

INTEGRATING SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT WITH SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

The 1990s were marked by profound transformations due to the fall of the communist regimes from Central and Eastern Europe. On the one hand, the globalization process expanded all over the world at a rapid pace. On the other hand, new concepts and techniques were designed and implemented in the business processes. The ever-changing business environment imposed new approaches to logistics which led to the emergence of supply chain management, a revolutionary managerial method that provides a distinct perspective on the entire supply chain. Later, the rising concern for sustainability highly influenced the evolution of supply chain management. The purposes of this study are to briefly define the concepts of supply chain management and sustainability, and to present their relationship. To achieve the aims of the research, the author used a qualitative research method. In this sense, he deployed an extensive literature review. The last decades have witnessed the emergence of a growing body of literature related to the relationship between supply chain management and sustainability. The findings show that the worldwide increasing concern for sustainability led to the emergence of a new concept entitled sustainable supply chain management. Sustainable supply chain management integrates sustainable practices and sustainability dimensions alongside the entire supply chain.

Keywords: *supply chain management, sustainability, supply chain, sustainable supply chain management*

Classification JEL: *M00, Q01*

1. Introduction and context of the study

The 1990s were marked by profound transformations due to the fall of the communist regimes from Central and Eastern Europe. On the one hand, the globalization process expanded all over the world at a rapid pace (Cornescu et al, 2004; Toma, 2005; Marinescu and Toma, 2015) and caused the free movement of goods, services, information and money (Frankel, 2000). The development of free trade has created multiple opportunities for economic growth and businesses around the world (Bergsten, 1996; Ben-David and Loewy, 1998; Moore, 2003).

On the other hand, new concepts and techniques were designed and implemented in the business activities and processes. The ever-changing business environment imposed new approaches to logistics which led to the emergence of supply chain management (SCM), a revolutionary method that provides a distinct perspective on the entire supply chain (Houlihan, 1985; Hines, 2003). Later, the rising concern for sustainability highly influenced the evolution of SCM. Therefore, a new term emerged in the literature, entitled sustainable supply chain management.

The purposes of this study are to briefly define the concepts of SCM and sustainability, and to present their relationship. The research is structured as follows: the second part illustrates the literature review. The research methodology is presented in the third part. The findings of the research are exhibited in the fourth part. The study ends with conclusions.

2. Literature review

Since its emergence in the early 1980s, the concept of SCM has captured the attention of numerous theoreticians and practitioners. At that time, R. K. Oliver and M. D. Webber, two American business consultants, coined this syntagm to portray „the range of activities coordinated by an organisation to procure and manage supplies” (Hines, 2007, p. 109). In its gregarious form,

SCM focused on „the task of balancing inventories and functional integration in the spirit of logistics” (Oliver and Webber, 2012, p. 183).

The supply chain is „that network of organisations that are involved, through upstream and downstream linkages, in the different processes and activities that produce value in the form of products and services in the hands of the ultimate customer or consumer” (Lysons and Farington, 2006, p. 91) or „a network of partners who collectively convert a basic commodity (upstream) into a finished product (downstream) that is valued by end-customers, and who manage returns at each stage” (Harrison and van Hoek, 2011, p. 7). Thus, it is characterized by the following key features:

- The supply chain represents a network of partners/organisations.
- It encompasses both upstream and downstream linkages.
- The supply chain involves processes that provide value to ultimate customers.
- Each partner/organisation carries on a specific process.

Consequently, SCM is defined as:

○ „the systemic, strategic coordination of the traditional business functions and the tactics across these business functions within a particular company and across businesses within the supply chain, for the purposes of improving the long-term performance of the individual companies and the supply chain as a whole” (Mentzer et al, 2001, p. 18).

○ „all the activities involved in delivering a product from raw material through to the customer, including sourcing raw materials and parts, manufacturing and assembly, warehousing and inventory tracking, order entry and order management, distribution across all channels, delivery to the customer, and the information systems necessary to monitor all of these activities” (Lummus et al, 2001, p. 428).

○ „the management of supply chain assets and product, information, and fund flows to maximize supply chain profitability” (Chopra and Meindl, 2007, p. 6).

