

RE-SOLVING WICKED PROBLEMS IN GLOBAL VALUE CHAINS: HOW PROBING INTO MODERN SLAVERY CAN ADVANCE MNE RESEARCH AND SUPPORT BETTER POLICYMAKING

ABSTRACT:

Purpose: The paper responds to the response pieces by Burmester (2024) and by Dindial and Voss (2024) to my original paper on “Taming wicked problems through international business policy: recommendations for addressing modern slavery”. Beyond engaging with the issues raised by Burmester (2024) and Dindial and Voss (2024), my follow-up helps further clarify the key difference between so-called “grand challenges” and “wicked problems” for both international business (IB) policymaking and multinational enterprise (MNE) research.

Design/methodology/approach: In response to Burmester (2024), the paper juxtaposes key literature on grand challenges and wicked problems to show the theoretical value of applying a wicked problem lens to modern slavery. In engaging with some of the issues raised by Dindial and Voss (2024), I further build on the most current review papers on navigating control and coordination issues within MNEs and the literature on global value chains (GVCs).

Findings: I operationalize the field of IB policy of relevance to modern slavery research and propose an augmented conceptual model of MNEs’ control and coordination mechanisms to address modern slavery under conditions of distributed responsibility in their GVCs.

Originality/value: The paper problematizes the grand challenges’ label imposed on modern slavery and leverages a wicked problem theoretical toolkit that can help better guide modern slavery’s global and multi-level governance nexus. The proposed augmented conceptual model also provides a significant attempt to address some of the key theoretical gaps in GVC and MNE control-coordination literature.

Keywords: *Modern slavery, global value chains, MNE control-coordination mechanisms, IB policymaking, wicked problems*

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a non-expert on modern slavery, I approached writing the “Taming wicked problems through international business policy: recommendations for addressing modern slavery” (hereinafter simply TWPs) with the intent of exploring the usefulness offered by the wicked problems’ theoretical toolkit specifically from the perspective of international business (IB) policymaking as an evolving sub-field of IB research (Van Assche and De Marchi, 2024). It is for this precise reason that the main part of the paper’s title makes *no* reference to modern slavery and that the supporting part of the title after the colon was framed around making “recommendations for addressing modern slavery”.

I also made sure to emphasize this very clearly in the introduction of TWPs, underscoring the broader purpose of the paper to provide guidance on potentially “re-solving other types of global wicked problems, like, corruption, inequality, and climate change” (Rašković, 2024, p. 2). Burmester has picked up on my original motivation by noting: “TWP is much more about wicked problems than it is modern slavery” (2024, p. 2). Indeed, that was my intent, which helps explain why I spent quite a bit of time providing rich statistics on modern slavery (also coincidentally requested by one persistent reviewer) in the hope the paper is going to be read beyond the narrow readership audience of those interested in modern slavery.

As an economic sociologist exploring wicked problems at the intersection of global business, society and policymaking (see, e.g., Rašković, 2022) and mostly operating on the non-market side of multinational enterprise (MNE) strategy (see, e.g., Rašković *et al.*, 2024), I was somewhat unnerved by Caruana and colleagues (2021) who provocatively framed modern slavery as a “Non-Field”. How can such an important issue and phenomenon of such

moral relevance to the field of IB be simply dismissed as a “Non-Field”? Behind the title was the implicit idea of the concept lacking an overarching theory which goes against Kevin Bales’ (2023) efforts to theorize modern slavery since the late 1990s (see, e.g., Bales, 1999). Such theoretical “agitation” has provided a common touchpoint with another point of theoretical “agitation” much closer to my own field of research – the concept of grand challenges. The concept of grand challenges has been recently criticized for turning into “a Tower of Babel” (Carton *et al.*, 2024; Dorado *et al.*, 2022) and ripe for theoretical retirement (Seelos *et al.*, 2023) – following the widespread popularity less than a decade ago (e.g., Ferraro *et al.*, 2015; George *et al.*, 2016).

Recent points of criticism of the grand challenges’ concept have arisen in stark contrast to the proliferation of research on grand challenges across the IB and IB policy literatures (see, e.g., Doh *et al.*, 2023) set in motion by the seminal work of Buckley, Doh and Benischke in the *Journal of International Business Studies* back in 2017. Unlike the general management literature, where scholars have started to poke holes in some of the overly-stretched grand challenge labels (see Dorado *et al.*, 2022; Seelos *et al.*, 2023; Carton *et al.*, 2024), the IB literature still seems to be very much infatuated with the concept. This poses a potential theoretical risk for IB’s understanding of complex intractable problems (e.g., Gonzales Martinez, 2024) – including modern slavery.

In their *AIB Insights* special issue editorial on modern slavery, Michailova, Stringer and Mezas (2020) explicitly described modern slavery as “a grand challenge that can and should be tackled by IB researchers and educators” (p. 1). In full agreement with their call to arms, I felt that the phenomenon-focused nature of modern slavery research and lack of theoretical depth offered by the over-abused (albeit “sexy”) label of a grand challenge is becoming a theoretical liability. This is *why* I decided to write TWP and publish it in the *Critical Perspectives on International Business* known for their critical studies’ intellectual tradition

(Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard, 2019). Burmester (2024, p. 10) astutely picked up on this, albeit somewhat critically, by noting: “One of the greatest strengths of the (TWP) paper lies not in its detail but in its motivation”. I respectfully disagree with the level of detail offered by the wicked problem toolkit and hope to show how TWPs can be useful for addressing the issue of multi-level governance (MLG) outlined by Burmester and colleagues (2019).

Thus, the purpose of my follow-up response to the TWPs was to answer some of the questions posed by Burmester (2024) in his response to the TWPs and address some of the issues raised by Dindial and Voss (2024) related to the MNE literature on control and coordination (see Zeng *et al.*, 2023) in the context of increasingly opaque global value chains (hereinafter GVCs; see Kano *et al.*, 2020). Regarding the points which Burmester (2024) or Dindial and Voss (2024) raised but I did not directly respond to/engage with in my rejoinder, the reader should assume I agree with them and did not respond in the interest of keeping my response of a manageable length. Overall, I have found the two response pieces to be complimentary to each other and intellectually very stimulating; and would like to thank the authors for their time and insights on TWPs. They have helped me find shortcomings in my initial understanding of modern slavery and its link to the issue of MLG (Burmester *et al.*, (2019) which lies at the core of MNEs’ lead role in *re*-solving modern slavery.

