews.

As has been discussed in the previous section, Mr Tembe came to South Africa from Mozambique as an illegal migrant, and along the way, acquired permanent residence. His account of working within the exporting industry is a positive one but it is the only positive account among the participants, perhaps because he has tangible evidence of upward mobility as a worker from being a part-time worker to filling a managerial position close to sixteen years later. But that is not the story for the other migrants. When asked what made him come to South Africa and how he came to work for his company, Mr Chigudu asked, "why does anyone leave their home country? I came in search of work and better living conditions." He recounted how Zimbabweans often discuss countries that are taking foreign workers, usually in labour-intensive industries, and with the general understanding that Zimbabweans are hard workers, he felt that if it was just about his labour power, he could do that: work hard, get paid and make a living. Following the recommendation of a friend who was already in South Africa working

as a “fish catcher” in Cape Town and making a living, he also made his way to Cape Town seeking employment in the fish industry. With a valid passport, he entered South Africa as a visitor but never looked back. He explains that failing to find employment in Cape Town and upon someone else’s recommendation to try Gqeberha or Durban, he ended up in Gqeberha where he found work as a seasonal worker for one company and a part-time worker for two others. Despite the fluctuating income, he makes ends meet and hopes to secure a more stable job.[21] Mrs Mussa (from Mozambique) stated that six years ago, she was in a relationship with a South African man who lived around the area and in 2020, just before the Covid-19 pandemic, she visited him and they started a family and then with Covid-19 lockdown, she decided to stay in the country seeing as they were already a family. She secured a part-time position at a fishery company as part of the fish processing workers, while her partner is a seasonal worker for a different company. She also explained that she has been trying to get permanent residency because of her marriage status to a South African but this is complicated by the informal nature of their union which is not officially recognized by Home Affairs. She stated that the situation is made worse by having exceeded her authorized stay in South Africa.[23]

Both Mr Mwale[24] and Mrs Chemambo[22] had similar reasons for leaving their home countries, that is, economic hardships and in search of a better life. They both felt uncomfortable to divulge any more information beyond that about their status within the country or how they ended up working in the fisheries industry as labour. However, Mr Mwale, before ending our discussion asked me whether, given that this is low-skilled work and with a volume of people who are readily available for employment, I think that most of the foreign labour in these companies would be here on a work permit. He suggested that either they are married to a South African national or they are illegal.[26] As far as their experiences as migrant labourers, they express similar sentiments about knowing that they are cheap labour, and so all they can do is be very grateful when they find work in labour-intensive industries which take part-time and seasonal workers. This is because such industries usually have minimal bureaucratic hurdles such as paperwork issues. Mrs Chemambo noted that while this is a good thing, such employment is also accompanied by exploitation, particularly for migrant workers because

[21] Interview with Mr Chigudu, a Zimbabwean man working at Company 3, 13 October 2023.
[23] Interview with Mrs Mussa, a Mozambican man working at Company 4, 30 March 2024 [24]
Interview with Mr Mwale, a Zambian man working at Company 3, 13 October 2023.
[22] Interview with Mrs Chemambo, a Zimbabwean woman working at Company 4, 1 April, 2024. [26]
Interview with Mr Mwale, a Zambian man working at Company 3, 13 October 2023.

there are no structures of support like trade unions, for example, because the workers are undocumented. She added that even with paperwork, migrant workers usually accept the working conditions because of the compelling reasons they left their home country. She observed that while South African workers may complain, even the South African workers

realize that there are many unemployed people in the county who are desperate for a job, and this awareness leads to them prioritising keeping their jobs over protesting about the working conditions. She added that some of the workers come from the rural areas of the Eastern Cape, so they are also comparing their lives in the rural area versus working in the city. Survival is part of the experience as such workers must fight not to lose their place whether they are permanent, seasonal, or part-time workers. She states that for international migrant labourers like herself, the stakes are higher due to the risks of deportation and separation from family and, as such, they often tolerate difficult circumstances as they focus wholly on earning a living and not attracting unwanted attention.[23]

In concluding the findings in this section, it is important to state that most of the workers interviewed for this study, whether South African or foreign nationals, believe that working for exporting companies is better than working for local companies. The rationale behind this is that most, if not all of them, are being looked at by their families as the hope of the family and so there is a sense of pride that comes with stating that you work in the exporting industry. While that may not translate to good wages, the exporting industry seems to somewhat legitimize their efforts. Several of the workers interviewed expressed the belief that life would be much harder if they were working for a local company.[24] In this way, regardless of the working conditions, the informal employment, and so forth, being plugged into an exporting industry, in some way, helps the workers to be seen as doing meaningful work by their society simply because of the "international" aspect. Nevertheless, the findings of this study echo the views that governed the operation of the gold mines, that black labour was "cheap, disposable, and exploitable" (Crush & Tshitereke, 2001:50). The discussion highlighted the immense vulnerability that comes with being a migrant labourer and this is precisely what makes migrant

