

Corporate social responsibility in the international shipping industry: State-of-the-art, current challenges, and future directions

By

Peter Lund-Thomsen, René Taudal Poulsen, and Rob Ackrill

Introduction

Corporate and intergovernmental actors recognize the importance of the international shipping industry for its role in facilitating trade and providing countries and firms with access to global markets. About 90% of all goods traded internationally are transported by sea (BIMCO 2016a). This promotes economic development, creates jobs, and boosts living standards around the world (Wilhelmsen, 2014; NYK, 2014; WEF, 2013, WTO/OECD 2013; Maersk, 2015). Moreover, shipping is the most carbon-efficient mode of commercial transportation (BIMCO 2016a; ICS 2016), with much lower carbon emissions per unit weight carried per unit distance than the other main transport modes (WSC 2016).

Since the early 2000s, transparency on social and environmental issues has been on the rise in international shipping. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies, here defined as the integration of economic, social, and environmental activities into the core business practices of firms (Lund-Thomsen, 2004), are being formulated and reported on by many shipping companies in Europe, Asia and North America (Vejvar et al., this issue). As the norms of CSR spread among maritime firms (Fafaliou et al. 2007; Skovgaard 2014), not only has the number of shipping companies engaging in CSR reporting increased, so too has the amount of information provided and the number of measures included in shipping company CSR reports. Alongside these developments within the shipping industry, CSR has emerged as a topic of analysis among maritime researchers (Yliskylä-Peuralahti and Gritsenko 2014; Yliskylä-Peuralahti et al. 2015; Sampson and Ellis 2015; Yuen and Lim, 2016).

The Special Issue

This special issue builds on this work, with the aim of critically assessing current CSR discourses and practices in the shipping industry. The special issue includes five papers that analyze the potential, limitations, and effects of CSR within the international shipping industry, examining what is required to promote more widespread social and environmental upgrading amongst shipping companies and their wider set of stakeholders.

The first article, by Vejvar et al., explores the *diffusion of CSR rhetoric and practices* within the shipping industry. The authors argue that social sustainability remains an underexplored topic in the literature on CSR in the international shipping industry. Drawing upon neo-institutional theory, they articulate three propositions about how coercive, normative, and mimetic isomorphic pressures impact upon the social sustainability discourse of shipping liner operations. They undertake a qualitative content analysis of the sustainability reports of the top ten companies, by fleet size, in the liner shipping industry. The authors conclude that social obligations and pressures stemming from laws and regulations shape the social sustainability discourse within the industry. However, there is little evidence to suggest that mimetic pressures affect the social sustainability discourse of liner shipping companies.

The second article, by van Leeuwen and van Koppen, looks into the potential of *crisis-oriented strategies on environmental sustainability* as a driver of reduced CO2 emissions in the international shipping industry. For decades, environmental protection has been on the agenda of individual shipping companies, as well as the United Nations' International Maritime Organization (IMO), which regulates international marine environmental protection (IMO 2016; Mukherjee and Brownrigg 2013). However, until recently, attention was mostly directed towards oil spill prevention, dumping of garbage at sea and phasing out toxic hull paints. In the last decade, the maritime environmental protection agenda has broadened, to include shipping's contribution to global climate change; air pollution from sulphur oxides, nitrogen oxides and particulate matter; the spread of invasive species in ships' ballast water tanks; biofouling on ships' hulls; and handling of hazardous materials at the end of ships' life-cycle (IMO, 2016).

Although the shipping industry faces fundamentally the same environmental challenges as other industries, such as airfreight and road transportation, as well as power plants, its responses have lagged behind those from onshore industries. Environmental protection standards at sea currently do not reach those onshore (Lister et al., 2015). In the words of the Sustainable Shipping Initiative, an NGO whose membership consists of major maritime firms,

“Many key players in the industry are aware of these factors, but, unlike the aviation and auto sectors, have not yet acted decisively to prepare shipping for this new world. Shipping has a compelling case as the most energy-efficient freight service, but any return to growth will be unsustainable if the industry does not innovate to cut costs and reduce its environmental impacts”. (SSI, 2016).