However, I also want to go further than simply fine-tune my initial thinking and imbue research on modern slavery with a stronger theoretical understanding of MNE control and coordination mechanisms along opaque GVCs which has been merely implied in Burmester’s (2024) response but is central to the response offered by Dindial and Voss (2024). For Dindial and Voss (2024), the potential of TWPs lays hidden in its overall motivation to open the “door for research that can infuse the policy space and invigorate IB policy scholarship” (*ibid.*, p. 2). I firmly believe that it is through an enriched theoretical understanding of both MNE control and coordination (Zeng *et al.*, 2023; Kano *et al.*, 2020) and the role MNEs play in MLG

(Burmester *et al.*, 2019) that the call by Michailova and colleagues (2018) for IB scholars to rise to the occasion can become properly actioned through the theoretical toolkit of wicked problems. However, to do so, IB policy research ought to pay greater attention to the MLG nexus associated with de-integrated, network-based GVC governance modes where responsibility might be highly distributed (DeBerge, 2024). However, that doesn't mean that MNEs cannot still take a lead role and exercise different forms of power and influence – including the power as “governors” in relation to societal issues requiring collective action (Burmester *et al.*, 2019).

2. JUXTAPOSING WICKED PROBLEMS TO GRAND CHALLENGES

Albeit openly admitting of being only “lightly acquainted with wicked problem theory”, Burmester (2024, p. 1) still seems quite sceptical of any kind of “gains made (in the paper from) wicked problematisation”. This is despite the fact Burmester and colleagues (2019) have already recognized the role of collective decision-making in MLG issues involving a variety of different stakeholders. Dindial and Voss (2024) seem to be more open to a wicked problem logic, but then focus their discussion on MNE control-coordination issues and the opaque nature of GVCs with distributed responsibility and control.

While it is perfectly acceptable to be “lightly acquainted” with wicked problems, I find it puzzling to understand why so many IB scholars studying modern slavery are willing to accept the classification of modern slavery as a grand challenge (e.g., Michailova *et al.*, 2020; Stringer *et al.*, 2022; Burmester *et al.*, 2019) but at the same time continue to be “sceptical” when it comes to seeing it from the prism of wickedness theory (if not the architecture of a wicked problem)? What is there to lose? To be fair to those IB scholars who have used the grand challenge label for modern slavery, which also includes Burmester and colleagues (2019), they appear to have followed the grand challenges' rhetoric within IB popularized by

Buckley and colleagues (2017) and have used it as a way to emphasize the complexity of the problem and its ability to command the public's attention in mobilizing action.

I have come across similar scepticism in my research on wicked problems more generally, often among senior academic gatekeepers who have popularized the concept of grand challenges within the IB literature and for various reasons overlook the growing theoretical critiques of grand challenges within the broader management literature where the discourse was initially adopted from (e.g., Dorado *et al.*, 2022; Seelos *et al.*, 2023; Carton *et al.*, 2024). While it might be fashionable for IB scholars studying modern slavery to take up buzzwords, we must also be aware of the unintended consequences of doing so in terms of inadvertently perpetuating the IB discipline's "loss of steam" (Buckley *et al.*, 2017), especially when it comes to broader social issues and theorizing about the broader social purpose of the modern corporation (Buckley, 2021).

Problematizing the first characteristic of wicked problems (i.e., no definite problem formulation) in terms of Rittel and Webber's (1973) 10-point anatomy of wicked problems, Burmester (2024) questions the causal logic related to modern slavery's legal definition. He points out that "phenomena are legally undefined because they are wicked, not wicked because they are legally undefined" (Burmester, 2024, p. 2). It is important at this point to clearly emphasize that both Rittel and Webber (1973) and myself in TWPs refer to a lack of a problem's *formulation* as a characteristic of a wicked problem and not to a lack of a problem's *definition*. Nonetheless, I could not agree more with the direction of Burmester's causal argument, since coming up with a fit-for-purpose legal definition of modern slavery grounded in, for example, human rights thinking (e.g., Landman, 2020) and/or social justice (e.g., Gutierrez-Huerter *et al.*, 2021) in a kind of counterfactual thought experiment would not make the phenomenon lose any of its wickedness.

In fact, Marmo and Bandiera's work shows that MNEs do not always merely avoid and exploit institutional voids but sometimes also actively engage with their suppliers – “reinforcing a moral consensus that is proving difficult to critique” (2022, p. 64). This points to MNEs using discursive power to achieve their objectives (Burmester *et al.*, 2019). Such things also happen against the backdrop of “benevolent” nation states which operate under the guise of protection but in fact perpetuate a system that allows profiting “from large-scale human exploitation with public consensus” (Marmo and Bandiera, 2022, p. 64). Burmester and colleagues believe that “states leave regulatory gaps to remain competitive in export markets and, by implication, to entice inward foreign direct investment” (2019, p. 144; *cf.* Phillips and Mieres, 2015).

Much of their benevolent behavior thus seems to be mere virtue signalling. For example, a recent comparative analysis of modern slavery legislation in Australia, France and the UK, found that only 22 MNEs worldwide would be required to comply with all three national legislations and how even among those who need to comply with various national requirements, there seems to be evidence of “creep” – for example, from reporting in France to reporting in the UK (McGaughey *et al.*, 2022, p. 249).

In mentioning a lack of a universal legal definition in the TWPs, I was merely collating some of the key references which point to the “reflective” rather than “formative” nature of the wicked problem construct in Table 1 in the TWPs (if I can draw on the analogy from structural equation modelling). Referencing Stringer and Michailova's (2018) point around the general lack of a legal definition was not used to make any directional causal arguments Burmester (2024) seems to have inferred from my writing (or perhaps from their writing). I merely referenced two seminal authors, in fact his colleagues, within the IB field who have studied modern slavery extensively and are considered authorities on modern slavery – at least within IB circles.

Contrasting the subsequent two references discussed under the same characteristic of wicked problems – Crane’s (2013) view of modern slavery being an immoral management practice and Gore and LeBaron’s (2019) point on the social reproduction of modern slavery – further illustrates the various narratives constructed by different stakeholders around modern slavery (Pradilla *et al.*, 2022), including academics and MNEs (Burmester *et al.*, 2019). This is a direct reflection of the wicked nature of modern slavery as a problem resisting a clear and effective *formulation*.

