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The limits of labor governance in global value chains: exclusions, 'edge' populations and civil society activism in unstable labor regimes

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ABSTRACT

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have played a pivotal role in the governance of labor in global value chains (GVCs). Yet many initiatives developed by CSOs in the global North fail to account for patterns of instability inherent within global capitalism which can result in expulsions of workers from value chains. Arguably, such patterns of instability propagate the existence of 'edge' populations in the global South, whose experiences of labor are shaped by sporadic entry and exit into insecure waged work. This article explores the efforts of Southern CSOs to develop effective labor governance for 'edge' populations using the case of the Indian tea industry. It draws on the lens of GVCs and labor regimes to document the reality of work on the margins of capital accumulation and demonstrates the ways through which spatial and temporal shifts in geographies of production (resulting in inclusions and exclusions of workers and producers) shape, but also limit, the strategies of CSOs to improve labor and livelihoods. In doing so, this article reveals a more complex picture of the realities and possibilities of labor governance in globalized production chains.

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KEYWORDS Global value chain; domestic value chain; transnational labor governance; civil society organizations; globalization

Introduction

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have played a pivotal role in shaping the transnational governance of labor in an age of globalization (Sasser et al., 2006). Yet, many studies of labor-focused CSOs—a category which typically includes labor activists and non-governmental organizations

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(NGOs) (Fransen & Burgoon, 2015)—have privileged international CSO-led initiatives stemming from the global North which aim to counter worker exploitation in global value chains (GVCs) (Sun, 2022). This includes the study of transnational advocacy networks (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), global framework agreements (Hammer, 2005) and multi-stakeholder initiatives (Bernstein & Cashore, 2007; Fransen, 2012).

The GVC framework has proven to be a useful conceptual device for understanding power relations between the various actors (corporates, supplier firms, states, civil society) shaping production across borders, as well as the design and implementation of labor governance programmes within these value chains (Gereffi et al., 2005; Nadvi, 2008). However, the majority of labor governance studies using this framework tend to overlook the fact that chains themselves are subject to constant temporal and spatial changes determined by the wider inherent instabilities of global capital accumulation (for exception see Bair & Werner, 2011). Indeed, the ‘inclusionary bias’ found in many of these chain-focused approaches fails to consider the fact that workers and producers are vulnerable to expulsions from chains due to the changing commercial imperatives of lead firms (Bair & Werner, 2011, p. 989). This is not only a conceptual oversight within the literature (which impacts upon the study of labor governance within value chains) but is also an oversight on the part of global North CSOs who use the chain as a primary lever for change and tend to approach governance exclusively through this mechanism. A recognition of these instabilities as part of the ‘everyday’ of globalized capital reveals the conceptual and empirical limits of viewing CSOs as simply governors of value chains, and instead pushes the question of how CSOs across a range of geographical locations seek to improve labor conditions within the ever-transformational reality of global capitalism.

The labor regime literature has sought to decenter the lead firm in discussions over labor governance. As a concept, the labor regime can be used to demonstrate how working conditions are shaped by the need to hold capital and labor in ‘antagonistic relative stability’ (Baglioni et al., 2022, p. 1), and can be utilized by scholars to explore how firms and states control the workforce in a bid to maintain contracts with transnational lead firms. As such, the concept has the potential to help theorize the role of CSOs in governing labor from a more structural perspective by introducing a critical political economy lens to GVC studies. The local labor control regime may be maintained through a variety of coercive methods which are typical of postcolonial agricultural production and which aid accumulation within the value chain.

Yet, similarly to the GVC framework, this literature has not sufficiently examined the limits of specific regimes in maintaining lead firm linkages under globalization (under which processes of inclusion *and* exclusion are

rife). By emphasizing ‘stability’, the literature tends to neglect the *failure* of regimes to maintain capital at particular junctures and moments in time, and may not sufficiently account for the ways through which inclusion and exclusion are shaped (at least in part) by competition between sites of production (i.e. labor regimes) at local, regional and global scales.

This article offers a conceptual framework to understand the role of CSOs in shaping labor governance within unstable and ever-shifting regimes of production (where examples of worker expulsions from value chains are apparent). By introducing Bhattacharya’s concept of ‘edge’ populations to GVC and labor regime analysis, the presence of workers and producers defined by their ‘occasional entry [and exit] into insecure waged work’ (Bhattacharya, 2018, p. 50) is analytically centered. This concept is combined with insights from the GVC and labor regime literatures to demonstrate the complex intersections between capital instability and regime collapse, and how this contributes to the (re)production of ‘edge’ populations. Empirically, the article then uses the case of the Indian tea industry to explore the role of Southern CSOs in creating and maintaining labor governance within and beyond the value chain in unstable production arrangements.

Empirically, the article demonstrates that labor governance for Southern CSOs is not simply about securing working conditions and wages for workers within value chains. It is also a mechanism to try and secure the livelihoods of those who are suddenly excluded from chains due to changing patterns of accumulation. The empirical findings broaden the scope of labor governance studies in the GVC and labor regime literatures by highlighting the ways through which NGOs and labor activists politically respond to what is, in some cases, an ongoing crisis of social reproduction (as well as production) within the Indian tea industry. By centering ‘edge’ populations within the analysis, as well as the role of local (rather than global) CSOs, a new understanding of the realities of labor governance at the borders of capital accumulation is reached.

Overall, the findings challenge current research on CSOs influence across GVCs and labor regimes in three key ways. Firstly, the findings illustrate that CSOs governing labor should not be understood through the value chain alone but should be conceptualized as operating within and beyond the chain. This follows Bair and Werner (2011) argument that value chain research suffers from an ‘inclusionary bias’ which ignores the fact that chains are in continuous spatial and temporal flux due to the changing accumulation strategies of global capital. It also follows that a chain approach tends to privilege actors at the top of the value chain (such as international CSOs), rather than centering the analysis on local CSOs. The findings demonstrate that the GVC lens should position dynamics of inclusion and exclusion more centrally within discussions of labor governance by CSOs.

Secondly, the findings illustrate that although the specific challenges of labor governance can be conceptualized using the labor regime (due to its focus on relations between capital and labor), this framework should also be challenged for its tendency to focus on the construction of *stability* between labor and capital. Indeed, regimes may fail to adapt to the changing needs of global capital, leading instead to economic instability. Regime analysis must recognize that global competition between regime types in different production locales may lead to the loss of contracts, exclusion from value chains and potentially regime collapse. Whilst the labor regime literature has recognized that instability is possible, there is a dearth of studies addressing the more sudden and tumultuous shocks present within the everyday workings of GVCs.