[23] Interview with Mrs Chemambo, a Zimbabwean woman working at Company 4, 1 April, 2024.
[24] Mrs Chemambo, a Zimbabwean woman working at Company 4; Mr Mwale, a Zambian man working at Company 3; Mr Tembe, a Mozambican man working at Company 4; Mr Chigudu, a Zimbabwean man working at Company 3; Mr Gumede, a South African man working for Company 2; Mrs Mahlangu, a South African woman working at Company 1; and Miss Dlamini, a South African woman working at Company 1.

labour such an enticing pool for companies. Migrants do not have the power to challenge the wages they receive and the exploitative conditions that they might be experiencing. They struggle to access protection through labour law because they either are unable to enforce their rights or they do not have the legal status of an employee (Benjamin, 2008:1585). Although Marslev et al.'s (2022:828) submission that workers can proactively influence their circumstances and outcomes, is valuable in certain contexts, it is less so in this case. While I agree that they are not simply victims, the vulnerabilities of workers in general, and international migrant labourers especially, directly challenges the notion of them having the ability to effect change given the issues surrounding their legality and lack of structural support, such as trade unions. Migrant labourers, some of whom may be illegally in South Africa, can be an enticing pool of cheap labour for companies racing against MNCs' delivery schedules. This case study highlights the operationalization of the world-systems analysis in the way that South Africa, a country that has been deemed a semi-peripheral nation by scholars such as Alnasseri et al. (2011) and Andreasson (2001:186), makes use of cheap labour from peripheral nations such as Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, for the purpose of producing products for MNCs who are from the core of the system.

Insufficient attention is given to the question of migrant labour within the schools of thought that make up the global chain discourse as there is no breakdown of the different types of workers and perhaps the varying outcomes for those different types. I therefore argue that not only should workers be paid more attention to in relation to the discourse but special attention needs to be paid to the migrant labour force. This is because it is not a new phenomenon but rather commonplace in the Global South; the very geolocation that MNCs race to for cheap labour. Migrant labour might very well have a role to play in the creation of an even cheaper pool of surplus value and this is enough to make it an important labour force to examine within the discourse. Social upgrading as a concept is therefore somewhat utopian because it does not account for migrant workers who, objectively, are considerably more vulnerable to forced labour than national workers, regardless of whether they hold legal or illegal status. Being a foreigner carries risks, which are exacerbated for low-skilled workers in export-oriented, labour-intensive companies facing pressures from MNCs and profit demands. This precarious context renders exploitation almost inevitable. Perhaps for the concept of social upgrading to be more inclusive and have room for nuance and various contexts, there is a need for more attention to be paid to workers. An understanding and classification of the various types of

workers would aid in identifying the kind of workers that might just experience social upgrading; with more attention also being paid to the concept of "social downgrading" as a genuine possibility for workers in precarious industries. The North/South division also becomes an important issue to pay attention to because these chains/networks do not operate in a vacuum or a global economy characterized by equal players. The history of the Global North and the Global South plays a part in the interactions between the lead firms and the suppliers, and the effects that has on other parts of the chains, including the nature of the workforce. To this end, the world-systems analysis is still very relevant and of importance in understanding the dynamics between lead firms and Global South suppliers.

Overall, this study reveals labour precarity and exploitation, the casualization of work conditions, with an overall lack of labour and social protections, as the experiences of the workers in some of the fish-exporting companies in Gqeberha. As stated in the earlier chapter, South Africa's post-apartheid adoption of neoliberal economic policies, characterized by reduced state intervention and increased exposure to international markets, has had unintended consequences for the labour force. Various stakeholders and sectors adapted in ways that often compromised the welfare of workers (Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw, 2009:896). The private sector's cost-cutting measures resulted in widespread labour outsourcing, highly flexible work arrangements, and a surge in casualization through temporary contracts and task-based payments (Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw, 2009:896). South Africa's staggering unemployment rates, amplified by escalating unemployment in the Southern African region, result in a significant surplus labour market and higher rates of migrant labour. As Selwyn (2016:18) argues, the existence of such surplus labour breeds an environment conducive to driving wage levels below subsistence costs. This study highlights that surplus labour also means limited options for oppressed workers because work itself is hard to come by.