But let’s compare the theoretical usefulness of Rittel and Webber’s (1973) 10-point wicked problem anatomy against the general definition of *a* grand challenge. Adopting the widespread definition of grand challenges by George and colleagues (2016, p. 1881) “as a specific critical barrier(s) that, if removed, would help solve an important societal problem with a high likelihood of global impact through widespread implementation” does the reduction of modern slavery to a mere barrier imply an otherwise fit-for-purpose system? A system striving towards a socially acceptable equilibrium, if it weren’t for the “greedy MNE” according to Crane (2013)? But what kind of system do we exactly have in mind in such regard given the increased fuzziness of GVCs? Do we have in mind a global factory system orchestrated by MNEs, a global production network (GPN) of various subcontractors or an increasingly opaque GVC with the MNE still as the lead firm? Are we making inferences about the global economy as a whole or our everyday consumerist society in which we morally disengage on a daily basis to continue using our electric gadgets, eat seafood or wear a particular item of clothing?

A grand challenge lens unfortunately narrows down our thinking to some sort of *system* with clear “in” and “out” boundaries invoking an equilibrium way of thinking for an eventually solvable issue that is believed to be merely intractable – i.e., stubborn, but still *controllable*. According to Burmester and colleagues (2019), the key to solving it lies in MLG. But even if that system is the GVC, Dindial and Voss’ (2024) point to increasingly opaque GVCs, which

in turn calls into question the amount of control MNEs are able to exert within GVCs (see Zeng *et al.*, 2023). As Dindial and Voss have pointed out the “MNE is rarely the single benefactor of a particular GVC” and there seems to be a lot of “distributed responsibility between the MNE, its contracted GVC partners, and (non-)government organisations” (2024, p. 4). Burmester and colleagues make a similar point and emphasize how MNEs “share responsibilities” (2019, p. 141).

The issue of the implied technical nature of modern slavery through a grand challenge lens (as opposed to being considered an *adaptive*-type of problem¹) becomes even more jarring if we apply the definition used by Buckley and colleagues (2017). To them, grand challenges are “ambitious but achievable objectives that harness science, technology and innovation to solve important national or global problems and that have the potential the public’s imagination” (Buckley *et al.*, 2017, p. 1046). As if ramping up on disclosure/audit efforts and implementing blockchain technology to trace value adding activities along the entire GVC could eliminate modern slavery without addressing the mechanisms of its social reproduction.

It is likely that modern slavery’s ability to capture public attention and mobilize it into general public pressure seems to have contributed significantly to modern slavery being so easily labelled a grand challenge (Stringer *et al.*, 2022). The irony of adopting the grand challenge label also lies in the fact that in theoretically probing into a “real-world phenomenon” (Doh, 2015, p. 609) and adopting “a focus on phenomenon first” approach (Buckley *et al.*, 2017, p. 1047) to modern slavery through the grand challenge discourse, we theoretically overlook the complexity, complicatedness and messiness of real life (Gonzales Martinez, 2024) in which issues like modern slavery get re-produced within our society (within GVCs).

¹ In the context of change management and problem solving, adaptive problems cannot be solved with existing knowledge (usually applied to technical problems which can be broken down into solvable chunks). Adaptive problems require of stakeholders to “change their ways” as they are “part of the problem” which means the solutions to adaptive problems reside in the stakeholders themselves and how they adapt/alter their behaviors and/or understanding (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002).

I believe the wicked problem theoretical toolkit is much better suited to deal with such messy contexts (Head, 2019; 2022). It allows us to theoretically explore the social reproduction of wicked issues through a dynamic process of social structuration driven by the interplay between existing structures and agentic actors across the whole of society – not just the MNEs (Rašković and Takacs Haynes, 2021). It would be further morally irresponsible of any critical management scholar to point the finger solely towards the MNEs (e.g., Crane, 2013) – thereby reducing IB’s contribution to better understanding the MNEs business case for modern slavery through either the global factory model, GVCs or GPNs. We must also recognize the role that supranational institutions, nation states (and their governments), consumers and society at large play in the social reproduction of modern slavery (Marmo and Bandiera, 2022; Gore and LeBaron, 2019; LeBaron and Phillips, 2019; Burmester *et al.*, 2019), which Dindial and Voss cover under the concept of “distributed responsibility” (2024, p. 4). At the risk of invoking any of the moral disengagement mechanisms, like victim blaming, the victims’ families and communities can also sometimes play an active or a passive role in perpetuating and/or enabling the exploitation of family members or members of the community as modern slaves, which points to a much more complex social re-production logic than is issue of industrial relations.

The inference to a critical barrier also implies the idea of a technical problem which can be broken down into smaller parts and eventually optimally solved by making an intractable problem tractable (Landman, 2020; Heifetz and Linsky, 2002). Burmester (2024) points to how “wickedness theory reveals much about the urgent and intransigent societal problems that is not known to social scientists and activists intimately acquainted with the contours of their particular policy battleground” (p. 2). His point is valid and correct to a large extent, but by inferring to specific policy battlegrounds again falls into the trap of thinking a wicked problem can be fine-sliced into various policy fields (Van Assche and De Marchi, 2024)

and stakeholder silos. Like other wicked problems, modern slavery is not just an isolated problem in itself – either an economic, a social or a political one – rather it is a symptom of myriad other underlying causes and interconnected social, political, environmental and economic issues – many of which are wicked in their own right (Head, 2022) and some even super-wicked (see Rašković, 2022).

If the lack of our ability to clearly formulate a wicked problem is what captured Burmester's (2024) attention, I believe the most important characteristic of wicked problems of particular relevance to both business decision-makers *and* policymakers is their underlying *moral* imperative to address wicked problems in their *entirety* (Wexler, 2009). However, the moral imperative doesn't lay with the decision-makers, like managers or policymakers. It should refer to moral choices of *all* the involved stakeholders – along the entire GVC and trickling all the way down to consumers. Exploring the evolution of ethical framing of modern slavery in the UK construction industry, Gutierrez-Huerter and colleagues, for example, uncovered specific patterns of mean making where human rights and/or social justice perspectives have been complemented by “the discursive constructive of moral legitimacy” of the various stakeholders involved (2021, p. 35). Such an idea of using discursive power to seek legitimation was also discussed by Burmester and colleagues (2019).

Upholding a moral imperative (as a decision-making principle) immediately points to the public policy realm and helps prevent cherry-picking of either stakeholders and/or specific causes (Sinkovics *et al.*, 2021). It also safeguards against specific decision-makers presenting themselves as “solution makers” by offering partial solutions to pre-selected aspects of the problem which can be solved and used to gain legitimacy without any real “skin in the game” (Rašković, 2022).

