Social Sustainability Practices: A Balancing Act of Economic, Environmental, and Social Considerations

SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICES: A BALANCING ACT OF ECONOMIC, ENVIRONMENTAL, AND SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

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ABSTRACT:

Social sustainability, one of the three pillars of sustainable development alongside environmental and economic dimensions, remains underexplored in international business research. While corporate sustainability efforts often emphasise environmental and economic outcomes, the social pillar, encompassing equity, justice, inclusivity, and community well-being, has received comparatively little attention. This chapter addresses this gap by investigating the following research questions: *i) How do MNEs' corporate sustainability practices balance social with economic and environmental goals in the countries where they operate? ii) What do these practices reveal about advancing or undermining social sustainability?.* Drawing on sustainability and international business literature, two cases positioned at opposite ends of the social sustainability spectrum are explored, i.e., one case in the healthcare industry and the other case in the mining industry. By using secondary data and a thematic analysis approach, this chapter illustrates that the three pillars of sustainability are more dynamically interdependent and tightly coupled than typically portrayed, where instability in one area can create a chain of events throughout the entire sustainability agenda. Failures in the social domain can set of a chain reaction across economic and environmental achievements, undermining corporate legitimacy. This study contributes to a more integrated understanding of social sustainability in global value chains and offers practical implications for multinational enterprises under evolving regulatory frameworks, such as the European Union's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive. The findings support a holistic sustainability paradigm that recognizes the dynamic interdependence of the three pillars and promotes business strategies aligned with long-term societal well-being.

KEYWORDS:

1. Social sustainability
2. International business
3. Business practices
4. Qualitative research

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1. Introduction

Social sustainability is one of the three pillars of sustainability, alongside environmental and economic dimensions. Hollander et al. (2016) refer to social sustainability as the characteristic of society that encourages conditions for human well-being, especially for vulnerable individuals or groups. Specifically, it focuses on promoting equity, social justice, inclusivity, and the overall quality of life for all individuals within a society. Despite the equal importance of the three pillars, most of the literature on sustainable business practices focuses on the economic and environmental parameters and has almost ignored the societal dimension of sustainability (Ajmal et al. 2018; Cuthill, 2010; Vavik & Keitsch, 2010). Indeed, social sustainability has been the most theoretically vague pillar so far (Dempsey et al. 2011), which has contributed to its limited application in both research and practice. At the same time, addressing global societal challenges, such as climate change, pandemics, biodiversity conservation, extreme poverty, and so on, requires an integrated approach that includes social justice in connection with environmental and economic solutions (Peterson, 2016; Leite, 2022). In light of this, further understanding is needed to examine how companies engage with the social aspects of sustainability within different contexts and industry settings (Hutchi & Sutherland, 2008).

In the business literature, the social sustainability discussions have largely focused on regulatory issues related to human health and safety, rather than on the cultural and ethical ramifications of corporate decision-making (Linton et al. 2007). In the context of international business, aligning the three pillars of sustainability—economic, environmental, and social—poses additional challenges for headquarters (HQs) overseeing their geographically dispersed subsidiaries. Only a few studies have explored the link between social sustainability and business practices (e.g., Hutchins et al. 2019; Ajmal et al. 2018), and recent research calls (Ajmal et al. 2018; Montiel et al. 2021; Nakamba et al. 2017) emphasize the urgent need for more work incorporating social sustainability into business strategies. We aim to fill this gap by discussing examples of good business practices and malpractices across two distinct industries situated at opposite ends of the social sustainability spectrum. Novo Nordisk, operating within the healthcare sector, exemplifies a direct contribution to societal well-being by aligning its objectives with public health improvements. In contrast, Kamoa Copper Mining Complex represents a different dimension of social impact, wherein the implications of its products necessitate a broader discussion on sustainability and ethical responsibility. These cases provide a nuanced basis for analysing how corporate actions shape social sustainability. Accordingly, we raise the following two research questions*: i) How do MNEs' corporate sustainability practices balance social with economic and environmental goals in the countries where they operate? ii) What do these practices reveal about advancing or undermining social sustainability?*

To address our research questions, we draw on research from international business (IB) and sustainability literature. The examination of Novo Nordisk and Kamoa Copper shows the complexities MNEs face in achieving truly integrated sustainability. While both companies have made progress in specific areas, the integration of economic, environmental, and social considerations remains a difficult and ongoing challenge. These findings not only contribute to a theoretical understanding of social sustainability but also hold practical implications for multinational enterprises (MNEs) aiming to strengthen the social pillar within their sustainability practices. For example, in this chapter, we argue that social sustainability must be fully integrated into business practices, not merely as a supplementary goal, but as a core component of a comprehensive sustainability strategy. Specifically, this chapter advances theory by challenging the traditional view of sustainability's three pillars as equally weighted. Instead, we position social sustainability as a foundational and dynamic core that critically influences the strength and legitimacy of economic and environmental efforts. This reframing highlights the tightly coupled nature of the pillars, where failures in social responsibility can trigger a

chain reaction that undermines overall corporate sustainability. This perspective enriches academic debates and guides managers in developing more integrated sustainability strategies.

This book chapter is organized as follows: first, we provide an overview of the literature on sustainability issues from an IB perspective. Afterward, we discuss the methodology used and introduce the two cases. The book chapter continues by presenting the findings and discussion section, and ends with concluding remarks emphasizing the contribution to theory and practices.

