

# Global Framework Agreements in practice

## Effects and challenges in German companies' Asia-Pacific entities

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### 1. Introduction

Global Framework Agreements (GFAs) in transnational industrial relations aim to ensure, at minimum, that the core labour standards of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) are enacted and that robust transnational social dialogue including collective bargaining is developed throughout the global operations and suppliers of a multinational corporation (MNC). Research to date indicates that multinational corporations vary widely in the implementation and dissemination of their agreements throughout their dispersed global operations. Questions regarding factors of generating and sustaining effectiveness and expansive application of Global Framework Agreements remain.

This chapter contributes some response to those questions. It reports and discusses findings from the authors' empirical investigation of the application of Global Framework Agreements in multinational corporations headquartered in Germany and their subsidiary entities in Asia-Pacific contexts. It is first useful to outline some background remarks regarding the development of Global Framework Agreements and some key points of discussion in contemporary debates. From there, we introduce the empirical study, discuss findings and raise further questions.

Global Framework Agreements are interventions designed and undertaken by Global Union Federations (GUFs) in cooperation with global multinational corporations. Global Union Federations are constituted by affiliated national trade unions typically organized by industry sectors (Ford/Gillan 2015). They undertake Global Framework Agreements with the

headquarters of multinational corporations. They are supported in those undertakings by unions in the headquarters of multinational corporations and European Works Councils, which in some cases are also signatory parties to a Global Framework Agreement. Early Global Framework Agreements focused mostly on securing ILO core labour standards, collective bargaining rights, and workers' safety (Fichter/Helfen/Sydow 2011; Hammer 2005; Schömann et al. 2008; Telljohann et al. 2009).

A second generation of Global Framework Agreements has strengthened content development, shared responsibility demand and increased capacity potential (ILO 2019; Mustchin/Martinez-Lucio 2017; Platzer/Rüb 2014). Recent agreements apply globally throughout the multinational corporation and its supply network and include more extensive joint monitoring and compliance measures (Hadwiger 2015; ILO 2019). Appraising effectiveness of Global Framework Agreements is notably difficult and usually attempted on a case-by-case basis (Papadakis 2011).

Global Framework Agreements have been shown to initiate and sustain organizing and bargaining procedures and to enforce corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and compliance at the subsidiary level (Bourguignon/Garaudel/Porcher 2020; Lévesque et al. 2018) and among suppliers and contractors (ILO 2018; 2019; Platzer/Rüb, 2014). Multiple factors affect that activation, including the quality of information and communication, training, and monitoring systems (Papadakis 2011), network communications (Fichter/Helfen/Sydow 2011; Helfen/Sydow 2013), institutional frictions and strategic interests (Bourguignon/Garaudel/Porcher 2020; Helfen/Schüßler/Botzem 2015), and actor competencies and moral capital (Casey/Delaney/Fiedler 2021; Lévesque et al. 2018).

Poor local management engagement (Williams/Davies/Chinguno 2015) and transnational firm complexities and dynamic (sometimes illegal) relations with some suppliers are important obstructive factors (Sobczak 2012). The challenging questions of the enactment and effectiveness of Global Framework Agreements invite multi-perspectival research into their on-the-ground course.

## 2. Empirical study

We conducted an empirical study of transnational social dialogue including Global Framework Agreements of multinational corporations headquartered in Germany and operating in multiple regions of the Asia-Pacific region. We focused on large global companies operating in sectors of industrial technology, pharmaceuticals, energy, and transportation. The companies own (typically wholly) scores of production subsidiaries and engage an unknown number of diversely structured and linked supplier entities in the Asia-Pacific regions. Hundreds of thousands of workers are implicated.

All companies (whose names are withheld) have many years of experience in Asia-Pacific operations. The population of companies, rather than individual companies, with active Global Framework Agreements is our focus in inquiring into factors of effectiveness at the local level.

Our data is drawn from actors with primary experience (e.g. who worked or interacted locally or transnationally) of six multinational corporations operating widely across the Asia-Pacific region. Respondents' primary experience pertains to China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and South Korea. These countries possess diverse socio-cultural heritages, institutions, and political backgrounds. We acknowledge and respect that complexity and underscore its contextual influence. But we necessarily bracket theoretical discussion of that in this chapter. Our focus is on gaining knowledge and insights into developments in transnational social dialogue and global agreements and their outcomes and indicators in the midst of dynamic complexities.