However, to conclude the debate on this issue, I tend to agree with Burmester's problematization of the almost axiomatic acceptance of Rittel and Webber's (1973) original

wicked problem anatomy, which has remained virtually unchallenged over the last 50 years. The spirit of Burmester's (2024) critique leads me to think that rather than getting hung up on specific characteristics of wicked problems and meeting the grand challenge discussions in some "dark alleyways" (Burmester, 2024, p. 8), we need to focus more on the underlying principles of wickedness. I explored such principles more systematically in my *Journal of International Business Policy* paper (Rašković, 2022). Burmester's (2024) problematization of Rittel and Webber's (1973) anatomy leads me to echo the recent critique of the grand challenges' concept by Seelos and colleagues (2023). The authors advocated not to "throw the baby out with the theoretical bathwater" and instead evolving away from our obsession with grand challenges towards specific principles, which I also discussed in Table 2 of the TWPs.

Among such principles, I believe the principles of *polytely* (i.e., multiple stakeholders with conflicting and competing needs, priorities, views and understanding) and *politics/politicking* (i.e., around problem framing, stakeholder inclusion and governance issues) strike at the core of what Burmester and colleagues (2019) have identified as modern slavery's MLG nexus in which MNEs often act as central governors.

3. THE "SHADOWY GOVERNORS" KNOWN AS IB POLICYMAKERS

Burmester (2024) was rightly critical of the lack of theoretical precision when discussing IB policy and *policymakers*, asking himself who are the "shadowy set of governors known as "IB policymakers"?"?. However, he was equally vague when tip-toeing around systematically identifying *all* relevant public stakeholders associated with either transnational or global labor governance issues (Burmester *et al.*, 2019).

In his response to the TWPs, Burmester (2024) answered his own question by referring to the "conventional reading" of IB policymakers as the "policy apparatus of national governments and their combination in intergovernmental organisations" (p. 7). While I can surely accept some responsibility for the lack of terminological precision and the construct

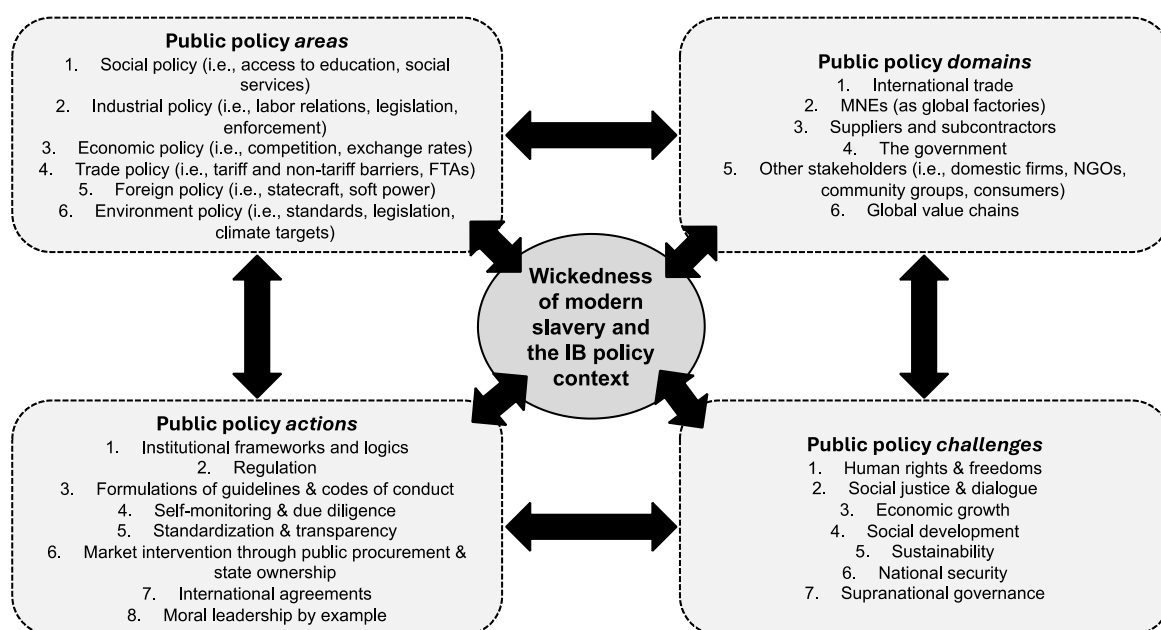
clarity around IB policy (referring to the *public* policy domain), some responsibility must also rest on the evolving nature of the IB policy field under the umbrella of the relatively new *Journal of International Business Policy* established in 2018.

Having recently taken over the editorship of the journal, Van Assche and De Marchi (2024, p. 2) recognized the need to evolve IB policy away from the abstract circular definitions (i.e., public policy relating to IB; Lundan, 2018) and lofty aspirations of benevolent governments (Clegg, 2019) towards making a more “actionable definition (by) treating it as a subset of public policy” (Van Assche and De Marchi, 2024, p. 2; *cf.* Van Assche, 2022). Moving away from Clegg’s (2019) emphasis on the role that mostly governments play in public policy against an increasingly politicized nature of IB (Beugelsdijk and Luo, 2024), Van Assche and De Marchi drew on Smith and Larimer’s (2018) definition of public policy, which captures the whole gamut of actions and activities taken by various kinds of *public* entities “to take shape or alter cross-border business transactions with the goal of addressing public policy challenges” (Van Assche and De Marchi, 2024, p. 2). Such societal challenges can be “both grand or mundane” and can include “economic development, social justice, environment protection, technology, security, education and healthcare” across local, regional, national and international levels (Van Assche and De Marchi, 2024, p. 2).

In providing the most actionable definition of IB policy to date, Van Assche and De Marchi (2024) have made a huge leap forward to tease out “the shadowy governors” and clearly operationalize them as *all* public entities at the local, regional, national and supranational levels whose actions include, but are not limited to, “the enactment of regulations, the formation of guidelines, the signing of international agreements, the intervention in markets through state ownership or public procurement, and more” (Van Assche and De Marchi, 2024, p. 2).