Thirdly, the findings demonstrate that, due to the highly unstable nature of capital accumulation, the reality of labor governance and activism on the ground may focus on social reproduction and survival, as well as working conditions and wages. Studies of governance in value chains and labor regimes should more fully center the necropolitical dimension at play within the workplace and how this lends explanatory potential to the types of strategies undertaken by local CSOs, the political framings of the labor struggle, as well as why various initiatives don't always succeed. Overall, the article uses the prism of Southern CSO activism to highlight the challenges of governing labor in 'edge' populations and joins the call for bottom-up approaches to the study of labor governance and GVCs which recognize instability under global capitalism.

The article is structured as follows: The following section outlines the role that CSOs play in shaping transnational labor governance in GVCs and introduces the concept of 'edge populations' to help theorize possibilities for governance at the margins of value chains. Section three provides an overview of the methodology and case study selection whereas Section four provides the context by detailing the colonial and postcolonial labor regimes of Indian tea production. Section five presents a detailed empirical account of how Southern CSOs have sought to improve labor conditions in the 'edge' populations of workers, and how a broadening of the conceptual and empirical focus beyond the chain reveals a much deeper picture of the complexities at play in the shaping of labor governance for transnational production. Section six concludes.

Civil society, labor regimes and crises of (re)production

CSOs and labor governance in an age of globalization

Under globalization, the expansion of GVCs led by multinational corporations has encouraged CSOs to shift advocacy and campaigning away from

states and toward the private sector (O'Rourke, 2006). The myriad roles that CSOs play in shaping labor under globalization have often been conceptualized using the chain-centric GVC approach which maps 'the organized nexus of interconnected functions and operations by firms and non-firm institutions' through which goods and services are produced and governed (Coe et al., 2004, p. 41). By targeting firms coordinating GVCs, CSOs hope to gain leverage to improve the position of labor within the global economy. This article uses the term 'labor-focused CSOs' to include both NGOs and labor activists who shape labor rights governance through various strategies, campaigns and advocacy (Fransen & Burgoon, 2015).

During the 1990s, initial CSO activities targeting GVCs included the formation of transnational advocacy networks (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), transnational consumer networks (Sasser et al., 2006) as well as the growth of anti-corporate movements challenging labor exploitation (Connor, 2004). Over time, sustained activities led corporations which were concerned about reputational risk to develop their own labor governance programmes such as codes of conduct, and this has increasingly involved collaboration with CSOs to build greater accountability (Arnold, 2022). Since the 2000s, the dominant institution governing labor standards in value chains has been the multi-stakeholder initiative (MSI) in which NGOs cooperate with multinational corporations (MNCs) to produce third-party codes of conduct (Bartley, 2007; Fransen, 2012). Alongside MSIs, trade unions have used global framework agreements between corporations and worker organizations to ensure that minimum legal employment regulations are being met in international production networks (Hammer, 2005).

Whilst these initiatives play a major role in shaping the governance of labor, there is growing recognition of the wider instabilities of global accumulation which continually transform temporal and spatial geographies of corporate-driven value chains. As a result, scholars such as Bair and Werner (2011) have argued against the static nature of many GVC-based studies for freezing 'complex and relational circuits of economic activity' which are in reality subject to continual transformation (Bair & Werner, 2011, p. 989). The authors noted that the GVC framework tended to emphasize the role and position of actors incorporated into production chains whilst neglecting the frequent exclusions of actors from such chains under the changing geographies of global production (Bair & Werner, 2011). By *exclusion* specifically, the authors were referring to those processes by which 'regions and actors become disconnected or expelled from commodity chains that may [simultaneously] be incorporating new regions and actors elsewhere' (Bair & Werner, 2011, p. 989).

Bair and Werner (2011) intervention follows a Marxian analysis of the wider dynamics of capitalism within which both historic and contemporary patterns of (dis)investment and dispossession lead to inclusion and/

or exclusion within GVCs. They asked how our understanding of transnational production would differ if analysis was based upon ‘layered histories and uneven geographies of capitalist expansion, disinvestment, and devaluation’ (Bair & Werner, 2011, p. 989). From a labor governance perspective, these changing geographies of globalized production (which (re) produce inclusion and exclusion) have significant implications for workers and producers whose livelihoods are impacted through potential loss of employment and/or income (Bair & Werner, 2011).

Value chain approaches to the study of labor-focused CSOs have done tremendous work in revealing the multifaceted roles of local trade unions and NGOs in shaping governance across different scales of production (Alford, 2016; Barrientos, 2013; Neilson & Pritchard, 2011). However, the focus on chains within this work has often assumed stability in production relations across the GVC and therefore has not empirically centered the continuous processes of expansion, disinvestment and expansion present within capitalism, nor how these dynamics shapes CSO strategies to address labor governance. This article argues that the ever changing spatial and temporal dynamics of capital and its production of ‘edge’ populations needs to be taken seriously within studies of labor governance in GVCs. For a fuller understanding of how these dynamics intersect with labor, and how local sites of production are impacted, a dynamic (as opposed to static) multi-scalar approach which centers the shifting parameters of global capital within the study of CSOs, labor governance and value chains is needed. A partial remedy can be found within the labor regime literature, to which the discussion now turns.

Labor regimes, ‘edge’ populations and crises of social reproduction

Labor regime analysis has examined how social relations and institutions bind capital and labor in *antagonistic relative stability* within value chains (Baglioni et al., 2022, p. 1). Such regimes are multi-scalar and result from ‘the articulation of struggles over local social relations, and their direct or indirect intersections with the commercial demands of lead firms in production chains’ within which national institutions and local labor control practices are considered (Baglioni et al., 2022, p. 3). Here, the local labor control regime may be maintained through hierarchical differentiation of workers based on constructs of gender, race, class and/or caste, as is common in postcolonial agricultural production (Shah, 2023). The establishment and maintenance of labor regimes can be understood as a mechanism through which local firms and producers control the workforce in a bid to maintain contracts with corporations.

The labor regime literature is typically strong in combining insights from ‘chain’ studies of corporate led production systems with labor process theory. This means that the labor regime literature combines analysis on how labor is organized in the workplace to appropriate surplus value with broader analysis of the multi-scalar dynamics of accumulation in an age of global capital. As such, there is consideration of how workplaces are shaped by local labor processes, their integration into the national political economy (regulated by state policy on labor, employment rights, and working conditions) and by wider power asymmetries within value chains (Smith et al., 2018). It is this combination of local, national and global dynamics which together constitute labor regimes in the workplace (Taylor et al., 2013).