Addressing this gap, the article of van Leeuwen and van Koppen is entitled, ‘Moving sustainable shipping forward: the potential of market-based mechanisms to reduce CO2 emissions from shipping’. The authors examine this topic at a time when the IMO is considering whether the organization should adopt market-based mechanisms (MBMs) to reduce fuel consumption in commercial shipping. Van Leeuwen and van Koppen question how effective these MBMs are likely to be, and how shipping companies might react to the economic incentives that would likely follow from the introduction of MBMs, depending upon the environmental strategies they follow. Here, the authors employ a four-stage model of environmental management which they label as ‘crisis-oriented’, ‘process-oriented’, ‘chain-oriented’ and ‘full environmental sustainability’ strategies. The article concludes that the shipping sector tends mostly to operate in the crisis-oriented mode, where simply complying with existing social and environmental legislation, as well as CSR standards, is seen as sufficient for many shipping companies.

In the view of van Leeuwen and Van Koppen, the crisis-oriented focus seems well-suited to the cost-inducing fee-based or cap-and-trade-based MBMs which the IMO is currently considering. At the same time, the effectiveness of MBMs are likely to be related to whether the shipping sector can deal with the interrelated challenges of increasing costs and complying with the new strict monitoring and enforcement requirements that would be associated with the introduction of MBMs. To facilitate the introduction of MBMs by the IMO, it would help if companies were to adopt a process-oriented strategy instead of the crisis-oriented strategy. This could happen if sufficient funds were made available for the adoption of environmental measures and technologies. Furthermore, by registering individual ships' fuel consumption, van Leeuwen and Van Koppen believe that MBMs could inform the selection of relevant environmental technologies and environmental measures.

The third article in this special issue, by Yliskylä-Peuralahti, asks whether it is possible to envisage a broader *sustainability transition* within the shipping industry. Her article looks at the case of energy consumption in Baltic Sea Shipping. In terms of its energy consumption, the shipping industry relies mainly on heavy fuel oil (HFO), a residual from oil refining. This explains the very high levels of sulphur oxide and particulate matter emissions from ships. Well-known emission reducing technologies, such as scrubbers in power plants, and catalyzers and particulate filters in cars, are currently only installed in a minority of the world's 89,000 merchant vessels (above 100 GT) with very limited into the shipping fleet (Lister et al., 2015). However, ship-owners and maritime technology providers have recently started searching for alternative, cleaner fuels, such as liquefied natural gas (LNG), methanol, biofuels, batteries, wind and solar energy.

In her article, Yliskylä-Peuralahti introduces a multi-level perspective aimed at understanding the factors that support or undermine environmental upgrading in maritime transport in the Baltic Sea region. Employing a case study methodology to analyze a frontrunner shipping company, she uses a theoretical perspective known as the sustainability transition framework to explore whether current renewable energy niches could become mainstream technologies within the industry. Her findings indicate that low prices of fossil fuels tend to undermine the financial viability of using non-fossil energy sources in maritime transport. In conclusion, Yliskylä-Peuralahti highlights that the limited demand for lower emissions from market actors, lack of interest on the part of ship owners, and the present regulatory instruments in the maritime industry, are not supportive of greenhouse gas reductions or improvements in energy efficiency within the industry.

The fourth article, by Benderson, provides an overview of recent developments in the area of *anti-corruption measures* within the international shipping industry. He shows that the shipping industry also faces several social challenges which stem partly from the highly international nature of its operations. In ports around the world, the payment of facilitation money to pilots, port captains, or even government officials, such as port state control officers is often expected. In the words of the Baltic and International Maritime Council (BIMCO), a global ship-owner association,

“While taking all appropriate measures to avoid corrupt practices, most shipping companies will at some point be faced with a demand to make a facilitation payment of some sort, or risk having their ship detained in port for an undetermined period of time and/or a higher financial penalty imposed.” (BIMCO, 2016b).