Drawing on the most recent operationalization of IB policy by Van Assche and De Marchi (2024), which did not yet exist when TWP's was first published online, I have tried to illustrate the IB policy field of relevance to modern slavery in Figure 1, which can in turn hopefully guide us to identify the necessary policymakers across local, regional, national and supranational levels (Burmester *et al.*, 2019) covering different domain areas in the top-right corner of the figure. Such policymakers, for example, would include economic and trade advisors to the executive branch of government (i.e., the international trade domain), both government and non-government actors involved in human rights and labour exploitation issues and/or members of the government negotiating trade agreements, putting forward labor legislation and/or involved in trade and investment promotion (to name just a few). Identifying specific public policymaking actors should start by first looking towards the different public policy domains, and then subsequently thinking of specific public policy actions and areas where such agents can exert their influence on public policy of relevance to modern slavery in a regulatory, normative and/or cognitive sense.

Figure 1: The field of IB policy relevant to addressing modern slavery



Source: Own depiction inspired by Van Assche and De Marchi's (2024) Figure 2 on p. 3.

Figure 1 addresses Burmester's (2024) relevant critique that Lundan's (2018) typology of IB policy areas overlooks the role of foreign policy (as a specific public policy area). I fully agree with Burmester (2024) that foreign policy cannot be merely assumed under "transnational governance" in Lundan's (2018) original classification although his earlier work seems to suggest his interest in foreign policy seems to be confined mostly to international law and labor governance.

Burmester poignantly points out that "A zero-sum mentality pervades the foreign policy establishment" (2024, p. 7; *cf.* Rachman, 2012), which has significantly worsened in the post-Pandemic new normal fraught with different kinds of nationalism, identity politicking and receding globalization (Rašković, 2022; Luo, 2024). It is precisely for this reason that addressing any wicked problem requires not just "collective engagement" by subnational, national and supranational stakeholders (Van Assche and De Marchi, 2024, p. 2; Burmester *et al.*, 2019). It also calls for a unifying identity and collective agency of *all* involved stakeholders (Rašković, 2022). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) are an important step in such a direction, as a way of mobilizing action (van Tulder *et al.*, 2021).

Supranational organizations, like the International Labor Organization (ILO) or the United Nation's Human Rights Council, play an essential role in this and have the potential to counterbalance the zero-sum logic of national level foreign policies. As their key characteristic (Hartmann *et al.*, 2022), their *supraterritoriality* can help match MNEs' geographically dispersed activities along increasingly opaque GVCs (Kano *et al.*, 2020; Zeng *et al.*, 2023). Yet, this does not imply that MLG does not remain also very much a "place-centred phenomenon" (Burmester *et al.*, 2019, p. 144). The *consensuality* of supranational institutions, another of their key characteristics, can further help mobilize the necessary collective action, even if it acts as a double-edged sword due to a lack of enforcement mechanisms (Hartmann

et al., 2022). It is here that the so-called “major MNEs” can step in as lead governors (Burmester *et al.*, 2019).

4. BETTER UNDERSTANDING MNE CONTROL AND COORDINATION IN GVCs

Dindial and Voss’ (2024) discussion of the TWP is much more focused compared to Burmester’s (2024) in the sense that it questions the level of control and coordination MNEs are able to exert under conditions of distributed responsibility. Their response is based on the belief that the TWP offers “a too optimistic picture of the difference IB could make” (Voss and Dindial, 2024, p. 2), which seems to be in stark contrast with MNEs as lead governors involved in MLG (Burmester *et al.*, 2019). I see Dindial and Voss’ comment of “[p]ortraying IB as the saviour of wicked problems, and modern slavery in particular, if only the right tools and policies were employed” (p. 2) more as a theoretical provocation on the boundaries of MNE responsibility than an actual critique.

While I do not see IB (let alone IB policy) as any kind of “saviour” of the world’s wicked problems, I *do* believe both of them are uniquely positioned and theoretically equipped (Beugelsdijk, 2022; Van Assche and Di Marchi, 2024) to play leading roles in addressing the cross-border nature of value chain processes and outcomes associated with modern slavery, the multi-level and multi-stakeholder nature of such processes and outcomes orchestrated by lead MNEs. Through their link to transnational governance (Buckley, 2022), they can further help address many of the international corporate governance challenges associated with the conflicting needs, priorities, understandings and perspectives of diverse stakeholders in which control and coordination play necessary but insufficient roles (Aguilera *et al.*, 2019; Burmester *et al.*, 2019).

For Dindial and Voss (2024) the increasingly fuzzy nature of the modern MNE (Zeng *et al.*, 2023) and the corresponding opaqueness of the GVCs (Kano *et al.*, 2020; Zeng *et al.*,

2023) point to unresolved MNE control and coordination issues – be that from a GVC, GPN or global factory perspectives (Kano *et al.*, 2020). Before addressing both of these issues by drawing on the recent state-of-the-art reviews of GVCs (see Kano *et al.*, 2020) and MNE control-coordination mechanisms (see Zeng *et al.*, 2023), I would first like to thank Dindial and Voss (2024) for reminding me that an IB policy focus cannot be separated from MNE understanding in terms of MNEs’ boundaries and organizational mechanisms; and Burmester (2024) for reminding me that such issues need to be also explored in an appropriate governance context.

In my desire to contribute to the rapidly evolving field of IB policy research (Van Assche and De Marchi, 2024; Clegg, 2019; Lundan 2018), I overlooked the import of unresolved theoretical issues from the IB discipline into IB policy research – like conceptual clarity and the coarseness “regarding how various configurations and interactions of control and coordination mechanisms affect intended outcomes” of MNEs (Zeng *et al.*, 2023, p. 1599); especially in a GVC context.

I fully agree that both *control* and *coordination* (not just control!) are “at the heart of MNE functioning” regardless of their increasingly fuzzy organizational boundaries (Zeng *et al.*, p. 1599). While I agree with Forsgren and Holm’s (2021) caution of adopting an overly MNE-centric approach to MNE control-coordination efforts in a GVC context, I don’t think the fact that MNEs neither “own their GVC” (Dindial and Voss, 2024, p. 2) nor are any longer able to “institute hierarchy-like behavioural constraints across its suppliers” (Dindial and Voss, 2024, p. 4) absolves them from a *moral responsibility* to *re-solve* modern slavery even under conditions of “distributed responsibility between the MNE, its contracted GVC partners, and (non-)governmental organisations” (Dindial and Voss, 2024, p. 4; *cf.* Forsgren & Holm, 2021). There are important microfoundational mechanisms at play in GVC governance, which need to be better theoretically addressed (Kano *et al.*, 2020) and can capture some of the

ethical/moral tensions of relevance to control and coordination mechanisms when it comes to modern slavery (DeBerge, 2024).