Similarly to the majority of GVC studies, labor regime analysis suffers from its lack of attention to the dynamism of capitalism because it focuses on how stability is reached and maintained within the workplace (Baglioni et al., 2022). Indeed, the literature has discussed labor regimes as being ‘stabilizations of capital-labor relations and, as such, having a certain stability and durability’ (Baglioni et al., 2022, p. 15) and although their temporary nature is somewhat recognized, they are said to ‘evolve over longer time periods’ (Baglioni et al., 2022, p. 15). This conception of gradual and incremental changes leaves little room for consideration of how shocks to the system may force instantaneous regime collapse and subsequent expulsions from value chains. As such, more attention should be given as to how local patterns of ‘relative stability’ between capital and labor may fail to adapt to the changing commercial imperatives of global capital, producing more immediate forms of instability. By bringing Bair and Werner (2011) emphasis on the wider processes of accumulation structuring value chains into regime analysis, a temporally cognizant understanding of instability within processes of value creation and capture can be created. Brought together in this way, the literatures can be used to trace the reasons for worker expulsions from value chains altogether and can help us to understand how inclusion and exclusion may in part be predicated on the *inability* of the regime to fix capital in place, often in spite of low wages and exploitative working conditions.

Recognizing the instability inherent within labor regimes leads to a more detailed focus on the margins of value chains, and what this means for those people who reside and work in such spaces. Bhattacharya’s (2018) description of ‘edge’ populations who are defined by their ‘occasional entry [and exit] into insecure waged work’ (Bhattacharya, 2018, p. 50) ties neatly to this article’s focus on inclusions and exclusions within GVCs. Bhattacharya’s ‘edge space’—which constitutes the ‘spaces of non-capitalism or almost capitalism’, demonstrates the need within capitalism to ‘designate some spaces and populations as non-productive’

(Bhattacharya, 2018, p. 5). It is at this location of ‘almost included and yet on the boundary’ (Bhattacharya, 2018, p. 5) that many workers in value chains reside. This bears some resemblance to discussions regarding the adverse incorporation of workers into GVCs, in which informalisation generates labor relations premised on ‘enhancing the vulnerability, flexibility and disposability of workers’ (Phillips, 2011, p. 383). Yet, the ‘edge’ space also calls for a consideration of what might be termed adverse *exclusion* within GVCs.

The concept of the ‘edge’ population has clear analytical purpose for both the GVC and labor regime frameworks. The ways through which lead firms coordinate value chains often depends upon near-constant geographical shifts determined by market prices as well as wider institutional and geopolitical considerations. This in turn leads to dynamic processes of inclusion and exclusion at sites of production, and so the workers within them may be cast out of the value chain based on such decisions. Within these processes, the local structures of the labor regime can also play a key role in catalyzing such processes. For example, local capital may argue that certain aspects of the regime (such as labor law) can play a critical role in the decision of lead firms to move production contracts.

It follows that this precarious reality may pose an existential threat to workers’ own social reproduction (i.e. ability to survive) when commercial logics of value chains displace ‘previous privileges, without...elevating anyone or anything in their place’ (Bhattacharya, 2018, p. 53). This is an important point because it raises the question of living and dying within value chains as a reality which is often ignored in scholarship. In short, it begs for a fuller consideration of how labor regimes generate disposability at multiple scales (whether this be at local, national and/or global scales).

Within the concept of an ‘edge’ population lies a necropolitical dimension to labor relations in which there is a political making of spaces and subjectivities in an ‘in-between of life and death’ (Bhattacharya, 2018). This article will demonstrate that the necropolitical construction of the Indian tea plantations was not only a historical phenomenon of colonial rule but is also something revitalized through contemporary globalization dynamics of global tea production from the 2000s onwards. This can be empirically documented through the emergence of starvation deaths in the wake of plantation abandonment. Read through the ‘edge’ space, the labor regime itself must be seen as central in shaping who lives and who dies laboring because of shifting patterns of capital expansion and/or contraction. Following this, this article argues that the labor regime literature should more fully consider how different regimes (re)shape one another in ways which determine inclusion and exclusion from value chains and reproduce and/or reconstitute ‘edge’ populations. As such, the following section argues for a clearer discussion of labor regimes across spaces of

formal and informal work and across sites of competition at local, regional and global scales.

Agricultural labor regimes in competition

The study of labor regimes in agriculture has typically been focused on the plantation, which is a system of production founded under colonialism. During the colonial period, workers were often forcibly transported to plantations under conditions of slavery. Although workers are no longer unfree or indentured in a formal sense, the legacies of these hierarchies remain today in the form of unfree labor practices and exploitative employment conditions (Li, 2017; Manjapara, 2018). Workers are often housed on the plantation estate itself and depend on the employer for safe living conditions and for food (Neilson & Pritchard, 2011). Furthermore, these plantations are often in isolated rural areas which further contributes to a labor regime constituted by paternalism and dependency (Raj, 2022). Depending on the national regulations and wider political context, trade unions may represent the interests of labor in these formal sector businesses, but their effectiveness may be determined by political allegiances and/or their interest in representing female and/or migrant workers (Kamath & Ramanathan, 2017).

Following decolonization, many agri-sectors have witnessed an expansion in smallholder food producers who produce goods alongside established plantations (Banaji, 1977; Patnaik, 1976). Whilst some smallholders may engage in subsistence farming, many produce goods for the market and may employ waged labor (Langford, 2021). Waged labor on smallholdings is often part of the informal economy, which means that labor laws pertaining to the formal sector do not apply in this regime. Workers are self-employed on smallholdings, and often conditions are precarious due to the seasonal nature of agricultural labor and the fact that local migration may be necessary for workers to meet their own reproductive needs. Therefore, agricultural production can be said to be constituted by two distinct labor regimes.

Returning to Bair and Werner (2011) observation that global capital is mobile and therefore creates new and uneven geographies of development, it is important to consider the ways through which value chains intersect with distinct labor regimes (whether plantations or smallholdings) to reproduce, reinforce or transform the reality of work. The global accumulation strategies of MNCs can destabilize labor regimes in particular locales, with the potential to create broader crises of (re)production as some sites of production are expelled and others are included. For example, in the sugar, rubber and palm oil industries, recent research has shown that increases in global demand have led to the expansion of the plantation segment in

some regions, potentially undermining smallholder-based production (Li, 2017). Other studies have argued that the expansion of GVCs drives a growing preference for smallholder producers, who are perceived as potentially more productive in specific sectors and/or regions compared to larger production units and businesses (Ramamurthy, 2011). The extent to which specific modes and forms of organizing production are favored will partially depend upon the amount of value extracted from labor and must also consider the unique sectoral dynamics of production, the ways through which labor regimes are constructed by national institutions and the types of governance requirements within value chains.

The co-existence of different agri-food regimes at national and global levels raises the question of how these sites compete for incorporation into value chains and how this influences or shapes CSO thinking around labor struggles. Additionally, it also raises questions around how different regimes affect one another's overall stability. For example, higher productivity in smallholder agriculture may undermine working conditions in plantations as employers strive to accumulate more value in response to domestic competition (Langford, 2021). Equally, new forms of governance instituted by MNCs may lead to the expulsion of smaller scale producers unable to meet new standards introduced into the value chain (Ponte & Gibbon, 2005). These dynamics of local and global competition between agri-labor regimes can lead to inclusion and/or exclusion from chains and may influence the types of strategies taken by CSOs. Consideration must be given as to whether CSO efforts to support workers in one regime may impact on workers in another, as well as what potential strategies are effective within this competitive context.