It is within this context that LeBaron et al. (2018:18) argue that the development of the neoliberal market system was an inherently unequal project which, through global chains, deepens inequality more than distributing gains or advancing substantial development. This rising inequality has subsequently resulted in throwing onto the global labour market scene, extremely poor people lacking state protections or support rendering them powerless to resist exploitation (LeBaron et al., 2018:18). Selwyn (2019:72) argues that given this structure of the global economy, GVCs should be described as global poverty chains (GPCs) instead. This

study finds that workers in labour-intensive exporting industries can find themselves in extremely vulnerable situations especially when they are internal or international migrants. MNCs outsource for the purposes of finding the cheapest materials and labour. Such motivations also mean that various supplying firms have to try their best to be the cheapest if they want to be in partnership with these MNCs and gain access to international markets. To this end, labour is the cog in the machine that is often at the mercy of drastic negative changes in order to meet buyer demands. This can be in the form of labour automation, labour casualization, and exploitation. As such, the concept of social upgrading needs to make more room to discuss worker dynamics. My study shows that there are migrant workers in these industries both in terms of internal migrants and migrants from other nations. MNCs' need for cheap labour brings to question claims of worker benefits and warrants a nuanced classification of workers because, in accordance with the world-systems theory and the hierarchy of occupational tasks, workers in different parts of the world are most likely to experience labour-intensive exporting industries differently.

6. CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

In recent decades, manufacturing and global trade have experienced fundamental changes. Instead of executing all the production processes themselves and exporting complete products, firms now specialize in specific production stages that can be distributed globally. These related tasks across various geographic locations form global value chains. Much existing literature on global chains emphasises the benefits of participation for developing countries including technology transfer and skill acquisition (Gehl Sampath & Vallejo, 2018:482). However, scholars like Kummritz (2016:1) argue that such benefits are not so clear. Rooted in the world-systems traditions, scholarship on global chains was initially interested in the potential reproduction of inequalities within an already stratified and hierarchical world system. World-systems thinkers argued that core states accrue much of the wealth within a commodity chain by leveraging innovation-driven competitive advantages which transfer competitive pressures to peripheral zones in the global economy thereby exacerbating inequalities between the three zones (Gereffi et al., 1993:3). The world-system tradition further argues that the division of the global economy also includes the hierarchy of occupational tasks which sees those tasks demanding higher skill levels being reserved for core nations because the capitalist world-economy values and rewards specialized skills at a higher rate than raw labour power. Products that are made by people whose labour is undervalued are therefore relatively cheaper than those produced in the core nations (Harrison, 1988:19). The fact that despite the Global South accounting for 90% of global production labour across all skill levels, the region received less than half of the global income in 2021 is alarming, especially considering that the region's workers were paid a mere 21% of the global income (Hickel et al., 2024:2).

The abovementioned disparities were what Wallerstein's world-systems commodity chains approach was concerned about. However, the success of the Asian Tigers in global trade led to a breakaway from that thinking and the creation of the development-oriented GCC approach. Both the GVC and GPN approaches, which follow after the GCC approach, are also development-oriented with the discourse being underpinned by various tenets such as "upgrading." Upgrading (economic and social) is viewed as one of the major benefits to be accrued by firms and their workers in developing nations. Economic upgrading entails the move by a firm to higher value activities, technological improvements, more sophisticated knowledge and skills and increased profits for supplier firms (Gereffi & Lee, 2016:29). Social

upgrading, the focus of this study, is understood as the process of improvement for workers and their working conditions and rights (Dünhaupt et al., 2022:21). This study set out to explore the experiences of labourers in fish exporting companies in Gqeberha in a bid to interrogate whether participation in GVCs by South African fish exporting companies does indeed improve workers' lives. The ultimate goal was to relate those experiences to debates about the benefits of global chains. This was also in the context of Barrientos et al.'s (2018:228) submission that employment in global value chains can bring new opportunities for workers, but that for many workers, employment in these chains is insecure and unprotected. Consequently, the promotion of decent work for vulnerable workers remains a major challenge.

I focused on companies in Gqeberha, a city in the Eastern Cape province in South Africa that is deemed central to the provincial fishing industry's successes as most of the province's fishing infrastructure, cold storage and export facilities are concentrated in the Gqeberha harbour. South Africa itself is also extremely interesting in two ways: its labour landscape, and the character of the fishery industry. Regarding the former, South Africa has a long history of systematic racism and exploitation which was also prevalent in the workforce. The apartheid government systematically marginalized black capitalists and workers through various policies that maintained structural under-employment thereby consolidating socio-economic privileges for whites (Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw, 2009:885). This provided white capitalists with a pool of cheap black labour while also entrenching extremely unequal labour rights. These workers were drawn from the rural areas of the nation and also from neighbouring countries while permanently setting in the urban areas was made impossible. Internal and external migrant labour became a central feature of apartheid South Africa's economy and still remains a key issue to consider when assessing South Africa's labour market even in the post-apartheid era. Scholars like Pons-Vignon and Anseeuw (2009:885) argue that the transformation of a discriminatory and exploitative labour system is restricted to legislation without tangible changes in the reality for the workers.