2. Theory

In this section, we begin by outlining the conceptual foundations of sustainable development through its three interdependent pillars—environmental, economic, and social. We then present how social sustainability has been conceptualized in the literature, with particular attention to its operationalization through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

2.1 Previous research on the three pillars of sustainability

Sustainable Development (SD) is commonly classified into environmental, economic, and social interdependent pillars. In practice, this classification implies that full sustainability will only be achieved when all three dimensions are addressed satisfactorily (Vifell & Soneryd, 2012). Environmental sustainability focuses on the need to minimize harm to the planet by conserving biodiversity, protecting ecosystems, and using natural resources in a responsible way. It emphasizes long-term ecological balance rather than short-term exploitation (Purvis et al. 2019). Economic sustainability supports steady and responsible economic growth that aligns with both environmental conservation and social justice (Hale et al. 2019). It involves making decisions that promote long-term prosperity without compromising natural resources or social structures. Social sustainability, on the other hand, prioritizes human well-being and the creation of equitable, inclusive societies. It involves ensuring access to opportunities, safeguarding human rights, and promoting social harmony (Dillard et al. 2012). Therefore, sustainable development is also synonymous with one that is socially just and ethically acceptable (Hansmann et al. 2012).

Within IB research, broader assessments of social sustainability indicators in global supply chains include factors such as employment benefits, workplace relations, health and safety, and diversity (Leite et al. 2024; Popovic et al. 2018). Studies highlight that these indicators should prioritize addressing inequalities and promoting justice (Hicks et al. 2016). However, their effectiveness is often limited by the challenge of quantifying qualitative aspects of social well-being. The main issue is that, while MNEs frequently rely on frameworks like the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI, 2006), current indicators provide detailed guidance on economic and environmental performance but offer limited insight into social sustainability. According to Landorf (2011), the intuitive explanation for that is that social aspects cannot be measured via traditional metrics such as cost-benefit analysis, greenhouse gas emissions, and/or gross national product. Social indicators are quite fragmented, context-dependent, and lack a unified definition, making it difficult to establish a coherent framework for understanding them. These indicators are performative, meaning they actively shape and reflect particular social realities through symbolic representation (Hale et al. 2019). Furthermore, the division of sustainability into economic, environmental, and social pillars can create conflicts and exacerbate inequities, raising the crucial question: "Sustainable for whom?" (Hale et al. 2019). Nevertheless, the social dimension of sustainability is gaining increased attention, and a considerable body of literature addressing social sustainability has emerged across various fields such as sociology, urban planning, and tourism studies (see, e.g., Valta & Leite, 2025; Colantonio & Dixon 2010; Koning 2010; Vallance et al. 2011).

The ‘three-pillar’ paradigm is believed to have originated from influential global efforts, including the Brundtland Report, Agenda 21, and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (Moldan et al. 2012). It is also commonly referred to as the 3P’s - planet, people, and profits, highlighting the

interconnectedness of environmental, social, and economic dimensions (Kajikawa, 2008; Schoolman et al. 2012). Hancock (1993) approaches a three-pillar model positioning 'health' as a core element of sustainable communities. Hancock (1993) argues for a shift in focus from traditional economic development to a system of economic activity that enhances human development while being environmentally and socially sustainable. In Hancock's view, the economy should serve both the community and the environment, rather than as an entity that requires trade-offs among the three pillars (Purvis et al. 2019).

Despite the recognized importance of integrating the three pillars, achieving an alignment among them remains a significant challenge. Some researchers (e.g., Hadorn, 2006; and Mieg, 2012) have criticized the pillars for their underlying value conflict, such as nature versus costs, profit versus equity, or economic versus social priorities. Furthermore, there is also a controversial conflict of interest among diverse stakeholders, often leading to tensions between the pillars. In many cases, aligning stakeholder interests with one pillar is more manageable than balancing all three simultaneously (Kyburz-Graber et al. 2006). Despite critics around the three pillars and sometimes competing goals, researchers are unanimous (see, for example, Purvis et al. 2019; Mieg, 2012; Kyburz-Graber et al. 2006) that the three dimensions can influence each other in positive and/or negative ways.

Corporate practices (good or malpractices) can have a positive or negative impact on the three pillars of sustainability. For example, from a business point of view, investing in renewable green energy (environmental pillar) may simultaneously generate green jobs (economic pillar) and improve public health (social pillar). This illustrates a positive synergy, where reinforcing one pillar strengthens the others. In contrast, promoting tourism without environmental controls may generate revenue (economic pillar) but can lead to environmental degradation in the case of over-tourism (environmental pillar) and cultural exploitation or loss (social pillar). This represents a negative trade-off, a type of scenario where a gain in one pillar undermines the other(s). Understanding these interconnections is crucial for identifying strategies that support sustainable business practice. In this chapter, we depart from the social pillar dimension as a reference point with the goal of finding positive synergies. We argue that this interdependence forms the foundation of good practice in sustainable development and constitutes a backbone to this study.