Recent empirical investigations seem to indicate that MNEs are becoming acutely aware of this in both transaction cost and internalization-externalization theory terms (e.g., Marmo and Bandiera, 2022; McGaughey *et al.*, 2022) but seem to be co-evolving with the respective institutional environments at national and supranational level to manage the issue as a kind of strategic moral asset (Marmo and Bandiera, 2022) in a signalling race to the top of imbued with corporate political activity (McGaughey *et al.*, 2022).

According to Burmester and colleagues (2019), MNEs demonstrate agency by drawing on different sources of power – ranging between instrumental, structural, discursive and governing power. They believe MNEs play an active role in re-producing a “clear and yet sophisticated pattern of organizationally fragmented and spatially dispersed” IB activities (Kano *et al.*, 2020, p. 577). This often happens through facilitating degenerative forms of competition based on transaction cost economic logics which drive “outsourcing of production and labour recruitment, exploiting the informalisation of work and increased mobilisation of labour” and which in turn result in the construction of “a particular kind of labour force, and a particular mode of its utilisation, which generates maximum flexibility for firms and employers, limits the ability of workers to negotiate the production process and maximises the returns to capital” (Burmester *et al.*, 2019, p. 152).

The inadequacy of existing IB theory related to either GVCs or MNE control-coordination mechanisms should not imply that MNEs do not need to step up their game in mobilizing for a “Decade of Action” (van Tulder *et al.*, 2021) due to increasingly diffused responsibility (Forsgren and Holm, 2021) – especially when it comes to wicked problems (van Tulder and van Mil, 2022; van Tulder *et al.*, 2021; Rašković, 2022). Equally, nor should they simply relinquish the role to governments and policymakers. While governments may have a

clearer public interest mandate to try and *re-solve* wicked problems, research by Marmo and Bandiera (2022) shows that they are often enablers and part of the problem, influenced by major GPN-type MNEs (Burmester *et al.*, 2019) through MNE-government bargaining (Müllner and Puck, 2018) and targeted corporate political activity (Puck *et al.*, 2018).

Contrary to Dindial and Voss (2024), however, I still believe that MNEs remain central to *re-solving* the wickedness of modern slavery for three main reasons. First, despite the changing nature and definition of an MNE – as “an enterprises that does not necessarily directly own value-adding activities in foreign countries” (Zeng *et al.*, 2023, p. 1600; *cf.* Narula *et al.*, 2019) – control and coordination remain and have become even more critical for the MNE (Narula *et al.*, 2019) due to higher external interdependencies (Zeng *et al.*, 2023).

The second reason is that even in significantly changed network-based governance structures (DeBerge, 2024) – with different kinds of power relations and implications for responsibility – the role of the MNE as a lead firm is actually enhanced not diminished – especially when it comes to GVCs (Kano *et al.*, 2020; *cf.* Kano, 2018; Yeung, 2016; Yeung and Coe, 2015; Yamin, 2011; Buckley, 2009). In fact, for Burmester and colleagues: “MNEs are a perfect example of the non-hierarchical network nature of MLG” (2019, p. 145).

Thirdly, MNEs are not mere passive institution takers bound by various kinds of “rules” but actively exercise their agency (Burmester *et al.*, 2019). They do not just co-evolve together with their institutional environments (Cantwell *et al.*, 2010). This has particular implications for the development and deployment of their non-market strategies (e.g., Shirodkar *et al.*, 2024; Sun *et al.*, 2021), which enable MNEs to more effectively navigate the realms of politics and public policy (e.g., Rugman and Verbeke, 2001; Rizopoulos and Sergakis, 2010) or exert stronger (and often quite direct) influence on governments and other public policy entities through corporate political activity (e.g., Hillman *et al.*, 2004; Puck *et al.*, 2018; Hartwell and Devinney, 2022).

Dindial and Voss (2024) also point to the dangers of a *static* debate on MNEs' control over GVCs which does not properly account for any "changes to the intra-GVC relationships over time" and how they "affect the possible distribution of control across the chain" (Dindial and Voss, 2024, p. 4; *cf.* Stendhal *et al.*, 2021). The issue of how to theoretically and empirically account for temporal factors and dynamics in GVC arrangements is well acknowledged in the GVC literature (Kano *et al.*, 2020; Buckley *et al.*, 2019; Yeung *et al.*, 2015), so it would be unfair to shoulder the responsibility for these deficits alone. In fact, the ability for wicked problem thinking to account for the non-ergodic nature² of the global environment (see, e.g., Hitt *et al.*, 2021; Buckley, 2020), which calls for dynamic evolutionary systems' thinking (Rašković, 2022), also offers a stronger theoretical starting point than if wicked problem thinking were not invoked. I believe it has the theoretical potential to guide IB policymakers to become more sensitive to temporal aspects of GVC activities – in both structural and strategic terms (Kano *et al.*, 2020).

Having laid out my key arguments as a response to Dindial and Voss' (2024) response to the TWPs, I will now focus on discussing the question of the MNEs' distributed responsibility, followed by integrating the necessary organizational mechanisms for MNE control and coordination within the system of distributed responsibility by further expanding the augmented framework of MNE control and coordination proposed by Zeng and colleagues (2023).

4.1 The boundaries of MNE responsibility

For Dindial and Voss (2024), the issue of the MNEs' control over/within the GVC seems to be more a symptom than a root cause of their concern with TWPs. Opaque GVCs indeed rely on

² A non-ergodic environment is marred by radical uncertainty (i.e., the unknown unknowns), quantum and discontinuous types of changes, and the existence of dynamic equilibria (existing in so-called dynamic systems) which continuously changes even in the absence of external shocks (Rašković, 2022; Hitt *et al.*, 2021; Buckley, 2020).

“de-integrated, network-based governance modes” where efficiency, ethics and institutional pressures often clash (DeBerge, 2024, p. 197). This, according to Dindial and Voss (via DeBerger, 2024) opens up the issue of MNEs’ “distributed responsibility” in addressing wicked problems or “shared responsibility” according to Burmester and colleagues (2019).

The irony of such a debate is not lost on me in a time when MNEs are called to mobilize for a “Decade of Action” (van Tulder *et al.*, 2021) to meet the UN SDGs by 2030 (which decent work is part of), the increasing importance of ESG reporting within corporate governance circles (e.g., Tsang *et al.*, 2023) and leading IB scholars addressing the “social purpose” of the modern corporation (Buckley, 2021).