We, the authors, conducted interviews with labour (36), company (24), non-governmental organization (NGO), and expert (9) actors. Labour actors included global unions, German unions, and Asia-Pacific subsidiary company site actors. Company actors included headquarters and subsidiary managers and board members. All global union actors and headquarters union actors possessed transnational expertise; subsidiary level actors typically had regional or national experience. The interviews were conducted predominantly through virtual meetings (e.g. Zoom), a small number was conducted in-person.

Our interpretative sociological inquiry pursued broad questions regarding respondents' reflections on factors of transnational social dialogue or cooperative relations between management and workers. Specifically, we enquired into what on-the-ground actors regard as effective and what practices and relationships are changed, initiated, developed, and sustained through the Global Framework Agreement. We sought to identify factors of facilitation, hindrance, and creativity in the development of transnational voice. Our data analysis identified three thematic clusters of findings emerging into view and horizon. We label these as 1) primary effectiveness, 2) capacity development, and 3) salient challenges.

## 2.1 Primary effectiveness

We stress that to European observers – labour, management, or scientific researchers alike – elements of what we call primary effectiveness are likely to appear basic or of low importance. Conversely, adopting a lens angled to the recognition of institutional histories, political economies, and contemporary conditions of many Asia-Pacific emerging market economies, and listening to actors on the ground in those contexts, acutely sharpens attention to the value and potency of global institutional intervention. Actions on the part of transnational actors, collective and personal, emanating from (relatively) well-resourced origins such as Global Union Federations, headquarters unions and works councils, or European supported NGOs, are received with cultural hospitality and, moreover, with keen learning receptivity.

A Global Union Federation actor in India reports that “The very notion of a GFA was extremely radical when it came in [...] the notion of holding a company responsible for something that can happen outside [its headquarters' jurisdiction]. It's an extremely important instrument” (Actor #12). Labour law in India formally declares the provision and protection of labour rights and collective bargaining, but companies find ways to avoid these. “In a lot of [MNC local sites] you wouldn't even have management talking to the union” (Actor #12). Global Union Federation actors and local unions' efforts to inform local workers at subsidiary sites about the provisions of the Global Framework Agreement has, our data indicates, raised awareness, grievance formation, and demand.

Grievance formation, we contend, is a primary step. It shifts aggravation and resentment into articulation of wrong-doing and demand for change.

The persistence, and in some areas worsening, of precarious work presents a severe social problem and challenge to labour actors. Many precarious workers are first-generation industrial workers from rural villages with no expectation of rights or protections. Managers similarly lack knowledge of rights and protections and treat the workers poorly.

The Global Framework Agreement enables local actors to immediately claim their rights. For example, one respondent, Actor #13, an assembly line worker and union leader for a manufacturing subsidiary of BaCorp in western India, reported that local workers were able to establish their union because of the Global Framework Agreement. It was a “first-time achievement”. Actor #13 reports that his local union has gained “training and information about CSR and labour rights” and the Global Framework Agreement from transnational labour actors. He reports that through persistent invoking of the agreement, his small union has achieved a monthly meeting with HR managers: “This is very big. We are talking; they are talking to us”.

A further illustration is reported by Actor #10, a union leader in a large SCorp subsidiary in northern India, in which local workers learned about the Global Framework Agreement and were able to develop arguments that enabled technical (higher-skilled) workers to join the union. That accomplishment opened opportunity for further interactions among workers and the formation of initial demands.

It has been common practice for the Indian subsidiary sites of multinational corporations headquartered in Europe (and the United States) to provide separate canteens for those workers on site who are on continuous employment contracts and those on sub-contracted and day-labour arrangements. That practice was a company acceptance of socio-cultural norms in India in which a caste system hierarchically and hereditarily differentiates people. The differential arrangements for workers on continuous contracts and those with precarious arrangements – even as the workers are performing the same jobs and interacting with each other in everyday production – reflects those social structures.

Amid those complexities, labour actors report shifts toward shared canteens and improved food provision for temporary contract workers, who are typically a large majority. A local-site labour actor reports that his union asked the company to “give the same food to the [temporary] workers that is provided to continuously employed workers. The managers said ‘no, no’”

(Actor #10). The Global Framework Agreement does not refer to matters such as canteen facilities, but local actors used its social intentions to demand more localized equities that in turn stimulate further worker awareness and demand formation. Actor #10: “We are making their demands known and now they all sit together and eat. This is an achievement, a good thing”.