The fact that plantation-based labor generally occurs in the formal sector (meaning that it is subject to state regulations and oversight), whereas smallholder-based labor generally takes place in the informal sector (and is often unregulated) may also bear upon the types of strategies taken by CSOs. Labor activists and CSOs may focus on labor organizing in the formal sector (Gallin, 2001) which in the context of agri-food means these actors are focused on labor governance in plantations and larger agri-businesses. Locally, they may seek to support and facilitate collective bargaining with employers or else seek to engage with legal norms and frameworks to advance worker rights. Other labor activists and CSOs may tend to engage in informal segments of production to advance the rights of women or marginalized groups (Ford, 2006; Folkerth & Warnecke, 2011). Cross-coalition based CSOs may seek to do both, and to consider employment practices across both the formal and informal sectors of agri-food production. The question of CSO organizing at the level of the workplace should consider these dynamics alongside those of the value chain itself and ask: Which workers, in which regimes, are prioritized by which CSOs?

This leads to a consideration of the key ideological differences between labor-focused CSOs, who may hold contrasting priorities and therefore influence political and economic power through different strategies (Braun & Gearhart, 2004). Trade unions are involved in a ‘win-lose’ confrontation with capital and are driven by specific interests whereas other labor-focused groups and CSOs may be driven by their purported ideals prescribed by a catalog of human rights that address responsibilities of state actors (Braun & Gearhart, 2004). In addition, there are important structural differences. Trade unions have members which they are accountable to whilst CSOs have the freedom to follow ideals instead of interests, resulting in ‘political non-accountability’ (Braun & Gearhart, 2004, p. 188). NGO reputations are based on upholding norms that are non-negotiable since the realization of one right may not be compromised for the sake of another.

This has led to the observation that labor-focused organizations may be ‘wary allies’ (Compa, 2001) who often have political disagreements. Vanyoro’s (2021) study of South African CSOs revealed that trade unions and NGOs may adopt singular discourses at varying political moments to achieve their own goals, whereas Elias (2008) found that the use of the universal human rights framework by NGOs had often ignored more systemic issues of inequality for migrant workers in the case of Malaysia (to the dismay of trade unions). Although the empirical discussion of this article does not focus on trade unions explicitly, but instead considers a range of different CSOs, the ontological underpinnings of the various groups in the empirical case does bear a strong resemblance to the sorts of dilemmas and tensions outlined above.

A final consideration which influences the strategies of CSOs in shaping governance within labor regimes relates to the changing geographies of trade, production and consumption. In the early decades of the twenty first century, this has been characterized by the considerable expansion of South-South (including domestic) trade (Horner & Nadvi, 2018; Nadvi, 2014). In this unfolding context, labor regime analysis is not simply about multi-scalar interactions and intersections between global capital, state institutions and workplaces. It is also multipolar, involving MNCs located in regional and domestic (as well as global) markets sourcing from the same producers (Horner & Nadvi, 2018). Recognizing the multi-polarity of trade and production complicates the study of labor regimes but also allows us to grapple with the specific local dynamics of production which CSOs encounter when shaping labor governance.

Methodology and case selection

A case study methodology was used to capture activities and strategies of Southern CSOs in shaping labor governance in the case of the Indian tea industry. Fieldwork was undertaken in India, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (UK) between 2015 and 2019 during which semi-structured

interviews were held with fifty eight individuals from civil society, including international and local NGOs as well as labor activists and worker organizations. In addition, interviews were also held with relevant actors and organizations within the global and domestic value chains for Indian tea including producer associations, plantation owners, corporations, and government officials. Table 1 documents the interviewee type, the number of interviews held with each type as well as the location of interviews.

Respondents were selected based on their involvement within labor governance in the Indian tea industry, and secondary desk research facilitated mapping of the global and domestic value chains of Indian tea production and identification of the key CSOs, firms and state actors shaping the wider labor governance of the sector. Online publications and social media posts were often used to identify and locate interviewees, and snowball sampling was also used during the fieldwork phase to identify further relevant organizations. These organizations were specifically selected because they held expertise on labor governance and some were actively involved in shaping various campaigns and initiatives related to working conditions, wages and livelihoods in the Indian tea sector.

CSOs involved in the creation of new labor-focused programmes and initiatives were a central focus and key questions asked during interviews exploring how conditions of work within plantations and smallholdings have been impacted by broader processes of capital accumulation, how the co-existence of different regimes has shaped labor conditions, and how CSOs have strategized to improve working conditions and wages in the midst of industry-wide restructuring. Ethical protocols were followed throughout including the distribution of participant information forms regarding the research project as well as obtaining the informed consent of participants. Most interviews lasted ninety minutes, and a majority of interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, with extensive note taking utilized when recording was not possible. Interviews were supplemented by the use of secondary data, including trade data and reports produced by companies, government and civil society organizations involved in the governance of labor within the Indian and global tea sectors.

Table 1. Interview descriptions.

Interviewee type	Number of participants	Location of interviews
National NGOs	21	Bengaluru; Delhi, Kolkata
Global NGOs	13	London, Amsterdam, Utrecht
MNC lead firms	2	Bengaluru, Kolkata
Supplier firms	7	Kolkata
Business associations	1	Ooty
Smallholder federations	2	Jalpaiguri
Government officials	3	Jalpaiguri
Global institutions	3	Delhi
Trade unions	6	Delhi, Kolkata

The case of Indian tea is particularly relevant for the study of CSOs and labor governance for several reasons. Firstly, the Indian tea industry has been subject to numerous prominent campaigns by international and local CSOs since the 2000s due to evidence of extreme forms of labor exploitation (Langford, 2019; Neilson & Pritchard, 2011). As a result, a large academic literature has also emerged to study labor governance within the industry (Besky, 2008; Neilson & Pritchard, 2011). Yet studies on local CSO organizing and labor governance remain limited. This is a major gap given the fact that India has the largest number of civil society organizations in the world, and there are numerous CSO campaigns on the ground which can reveal more of the intricacies and difficulties in labor governance.