2.2 Previous literature on social sustainability

Social sustainability remains a broad and contested concept, with several definitions and perspectives shaping its meaning over time. Votaw (1973) explains that the characterization of social sustainability remains relevant, as corporate social responsibility (CSR)—a key framework often used to conceptualize social sustainability— has been interpreted in various ways ranging from legal responsibility or liability for some to ethical behaviour of companies within their legitimization efforts for corporate citizenship to others (Caroll, 1999). For many, social sustainability involves charitable contributions. This ambiguity complicates the efforts to define social sustainability under the umbrella of CSR in a way that becomes both comprehensible and operational for research and practice (Carroll, 1999).

Scholars distinguish between CSR as voluntary actions beyond legal compliance (e.g., Portney, 2008; Rodriguez et al. 2006) and broader perspectives that frame CSR as managing a firm profitably while being law-abiding, ethical, and socially supportive (Carroll, 1999). However, defining CSR through legal boundaries is problematic, given that MNEs operate across diverse regulatory environments where enforcement and expectations vary (Brammer et al. 2012). Being large, visible as many MNEs, and active in countries with different norms and standards creates complexities. In the meantime, societal expectations regarding business responsibilities have also grown, blurring the roles of public and private actors and linking CSR to related concepts such as sustainability, corporate citizenship, and human rights (Kolk, 2016).

In response to these evolving expectations, regulatory frameworks are emerging to provide more clarity and enforceability. Notably, the European Union's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), which came into effect in July 2024, mandates companies to systematically address environmental and human rights risks across their value chains. By making corporate due diligence a legal obligation, the CSDDD significantly strengthens the social pillar of sustainability, moving beyond the voluntary nature traditionally associated with CSR (Leite et al. 2024).

Rather than adhering to a fixed definition, CSR can be seen as addressing environmental, social, and ethical issues, whether legally mandated or driven by stakeholder pressures (Kolk, 2010). These issues include climate change, pollution, human rights, and community welfare, with MNEs facing the challenge of navigating diverse global expectations. Firms may take either reactive or proactive approaches to CSR, influencing their long-term legitimacy and success (Collinson et al. 2013). Furthermore, the distinction between market and non-market strategies is increasingly questioned, as all business activities involve trade-offs in different forms of currency, both monetary and non-monetary (Devinney, 2013). Early research in IB already recognized the complexity of CSR in a multinational setting, where businesses must balance conflicting social and political expectations across different regions (Gladwin & Walter, 1976).

In IB, research on social sustainability has largely focused on macro-level issues such as poverty and inequality, often examining MNE operations in developing countries, base-of-the-pyramid markets, and microfinance (e.g., Judge et al. 2014; Hill & Mudambi, 2010; Sinkovics et al. 2014). However, it is unclear how IB research can contribute to social sustainability, mainly on the firm-level goals. Furthermore, there is a lack of a practical perspective on what social sustainability should encompass (Ajmal et al. 2018; Leite et al. 2024). From a global value chain perspective, the CSDDD mandate will require companies to adopt more comprehensive approaches, integrating social sustainability into their core strategies and ensuring that issues such as employment rights, diversity, and social justice are systematically addressed across all tiers of their value chains (Leite et al. 2024). Thus, clarifying the meaning and the nature of social sustainability within IB research will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how social sustainability can be effectively integrated into the practices and strategies of MNEs and their dispersed subsidiaries.

In this chapter, we highlight that, while this study emphasizes the often-understudied social pillar of sustainability, it does so by recognizing the interdependent relationships between all three pillars. We believe that analyzing business practices through this holistic perspective enables a more realistic assessment of sustainability in IB rather than examining an isolated social dimension. This is relevant especially as firms face pressure to align social purpose with profit, justice with economic growth, and ethics with positive outcomes for society.

3. Method

This book chapter focuses on a case-based exploratory study, which is best suited when investigating new and poorly understood phenomena (Yin, 2017) that have multiple, context-specific, and complex elements (Piekkari & Welch, 2011). Since social sustainability involves diverse, interconnected factors—such as labor rights, equity, and community development—that vary across cultural, political, and economic environments, a case study can capture these nuances. Accordingly, we examined two cases to provide illustrative insights into social sustainability within the MNE's organizational practices.

3.1 Case selection criteria

The selection of the two cases was guided by the intention to illustrate how businesses navigate the complex balance between environmental, economic, and social sustainability across different industries and contexts. Rather than offering a direct comparison, our objective was to highlight

examples of both good practices and malpractices in healthcare and mining. We chose industries positioned at opposite sides of the social sustainability spectrum. The first case, Novo Nordisk, a Danish pharmaceutical multinational, entered China in the 1990s with a long-term strategy centered on patient education, physician engagement, and local partnerships. It established clinics, community programs, and an R&D center in Tianjin but later faced challenges, including a 2013 product recall in China and legal issues in the U.S. over off-label promotion. The second case, Kamoa Copper Mining Complex, located in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), represents one of the largest copper discoveries in Africa. Despite the company's commitment to sustainability, including environmental initiatives like hydroelectric power usage, Kamoa Copper has faced criticism for forced displacements, inadequate living conditions for affected families, and environmental damage, particularly water contamination. Novo Nordisk, whose health-sector products contribute directly to societal well-being, and Kamoa Copper, whose mineral extraction activities carry different social implications. Together, these cases provide a nuanced understanding of the diverse challenges and approaches companies face when integrating social sustainability into their operations.