It is important to note that achieving mixed canteens brings precarious workers greater visibility. It challenges toleration of the permanent worker–precarious worker dichotomy that is widespread in Indian industry.

In China, where precarious work is less reported, primary effectiveness is illustrated by the sustained interaction between Chinese union actors and the union actors of transnational headquarters (and Global Union Federation actors in a very low-profile manner) in dialogue and learning. The introduction of the Global Framework Agreement with SCorp subsidiaries in China enabled transnational interactions and exposure to forums of expression. A union chairman, Actor #20, reported that many elements of the Global Framework Agreement were “very basic” for them in China because “they are already in compliance with ILO principles”.

Nonetheless, expression of concerns about non-compliance with those agreed principles is obstructed. Actor #20 remarked on his admiration for the German union actors whom he had observed on visits to Germany: “The young ladies and young men representing the works council. They are very strong people. They know what to do”. He reported that in China when he asks local workers “do you have questions for the company, they say, no, no, never, never.” The low expectations of workers and traditional deference obstruct demand for social dialogue beyond wage complaints. Actor #20’s reflections further reported the problem of communication and the lack of channels for it.

The efforts of transnational labour actors to disseminate the Global Framework Agreement and inform workers of its provisions and potential had encouraged the establishment of multiple networks, including email lists. Actor #20 reports that the union leaders have introduced a global “communication email between employees and the management. Now we know some things together with our executives [...] Ten years ago announcements would only go to the group general manager [...] Nobody else would know.” This illustration of communication and information

sharing, for Actor #20, has “noticeably improved” management–employee relations.

A works council actor (Actor #55) for SCorp in China reported that the Global Framework Agreement and the initial effects of its launch meetings and visits by German company and union actors stimulated some immediate initiatives in the form of surveying workers. Actor #55 reports: “This is the first time we have collected [data] on the different sectors in China.” The survey included attention “to the special problems for the blue-collar workers, for example, skills and competence development.” He reports that that information enabled them to prepare a collective contract: “We made the proposal to our company management team; this is the collective contract [...] between management and all company employees” (Actor #55).

The Global Framework Agreement incentivizes and empowers local labour actors and increases management awareness and pressures for negotiated interactions. In sum, we identify the on-going elements of primary effectiveness of recognition, grievance formation, demand stimulation, and experimentation with activating demands. These, as labour actor #10 remarked about mixed workers’ canteens, are real achievements. They enable solidarity building and collective formation of political will.

## **2.2 Capacity development: Key actors, networks, forums**

The primary effectiveness described above is a continual accomplishment. Further effectiveness, which includes institution building from new norms to robust collective negotiation among management and labour actors, requires enhanced capacity to act. Knowledge, skills, reflexive learning, and actor connectivity are significant elements. Our data reports diverse evidence of capacity development for the application and deployment of Global Framework Agreements.

Capacity development entails the retention and utilization of actor learning and knowledge transfer in new situations that shape those situations and political outcomes. Retained, accumulated, and transferred knowledge is significantly affected by the interaction and action opportunities of key actors. They occur at multiple levels and threads of networking. We highlight the role of key actors, networks, and forums. These factors, which are dynamically and intricately linked, reveal the importance

of key transnational actors whose initiatives build pathways to collective, cooperative transnational forums.

Transnational labour actors, through their facilitation of ideas stimulation, confidence building, demand-shaping, and experimentation, encourage local actors to adapt, innovate, and generate policy and practical approaches. These actions occur in multiple arenas, including highly visible and official company interactions with ceremonial endorsement, such as in formal occasions of company, union, and public officials engaged in plant visits, product or technological systems launches.

They also occur less visibly among micro-actors and networks of informal interactions. They occur in real-time, in-person interactions and in virtual on-line, social media, or private conversations. Some key labour actors are readily visible as leaders expected to assert a “strong and powerful” demeanour with employers or government actors. They are flagbearers of labour interest expression and demand for social dialogue. Others deploy a “soft and relational” approach.

We focus particularly on the latter type of transnational labour actor interaction. We observe transnational labour relationships developed consciously and carefully over time and elicit their effects. An example is that of Actor #11, whom we describe as a transnational Asia-Pacific labour actor with an expansive reach and influence.