Secondly, the case of Indian tea is interesting for the study of labor regimes and governance due to the ways through which its historical development has shaped contemporary production dynamics. Unlike other major tea producing countries, India has long maintained a large plantation segment, and this particular regime was maintained due to the specific political economy of trade between the Soviet Union (USSR) and India during the Cold War era which straddled the industry from foreign competition (Neilson & Pritchard, 2011). The subsequent eruption of a tea crisis in India during the 2000s was linked to the collapse of the USSR and the reorientation of the industry toward GVCs in Europe and other major tea markets (Kadavil, 2007). At the same time, corporations were simultaneously consolidating market power through a series of mergers and acquisitions. Empirically, this presents an interesting context for labor regime analysis, with the closure of plantation estates and the subsequent development of smallholder-based production forming the backdrop for the processes of inclusion and exclusion which are so central to the story of CSO organizing in this context.

Finally, the tea crisis itself represents an important moment for labor governance locally, and remains a central concern of local CSOs. Yet, due to the fact that the crisis represented a 'break' or explosion from the value chain, the crisis remains ignored by international CSOs (who continued to focus on workers and producers contained within the value chain). Empirically, the case demonstrates an often ignored reality of labor governance, which is that work can be highly volatile and therefore frequently constituted by 'edge' populations. The fact that a 'tea crisis' is a social reproduction as well as production crisis is revealed through this article's empirical examination of the role of local CSOs in shaping labor governance, wherein the complexities of the crisis only become fully realized through the various attempts to remedy the situation. Some attempts by CSOs to improve the situation are value chain based initiatives whilst others appeal to state institutions.

The case of Indian tea offers numerous insights. Firstly, it offers a bottom-up perspective on CSO organizing at the borders of a value chain, in which forms of expulsion are mediating the types of campaigns and

advocacy available to NGOs and labor activists. Whilst studies of CSOs and labor governance in transnational production are numerous, these have tended to examine cases through the GVC lens, meaning that the focus is on specific chains rather than shifting geographies of production reshaping the borders of chains. Furthermore, the focus on *global* chains in these studies has ignored the changing nature of domestic market production which is increasingly characterized by smallholder farming. By decentering the GVC, this study examines the role of CSOs at the borders of chains whilst also incorporating the domestic production of tea into the analysis. This is particularly important due to the fact that approximately 90% of tea produced in India is sold domestically, with only 10% exported (Langford, 2019).

Secondly, the case of Indian tea highlights the rise of informal sites of production in the wake of expulsions, and demonstrates that established *and* emergent labor regimes in turn shape the broader patterns of inclusion and exclusion within GVCs. The role of the informal sector in reshaping power dynamics within formal sector labor regimes has largely been ignored within the labor regime literature despite the fact that smallholder production is an increasingly important segment of overall production in export-oriented agricultural sectors. The reality of competing regimes in turn leads to divergent approaches by CSOs. These approaches themselves reflect different political framings of labor and livelihood struggles in the context of the Indian tea sector.

Thirdly, the case highlights the fact that labor governance can materialize as campaigns for *life* as well as work, demonstrating the necropolitical dimension at work in the (re)production of 'edge' populations. Whilst 'edge' populations have been conceptualized by Bhattacharya, an empirical examination of how capital shapes this phenomenon through global value chains has not been explored. Thus, the empirical case allows the concept of an 'edge' population to be directly linked to the dynamics present within the global tea value chain, and in turn explores how this shapes possibilities and limitations for labor governance by CSOs and labor activists. The following section provides a brief history of Indian tea production and explores how the rise of value chain dynamics in the industry has altered local labor regimes. Following this discussion, the article proceeds to discuss the case of Southern CSO activism through the lens of 'edge' populations living on the borders of GVCs.

Indian tea production: from colonial to postcolonial labor regime

A brief history of the plantation labor regime

The commercialization of tea in India was instigated under British occupation in 1839 as a means of breaking China's trading monopoly (Liu, 2010). Production was centered on the plantation labor regime in which

thousands of people from tribal communities were enslaved on plantations in West Bengal and Assam with little recompense other than food and housing (Behal, 2010; Sen, 2015; Shah & Lerche, 2020). These indentured workers, exploited in relation to different social constructs (including race and caste) were made dependent on employers for key aspects of their social reproduction, creating a paternalistic relationship between owners and workers that has continued until this day (Chatterjee, 2001). At the (trans)national level, the British government ensured that estates were managed in line with their own commercial objectives, and British capital maintained a vertically integrated system of production. The gendered division of labor meant that male workers specialized in factory work whilst women engaged in the plucking of leaf in the fields (Raj, 2022).

Following Independence, a paternalistic labor regime continued as employers became legally obligated to provide food and housing under the Plantation Labour Act (1951) (Hayami & Damodaran, 2004). The fact that employers provide food and housing has since led to confrontation with trade unions as to whether such 'in-kind' benefits should be deducted from wages, as discussed further below. For much of the postcolonial era, the Indian government concentrated on the development of new markets to lessen the power of British capital. The 1978 Rupee-Rouble agreement with the USSR ensured the relative economic stability of the industry up until 1991 (Neilson & Pritchard, 2011). Between 1947 and 1990, smallholder production accounted for just 7% of production. This made India exceptional compared to other tea producing countries who have relied much more extensively on smallholders in the postcolonial era (Kadavil, 2007).

In the 1990s, the industry was transformed by a series of events affecting the organization of tea trade. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 and India's subsequent IMF bail-out led the Indian economy toward a programme of market liberalization (Neilson & Pritchard, 2011). At the same time, the consolidation of MNCs in global markets led to the formation of tightly coordinated value chains. Indian tea producers competed with other countries to supply an ever-decreasing number of buyers. This situation was due to mergers and acquisitions in key European markets during this period (Neilson & Pritchard, 2011). National constraints, such as the rising cost of production, decreased productivity of tea bushes and heavy export duties meant that plantation owners were ill-prepared for these structural changes within the global tea industry, and as such, they increasingly challenged their legal obligation to provide food and housing (Raj, 2022). Many deducted the costs of these from workers' monthly wage payments (Sen, 2015).

In 2001, global tea prices plummeted, and casualization of work became more widespread on the plantations. Limited hours were available for permanent employees in some cases whilst new workers subsequently hired

by plantations were not entitled to the same rights as permanent employees (Raj, 2022). Many men lost permanent jobs in the tea factories and whilst some women retained permanent employment, others were reduced to temporary work status. This is a direct example of the ways through which global capital leads to ruptures and subsequent expulsions of workers from GVCs.

By 2008, a tea crisis had been declared, as the industry earned just US\$590.23 million (m) in foreign exchange in comparison with US\$506.832 million dollars in 1981. This represented a drastic cut in real terms and led some plantation owners to abandon estates (Raj, 2022). Larger corporations also chose to divest from plantation ownership to focus on branding and marketing during this era (Raj, 2022; Raman, 2010). For workers, this generated a social reproduction crisis (as abandonment of plantations not only meant unemployment, but also a lack of access to food). Between 2002 and 2014, it was estimated that 1000 starvation deaths have occurred on plantations in the Northern states, with reports of a further 100 deaths in the Dooars region of West Bengal between 2014 and 2015 (Sen, 2015). These deaths relate to the estimated closure of 28 estates (Sen, 2015).