The other element that makes South Africa interesting, is the character of the fishery industry which was historically dominated by a few large companies and these ownership concentration patterns are argued to have continued in the post-apartheid era (Yakob et al., 2006:2). This is exemplified by companies like Irvin & Johnson and the Sea Harvest Corporation who between themselves, held 75% of the fishing quotas during apartheid and are argued to still be in control

of both the domestic and export markets for the South African hake fishery (Vilakazi & Ponte (2020:14). Industry transformation by the post-apartheid government was expected to yield equitable wealth distribution but instead resulted in very little change because the Marine Living Resources Act (MLRA) framework favoured and privileged economic competitiveness and the establishment of private companies (Isaacs & Hara, 2015: 10). Although there was more access to marine resources, Menon et al., (2018:4) contend that all areas of the fishery value chain remained concentrated in the hands of big white-owned business. South Africa's labour landscape and the character of the fishery industry highlight the racial, class and power dynamics and tensions between businesses, which further propelled my interest in the kind of environment the labour force experiences especially in the context of the global economy where demands are higher and a lot more forces are at play.

The main themes generated from this study's data collection were labour precarity and exploitation, the casualization of work conditions with an overall lack of labour and social protections, as well as migrant labour. This study showed that the pressures from MNCs, whether it is in terms of delivery schedules or the search for the cheapest labour and products, means that supplier firms have to find a way to meet those demands while also making profits. This may result in casualized work arrangements. This is because it is cheaper to pay temporary, seasonal, or casual workers as opposed to permanent workers who are accompanied by various legal and social rights and benefits. Task-based payments also help in reducing costs while being able to meet buyer demands. While such strategies are beneficial to the companies concerned, they leave workers susceptible to sudden job loss or relegation from permanent to seasonal or temporary positions.

Consequently, workers find themselves in precarious and unstable employment situations, characterized by heightened insecurity and vulnerability. The alarming rates of unemployment in South Africa create a surplus labour pool that further entrenches the vulnerability of these workers. Labour precarity, casualization of work, and the existence of migrant labour, collectively culminate in the exploitation of vulnerable workers who are unable to resist such working conditions. These findings substantiate LeBaron et al.'s argument that elite-driven global economic development perpetuates inequality and exploitation. While my study does not suggest that working for exporting companies is worse than working for other companies, this study found that participation in global value chains does not guarantee decent work.

The findings also show the relevance of the world-systems tradition and its view of the global economy in terms of a tripartite division. This is because South Africa as a semi-peripheral nation can be understood in this context, to show evidence of the use of migrant labourers from neighbouring countries that are situated in the peripheral regions of the world division to produce goods for companies positioned in the core zone of the system. As Barrientos et al. (2018:228) submit, promoting decent work for vulnerable workers within global chains remains a major challenge. My study suggests that part of the problem is that the vulnerable positions these workers find themselves in constitute a fundamental element of the way the system functions. This stems from a discussion in the earlier chapters of this research through Wallerstein's (2011:483) idea of how a hierarchy of occupational tasks is one of the central elements of the division of the world-economy resulting in an unequal distribution of economic tasks which perpetuates inequalities. In this way, power is a central element in understanding the character of global chains and how they operate because those that drive them (MNCs from the Global North) govern them in a way that is not favourable to the Global South. In this case, power is essential to understanding the outcomes for Global South suppliers and their labour force. To this end, I view the world-systems tradition as still being relevant in understanding some contexts in which global chains operate which are predicted upon power asymmetries between the Global North and the Global South

The findings of this study also suggest that more attention needs to be paid to workers and the differences between various kinds of workers. The study shows how migrant labourers are an important part of the workforce in the fishery industry in Gqeberha. Furthermore, while speaking on the issue of migrant labour, there is a need to clarify between internal migrant labour and international migrant labour, highlighting the complexity of the worker category. Workers bring with them diverse elements to consider such as their race, nationality, and regional origins. This complexity and nuance necessitate a comprehensive approach to understanding the multifaceted character of the workforce in global chains in order to address the idea of decent work. Also, given the idea of a hierarchy of occupational tasks, workers in different parts of the world are likely to experience labour-intensive exporting industries differently. As such, as part of understanding the workforce that is plugged into the exporting industry, the study of global value chains needs to pay increased attention to the multifaceted experiences, agency, and struggles of workers within these industries, with the understanding

that their diverse locations and contexts shape their experiences with and outcomes from participation in global value chains.

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