Actor #11, who was mentioned by several respondents in different countries, lives in Germany and works for the union engaged over decades with SCorp in our study. Actor #11 focuses on transnational social-dialogue development in SCorp operations. Introducing the Global Framework Agreement into its operations in China, in which the Global Union Federation has no official presence, posed considerable challenges.

A first task of initiating the Global Framework Agreement involved setting up an expansive and inclusive meeting in China. The headquarters union assigned Actor #11 to organize it. We observed that Actor #11’s network building among other individual transnational actors played a significant, low-visibility role in facilitating the meeting, from which major other developments have arisen. Respondents told us that before the Global Framework Agreement, German trade unions “only knew Germany and nothing else [...] even when they dealt with global companies” (Actor #28).

The preparation of the Global Framework Agreement required German and European Works Council actors to expand their transnational

expertise. Actor #11's cultivation of transnational collegial and networked relationships across multiple countries has enabled the headquarters union to forge relationships with the Chinese unions and, as corroborated by others, in other Asian sites. The achievement of Chinese relationships points to a further level of cooperative articulation between headquarters unions and global unions in navigating the political complexities of labour relations in China.

An illustration of local actor influence identifies paths and elements of effectiveness. A local (i.e. regional within a state of India) labour actor associated with SCorp for many years illustrates the vital role of championing the dispersion of the Global Framework Agreement and encouraging union members to learn about its potential benefits to Indian workers.

Actor #10 reports of his SCorp site that management “were opposed to [the Global Framework Agreement]” even though they “knew little about it other than that HQ [headquarters] had signed it”. Actor #10 informed union members that the Global Framework Agreement “gave them rights” that he believed had greater chance of recognition in India because “the parent union in Germany and IndustriALL global union have signed this GFA with [SCorp]. You are in the union. It [the GFA] is your right.”

Actor #10, as a union leader, invoked the German and Global Union Federation institutional heft to encourage local workers, who are inclined to assume that Indian labour law is poorly effective, that they could gain local capacities. He arranged for senior officers from both the Global Union Federation and headquarters union to visit local unions and talk about the Global Framework Agreement with workers at several large plants. Actor #10 emphasized the engagement and “huge support” of headquarters union actors for the Global Framework Agreement and its activation.

As a result, local union membership increased and in early 2021 an agreement on wage increases and improved conditions was signed. The wage agreement was corroborated independently by another headquarters actor, Actor #45, an SCorp supervisory board member, as a dispute on its application had been communicated to the Global Framework Agreement's monitoring committee. Knowledge of that “reached us over the ocean”. Actor #45 reported that the board “called the responsible manager on the management board and said: ‘There's an issue in India, [deal with it]’”.

That account illustrates both the Global Framework Agreement's monitoring intervention and its encouragement of trans-regional labour

network building across Indian sites where the wage dispute was raised. Local labour actors gained immediately favourable results as well as learning skills for “organizing themselves as a partner against a big player like SCorp” (Actor #45).

Key actors can also include company actors, such as HR directors, who may be motivated by their own discretely expressed values of engagement. Transnational labour actors described a particular company actor’s influence. They noted that a pressing task is “to bring the content of the [GFA] to the people’s knowledge”. In their company, KCorp, they noted that “this had only been possible because the head of the human resources [at headquarters] supports it. He [ensured] it was [widely] published” (Actor #46).

The work of key actors, both labour and management, in gaining direct links, building trust, continuity of communication, and sharing knowledge builds networks of relationships. Networks enable ideas transfer and, in the case of labour actors, demand formation among local unions and associated workers. Asia-Pacific nationals who, as managers, have spent time at the sites of German headquarters and are familiar with headquarters production and management systems, including social dialogue forums such as works councils, share some of those features in their management of subsidiaries.

Labour actors more typically experience Europe-based union actors visiting them and providing training workshops. Respondents in India reported spillover effects in building local NGO knowledge and capacity. An NGO actor, Actor #8, linked to BaCorp, reported learning that the Global Framework Agreement should apply to all company sites: “BaCorp doesn’t abide by the GFA. They [local managers] say they can’t do it because of U. S. clients who don’t want unions. [...] We [NGO] together with the union put pressure on issues like teaboys [child workers serving factory workers]. We tell them they’ve signed the GFA, they must do it” (Actor #8).

This instance illustrates collaboration of transnational and local union actors with a local NGO to utilise the Global Framework Agreement to demand attention to persistently ignored child labour in BaCorp sites’ suppliers, including on BaCorp premises.