○ „simply and ultimately the business management, whatever it may be in its specific context, which is perceived and enacted from the relevant supply chain perspective” (Lu, 2011, p. 13).

○ „the coordination and the planning of all company processes, from product design to its delivery to the final customer” (Lehyani et al, 2021, p. 283).

○ „the design, planning, execution, control, and monitoring of supply chain activities with the objective of creating net value, building a competitive infrastructure, leveraging worldwide logistics, synchronizing supply with demand, and measuring performance globally” (Gatewood and Drake, 2024, p. 191).

○ „the monitoring and optimization of the production and distribution of a company’s products and services” that aims to “improve and make more efficient all processes involved in turning raw materials and components into final products and getting them to the ultimate customer” (Fernando, 2024, p. 1).

Thus, SCM represents, in short, the design, planning, coordination and controlling of all supply chain activities. In spite of the fact that there is no agreed definition of SCM, its constituents are the following:

- „the object of the management philosophy,
- the target group,
- the objective(s) and
- the broad means for achieving these objectives” (Stadtler, 2002, p. 7).

On its turn, sustainability is „the ability to maintain or support economic, environmental, or social processes over time without depleting natural resources” (Mollenkamp, 2023, p. 1). Apart from the environment, it is „equally inclusive of social sustainability (often summarized as well-being, equality, democracy, and justice) and the economics of well-being” (Caradonna, 2022, p. 14) and seeks „to preserve a particular civilization, and offer a range of choices to future generations”

(Vos, 2007, p. 339). On this line, the last decades have witnessed the emergence of a growing body of literature related to the relationship between supply chain management and sustainability.

However, SCM is only one of the prerequisites of today’s business success in an unstable global environment (Toma, 2006a; Toma, 2013; Toma and Marinescu, 2015a). This is why companies, irrespective of their industry, should possess effective leadership (Marinescu and Toma, 2015b; Toma et al, 2020a; Toma et al, 2020b; Toma, 2024a) and robust management (Toma, 2008a; Toma et al, 2014; Toma and Marinescu, 2015b; Grădinaru et al, 2020), demonstrate profound strategic thinking (Toma et al, 2016a; Toma, 2024b) and planning capacity (Toma et al, 2016b), implement successful business and corporate strategies (Toma and Marinescu, 2013; Toma and Grădinaru, 2016; Toma, 2023a; Toma, 2023b), create sustainable business models (Toma and Marinescu, 2012; Toma and Tohănean, 2018; Tohănean and Toma, 2018; Toma and Tohănean, 2019; Tohănean and Toma, 2024a), personify the entrepreneurial mindset (Marinescu et al, 2017; Toma et al, 2017a; Toma et al, 2017b; Toma, 2019; Catană et al, 2020; Toma, 2023c), promote creativity and innovation (Toma et al, 2013; Marinescu et al, 2016a; Toma et al, 2016c; Marinescu and Toma, 2017; Tohănean and Toma, 2024b), motivate their employees (Marinescu et al, 2016b; Săseanu and Toma, 2019), adopt a socially responsible behavior (Toma, 2008b; Marinescu et al, 2010a; Toma et al, 2011a; Toma et al, 2011b; Toma, 2012). Also, they frequently use a plethora of instruments and methods like quality (Toma, 2006b; Toma and Naruo, 2009; Toma et al, 2012), lean (Naruo et al, 2007; Marinescu and Toma, 2008; Toma et al, 2022) and agile (Toma, 2023d) management, constant organizational learning and training (Toma, 2011; Marinescu and Toma, 2013; Toma and Hudea, 2024), Six Sigma (Toma, 2008c), Balanced Scorecard (Toma et al, 2010), teleworking (Catană et al, 2021), marketing mix (Marinescu et al, 2010b; Grădinaru and Toma, 2017; Toma and Grădinaru, 2018; Catană and Toma, 2021) and customer experience (Toma and Catană, 2021a; Toma and Catană, 2021b).

3. Methodology

In order to achieve the objective of the paper, the author used a scientific methodology based on a qualitative research method. In the beginning, he began to search for the main sources of data through desk research. Then, the author gathered the relevant information mostly from articles, reports and books. After reviewing the scientific literature, he analysed and synthesized the data. In the end, the author elaborated the study.