3.2 Data gathering and analysis

Our study is based on secondary sources, since the cases have been widely publicized and are well-known from their international media coverage (cf. Leite & Johnstone, 2023). Due to the sensitive nature of the data, particularly regarding past corporate malpractices and ongoing legal proceedings, obtaining firsthand information was not feasible. Therefore, we relied solely on secondary sources. and argue that despite this limitation, secondary sources are highly valuable, allowing for triangulation through multiple perspectives and cross-referencing (cf. Vaara et al. 2006; Gnyawali & Park, 2011; Park & Kim, 2021). Additionally, secondary sources provide an investigative foundation by offering a broad view of the cases, drawn from various media outlets, research, and expert analysis, thus supporting a comprehensive examination of social sustainability practices.

To compile the data, we accessed an extensive range of media materials, including daily newspapers, business and industry magazines, press releases, reports, corporate and NGO websites, a documentary film, and academic articles (cf. Reddy and Agrawal, 2012). Ultimately, we identified 56 relevant documents and moving material (approx. 45 min of documentary film) that contributed to explaining the progression of the cases (see Table 1). These materials were carefully reviewed, and two case narratives were developed to present an overview of the events. The analytical process followed a thematic analysis approach (cf. Vaara et al. 2006), through which we identified the key issues across the cases, specifically the corporate good practices and malpractices in aligning the three sustainability pillars.

[Table 1 about here]

4. Case narratives

The two case narratives presented in this section illustrate contrasting approaches to business practices. The cases also provide a nuanced foundation for analyzing how corporate behavior shapes social sustainability across diverse industries.

4.1 Novo Nordisk (Healthcare industry)

The Danish multinational pharmaceutical company Novo Nordisk specializes in diabetes care medications and devices. In the 1990s, the company aimed to entre China, but the main strategy was not just to sell products. The entry strategy focused on a long-term, comprehensive approach to patient care and working with physicians. It involved building partnerships with key stakeholders and educating the public, particularly about diabetes prevention (Kannabhiran, 2011). During this time, diabetes was

not well understood in China, and this lack of awareness came at a time when the country was experiencing a rise in diabetes cases, linked to an improving standard of living.

To address the problem, Novo Nordisk recognized the importance of engaging with various stakeholders, and several initiatives were taken to bring positive change. Novo Nordisk built clinics to provide specialized care for diabetes patients and invested in community diabetes prevention programs (Wand & Boel, 2006). Additionally, the company engaged in partnerships with the Chinese Ministry of Health for a joint effort to develop guidelines, provide training for pharmacists, and run awareness campaigns for diabetes prevention. The company also helped to integrate diabetes care into the broader health system. In 2006, a research and development (R&D) center was established at the company's subsidiary in Tianjin to develop solutions specifically for the Chinese market. By 2009, the entire product line was transferred to China, creating a local supply chain for their diabetes products. As a result, the company helped improve conditions for insulin suppliers in China and built strong relationships with suppliers, distributors, and the government.

In 2013, Novo Nordisk recalled 30 batches of its prefilled insulin product, NovoMix 30 FlexPen and Penfill, due to a manufacturing defect at the Tianjin facility. Some cartridges contained incorrect insulin doses, which posed health risks for patients. The company identified the root cause and took corrective action to resolve the issue (Manufacturing Chemist, 2013). Today, the company holds a 77% market share in China, thanks to the value the company has created through long-term commitment to the Chinese market as well as collaboration with the local government and community.

According to the Financial Times (2023), analysts expect that Novo Nordisk will soon receive approval in China for its obesity drug Wegovy. Highlighting the importance of the Chinese market (China daily.com.cn), the president of Novo Nordisk in China stated:

> *"We attach great importance to the Chinese market and will continue to fulfill our long-term commitment of 'In China, For China; In China, For the World', constantly strengthening our layout and capability in the industrial chain in China".*

In the US, Novo Nordisk is growing rapidly. The company's main goal is to address both diabetes and obesity (Novo Nordisk Annual Report, 2022). In 2021, the company became the only manufacturer approved by the FDA (US Food and Drug Administration) for a treatment specifically for chronic weight management in adults with obesity. The active ingredients are Ozempic, for type 2 diabetes, and Wegovy, for obesity. In the US, sales of Wegovy rose by 344%, while sales of Ozempic increased by 50% (CNBC, 2023).

Novo Nordisk seems to contribute to society by improving the quality of life of people suffering from chronic diseases such as diabetes and obesity. However, the company has also faced challenges. A lawsuit has been filed, claiming that Novo Nordisk failed to adequately inform patients that its drugs could potentially cause gastrointestinal side effects, including stomach paralysis (Environment litigation group, 2024). Further, Novo Nordisk has also been engaged in illegal off-label promotion of its drug NovoSeven. The company marketed the drug for unapproved uses such as trauma, cardiac surgery, and liver transplants, even though the FDA had only approved the drug for specific bleeding disorders in hemophiliacs. This led to false claims being submitted to Medicare and Medicaid, with taxpayers covering the cost of unauthorized prescriptions. As a result, the company agreed to pay $25 million to resolve civil liability and signed a Corporate Integrity Agreement to prevent future violations (U.S. Department of Justice Press release, 2025). This case highlights regulatory breaches, public health risks, and fraudulent misuse of government healthcare funds, reinforcing concerns over corporate ethics and compliance in the pharmaceutical industry.