Local union capacity building for the Global Framework Agreement’s uptake occurs through targeted training and incentivization. Across different Asia-Pacific contexts, it also includes basic organizing and bargaining skills. More generally, transnational communication networks supported

by headquarters actors provide an infrastructure that further enables institutionalizing the Global Framework Agreement. As well as increasing labour actor networks, reports from company actors of transnational company forums, such as those from HR directors and CSR officers, indicate a further node of potential network intersection across regions and interests.

The primary role of key transnational actors illustrated above extends to facilitation of global forums. In the case of companies referred to in our data, the establishment of global forums has been set in motion by their Global Framework Agreement. Global forums are typically built on forums already established in multinational corporations in Germany and transnationally in the EU. The European Works Council provides a model for transnational structures and processes.

In the SCorp example, the Global Framework Agreement, in effect for a decade, has enabled notable new interventions in social dialogue. Actors report it has enabled an unprecedented interaction of lead actors: “The German union representatives and the [Chinese] union representatives met with global top management and local management. The local union representatives [were exposed to] a level of information and discussion which they never had in their everyday working experience.” The Chinese union actors “had a very open and critical discussion with the management”. They gained at least an initial experience of “what we call social dialogue [...] to be on a level with the management” (Actor #11).

Company actors reported illustrations of the global forum initiated by the Global Framework Agreement, enabling them to address some significant problems that affect their company’s operations and personnel and their industry globally. Actor #51, an HR Director at KCorp, reported: “We have many fatalities in the industry and in [our company]. It’s not an acceptable situation.”

The Global Framework Agreement has “created a binding set of rules” that is important for addressing the priority of safety as well as labour standards and other issues. Actor #51 also remarked that the company’s European Works Council is an important instrument in transferring institutional resources and know-how to the global forum and to enacting the Global Framework Agreement. He remarked that global dialogue forums are important for the future. The company’s future “cannot be created or founded by us as managers. It is founded and created by the employees”.

The global dialogue enabled by the Global Framework Agreement is a significant element of that recognition.

For workers and local union actors in emerging market economies it is astonishing to be represented or to be a part of a world works council. For them, it is hard to fathom that “the CEO is over there talking to you” (Actor #21). Global works forums institutionalize mutual access and connectivity of headquarters and subsidiaries to each other and to European Works Councils and they also offer the potential of conjoint engagement in decision forums.

The Global Framework Agreement as a corporate-level instrument can provide distant labour actors with unprecedented access through dispute channels to headquarters’ governance decision-makers. It can also risk fostering dependence on institutions and actors originating in Europe. Europe-based transnational labour actors expressed concern for the high reliance on German actors in facilitating meetings, training sessions, and networks. There is much agreement that “We need to reduce dependency on German actors” (Actor #14) in solving transnational problems.

At the same time, company actors reported the benefit of being able to call on German labour actors (including those flying-in) to negotiate labour disputes in transnational sites cooperatively. Actors provided illustrations to the researchers on cases in Malaysia and South Korea. Local labour actors, in turn, enlist the presence of senior German actors to put pressure on local management.

A respondent reported an illustration of a supervisory board member visiting China: “the Chinese workers use [his presence] to come to agreement with their management. When he’s present, the management does not say no” (Actor #9). Furthermore, headquarters interventions by German and other European multinational corporations on transnational subsidiaries include expression of dissent from some national labour laws as in, for instance, the case of Indonesia’s controversial Job Creation Law 2021. A national union leader in Indonesia (Actor #23) reported that “The European MNCs signed agreements with us [local unions] that they won’t apply the [new detrimental] law.”

These illustrations of headquarters intervention are viewed by local labour actors as highly favourable. Further capacity building for transnational social dialogue requires establishment of effective global and regional company forums or works councils, active networks, and enhanced participation of local management.

### 2.3 Salient challenges

The challenges to implementation and effectiveness of Global Framework Agreements beyond primary effects and initial capacity building through network action and union formation are immense and perpetual. Significant tension occurs between headquarters company actors valuing transnational social dialogue and company imperatives to seek profit-making opportunities in low-cost regions. Subsidiary management fluctuates. It is highly dependent on individuals.

A first aspect of the challenges presented by management engagement are factors associated with the group complexity of multinational corporations in their global operations. Geographic expansion, transnational divisional development and a global business climate of company mergers and acquisitions intensify complexity. That increases the tenuousness of global appraisals of company activities beyond those of accounting systems and financial reporting. Company actors acknowledge the challenges posed by dynamic complexity.

