



# Change agents and sustainable supply chain collaboration: A longitudinal study in the Dutch pig farming sector from a sensemaking perspective



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## ABSTRACT

Academic research on sustainability issues in supply chain collaboration has recently begun to focus more on a network-oriented view. Both horizontal and vertical relationships are being explored, which has led to recognition of the significance of the active participation of change agents in this process. This paper provides a practical example of how change agents shifted an entire chain (pig farming) towards sustainability over 17 years. The longitudinal study examined the mechanics of how change agents in a chain successfully engage others on sustainability issues. A sensemaking approach was used that focussed on three aspects: communication, action, and building relationships. The findings show that the change agents worked on different levels of supply chain collaboration in response to the evolution of the sustainability initiative. Their focus moved from producers controlling the entire chain to engaging in partnerships with other contributors both inside and outside the chain. They translated the abstract concept of sustainability into language understandable for the potential partners, fostering transparency, joined an eco-label certification program, and later invested in experiments to find solutions to new ideas as they arose through reflection. This stepwise construction of a network reveals the evolution of reciprocal interdependence in an informal, personal and trust-based way between organizations which can be applied to sustainability initiatives in other fields.

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## 1. Introduction

Supply chain collaboration on sustainability issues has gained momentum, not only in everyday corporate practice but also in the supply chain management literature and the business ethics literature (Quarshie et al., 2016). In the past two decades, the focus of academic research in these fields has gradually converged from either environmental topics and performance outcomes or ethical concerns and policies to greater appreciation for a network-oriented view. This view focuses attention on the horizontal collaborative ties between suppliers and associated vertical alliances between suppliers and buyers. It also recognizes the active participation of key actors or “change agents” in engaging others to collaborate across the supply chain (Hagedoorn, 2006;

Lazzarini et al., 2008; Prima Dania et al., 2016; Quarshie et al., 2016).

However, despite the convergence on the need for collaborative strategies and the leadership role of change agents, gaps remain in our understanding of how chain relationships evolve into partnerships that embed sustainability issues (Meulensteen et al., 2016; Quarshie et al., 2016). Knowledge of the coordinating interactions through which such change agents translate sustainability concepts into supply chain collaboration is limited (Nassimbeni, 2004). Therefore, authors are calling for more research on long-term collaborative efforts to reach sustainability objectives (Bansal et al., 2014; Seuring and Gold, 2013; Winter and Knemeyer, 2013). Ashby et al. (2012) also emphasized that research which offers real-life insights and guidance into how collaboration on sustainability can be achieved is scarce and should be a key priority.

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We are particularly lacking qualitative research to better understand the actual efforts that are needed to collaborate and build trust with suppliers and communities. These interactions are seldom viewed through a supply chain lens (Quarshie et al., 2016). Insight into chain collaboration increases our understanding of how to involve people across and beyond the chain. This is relevant for change agents who need to gain support from the main chain actors by “getting everyone to understand the key issues and embrace the new vision” (Quarshie et al., 2016).

Finding ways to involve people across the chain is particularly connected to sustainability issues, which permeate all levels of the chain and often are not fully defined, but “are continually (re) constructed as events and issues emerge and are articulated by resourceful actors and stakeholders” (Selsky and Parker, 2010). These emergent issues require parties to negotiate, align values and build trust to achieve agreement on environmental, social and financial responsibility (Clegg et al., 2007; Ring et al., 1994; Sharma, 2000). These exploratory and often intuitive processes are easily impeded by the lack of a common cultural setting in the supply chain. Therefore, the interactions to engage others are critical mechanisms to ensure coordination and create shared meaning (Hult and Slater, 2004).

In view of the above problem definition, the purpose of this paper is twofold. The first purpose is empirical, to identify collaborative patterns of interactions that change agents deploy over time. We also assess how a better understanding of these patterns of interactions can help improve the management of supply chain initiatives. The second purpose is to generate theoretical insights into the long-term construction of collaboration that contribute to the network-oriented view on supply chain collaboration. We draw on a 17-year longitudinal study that followed the efforts of two change agents who initiated the first Dutch sustainable pig-farming chain. They have engaged others to collaborate on sustainability issues throughout the entire period under study. Accordingly, this paper provides new insights and suggests patterns of action involving long-term engagement interactions to manage collaboration for more sustainable supply chains.