In terms of environmental impact, Novo Nordisk announced in 2020 that the company had achieved its goal of using 100% renewable electricity across all global production facilities (Novo Nordisk Annual Report, 2021). Building on this, the company aims to reach net-zero CO_2 emissions from its operations and transport by 2030. Novo Nordisk also plans for all its direct suppliers to use 100% renewable power by 2030, which is expected to eliminate approximately 300,000 tonnes of CO_2 annually from its supply chain (Novo Nordisk Annual Report, 2021).

In terms of social impact, Novo Nordisk has provided diabetes care to 36.3 million patients. Of these, 5.5 million were reached via access and affordability initiatives. Since 2021, the company's expansion has also created 6,700 new jobs. The company's profitability has even surpassed the GDP of its home country.

4.2 Kamoa Copper (Mining industry)

The decarbonization of the global economy and the transformation towards electrification of many industries around the globe have increased the demand for other raw materials, such as mined metals like copper and cobalt. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a major producer of these mined metals. 70 % of the world's production of cobalt and one-third of the world's production of copper takes place in the DRC (Amnesty International 2023). Expectations of an accelerating global demand for these two minerals are behind the expansion of industrial mining in and around the city of Kolwezi in the DRC. In this area, many of the country's most productive cobalt and copper mines are located. Many Congolese have taken jobs at industrial mines in the region to get a better and wealthier life for themselves and their families (The New Yorker, 24.05.2021).

Kamoa Copper S.A. is situated near the city of Kolwezi in the DRC. The company operates the Kamoa Copper Mining Complex, which is comprised of a series of copper deposits and is recognized as the largest copper discovery ever on the African continent. A first deposit was discovered by the company in 2009, and a second deposit was found in 2016. The first copper was produced in the mines in 2021. (www.kamoacopper.com)

Kamoa Copper is a joint venture between the Canadian mining company Ivanhoe Mines (which indirectly holds 39.6%), the Chinese multinational mining company Zijin Mining Group (which indirectly holds 39.6%), and a private Hong Kong-based company called Crystal River Global Limited (which indirectly holds 0.8%). The Government of the DRC owns the remaining shareholding of the company (20%). (www.kamoacopper.com)

The company is working hard with sustainability issues, and all three parts of the sustainability triad (economic, environmental, and social aspects) are part of the company's mission. Kamoa Copper wants to create one of the largest, lowest-cost copper mining complexes in the world. The company aims to contribute to the sustainable transformation of the DRC and its people. The company has, for example, expressed its readiness to collaborate with the DRC government, state-owned utilities, other mining companies, and regional stakeholders to improve rail and power infrastructure in the province (Amos et al. 2018). The company further wants to become pioneers of a new standard for environmentally and socially responsible mining in the DRC, as well as producing green copper to fuel low-carbon technological advancement. Environmental sustainability is extremely important to the company. All mines are powered by clean, renewable hydro-generated electricity (Retriever, 20.04.2022). The Kamoa Copper Mining Complex is expected to become among the world's lowest greenhouse gas emitters per unit of metal produced once all mines reach a steady state of production (www.kamoacopper.com). The company collaborates with partners that share the company's values of environmental, social, and economic sustainability, like the two Swedish companies Epiroc and

Sandvik (Nerikes Allehanda, 14.09.2023; Dagens Industri, 14.03.2024). Both companies supply mining machinery to the Kamoa Copper Mining Complex. Epiroc also provides technical support and operator training (Retriever, 20.04.2022). Helena Hedblom, Epiroc's President and CEO (Retriever, 05.09.2023), has stated the following:

> *"The customer's focus on sustainability and productivity, coupled with the mine's large size, makes it extra exciting to contribute to its success".*

Lately, large orders have been enabled and supported by the Swedish government through the Swedish Export Credit Agency, which has helped Kamoa Copper to purchase the Swedish equipment from Epiroc and Sandvik by issuing credit guarantees of almost two billion SEK (Dagens Industri 14.03.2024).

In 2017, the company decided to further expand the Kamoa Copper Mining Complex. An expansion plan was set up, and as a result, 45 families were forced to leave their homes and farmland. Kamoa Copper promised that all displaced families would receive new homes and that the company would follow the norms agreed upon within the industry. These norms require that people displaced by mining projects should be resettled in conditions that are better than what they had before (Nerikes Allehanda, 24.09.2023). However, according to a report by Amnesty International (2023), this promise was not fulfilled. The new houses lacked basic amenities such as showers, running water, and sewage systems. The company reluctantly admitted that the new homes had no sewage systems and that the toilets were simply holes in the ground. Although families were resettled in 2017, the primary school that Kamoa Cooper had promised did not open until 2021 (Amnesty International, 2023).

A documentary by Swedish TV4 (Kalla fakta: Dödsgruvorna, 2024) interviewed families who had been displaced. The interviewed families said that they owned their own land and earned a surplus from farming before the relocation. Now, they struggle financially and cannot afford to send their children to school. All families also had to wait for another two years before the "promised" health clinic opened in 2023 (Amnesty International 2023). Kamoa Copper has stated in a written response to the Amnesty International report (2023) that they have recently established a program to review how the forced displacements are handled and how living conditions can be improved (Company and government responses to Amnesty International and IBGDH, 2023). To date, more than 1300 people have been forcibly displaced due to the expansion of the mine (Dagens Industri 14.03.2024). Recently, several reports have emerged about water pollution linked to the mining facility (Dagens Industri, 14.03.2024; Gefle Dagblad, 19.03.2024). Water samples from a river near the Kamoa mine revealed that the drinking water contains 100 to 200 times more heavy metals than natural levels (Aftonbladet 13.03.2024, Dagens Industri 14.03.2024). One of the major owners of the mine, Zijin Mining Group, has previously been accused of polluting waterways near other mines that the company operates in the DRC (Aftonbladet 13.03.2024).