Our data shows that actors with an expressed commitment to corporate social responsibility, including ensuring CSR enactments among their contracted suppliers, may, at the same time, be unaware that their company has signed an agreement such as the Global Framework Agreement that entwines industrial relations and corporate social responsibility, with intended global application. A headquarters company actor (Actor #47) with responsibilities for a significant operation in the company's subsidiary companies in China reported his team "are really serious about CSR". The subsidiary companies contract numerous supply companies in China that must be approved at headquarters level.

As for what the company calls "CSR-critical cases" under explicit scrutiny, Actor #47 reports "we're serious about the audits. We [BaCorp] do them ourselves everywhere [globally]". Actor #47 reports that he has visited sites in China and met suppliers, and Chinese managers "spend a few years with us in Germany". "Our China guys work on sourcing suppliers. We have so many suppliers in China... We don't always know what happens when some supplier gets other [suppliers] in...".

Actor #47's company, BaCorp, like others, publicizes its global agreements on company websites and reports. But the complexity and busyness of everyday work life necessarily shapes attention. That reality contributes

to a lack of awareness and dissemination of a company's Global Framework Agreement: “[BaCorp] is so huge; it's hard to know what goes on. Most people [operations managers] just focus on their particular area; they don't know what else is going on” (Actor #47).

A German headquarters union respondent reported that in “a lot of German companies in Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines... their suppliers don't even know that there is a GFA” (Actor #10). In addition to factors of management actors' lacking information due to complexity and challenges of communications with suppliers, respondents reported overtly less cooperative management action and reinforcement of traditional power hierarchies. Obstructive or neglectful action is reported in multinational corporations that elsewhere indicate valuable cooperative action. National context and actor interpretation are significant.

For example, a senior HR officer in a multinational corporation with HR and industrial relations responsibility for several large entities reported in response to questions about the Global Framework Agreement: “For us, the European [headquarters] GFA is purely a direction [...] we are not against ILO practices. But we pick and choose. What we stick to is Indian law and labour compliances” (Actor #52). In referring to the Global Framework Agreement as a European agreement, Actor #52 appeared to interpret the Global Framework Agreement in ways that enabled senior managers of the entities to strategise their regulatory compliance.

A senior manager stated: “We discourage any kind of interface or intervention globally, coming from [the headquarters union] coming into the country or them [influencing] us.” (Actor #53) Senior actors from headquarters can either tolerate these subsidiary manager attitudes or have a dialogue with them in view of the Global Framework Agreement's implementation.

Furthermore, in Asia-Pacific contexts with large proportions of contract labourers employed by the multinational corporations, targeting labour suppliers is crucial and recurrently obstructed. Managers may be deliberate in that obstruction or lack knowledge of core concepts and obligations. A Global Union Federation actor summarized a primary challenge: “If a local [company] actor doesn't know what freedom of association means, how can they implement the GFA?” (Actor #21)

Another factor of complexity that indirectly may affect management engagement as well as union capacity development is union complexity in

many Asian contexts. Actor #48, a senior HR manager at a Korean subsidiary, reported: “We have thirty trade unions on site. They want to [negotiate] with us separately, even the small ones.” Actor #48 reported the difficulty of reaching agreements that endure and, from an HR perspective, should pertain across the site’s personnel. Labour actors similarly noted trade union fragmentation.

A further challenge is improving coordination of labour actors. This firstly applies to union development and member formation, and subsequently includes collaboration with labour-oriented NGOs. There is wide evidence of very limited dispersion of knowledge about the Global Framework Agreement and its potential uses for local company sites. While there is some evidence of local actors in India and China invoking whistleblowing mechanisms to involve the international committee established under the Global Framework Agreement to resolve issues, there is much evidence of a lack of knowledge about the existence and potential of the Global Framework Agreement within company sites.

Knowledge about the application of the Global Framework Agreement to suppliers is rare among local union actors. Where it is more visible and operationalized, it appears strongly associated with the direct relationship links initiated by headquarters, interaction of the European Works Council, and inclusion in network development. Labour actors associated with NGOs, including those originating in European cities or supported by NGOs at the German headquarters, as well as with Global Union Federation activities, indicate stronger knowledge and political engagement.