In this paper, we adopt a sensemaking perspective to clarify the interactions to collaborate on sustainability issues. This perspective is based on the theory of organizational sensemaking by Weick (2001, 1995, 1979) and others who have built on his work. Utilizing the lens of sensemaking seems a promising approach as it provides a more robust conceptual basis to study the interactions to engage others and to create shared meaning than simply analyzing the change agent's efforts as a series of actions over a period of time (Basu and Palazzo, 2008).

In the next section, we introduce theoretical notions from organizational sensemaking within the context of change agent roles in a sustainable supply chain. Subsequently, we extend this line of reasoning by developing a sensemaking perspective focused on three key concepts: communicating, acting and building relationships. Then we explain the qualitative research methods. This is followed by the presentation of our longitudinal empirical fieldwork from the sensemaking perspective. The paper concludes by discussing the contributions and future research directions of this study.

## 2. Change agents and sustainable supply chain collaboration

This paper builds on the network-oriented view in the supply chain literature that recognizes the engaging, meaning-making role of change agents in collaboration on sustainability issues (e.g.

Quarshie et al., 2016; Visser and Crane, 2010; Vlachos et al., 2013). The change agent is defined as a supply chain member who is “seeking to drive or subvert a change agenda” (Buchanan and Badham, 2008) toward sustainability and whose role is formally appointed or, in this case, self-appointed.

The unit of analysis in this paper is the change agent as an individual and not in the shape of the organization as a whole, as in chain research on the greening of industrial development. Research in a food supply chain by Andersson and Sweet (2002), for example, referred to collaborative guidance by “a firm that takes on the role of change agent”. Rossi et al. (2000) defined multinational corporations, governments and civil society as “leading agents of change” and “critical institutional change agents in sustainability”. In this field, inter-organizational collaboration became a dominant theme in the 1990s (Rossi et al., 2000; Sarkis et al., 2015). The focal point of efforts to reduce environmental impact changed from organizational processes to the relations between organizations (Boons and Baas, 1997). Research addressed the “strengths and limitations of partnerships between government, business and NGOs” (Rossi et al., 2000) and “solutions using an interactivity based process of social networking” (Partidario and Vergragt, 2002).

The individual as change agent is a more common unit of analysis in fields that focus on social partnerships and intra-organizational sustainability processes. Some social partnership studies mention the involvement of powerful actors that “seek to manage the meaning of partnership” (Selsky and Parker, 2010) or “bridging agency as a collective process” (Manning and Roessler, 2014) in sustainability processes. Intra-organizational research more elaborately examines individual change agents in sustainability processes. This body of literature regards change agents as key interpreters in a search process of how organizations configure sustainability in relation to their organizational context (Metcalf and Benn, 2013; Rauter et al., 2017). These intra-organizational studies acknowledge that change agents gradually translate general information on sustainability into diverse organizational settings, practices and routines (Aguilera et al., 2007; Cramer et al., 2006; Haack et al., 2012; Onkila and Siltaoja, 2015).

Change agents in the supply chain are similarly involved in a process of searching for interpretations of what sustainability means in actual practice. However, in the supply chain context, the change agent is confronted with two main circumstances that differ from the setting of the individual organization. Firstly, given the lack of a shared culture in the chain, collaboration often needs more negotiation and coordination, “eventually enabling participants in inter-organizational relationships to achieve more congruent understandings” (Vlaar et al., 2006). Secondly, the supply chain has no overarching top management that validates the change agent role in collaboration. This is contrary to the situation of the change agent within an organization who, ideally, is supported by the CEO or top management and engages others on centrally determined priorities of sustainability issues (Basu and Palazzo, 2008; van der Heijden et al., 2012).

In this paper, we posit that in chain collaboration for sustainable development, members struggle to understand each other. Problems of understanding emanate from the fact that chain partners are interdependent, but their interdependencies are often asymmetric. They are accustomed to different cultures, which include dissimilar structures, ways of working, organizational resources, knowledge and terminologies (Vlaar et al., 2006). Therefore, chain partners acting as change agents should take time to “discuss and develop a shared understanding of sustainable development” (Sharma and Kearins, 2011).

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