Much of Dindial and Voss’ (2024) thinking seems to be driven by DeBerge’s (2024) case study of a specific supply chain related to a digital electronics GVC. Grounding the governance of GVCs in an overarching transaction cost economics logic, DeBerge (2024) outlines the increasing tension between the shrinkage of MNEs’ organizational boundaries in complex GVCs *and* the expanding role of MNEs’ boundaries of responsibilities – which separates the potential overlap between ownership, control and responsibility (Narula, 2019; Narula *et al.*, 2019; Egels-Zandén, 2017).

DeBerge’s (2024) study highlights the ineffectiveness of various cascading modes of compliance (i.e., audits, codes of conduct, various kinds of standards, due diligence) as forms of so-called “*quasi*-internalization” (Narula, 2019; Van Assche and Narula, 2023) due to the high level of GVC structural inertia. He shows that in the absence of significant external institutional pressures (i.e., regulatory public policies) which “institutionalize (...) expanded responsibility boundaries when firms do not possess adequate awareness, motivation, and/or capabilities” MNEs will not be inclined to implement strategic behavior and changes “toward greater internalization of responsibility boundaries” (DeBerge, 2024, p. 198; *cf.*, Buckley and Liesch, 2023).

In fact, DeBerge's (2024) findings provide empirical support for the central premise of the TWPs, as he has been able to directly link the question of distributed responsibility with the creation of a "collective action problem" (DeBerge, 2024, p. 200). This question is at the heart of the MLG idea preoccupied with societal goals with minimal impact on human rights (Burmester *et al.*, 2019). While highlighting the need for a stronger integration of the GVC and global strategy literatures (*cf.* Pananond *et al.*, 2020), DeBerge's conceptual 'model' in Figure 5 (2024, p. 217) falls short of integrating the internalization of an MNE's responsibility boundaries within the GVC into the actual global strategy literature and its focus on control and coordination under conditions of distributed responsibility.

4.2 MNE control and coordination under conditions of distributed responsibility

Building on the augmented conceptual model developed by Zeng and colleagues (2023, p. 1609), my model depicted in Figure 2 incorporates DeBerge's (2024) findings into existing theoretical discussions on MNE control and coordination. The model approaches modern slavery as a form of ethical externality under conditions of distributed responsibility. In doing so, my aim is to demonstrate that both the changing nature of GVCs' governance modes and MNEs' distributed responsibilities do not prevent us from theorizing about the necessary control and coordination organization mechanisms MNEs can/need to implement to take a lead in issues related to the MLG nexus (Burmester *et al.*, 2019).

The left-hand side of the model captures the "influencing factors" across different levels (Zeng *et al.*, 2023) with implications for MLG (Burmester *et al.*, 2019). Among the listed factors, the role of moral decision-making and ethical concerns needs to be incorporated, especially at the microfoundational level. Kano and colleagues (2020) have identified this level as a particularly understudied area of GVC research. Addressing this research gap can in turn

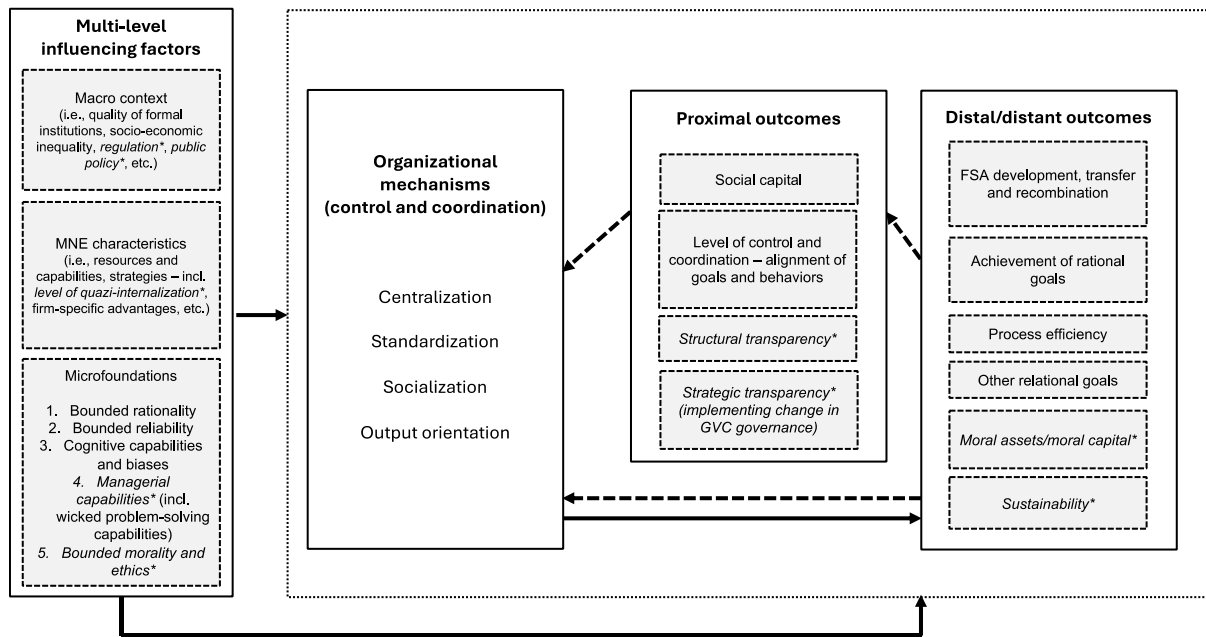
provide an opportunity for IB research on modern slavery to contribute to the broader GVC literature.

The middle part of the model teases out specific MNE control and coordination organizational mechanism which MNEs exercise through different types of agency, as the lead firm and different sources of power (Burmester *et al.*, 2019). The right-hand side of the model distinguishes between the so-called “proximal” and “distal/distant” outcomes. The distinction is of particular relevance to the *wicked* nature of modern slavery and the moral imperatives of the involved stakeholders, as decision makers.

In addition to existing microfoundational aspects of bounded rationality and bounded reliability outlined by Zeng and colleagues 2023, and the cognitive and managerial capabilities outlined by Kano and colleagues (2020), the microfoundational “arsenal” of relevance to modern slavery should also account for the concept of *bounded morality* (incl. moral disengagement mechanism), as well as any managerial decision-making capabilities specifically relevant to solving wicked problems (i.e., stakeholder management, compassion and storytelling; see Rašković, 2022).