6. Case findings

We organize the results from the two cases in the following manner: *i) How do MNEs' corporate sustainability practices balance social with economic and environmental goals in the countries where they operate? ii) What do these practices reveal about advancing or undermining social sustainability?.*

6.1 Economic, environmental, and social considerations in corporate practices

Our examination of the two cases indicates that both Novo Nordisk and Kamoa Copper have demonstrated varying degrees of success and failure in the attempt to balance the three pillars. The MNEs' (un)sustainable corporate practices are summarized in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

In case 1, Novo Nordisk emphasizes long-term social sustainability through patient care and education. Its initial entry into China in the 90s was driven by a commitment to address diabetes through a comprehensive strategy that included building clinics, forming local partnerships, and developing a local supply chain suggests good business practices. The company's strategy not only improved access to diabetes care but also fostered strong relationships with local stakeholders. Novo Nordisk's efforts in the social realm are notable, but ethical issues in drug promotion risk undermining legitimacy. Additionally, product recalls compromise health objectives and raise concerns about corporate malpractices. In the meantime, the company has made significant milestones in environmental sustainability, achieving 100% renewable electricity across its global operations in 2020. These efforts reflect the company's ongoing attempt to balance economic growth with environmental and social responsibility. However, the company's approach lacks synergy across the three pillars. The Novo Nordisk case shows (see Table 2, good practice versus malpractice) an imbalance among the three sustainability pillars. While the company makes a positive contribution to the environmental and economic pillars supporting long-term growth, its social pillar is compromised by ethical concerns, weakening the overall impact and synergy. Therefore, the company's model, in this case, cannot be considered fully sustainable. These findings are in line with Vifell and Soneryd's (2012) statement that if the three pillars are not well-balanced, a company cannot claim that it implements a sustainable model. This case exemplifies the importance of mandates such as the CSDDD (Leite et al. 2024) to close the gap between declared sustainability commitments and actual practices, especially across borders.

In case 2, Kamoa Copper operates in a contrasting context, focusing on the economic benefits of expanding copper production in the DRC by using hydro-generated electricity to power its operations and minimizing greenhouse gas emissions. Commitment to reduce environmental impact is noble; however, its environmental and social practices have been criticized (see Table 2 for corporate good and malpractices). Forced displacements of local families for mine expansion, poor living conditions in resettlement areas indicate social injustice, while significant water pollution from mining activities underscores the challenges in balancing social and environmental responsibilities. These social failures highlight the company's neglect of social sustainability, risking its legitimacy and long-term success. Despite the company's efforts to improve infrastructure and social standards, media reports suggest that many promises have not been fully realized, raising concerns about corporate accountability. Kamoa Copper's actions highlight the difficulties of maintaining ethical practices while pursuing economic objectives in resource-rich but underdeveloped regions such as the DRC in Africa. These findings suggest that social neglect (displacement, unmet promises) undermines legitimacy while environmental harm threatens long-term community health and the health of natural ecosystems. The Kamoa Copper case demonstrates a clear failure to achieve a balanced approach across the pillars, leading to a negative synergy scenario in which economic growth undermines the social and environmental aspects. This supports the idea that misalignment among pillars may result in a cumulative harm chain, especially in vulnerable regions (Hadorn, 2006; Mieg, 2012).

Both cases illustrate the practical challenges discussed in the literature on sustainable development and the three-pillar model. Despite notable achievements in economic growth and partial environmental efforts, both companies demonstrate significant shortcomings in addressing social sustainability — a dimension frequently recognized as the most difficult to integrate into organizational strategies (Dillard et al. 2012). As Vifell and Soneryd (2012) argue, true sustainability

requires satisfactory performance across economic, environmental, and social pillars simultaneously, yet synergy among these dimensions remains vague in both cases. Furthermore, the criticisms faced by Kamoa Copper regarding community displacements and unmet social commitments highlight the broader issue of stakeholder value conflicts as stressed by Hadorn et al. 2006. This reinforces the growing importance of regulatory frameworks such as the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) in strengthening the social pillar. These findings confirm that while partial success in individual pillars is possible, achieving a fully integrated and ethical approach to sustainable development remains a considerable challenge for MNEs.

6.2 Lessons in Advancing Social Sustainability

What do these practices reveal about advancing or undermining social sustainability? The cases highlight the complexity of corporate responsibility, where sustainability narratives are often undermined by local realities and weak enforcement mechanisms. Both Novo Nordisk and Kamoa Copper risk damaging their legitimacy through gaps between public commitments and actual practices. Novo Nordisk's off-label drug promotion and failure to disclose side effects, and Kamoa Copper's inadequate resettlement standards and environmental mismanagement, reveal a persistent disconnect between rhetoric and practice. The complexity of balancing the pillars reinforces Hadorn's (1999) criticisms of the value conflicts and trade-offs inherent in the three-pillars sustainability framework. Several lessons emerge for advancing social sustainability in such corporate contexts.