The growth of the smallholder labor regime in India

The 2000s was also marked by an increase in smallholder-produced tea in India. Whilst smallholder production was less than 10% in 1995, by 2018 the percentage of tea produced by smallholders had reached 44% of total production (Tea Board of India, 2018). Expansion was driven by favorable tea prices during the 1990s and supported by government programmes encouraging farmers to convert to tea production (Seddon & Schmidt, 2017). In Assam alone, state efforts to popularize small tea production led to a growth of 657 farmers in 1990 to over 84,000 today (BASIC, 2019). Smallholder production can be comprised of farming using family labor but may also include the use of waged labor and therefore represents a new form of labor regime. The type of labor employed (family labor or family and wage labor) can usually be determined by multiple factors, including whether the farmer has sufficient income to employ workers, the nature of the work, and seasonality (Kadavil, 2007). Because fewer than 10 workers are employed on smallholdings in most cases, tea farmers in India are not obligated to follow labor laws. It also follows that unlike the plantation estates, there is no requirement to provide housing or wider social support to waged laborers on smallholdings.

The rise of smallholder farming can be directly tied to the changing commercial logics of domestic and global value chains (Langford et al., 2023). Smallholder farmers in this industry are generally more productive

compared to plantations due to the manual and intensive nature of work (without machinery present) combined with more regular plucking of leaf. Together, this has been found to increase the overall yield per hectare (Hayami & Damodaran, 2004). From the perspective of capital, the growth of informal production through smallholder expansion allows further extraction of value from the Indian tea industry. This is because there are higher power asymmetries in the smallholder value chain compared to plantations. Smallholders do not have access to processing factories and so must depend on middlemen to transport leaf to nearby factories within a short timeframe. Evidence from certification pilot schemes in the industry has empirically demonstrated that wages are lower in smallholdings compared to plantations.

The co-existence of two labor regimes has direct implications for the construction and maintenance of ‘edge’ populations in the context of the Indian tea industry. Smallholders constitute an ‘edge’ population due to their emergence at the new frontiers of value extraction, and workers laboring on these farms tend to have lower wages and originate from low caste backgrounds (Hannan, 2019). The growth of smallholders has also created ‘edge’ populations on plantations because estate owners are increasingly subcontracting production to the former, leading to casualization of plantation tea workers. On average, plantation estates in India are sourcing around 17.9% of tea from smallholders (Tea Board of India, 2018) which has the potential to undermine working conditions whilst providing plantation owners with a cheaper source of tea¹ in response to the pressures of global and domestic corporations. Therefore, it is essential within this context to understand different labor regimes within the same industry as having a relational component.

Southern CSOs and the framing of labor exploitation

The decline of plantation-based labor and the rise of smallholder production in Indian tea expose the vulnerability of ‘edge’ populations to ongoing processes of capital accumulation. This has produced a dual crisis whereby the plantation-based industry is in decline whilst the informalisation of production is simultaneously on the rise. The following section explores how Southern NGOs have sought to improve labor governance for tea workers in this unpredictable context. It demonstrates how the construction of dual labor regimes exposes a joint challenge of ensuring decent work whilst also ensuring the survival of workers. Specifically, it examines five targeted initiatives and demonstrates the various ways in which their decisions were shaped by the lived reality of ‘edge’ populations. In doing so, it demonstrates the centrality of placing such a concept at the heart of both GVC and labor regime analysis. Where relying on

primary data, the names of organizations have been anonymized in line with observed ethical protocols.

Global network on the right to food and nutrition

The 'Right to Food' campaign was instigated by the Global Network on the Right to Food and Nutrition (GNRTFN) in 2015. This network is composed of social movements and civil society organizations worldwide to support and give visibility to the struggles for these human rights, and it is comprised of the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF), FIAN International, Pesticide Action Network, Right to Food Campaign (Nepal), Right to Food and Social Security Campaign (Bangladesh) and the Right to Food Campaign (India). The campaign has focused on plantation closures and the question of how workers can reproduce without the food provisions that were previously provided by employers.² Its primary focus has been on West Bengal where there have been a series of plantation closures in which workers were left unable to find food. This led to starvation deaths as previously discussed despite the fact that plantation abandonment is illegal (Sen, 2015).

The Network has approached the question of worker malnutrition and starvation through the United Nations (UN) Right to Food framework in which the 'Right to Food' is a principle enshrined in international law through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and other legal instruments (Windfuhr & Jonsén, 2005). According to the UN, the Right to Food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement (UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1999). The UN places binding obligations upon states to respect, protect and fulfill the right to food (Twomey et al., 2015). The decision to frame the problems facing tea workers as a human rights issue led the network to target the state. Following a fact-finding mission conducted by the network in 2015, the results were presented to the Supreme Court of India. Upon review of the evidence, the Court subsequently ordered the state government to pay an allowance to the workers living on abandoned tea estates in West Bengal, allowing workers the means to feed themselves.³

The campaign has demonstrated the urgency of the situation, whereby broader forces of capital has led to the collapse of local labor regimes. The paternalistic nature of employer-employee relations (itself an outcome of a labor regime which has fostered dependency) has left workers starving and unable to secure their own social reproduction. The fact that a majority of tea workers on plantations are from low caste backgrounds

was perceived by local NGOs as an obstacle to governmental action,⁴ which is why international legal instruments have been appealed to. However, the wider structural problem of what should happen to these workers remains unaddressed, and the results arguably only provide a short-term solution to what is a longer-term question of social reproduction. Moreover, the framing of the issue as human rights abuse has been criticized by other labor-focused CSOs for ignoring the broader responsibility of GVC-based actors, as remarked on by one prominent CSO:

It's an image of poverty, the starving people on the tea plantations, so it's a charity framework...so the way they look at it is the intervention has to be at the government level, the government has to intervene to take on responsibility because they are citizens of yours so therefore they must intervene to find basic facilities, so this is what has happened and this has actually deteriorated the conditions of work in the plantations. (Interview, CSO 23th March 2017)

This criticism relates to the fact that human rights have universalized the problems facing tea workers which arguably obfuscates the specific capitalist dynamics at play.⁵ The focus is on universal moral standards (which the state is responsible for upholding) and not about the wider restructuring of the tea industry by global capital. The ruling means that the state continues to make the payments to workers that were formally issued by plantation owners, thus holding the workers within the plantations which have ceased to operate. The case possibly points to the limits for social protection for workers in marginalized communities.

Whilst this NGO's framing of the plantation crisis may be interpreted as a partial reading of the problem, the focus on the crisis of reproduction is arguably a priority within edge populations who are sometimes made disposable within a capitalist system. The 'edge' space in this context generates a dual crisis—one of life and one of work. It appears that this division leads to tensions between different labor-focused organizations.