Since any delay in port is highly costly, shipping companies and seafarers find themselves under pressure to make such payments, even though this might compromise corporate anti-corruption policies (Sequeira and Djankov, 2014). In his short policy-oriented article, Benderson introduces an important initiative that seeks to combat corruption in the international shipping industry. He explains how the Maritime Anti-Corruption Network (MACN) was established in 2011. As an industry-driven initiative, MACN cooperates in a context where the maritime industry has not historically been a frontrunner in dealing with corruption charges. However, according to Benderson, this is now changing as many of the industry's key stakeholders are concerned about widespread corruption and bribery in the industry. In fact, corruption increases costs for shipping companies, and it also tends to affect negatively the health and well-being of shipping crews. Moreover, corruption may become a trade barrier. MACN seeks to address both the supply and demand challenges related to corruption in the international shipping industry, through industry collaboration. MACN thus engages in collective action projects that attempt to alter firm behaviour in the industry and affect stakeholders in countries where bribery is widespread. Currently, MACN is engaged in collective action projects in Indonesia, Argentina and Nigeria. In conclusion,

Benderson believes that these joint efforts by shipping companies may inspire collaborative work in other areas of the maritime sector and other industries as well.

In the final article of the special issue, “Seabirds matter more than us!”, Sampson addresses the issue of *seafarer health and welfare conditions*. Seafarer health and welfare remains an issue of concern, since occupational risks in shipping exceed those encountered in many onshore occupations (Nielsen and Roberts, 1999; Bloor et al., 2000; Wadsworth et al., 2008; Ellis et al., 2010). Members of the United Nations’ International Labour Organization (ILO) agreed the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) in 2006, which regulates (a) minimum requirements for shipfarers to work on a ship, (b) conditions of employment, (c) accommodation, recreational facilities, food, and catering, (d) health protection, medical care, welfare, and social security protection, as well as (e) compliance and enforcement (ILO, 2016). The Convention came into force in 2013, but occupational risks such as fatigue, depression and fatalities remain overrepresented in a shipping context. A comprehensive literature review analyses these issues (Nielsen and Roberts, 1999; Bloor et al., 2000; Sampson and Thomas 2002; Wadsworth et al., 2008; Ellis et al., 2010), but the potential beneficial effects of corporate social responsibility in alleviating such challenges still deserve more attention from social scientists.

In her article, Sampson demonstrates that there is the potential for open ship registers to act, to varying degrees, as ‘regulatory havens’. There are also well-known challenges relating to regulatory enforcement at both port-state and flag-state levels. In this context it is particularly helpful to consider the potential drivers of CSR within the commercial cargo shipping industry. Her article therefore examines three case studies, in order to explore: supply chain pressures relating to the exercise of CSR; financial drivers of CSR; and the role of paternalism in the exercise of CSR as well as normative orientations towards CSR in the shipping industry. She concludes that the shipping industry is more concerned about the protection of the environment, connected with its CSR policies, than it is about the health and welfare of sea-based employees.

The Contribution of the Special Issue

As a collection, the articles included in this special issue represent three ways of studying the shipping industry from a research perspective. The first seeks to study the shipping industry as having unique characteristics that are worth examining in their own right. The shipping industry is seen here as unique in terms of its role as mediator in the relationship between consumers and producers in global supply chains. The shipping industry is a “business-to-business” industry and is therefore not directly subject to consumer pressures, as is the case with the garment, footwear, or sports equipment industries, for instance.

The second approach to studying the shipping industry is to use it as a means for developing academic subdisciplines within other well-established disciplines. For instance, maritime economics or maritime logistics could build upon already developed academic disciplines in the social sciences. The third approach to studying the international shipping industry is to use it as a case for developing or applying new concepts/theories to the study of the industry itself. Here the shipping industry becomes one industry out of many that can be analyzed from particular theoretical perspectives.¹

Whichever perspective one adopts for the study of CSR in the international shipping industry, we believe that the papers highlight the ongoing, contested nature of CSR in the industry, reflected in a