The persistent hindered development and distribution of education and training for labour actors (and company actors) at the local level despite the Global Framework Agreement’s potential is a key challenge. That under-development hinders formation of coordination with labour-oriented NGOs which often possess international resources and networks with considerable potential for capacity building.

### 3. Discussion

We have purposefully presented a data-rich discussion. That has enabled the illustration of effects and challenges and the innovative actions of various transnational and local actors in aiming to improve employment re-

lations and social dialogue in Asia-Pacific contexts. Our study brings into focus and highlights complex factors affecting the implementation of the Global Framework Agreement across company entities. Existing research frequently points to the limited outcomes of Global Framework Agreements at the local level. Local manager resistance and local union capability are notable factors of hinderance (Williams/Davies/Chinguno 2015) as well as poor dissemination of the content of Global Framework Agreements (Papadakis 2011).

Researchers contend that greater coordination of multilevel actors and concerted dissemination of the knowledge about Global Framework Agreements is required to improve effectiveness (Lévesque et al. 2018). Our study confirms these factors. Importantly, it adds to debates through its identification of often overlooked factors of primary effectiveness, and their linkage to capacity development. The factors of primary effectiveness, we contend, remain continuous. Actors utilise those experiences to shape capacity development toward disseminating and securing improved labour practices across widely unequal employee cohorts directly employed by or closely associated with global multinational corporations. These primary effects and emergent capacities must not be under-estimated even as they appear modest to European eyes.

Among salient issues and challenges we identify these factors: management engagement, coordinated labour action, and accelerating alliances for summary discussion. Management engagement is a tough but malleable problem. Management engagement refers to being informed, taking action to disseminate commitments spelt out in the Global Framework Agreement, “mainstreaming” it into daily organizational actions with workers and suppliers, and monitoring compliance. These are management responsibilities agreed to under the Global Framework Agreement.

We propose that, despite concerns about dependency on German institutional heft and actor competence, those qualities be better regarded as an abstracted (non-national) institutional resource for multi-actor utility. That is, in the case of multinational corporations headquartered in Germany, German actor and institutional resources be pragmatically regarded as legitimate demands by Asia-Pacific actors without fear of neo-colonialist incursions or cultural insensitivities.

Local actors seek to use the resources and opportunities provided by the Global Framework Agreement to find ways to build local capacities.

Partnering those actors includes German (and other EU) actors exerting concerted pressure on corporate actors and stakeholders at headquarters to demand increased management engagement and responsibility at all levels of the company group.

Coordinated labour action is a continuous challenge for Global Union Federations and key national unions. Global and regional works councils are a significant intervention. There is much scope for development of more solidaristic engagement by unions involved with GFA companies in OECD countries such as Australia and South Korea. These countries are noted for their strong trade unions and effective collective bargaining. Greater union-to-union sharing of those competencies proposes to disperse knowledge and innovate social dialogue forums.

For instance, the multinational corporations in our study have sizeable operations in Australia. Their Global Framework Agreements, while applying there as elsewhere, appear as “too basic” in comparison to established institutions and capacities to attract local interest and may thus be ignored. Nonetheless, extending network relations invoking transnational union solidarity may add transnational voice to activate legitimacy embedded in the Global Framework Agreement in Asia-Pacific neighbours.

Such actions further include accelerating alliance building with labour-oriented NGOs, which often have a specific interest focus (e.g. child labour), to disseminate awareness of the reach of Global Framework Agreements and raise demand among the supplier firms’ workers. A globally networked alliance, anchored with the legitimate heft of headquarters and global unions, proposes to mobilize a joined-up approach to the tenacious challenge of supply chain integration in the Global Framework Agreement.

## 4. Conclusion

The ambition of the Global Framework Agreement and the empirical realities on the ground reveal a wide distance. Our data illustrates that conditions in many Asia-Pacific contexts are far from conducive to progressive development of social dialogue. Immense obstacles remain. Effective implementation of Global Framework Agreements throughout company operations continues to present significant challenges to multiple and globally dispersed actors.

This chapter has identified some vital factors of initiating and embedding demand that open horizons of possibility and capacity building for local actions. For local union actors the Global Framework Agreement is a “huge” intervention. Its progressive effectiveness demands unprecedented global solidarity of the relatively well-resourced actors of the headquarters of multinational corporations: unions, managements, NGOs concerned with corporate social responsibility, and citizens with workers of the global south.

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