Center for labor⁶

Justice for tea workers

Justice for Tea Workers was developed in 2002 as a labor standard for the Indian tea estates by a Delhi-based NGO called Center for Labor (CfL). During the tea crisis, CfL responded to plantation closures by documenting starvation deaths and raising awareness of the conditions facing workers in tea growing regions.⁷ Frustrated by the situation, CfL decided to develop Justice for Tea Workers as a new multi-stakeholder initiative. As such, it used a value chain lens to approach the governance of the industry and to target corporations present within the domestic and global

value chain. CfL argued that other MSIs had failed to address systemic problems in the tea industry and that Justice for Tea Workers would correct these oversights by developing a code of conduct that ‘addresses core issues in the industry to secure productive employment, respect of labor standards and labor rights...and a commitment to sustainable and long-term development’. CfL argued that long term development was a crucial differentiator of Justice for Tea Workers (compared to other value chain initiatives) because it pushed corporations controlling value chains to play a role in mediating the social impacts of plantation estate closures. It incorporated relevant national legislations and established norms found in global MSIs together with the perspective of workers. Justice for Tea Workers aimed to become a national tea standard for the domestic market and targeted the two largest domestic corporations: Hindustan Lever and Tata Global Beverages.

Unlike the Right to Food campaign, Justice for Tea Workers attempted to use the value chain as a lever for progress in relation to labor conditions in tea, and explicitly recognized the ways through which corporations drive processes of inclusion and exclusion as part of broader accumulation strategies. Drawing on recent developments by CSOs in the global North, CfL believed that the standard could be used to develop new approaches to labor governance on the plantations and to also develop a local, supply chain labor standard for the first time in the industry’s history.⁸ However, corporations rejected Justice for Tea Workers and refused to participate in the initiative. They argued that there was no commercial logic for them to participate because they believed that domestic market consumers would not be interested in such a programme. This exposed the limits of market-based governance within the domestic context of tea production.

Equality in tea

Following the rapid emergence of smallholders during the 2000s, CfL once again looked to improve labor standards in the tea industry by forming a new initiative known as Equality in Tea. This initiative was developed in 2006 alongside a UK based charity to improve working conditions and wages in the rapidly growing smallholder community. Equality in Tea’s stated aim was to vocalize the concerns of small tea growers and to expand the coverage of unionization among workers employed in the smallholdings. This was a direct response to the processes of informalisation happening in the industry which had produced new ‘edge’ populations within the domestic and global value chain. However, despite this early focus on labor in smallholdings, CfL found that smallholder producers themselves were so impoverished that the power asymmetries within the value chain between smallholders, bought leaf factories and corporations had to be addressed prior to the focus on waged labor:

These holdings are also very unstable. Since these are very small holdings, people have actually converted their land into tea plantations and if in one season, they don't make the profit that they expected, they just abandon tea and try something else. Any price fluctuation in the market, they just close shop. Instability is inherent to these smallholders and we cannot help workers without addressing this. (Interview)

Equality for Tea therefore evolved from a labor focused initiative to one which focused on building countervailing power in the value chain.⁹ By doing so, it aimed to increase value capture for smallholders, and the strategy consisted of three key parts: Firstly, the organization of smallholders into producer associations; secondly, the collective purchasing of processing factories which would allow producers to capture more value through economic upgrading; thirdly, the creation of a new tea brand based on fair trade principles.¹⁰ This once again reflected a strong engagement with the structural power of the value chain, but one which did not rely on corporate backing and engagement. This shift in approach was a direct outcome of CfL's previously unsuccessful negotiations with domestic firms. By creating collectively owned processing facilities and producers' associations, Equality in Tea hoped to lessen the dependence of smallholders on middlemen and bought leaf factories.

Whilst Equality in Tea initially focused on labor, the reality of smallholder's weak economic position led CfL to shift their attention to the crisis of reproduction for the farmers themselves. Whilst the initiative succeeded in creating a producer association that was able to obtain government support, the project ended before the development of a tea brand could happen.¹¹

The movement from workers to producers is indicative of the tension facing labor activists in the informal sector, whereby both groups are impoverished and where reproductive crises are evident amongst both communities. This has led to divisions between trade unions and CSOs operating locally, with one evaluator of Equality in Tea noting that trade unions were not included due to 'conflicts of interest' between farmers and waged workers. It was noted that the project could 'ill-afford' such tensions, and the shift from workers to producers was praised for 'implementing a programme that was not addressing labor issues, and yet was closely linked'.

Institute for worker and labor rights

Plantation-based work

The crisis facing the plantation estates has also been the sustained focus of the Institute for Worker and Labor Rights (IWLR). IWLR is a Delhi-based NGO committed to the organization of labor to improve working

conditions and wages. It works closely with trade unions and claims to represent the interests of labor activists. Similarly to CfL, they also focus on the role that corporations have played in producing a crisis of reproduction on the plantations. However, their chief concern is on the ways through which the labor regime has fostered a belief amongst the workforce that they will live and die on the plantation. This is a direct result of the blurring of boundaries between the productive and reproductive spheres when workers simultaneously live on, and are sustained by, the plantation and the plantation owner. IWLR have organized educational workshops for tea workers to explain value chain dynamics and to reveal the wider forces of appropriation. Their express intention has been to organize workers to challenge corporations, rather than the plantation owners:

The corporates have gotten away with it, because for the unions it doesn't matter whether Unilever buys from us, or someone else...It doesn't matter because our employer is only the plantation owner. (Interview)

IWLR differentiates their work from Indian trade unions who fail to consider the global dynamics of capital accumulation in their labor organizing. They recognize how colonial legacies of paternalism have affected worker understandings of their own exploitation.

In the context of plantation closures, IWLR has focused on pushing state actors to develop a more combative relationship with the industry. Recognizing that the government is 'cozy with capital', they have argued against bail out packages for plantation owners in financial distress because they believe that the financial aid offered for reinvestment has failed to support workers. In contrast to the Right to Food campaign, they have consistently argued for a different form of legal engagement with the industry. This includes protestation regarding bail out packages offered to plantation owners by the government, in which they argue that the financial aid offered has not been used for reinvestment. In the case of abandoned tea plantations, IWLR has instead argued that the government should utilize the legal powers they have under the Indian Tea Act (1953) to support workers in distress and at risk of starvation. The Tea Act allows the government to take ownership and control over abandoned estates, to auction those estates and sell them to its own citizens. By advocating for such changes, IWLR has focused on challenging the state-capital nexus within Indian tea production.