¹ We owe this point to Associate Professor, Henrik Soronn-Friese, Copenhagen Business School

number of common themes that run through the papers. First, economic sustainability concerns frequently seem to trump social and environmental sustainability considerations in the shipping industry. In our view, this could lead to both positive and negative social and environmental outcomes. For instance, if actors within the shipping industry are of the view that prioritizing economic sustainability is best achieved by raising the bar in terms of introducing new, tougher social and environmental standards within the industry, we are likely to observe positive social and environmental outcomes through the introduction of new regulatory measures. For example, shipping companies might push for tougher legislation in certain areas, if they believe that this will provide them with a competitive advantage vis-à-vis CSR latecomers in the industry who will have to catch up in the area of CSR. The introduction of more stringent environmental standards could, for instance, result in smaller shipping companies being squeezed out of the industry. At the same time, shipping companies might also push for weaker social and environmental standards within the industry, if tougher standards damage their financial bottom line.

As Sampson argues, however, it is not simply a question of economic versus social and environmental – within the industry, the environmental is seen as being prioritized above the social. This has critically important implications for the study of CSR in the international shipping industry, reflected also in a second theme seen across the papers. They reflect a broader concern about whether we are observing a movement towards improved CSR performance within the industry or not. Just because shipping companies are using the CSR and sustainability rhetoric, this does not automatically translate into improved CSR performance. Indeed, one might ask whether the industry is actually in the process of lowering the bar in terms of its CSR performance through greenwashing. Greenwashing here refers to socially and environmentally destructive companies who attempt to portray themselves as friends of the environment and leaders in the struggle against poverty in the developing world.

In this way, we believe that it is important to highlight the various tensions, conflicts, and dilemmas that exist in relation to the diffusion of CSR within the international shipping industry. Not all actors in the industry necessarily share the same interests. Hence, instead of glossing over these differences, as sometimes might happen in some CSR reports of international shipping companies, we believe that it is important to focus on how these different interests can be balanced in the best possible way. Ultimately, there will be trade-offs when economic, social, and environmental concerns have to be balanced in company operations, with the shipping industry no exception to this.

Hence, in the analysis of CSR in the international shipping industry presented in this special issue, the articles underscore the idea that we might be observing two kinds of change process in the industry. The first change process is related to cognitive change – the ways in which CSR and sustainability concerns are being perceived in the industry. This can be contrasted with the other change process, which we call behavioural change. This asks whether shipping companies are actually changing their economic, social, and environmental behaviour.

This also raises broader questions concerning CSR in the international shipping industry. First, from an international political economy perspective, a key question is the legitimacy, effectiveness, and authority of various CSR initiatives or systems of standards, which seek to regulate the economic, social, and environmental behaviour of shipping companies. Given the proliferation of new CSR initiatives in the industry over the last decade, there will be scope for comparative studies which explore the legitimacy, effectiveness, and authority of various new multi-stakeholder initiatives that are addressing different sustainability aspects in the industry. In this context, the evolutionary

nature of institutions and governance structures within these multi-stakeholder initiatives requires further critical scrutiny, as various actors within the industry attempt to steer different developments in their own preferred directions.

As such, CSR institutions and governance arrangements are found in the international shipping industry at various scales. Economic geography is thus important to the analysis of CSR in the industry. Not only is there a clear element of transnational mobility in the industry, but notions such as place, scale, and space are very useful analytical constructs in understanding the evolution of these new CSR arrangements. From a policy perspective, the international industry is footloose, in the sense that it is very easy for ship-owners to change the national flags under which individual ships are registered. Hence, it may be difficult to find effective policy levers to guide the industry, where this is an important factor in the implementation of particular CSR measures. An important consideration is thus to establish where the CSR pressure points are in the industry. Moreover, at what scales do we identify these pressure points: international, regional, national, provincial, and/or local?

The question of how greater transparency might lead shipping companies and the shipping industry at large to engage in environmental and social upgrading also merits further attention. Does CSR lead to sustainable mobility? This special issue shows how the specifics of shipping segments and markets might influence CSR practices in different ways, and why industry context matters. Different technologies, in terms of ships (from standardized to sophisticated and specialized) and trading patterns (from liner services to global tramp operations) influence CSR challenges. Likewise, shipping segments differ in terms of their positions within global supply chains, as do market characteristics (market concentration, the bargaining position of buyers-sellers, size of companies, duration of contracts, market volatility etc.). These differences might also influence CSR practices.