4. Results and discussion

In this part of the paper the author present the connection between the two above-defined concepts. In the past decades there has been an increasing attention towards the relationship between SCM and sustainability (Figure no. 1). Consequently, sustainable SCM emerged as a new concept, being defined as “the practice of integrating environmental, social and financial considerations into the sourcing, production and distribution of goods and services” (McGrath and Jonker, 2024, p. 1).

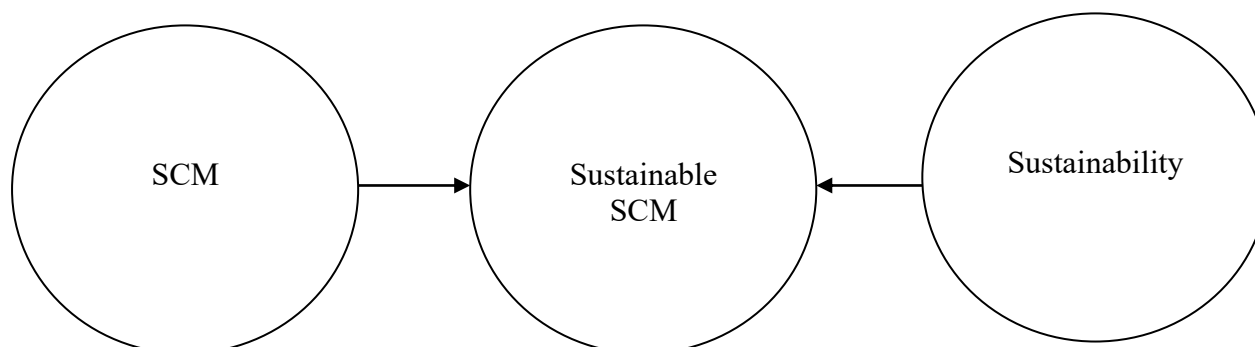


Figure no. 1. The relationship between SCM and sustainability
Source: author’s contribution

On the one hand, sustainability issues have gained higher attention within the business processes and activities of companies in the in the last decades. It is stated that the main features of business sustainability may be expressed as:

- „ (1) economic focus,
- (2) environmental focus,
- (3) social focus,
- (4) stakeholder focus,
- (5) volunteer focus,
- (6) resilience focus, and
- (7) long-term focus“ (Ahi and Searcy, 2013, p. 330).

On the other hand, SCM illustrates the planning and control of various elements (e.g., information, raw material) and both the internal and external logistics activities. Thus, the key attributes of SCM may be considered as:

- (1) flow focus, (2) coordination focus, (3) stakeholder focus, (4) relationship focus, (5) value focus, (6) efficiency focus, and (7) performance focus (1) flow focus,
- (2) coordination focus,
- (3) stakeholder focus,
- (4) relationship focus,
- (5) value focus,
- (6) efficiency focus, and
- (7) performance focus“ (Ahi and Searcy, 2013, p. 330).

Thus, SCM and sustainability share a common characteristic, namely the stakeholder (e.g., customers, suppliers) focus. This important remark leads to a more precise definition of sustainable SCM as follows: „the creation of coordinated supply chains through the voluntary integration of economic, environmental, and social considerations with key inter-organizational business systems designed to efficiently and effectively manage the material, information, and capital flows associated with the procurement, production, and distribution of products or services in order to meet stakeholder requirements and improve the profitability, competitiveness, and resilience of the organization over the short- and long-term” (Ahi and Searcy, 2013, p. 339). This definition better expresses the complex relationship between SCM and sustainability due to a higher integration of the sustainability dimensions into SCM (Seuring and Muller, 2008).

5. Conclusions

The paper exhibits the concepts of SCM and sustainability, defines them, and highlights some of their main characteristics. Also, it deciphers the relationship between them and outlines the influence of sustainability in the SCM domain.

The paper shows that the integration of sustainability dimensions into SCM led to the emergence of a new concept entitled sustainable SCM. In essence, sustainable SCM integrates sustainable practices and sustainability dimensions alongside the entire supply chain.

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