Smallholder-based work

IWLR's engagement in the smallholder segment has been concerned with the impact of informalisation of production on tea workers in the formal sector, as well as the low wages received by waged laborers on smallholdings. In relation to plantation work, IWLR are concerned with the types

of threats made to workers in relation to productivity targets. They reported that plantation owners would threaten workers with outsourcing to smallholders if targets were not met:

So they are trying to push up productivity more – despite the norms of productivity already being there – where there are small holders around the plantation, they can actively push the productivity norms higher and higher. (Interview)

Once again, IWLR has advocated that the same wages should be paid to plantation workers and waged workers on the smallholdings. They highlight the fact that neither party earns the agricultural minimum wage set at state level, and because plantation work has been undervalued through collective bargaining, they have not reached the equivalent wage. The failure of plantation-based workers to meet minimum wage equivalent through collective bargaining is linked to discrimination against low caste workers, once again demonstrating their existence as ‘edge’ populations. Moreover, workers on smallholdings do not get the agricultural minimum wage because they are not in the formal sector, and the sector-wide wage agreements mean that tea workers are undervalued across plantations and smallholdings regardless:

In West Bengal, the wages of the small growers are doubly low so they are not getting the tea wage, which is cash and non-cash and they are also not getting the agricultural wage because its tea. (Interview)

This led IWLR to begin unionizing small growers, although admittedly there has been little progress. By pushing for both smallholder-based waged labor and plantation workers to be paid the agricultural minimum wage, IWLR hopes that a more level playing field can be achieved between these two competing forms of production. However, discussions around supporting farmers themselves were not forthcoming, perhaps due to the ways in which smallholder competition has undermined labor conditions on plantations.

In summary, Southern NGOs and labor activists have sought to improve labor governance in the context of major instability within the sector. The following cases each demonstrate the challenges of not only ensuring decent work, but additionally trying to ensure the survival (i.e. the social reproduction) of workers who have become ‘edge’ populations. The major similarities and differences in approaches can be summarized in the following table (Table 2).

Conclusion

This article introduced the ‘edge’ population (Bhattacharya, 2018) as a key concept to improve our understanding of CSO-led labor governance

Table 2. Summary of approaches.

		Outcome
Right to Food	Persuade the Indian state to recognize 'Right to Food' in light of starvation deaths in the tea plantations	Successful outcome-state now paying the wage equivalent in some areas of West Bengal
Justice for Tea Workers	- Develop a new certification scheme/MSI 'Bottom-up' standard that accounts for corporate responsibility in times of crisis - Domestic market focus	Corporates reject the idea of recognizing this scheme-arguing that consumers 'don't care' about the issues
Equality in Tea	- Strengthen trade union involvement in smallholder regimes - Unionization of workers in smallholdings	- Realization that smallholders themselves are so impoverished that the aims aren't appropriate - Smallholders readily abandon tea - Creation of smallholder association
Institute for Workers Rights-(a) plantation based work	- Use Tea Act to support workers - Criticism of bail out packages - Focus on plantation labor regime and wider capital dynamics - Worker education about the GVC - Informalization of production in formal sector - Low wage received by waged laborers in smallholdings	No material outcomes as of yet

within the GVC and labor regime literatures. The concept allows the centering of vulnerable workers and producers defined by their entry and exit into production chains and offers an empirical exploration of how Southern CSOs in the Indian tea industry shape labor governance in response to the complexities created through unstable and ever-shifting regimes of production (including examples of worker expulsions from value chains). The empirical findings broaden the scope of CSO studies in the value chain and labor regime literatures by highlighting the ways through which NGOs and labor activists politically respond to what is, in some cases, an ongoing crisis of social reproduction (as well as production) within the tea industry.

Overall, the findings challenge current research on CSOs in GVC and labor regimes in three key ways. Firstly, the findings illustrate that CSOs and their role in labor governance should be understood both within and *beyond* the value chain. This is necessary in order to account for exclusions and expulsions of workers and producers, which occur due to the dynamics of capital accumulation and associated forms of disinvestment. The findings urge caution in approaching value chains as stable entities and demonstrate that 'edge' populations are vital sites of empirical research in the global agri-food industry. The article's findings contribute to the growing body of literature which brings a critical political economy lens

to the study of GVCs within which processes of disinvestment and dis-possession are central to the inner workings of global capitalism.

Secondly, the findings illustrate that labor regime analysis, whilst accounting more explicitly for capital-labor dimensions to production, could be further improved by accounting for the instability of regimes created through global competition between regime types across different production locales. Specifically, the literature should pay closer attention to the interactions between formal and informal production within locales, as well as competitive dynamics between labor regimes at the local, regional and global scales. Stability and instability within labor regimes are not simply about capital-labor relations within specific chains but are also about broader forces of global competition and capital accumulation.

Thirdly, the findings demonstrate that, due to the existence of 'edge' populations, the reality of labor governance on the ground is as much about social reproduction and survival as it is about working conditions and wages. This complexity leads to different political framings of the problem as CSOs are faced with a dilemma regarding whether to focus on the survival of workers by appealing to state actors through international human rights laws, or to link the crisis more explicitly to the role of capital and the need to regulate economic actors through new multi-stakeholder standards or enforcement of national laws.

Overall, the article uses the prism of Southern CSO activism to highlight the challenges of governing labor in 'edge' populations and joins the call for bottom-up approaches to the study of labor governance and GVCs (Newsome et al., 2017). By analyzing the case of labor-focused Southern CSOs in the Indian tea industry, it has illustrated that labor governance at the bottom of the value chain is indeed constituted by dynamic processes of inclusion and exclusion which generate reproduction crises for workers and producers. These processes have shaped broader transformations in the industry in which some plantation workers have been expelled from value chains, whilst smallholder producers (and their waged workers) have been incorporated but still residing on the margins. The case has highlighted the limits of CSO strategies which exclusively target the value chain, and has illustrated the divergent forms of engagement instigated by local CSOs to address ongoing processes of destabilization as a result of global capital accumulation strategies.

Notes

1. Interview, Managing Director, Planter 2, 7th July 2015; Interview, Managing Director, Planter 3, 19th July 2015;.
2. Interview, Communications Officer, NGO, 18th March 2017; Interview, Managing Director, NGO, 23rd March 2017.

3. Interview, Communications Officer, NGO, 18th March 2017.
4. Interview, Communications Officer, NGO, 18th March 2017; Interview, Managing Director, NGO, 23rd March 2017.
5. Interview, Representative, Trade Union, 24th March 2017.
6. This is a pseudonym. The real organisation and associated campaign names have been changed to reflect anonymisation.
7. Interview, Managing Director, NGO, 2nd March 2015.
8. Interview, Managing Director, NGO, 2nd March 2015.
9. Interview, Managing Director, NGO, 2nd March 2015.
10. Interview, Managing Director, NGO, 2nd March 2015.
11. Interview, Managing Director, NGO, 2nd March 2015.

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Data availability statement

For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

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