In order to answer the question of effectiveness comprehensively, future studies need to focus on both the intended and unintended consequences of CSR policies in the international shipping industry, bearing in mind that social and environmental concerns can rarely be sharply separated. Sampson's study shows how shipping companies' environmental focus on safety and oil spill prevention can lead to additional, undesirable social pressures on seafarers. Likewise, IMO's new ballast water management convention, which will enter into force soon, might lead to new concerns on facilitation payments in ports. In other words, new social and environmental regulation could interact with shipping company CSR practices in unexpected ways.

More than a decade has elapsed since the first shipping company CSR reports were launched, and therefore CSR impact and effectiveness studies are gradually becoming more feasible for social scientists. Further research in this area needs to address a key issue: does CSR reporting make companies more accountable and lead to significant improvements in CSR-related performance? How can companies move from 'procedural' transparency to substantial transparency and avoid 'box ticking' in CSR reports? Does CSR reporting create 'data overload' and fail to address important externalities? The question of what CSR reports do *not* include also needs further scrutiny.

Future research on CSR in the international shipping industry also needs to reflect two related points identified earlier as emerging from the papers in this special issue. First, within CSR there appears to be evidence of a hierarchy of concerns, with economic pressures dominating much of the industry's approach to CSR. Below this, however, as Sampson has argued, social concerns are perceived even to lag behind environmental concerns, let alone economic pressures. Second, a

distinction needs to be drawn between ‘saying’ and ‘doing’. Thus, even as more companies reflect on CSR activities in their reporting processes, to what extent is this being matched by actions – in general, let alone differentiated between economic, environmental and social concerns? Indeed, to what extent does the prioritization of economic concerns actively undermine delivery of the other two?

Finally, a burning issue in relation to CSR in international shipping is illustrated by the February 2016 decision of one of the world’s largest shipping company, A.P. Moller-Maersk, to redirect its recycling of ships to India after having had its ships recycled in China and Turkey for a number of years (Spurrier, 2016). China and Turkey have traditionally been seen as more socially and environmentally sustainable sites for ship recycling, particularly because ships are often recycled in dry docks. At the same time, ship recycling in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh has often been criticized for taking place under hazardous social and environmental conditions, given the use of the beaching method, where ships are disassembled under “hard-to-control” open-air conditions on the beaches of South Asia (Jain et al., 2013). Maersk’s decision seems to be related to the substantial overcapacity that exists in the shipping industry and the prospect of Maersk having to recycle several ships in the upcoming years. Recycling ships on Alang beach in India is thus likely to save Maersk a very large amount of money, as ship recycling in China and Turkey comes at an *additional* cost of USD 1 – 2 million per ship (Spurrier, 2016).

On the one hand, from an academic perspective Maersk’s decision could be seen as an opportunity for the Alang cluster to upgrade its social and environmental profile, as Maersk uses its influence to improve social and environmental conditions in Alang. On the other, critics such as the NGO Shipbreaking Platform argue that the move does not guarantee that ships are dismantled under safe working and environmental conditions. Hence, Maersk’s decision to redirect its recycling of ships towards Alang might be seen as a first step towards a social and environmental race-to-the-bottom within the industry. In this context, an interesting research question is whether certification according to the IMO’s Hong Kong International Convention on Ship Recycling is likely to actually improve social and environmental conditions of ship recycling facilities in Alang, or whether certification according to the Hong Kong Convention will simply become a new form of greenwashing (Jain et al., 2013).

In conclusion, the growth of CSR reporting in the international shipping industry recently is throwing up major research puzzles, providing fertile empirical ground for social and natural scientists. The studies in this special issue mark an important step in the development of a broader and more coherent approach to such analysis, but they only begin to scratch the surface of this rapidly expanding area of research interest. Such research will provide valuable inputs to firms in the shipping industry, and to maritime policy makers alike, allowing them in the future to chart a more sustainable course to for the international shipping industry.

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