First, while existing literature identifies these pillars as interconnected (Vifell & Soneryd, 2012; Purvis et al. 2019), our cases suggest that this interdependence is more dynamic than often assumed. Failures in one pillar—such as social displacement or ethical breach —do not simply coexist with successes in others; they trigger *chain reactions* that can disrupt economic achievements (e.g., operations or supply chains) and environmental credibility, if the social backlash can delegitimize green claims. This suggests that the pillars function less to be balanced and more as tightly coupled systems, where instability in one area can create a chain of events throughout the entire sustainability agenda.

Second, social commitments must be genuine, consistent, and embedded across all corporate activities, ensuring that ethical integrity supports and amplifies environmental and economic goals rather than undermines them. Novo Nordisk's early efforts in patient education and healthcare infrastructure in China show the potential of long-term stakeholder engagement, yet ethical issues have undermined trust and social impact. Similarly, Kamoa Copper's economic achievements have not prevented social injustices related to the displacements and the local community complaints. The cases also demonstrate that environmental milestones, such as renewable energy adoption, cannot compensate for failures in the social domain, underscoring the necessity of balanced progress across all three sustainability pillars. Moreover, meaningful community engagement is critical. It acts as a feedback loop, offering early warnings of social tensions that could cascade into broader sustainability failures. Neglecting it compromises both firms' legitimacy and long-term operational success. Finally, the cases confirm that achieving synergies between economic, environmental, and social pillars remains a significant challenge, reinforcing broader academic concerns about value conflicts in sustainable development (Vifell & Soneryd, 2012; Hirsch Hadorn, 1999). Partial successes in isolated pillars are insufficient; instead, integrated, holistic strategies are essential for advancing genuine social sustainability.

7. Discussion

The social dimension of sustainability, encompassing human rights, community welfare, labor standards, and equity (Colantonio & Dixon, 2010; Ajmal et al. 2018), is often underdeveloped in corporate sustainability strategies due to its qualitative and context-specific nature (Landorf, 2011; Hale et al. 2019). As argued by Dillard et al. (2012), businesses frequently emphasize economic and environmental reporting while struggling to operationalize social sustainability. The examination of Novo Nordisk and Kamoa Copper illustrates the difficulty of achieving integrated sustainability in industries that are inherently profit-driven and, in some cases, operate in regions with less stringent regulatory oversight. It was noticeable that while economic and environmental goals can be met with relative success, social sustainability remains a critical, yet often overlooked, and vague pillar. It is important to highlight that economic and environmental successes, such as job creation, tax revenues to governments, and commitment to reduce carbon footprint, cannot compensate for neglecting social responsibility.

This book chapter contributes to the ongoing debate about the social sustainability pillar by adding knowledge on an important dimension that is often dismissed in corporate sustainability strategies. By critically examining the cases of Novo Nordisk and Kamoa Copper, this chapter emphasizes that social sustainability must be fully integrated into business practices, not merely as a supplementary goal, but as a core component of a comprehensive sustainability strategy. While both companies have made significant progress in improving their economic and environmental performance, their struggles with social responsibility highlight the need for a more holistic approach. This includes better engagement with local communities, more robust human rights protections, and transparency in addressing social risks. Moreover, the cases demonstrate the importance of regulatory frameworks and industry standards that enforce greater accountability for social sustainability regardless of where the MNE is doing business. The chapter thus calls for a shift towards a balanced approach to recognize the dynamic interdependence of the three pillars and challenges companies to prioritize social sustainability in a way that matches their economic and environmental commitments. Ultimately, this contribution enriches the ongoing discourse by showcasing the vagueness of operationalizing social sustainability by firms and providing insights for businesses striving to achieve genuine and long-term sustainable development.

7.1 Managerial implications

Managers can learn three valuable lessons from the cases of Novo Nordisk and Kamoa Copper about integrating sustainability into corporate strategies. First, companies must align their sustainability narratives with real actions, ensuring transparency and accountability. Second, while environmental milestones, such as renewable energy use, are important, they cannot compensate for social shortcomings. Moreover, meaningful community engagement is essential for operational success. Achieving synergy across economic, environmental, and social pillars remains challenging, but managers should adopt strategies that reflect their interdependence and dynamic interaction. This involves developing integrated sustainability strategies that prioritize all three pillars, foster collaboration across departments, and set cross-functional goals to ensure that progress in one area does not come at the expense of another. Although the interdependence of sustainability pillars is well established in theory, the cases show how persistent trade-off thinking in practice continues to produce cascading failures. By shifting from viewing sustainability pillars as competing goals toward a

model of dynamic interdependence and mutual reinforcement, corporations can better anticipate and mitigate chain reactions, thereby fostering sustainability outcomes.

7.2 Limitations and future research directions

This study has several limitations that also present opportunities for future research. First, our analysis was limited to two cases within the healthcare and mining industries. This means that the findings should be interpreted with caution. To build on these results, future research should test these findings through large-scale empirical studies within the same industries by comparing practices in home versus host country markets. For example, have MNEs adopted similar practices in home-developed markets in comparison to host developing markets? Second, our focus was on illustrating corporate good practices and malpractices within social sustainability. Future studies could develop cross-case analyses to facilitate comparisons within the same industry, offering more robust insights into sector-specific challenges and strategies. Third, while our study highlights lessons learned from corporate practices, the broader issue of corporate malpractices remains surprisingly underexplored. Future research could further investigate the relationship between social sustainability and corporate malpractices, particularly unethical, illegal, or controversial behaviors. By studying these malpractices, researchers can identify opportunities for improving corporate practices, ultimately helping companies develop ethically sound sustainability strategies across all pillars.

