

GPN-Labour Symposium
Global Production Networks in the Spotlight: Chains or Opportunities for Workers?

CALL FOR PAPERS

Papers are invited for presentation at this workshop that will bring together leading scholars working at the interface between GPN analysis and global labour issues to galvanize the debate on the social implications of GPN, and to gain strategic insights on what challenges workers face in the current mode of GPN driven capitalism. The symposium will expand a growing multidisciplinary literature in the field of GPNs, with the potential to produce significant contributions with an integrated disciplinary framework.

The aim of this workshop is to:

- (i) Analyse theories or case studies that offer the opportunity to better understand the opportunities or dangers GPNs offers for workers, their wages and employment prospects;
- (ii) Explore the implications of integration into GPNs by Small and Medium Enterprises, to better understand how the GPNs affects SMEs (e.g. by altering their access to financial resources) in their process of employment creation and destruction.
- (iii) Examine the relationships between GPNs and employment outcomes and the mediating role of processes and institutions influencing this relationship geographically and at the firm, industry and national levels.
- (iv) Investigate policies that have been successful or that are likely to be so in facilitating a translation of economic benefits (for some) into social benefits (for many).

Consideration will be given to a special issue of a leading journal in an appropriate field such as Economics, Political Economy or Industrial Relations subject to the quality and focus of the papers presented and subsequently submitted.

Venue: Macquarie University.

Date: 14 February 2017, 10-3pm.

Organizing team and hosting institutions:

Lisa Magnani, Head, Department of Economics, Macquarie University,
 Ray Markey, Director, Centre for Workforce Futures, Macquarie University,
 Susan McGrath-Champ, Work and Organisational Studies, University of Sydney
 Chris F. Wright, Work and Organisational Studies, University of Sydney

Keynote speaker: Neil Coe, Professor of Economic Geography, Department of geography, National University of Singapore, Singapore. <http://profile.nus.edu.sg/fass/geonmc/>

Submission of abstracts to lisa.magnani@mq.edu.au or ray.markey@mq.edu.au

Due date for submissions: 12 December 2016

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Background:

Global Production Networks have become a major force since the 1970s. The changing nature of global integration processes have been driven by transnational capital and facilitated by national restructuring policies. These have opened the gate for a global division of labour, made flexible and open to the needs of global capital by widespread changes in labour market institutions e.g., the decline in union power across the globe. This profound transformation of the geography, engineering and logistics of production has had broad and profound implications for our understanding of economic and social development. Development is becoming synonymous with economic upgrading, a process that allows some firms to climb a series of horizontal and vertical ladders both within and between production networks, so as to produce more advanced products and operate in higher productivity/higher value added segments of global production (Milberg & Winkler, 2010). Consequently, a better understanding of the possibly very uneven effects of GPN integration is necessary. For example, despite the importance of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to boost job creation (the SME sector, Australia's greatest employer, comprises 96 per cent of all private businesses in Australia), surprisingly little is known about how SMEs adapt to GPN integration and how GPNs may facilitate or rather limit the success of SMEs in global environments. For example, understanding how SMEs integrate in GPNs may be important to understand how financial shocks transmit to the real economy or how GPNs may alleviate the financial constraints that SME traditionally face.

Importantly, what several studies have highlighted is that economic upgrading does not necessarily facilitate 'social upgrading' (e.g. better wages and protections for workers, improved job quality and secure employment, access to education and higher skilled employment opportunities) and may in fact result in 'social downgrading' (Barrientos et al., 2011). There is a consensus within the employment relations literature that GPN pressures tend to diminish working conditions at the supplier level (Wright & Kaine, 2015). However, reconsidering the role of labour within GPN structures and analysis and identifying the ways that workers can leverage power against lead firms may be a potential solution to this challenge (Rainnie et al., 2011; Donaghey et al., 2014).

From these considerations an important implication follows: economic development nowadays sees a "blurring of (development) stages" and the co-presence of industrialization and de-industrialization (as in the Theory of Compressed Development), the co-existence of extreme wealth and pockets of extreme poverty, often associated with working conditions that resemble those of the first stages of the Industrial Revolution. Given that GPNs are sources of economic power and wealth with particular implications for labour markets and employment relations, it is legitimate to ask questions about the link between economic upgrading and social upgrading, about the distribution of these effects among SMEs and larger firms and about the Political Economy of how these effects are distributed among workers. The scope is to identify those groups or individuals that have captured the gains from integration into GPNs and have successfully turned economic upgrading into social upgrading, improvements in living standards and work conditions. It is also an opportunity to ask questions about the diffusion of such improvements at the broader social level and the roles that labour and institutions play in facilitating these developments.

References

- Barrientos, S., G. Gereffi, & A. Rossi (2011). "Economic and social upgrading in global production networks: A new paradigm for a changing world." *International Labour Review* 150.3-4: 319-40.
- Coe, N. M., and M. Hess (2013). "Global production networks, labour and development." *Geoforum* 44: 4-9.
- Donaghey J., J. Reinecke, C. Niforou, & B. Lawson (2014). "From employment relations to consumption relations: Balancing labor governance in global supply chains." *Human Resource Mgmt* 53.2: 229-52.
- Milberg, W., and D. Winkler (2011). "Economic and social upgrading in global production networks: Problems of theory and measurement." *International Labour Review* 150.3-4: 341-365.
- Rainnie, A., A. Herod, and S. McGrath-Champ (2011). "Review and positions: Global production networks and labour." *Competition and Change* 15.2: 155-169.
- Wright C. F., and S. Kaine (2015). "Supply chains, production networks and the employment relationship." *Journal of Industrial Relations* 57.4: 483-501.