Among the MNEs’ characteristics, the use of so-called *quazi*-internalization strategies needs to be especially highlighted in the context of “cascading compliance” governance models (DeBerge, 2024, p. 198). These appear to be largely a form of discursive power (Burmester *et al.*, 2019). When it comes to macro-level factors, the “regulation” and “public policy” aspects merely draw attention to active agency pursued by major MNEs, like constructing different “barriers to effective transnational labour governance by pursuing their narrow economic interests in the establishment of international norms” (Burmester *et al.*, 2019, p. 151).

Figure 2: A conceptual model of MNEs’ control and coordination mechanisms to address modern slavery under conditions of distributed responsibility in GVCs



Source: Own conceptualization based on adaptations of Zeng and colleagues (2023), DeBerge (2024) and Kano and colleagues (2020). Note: Items depicted in italics and with a star have been added to the model and build on the wicked-problem logic of modern slavery.

Among the proximal outcomes, which Zeng and colleagues (2023) see as goals most closely related to control and coordination in terms of a firm’s behavior, the aspects of structural and strategic transparency build on the distinction between the role that structure plays in GVC power dynamics (i.e., structural power) and the behaviors of firms implementing strategic changes to GVC governance (DeBerge, 2024). The “transparency angle” in these two proximal outcomes underscores the importance of transparency, as one of the fundamental principles under the human rights’ framework to modern slavery (Landman, 2020; Nagar, 2023).

With regards to distal/distant outcomes the addition of “other relational goals” is less of a direct relevance to modern slavery, and more a distinction between the more proximal nature of social capital in managing inter-organizational relationships along the GVC and other types of more distant relational outcomes more closely related to temporal and other kinds of dynamics within the so-called new relational paradigm (see Dyer *et al.*, 2018). The “moral

asset/moral capital” distal outcomes draw on the idea of Marmo and Bandiera (2022) of firms going beyond merely managing transaction costs or pursuing reputational benefits. Lastly, the issue of “sustainability” goes beyond environmental sustainability and incorporates the notion of social sustainability, and the role fair work and sustainable labor practices play in social sustainability (Kobal Grum and Babnik, 2022).

In my last section, I turn my attention to the MLG nexus proposed by Burmester and colleagues (2019) and the need to expand beyond the role of “regulation” which they have mostly focused on. I draw on the different realms of public policy actions shown in Figure 1, introduced by Van Assche and De Marchi (2024).

5. ON MORE EFFECTIVE POLICYMAKING FOR *RE*-SOLVING THE WICKEDNESS OF MODERN SLAVERY: BEYOND REGULATION

In their global and MLG framework for addressing modern slavery, Burmester and colleagues (2019) focused on the role of regulation driven by public interest across “spatial and competence boundaries” (Burmester, 2024, p. 8). Both Van Assche and De Marchi (2024), as well as my conceptualization in Figure 1 clearly show that the field of public policy *actions* is much broader and cannot be reduced to *regulation* alone.

With regards to traversing spatial boundaries, the uniqueness of the IB discipline in theorizing the relationships between place, space and organization (Beugelsdijk, 2022) needs to be leveraged by IB scholars and brought into the discussion on MLG. This is because, MNEs and other perpetrators attempt to invoke a psychological distance between any kind of legal, special and/or cognitive responsibility and “the *locus* of the offence” (Burmester *et al.*, 2019, p. 141).

With regards to specific capabilities, the wicked problem theoretical toolkit can again offer specific types of capabilities which the grand challenges toolkit does not offer – at least

not beyond capturing public attention, mobilizing the public and leveraging technology. In my paper on IB policymaking for a wicked world in the *Journal of International Business Policy* (Rašković, 2022) I discussed some of the most common ones, especially stakeholder management, storytelling and policy entrepreneurship.

Burmester (2024) is completely correct in highlighting that the wickedness of modern slavery cannot be solved or even *re-solved* “through command but through negotiated alignment of governance objectives, from the individual, through to civil society organisations, corporations, government agencies, and onwards to intergovernmental organisations (and beyond)” (Burmester, 2024, p. 8; *cf.* Scherer et al., 2006). I firmly believe that adopting a wicked problem lens (as opposed to a grand challenge one) can better guide such negotiated processes across the multiple levels and various kinds of boundaries. It does so by lending itself much better to understanding the social structuration processes at play reproducing wicked problems, like modern slavery, than a grand challenge lens. The same also applies for any kind of MLG framework, which does not consider the *nature* of the problem needing to be addressed. All this, however, still requires much more nuanced theoretical approaches sensitive to place, space and organization dynamics (Beugelsdijk, 2022). It will require from the field of IB policy and the corresponding decision makers a better understanding of social psychology which is much better suited for the continuous *re-solution* of adaptive-type problems – something recently called for by Casson (2021) specifically in terms of policymaking.

6. CONCLUSION

I hope that by creating a large conceptual “superstructure” as Burmester (2024) has described it, I have been able to provide some “non-jaded” food for thought (Burmester, 2024). Having gone back to an earlier work by Burmester and colleagues (2019), I see immense value in infusing their seminal work on addressing the global and MLG nexus of modern slavery with wicked problem thinking. In spite of a fundamentally changed global environment (Kano *et*

al., 2020), the MNE remains not just a lead firm in creating a de-integrated, network-based mode of GVC governance (DeBerge, 2024), but should also be examined as the lead “governor” for *re*-solving the wicked problem of modern slavery in a new kind of transnational governance setting (Buckley, 2022).

In the changing GVC landscape, which remain the key building blocks of our global economy (Kano *et al.*, 2020), the relevance of public policy and its IB counterpart is becoming perhaps more important than ever (Buckley and Liesch, 2023) – not just due its regulatory role (Burmester *et al.*, 2019) but for a broader swathe of IB policy fields of *action* (Van Assche and De Marchi, 2024). As IB scholars join the call of Michailova and colleagues (2020) and mobilize to study modern slavery by drawing on existing IB theories, imbuing them with additional wicked problem thinking and problem-solving toolkits can help contribute to both more societally engaged IB research (Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard, 2019), as well as help close some of the theoretical gaps in GVC research, the boundaries of MNEs’ responsibility and perennial questions around MNE control and coordination which Dindial and Voss (2024) have highlighted us. At the same time, imbuing the rapidly evolving literature on the *new* transnational governance (Buckley, 2022) can also help us address the global and MLG nexus of modern slavery (Burmester *et al.*, 2019).

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