8. Concluding remarks: reframing corporate sustainability through the social lens.

This chapter has investigated how MNEs' corporate sustainability practices balance social, economic, and environmental goals in the countries where they operate and examines what these practices reveal about advancing or undermining social sustainability. Drawing on the cases of Novo Nordisk and Kamoa Copper, we have shown that while companies frequently achieve measurable progress in economic and environmental domains, social sustainability remains inconsistently addressed, despite its importance to corporate legitimacy, long-term success, and stakeholder trust (Dillard et al. 2012; Cuthill, 2010). Our findings highlight that failures in the social domain do not coexist unproblematically with environmental or economic achievements. Rather, they trigger chain reactions that can destabilize operations, damage environmental credibility, and erode public legitimacy (Hadorn, 1999; Mieg, 2012). This suggests that the pillars are not simply to be "balanced," but are tightly coupled systems in which instability in one domain can spread across the others. The cases also reveal the importance of embedding social sustainability into the core of corporate strategy rather than treating it as a compliance-oriented issue (Ajmal et al. 2018; Hale et al. 2019). This leads us to argue that social sustainability should not be viewed simply as one of three equal pillars to be balanced. Rather, it is a foundational and dynamic dimension that critically influences corporate legitimacy and long-term success (Dillard et al. 2012; Cuthill, 2010).

Theoretically, our contribution consists of moving beyond the traditional view of the three pillars as equally weighted elements (Vifell & Soneryd, 2012; Purvis et al. 2019). Instead, we position social sustainability as the core element that holds the system together, with the potential to strengthen or weaken the other pillars depending on how seriously companies commit to their social responsibilities. Ultimately, this chapter challenges both scholars and practitioners to rethink sustainability as a dynamic and interconnected system where social sustainability should not be

viewed as competing with economic profits but as the essential foundation upon which continuing economic success and environmental indicators depend.

To conclude, while prior research has recognized the importance of the social pillar for achieving fully sustainable development (e.g. Ajmal et al. 2018; Cuthill, 2010; Vavik & Keitsch, 2010), we know little about the impacts of the social pillar on companies legitimacy, how a social strategy can be developed, and how it might generate positive effects. We hope that our examination has provided an important foundation for future conceptual and empirical research on this very important and evolving topic.

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Appendix

Table 1: Overview of collected media material

Media material (data types)	Case 1 (number)	Case 2 (number)
Daily newspaper articles	12	11
Articles in business and industry magazines	6	4
Press releases	3	3
Reports	1	2
Corporate and NGO websites	5	6
Documentary film	0	1
Academic articles	1	1
Total:		**56**

Table 2. Summary of the MNEs' corporate practices

Case 1. Novo Nordisk								
Economic Pillar	**Good practice**	**Mal practice**	**Environmental Pillar**	**Good practice**	**Mal practice**	**Social Pillar**	**Good practice**	**Mal practice**
Improved host country healthcare while boosting home market revenue and job creation. Company revenue now exceeds Danish GDP.	✓		100% renewable electricity is used across all global production facilities.	✓		Integrated social sustainability into healthcare solutions, benefiting patients & society.	✓	
Opened R&D center and localized production, strengthening the local economy.	✓		Autoinjectors for diabetes, often disposable or with disposable components, contribute significantly to healthcare's environmental impact, estimated at around 4.4% of global net emissions (Pharmaforum).		✓	Improved access to essential medicines.	✓	
Manufactured defective insulin products, leading to major recalls and patient health risks.		✓	Novo Nordisk's insulin production uses large energy and water resources, contributing to its carbon footprint and environmental impact.		✓	Engaged in illegal off-label promotion, resulting in fraudulent claims to public health programs (Medicare/Medicaid).		✓
Provided insufficient warnings on drug side effects in the US, resulting in lawsuits.		✓						

Case 2. Kamoa Copper								
Economic Pillar	**Good practice**	**Mal practice**	**Environmental Pillar**	**Good practice**	**Mal practice**	**Social Pillar**	**Good practice**	**Mal practice**
Created jobs and opportunities in a resource-rich (host) but developing country.	✓		Targets "green copper" production aligned with global decarbonization goals.	✓		Poor community support: inadequate housing & delayed facilities for displaced families.		✓
Framed operations in alignment with international development goals (e.g., SDGs like clean energy transition and health equality).	✓		Partnered with Epiroc and Sandvik to use responsible mining equipment.	✓		Collaborates with the DRC government to improve infrastructure.	✓	
Water contamination from the mine, with heavy metals exceeding natural levels, harms agriculture and fishing, damaging the local economy.		✓	Water contamination with heavy metals threatens public health and ecosystems.		✓	Human rights violations occurred due to the forced displacement of over 1,300 people without meeting acceptable resettlement standards.		✓
Kamoa Copper's expansion displaced over 1,300 people, disrupting livelihoods, especially for farmers, and leaving many unable to afford basic services (Amnesty International, 2023).		✓						