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Author(s): Afriyie, Edmund Osei; Zahoor, Nadia

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Multinational Enterprises, Sustainability Activities, and Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals in Africa

Edmund Osei Afriyie

Department of Strategy and International Business

University of Birmingham, U.K

Email: exo212@student.bham.ac.uk

Nadia Zahoor

Department of Business and Society

Queen Mary University of London, UK

InnoLab, University of Vaasa, Finland

Email: n.zahoor@qmul.ac.uk

Abstract

Multinational enterprises (MNEs) are expected to address socioeconomic challenges in host and home countries as they are key drivers of change in addressing the United Nations' sustainable development goals (SDGs). However, MNEs in sub-Saharan Africa—part of the global south—has seen a slow engagement in adopting and promoting SDGs. This chapter identifies the role of MNEs in the implementation of SDGs. This chapter further explores how MNEs frame their sustainability efforts toward local development and the roles governments play in promoting corporate sustainability. The key contribution of this chapter is to highlight sustainability activities, SDG targets, and organizational activities aimed at addressing SDGs.

Keywords – Multinational enterprise, sustainable development goals, sub-Saharan Africa, SDGs.

Introduction

Multinational enterprises (MNEs) are key agents in shaping economic growth. It is estimated that MNEs account for half of the foreign direct investment (FDI), which provides job creation and boosts economic growth (Castellani et al., 2022; Nguyen, 2022). Brand reputations of MNEs in

the global north are well established as compared to those in the global south where natural resources are heavily exploited. In the global south, local institutions denounce such activities of western corporations as being a social and environmental burden. In addition, there has been considerable attention in the global north concerning corporate sustainability compared to the global south (Seuring & Müller, 2008). In this regard, research suggests that MNEs due to their global nature can be powerful actors to promote sustainable development that is in line with SDGs (Ghauri, Strange, & Cooke, 2021). MNEs can promote corporate sustainability through promoting education and initiating social campaigns in partnership with governments and international organizations (Forum for the Future, 2000). However, there is a lack of attention to the role of MNEs to achieve a breadth of SDGs (Wettstein et al., 2019). This is particularly true in the case of Africa where FDI is a key driver of economic growth and the aim of Africa SDG (Aust et al., 2020) and dashboards report is to “*help each African country identify priorities for action, understand key implementation challenges, and identify the gaps that must be closed to achieve the SDGs by 2030*” (SDGs Center for Africa and SDSN, 2018). Thus, it is essential to discuss the role of MNEs in the achievement of SDGs in Africa and this influence may differ among different SDGs.

Sustainability can best be described as the process of aiding humans in the realization of their potential quality of life without compromising the earth's support system (OECD, 2017). 2015 marked the establishment of the UN SDGs. MNEs' are not left out as they feed into the progress on a local, national, and global scale of this initiative by the United Nations. In addition, SDGs provide opportunities to strategize business operations (UNGC, 2015). Indeed, the private sector contributes significantly to goals in the areas of employment, job creation, provision of education, and financing which boosts the host nation's income (Robinson, 2004). To this effect, MNEs across the globe have SDGs embedded in their business operations and play a vital role on the global scale. Thus, there is a lack of investigative research on the contribution of foreign firms toward sustainable development in developing countries in collaboration with local stakeholders (Vazquez-Brust, Sarkis & Cordeiro, 2014). Furthermore, it is essential for international business (IB) research to explore more sustainability as research by van der Waal and Thijssens (2020) indicates that less than 25% of Forbes Global 2000 companies based in the Global North mentioned SDGs in their annual reports. Thus, this calls for concern about MNEs in the global south implementing sustainability strategies.

The review of this chapter covers the past and current state of SDGs in sub-Saharan Africa, the nexus between MNEs' activities, government partnerships, and SDGs through consulting sustainable reports, and the limitations and future direction of this study.

The state of Sustainable Development Goals in sub-Saharan Africa

The expectation of MNEs to address sustainability is a huge challenge due to the magnitude of MNEs' responsibilities and operations in local and international markets (Filatotchev and Stahl, 2015). Financial resources are required to execute SDGs but they have fallen short of targets over the past years and have a large funding gap in Africa (SDGCA, 2019). Genuine savings, an indicator of national wealth, is negative in 49 out of 54 sub-Saharan African countries. This suggests an unstable path with negative implications for welfare and development in the long run (Bissoon, 2017). For example, only five African countries met the growth rate of 7% predicted under SDG 8 in 2017 (SDGCA, 2019). Despite the inflows of FDI into the sub-Saharan Africa region in the past decade, the percentage of unemployment remains high. Amongst nations in the global south, Sub-Saharan Africa remains the region with the highest percentage of malnutrition in 2019 (UNNY, 2019).

Furthermore, it is predicted that all sub-Saharan African countries are less likely to meet their SDGs (Begashaw, 2021). In sub-Saharan African countries, poor institutional quality, income inequality, political conflicts, and overdependence on the export of natural resources can negatively influence genuine savings (Nyanzu et al., 2019). Despite these situations, SDGs have been a priority of governments and policymakers in sub-Saharan Africa to alleviate poverty and support economic growth (Selsky, 2005). To this end, the activities of SDGs by MNEs remain unfulfilled on a large scale. Furthermore, the limited implementation and delayed progress of SDGs by MNEs are a result of the close interaction with government policies. This poses a discussion on what roles MNEs have played in the progression of SDGs, what is expected of them in the future, and the role of International Business reviews in directing the course of this discussion (Tulder et al, 2021). Despite the presence of MNEs in rural and urban areas, the economic spillovers from the companies in Africa fail to reach the most vulnerable and less privileged people (Haglund, 2008). Furthermore, the private sector faces challenges in the sub-Saharan Africa region as they fail to innovate new growth models. Thus, these states of affairs have raised criticism as to whether SDGs are too ambitious or lack substance (Tulder et al, 2021).

Multinational Enterprises and Sustainable Development Goals

SDGs activities of MNEs are made available through self-published reports on an annual basis about their contribution carried out either on a global, regional or national level to inform stakeholders of their positive quota to these goals (Sachs, 2012). Large corporations in the *global north* have embraced SDGs, which are linked to their business models (PwC, 2015). MNEs are expected to operate in a sustainable manner *per the sector* they belong to, standards required by the local agencies, and some norms and values held highly by the communities (Lee, 2008).

Some firms do not engage fully in SDGs due to the costs incurred for action taken although sustainability can be good for financial gains. On the other hand, firms can be more competitive with their visibility of sustainability actions to draw more customers and be environmentally friendly. Also, there is a weak link between assessing adherence to SDGs, and the absence of precise metrics of sustainability strategies. In addition, firms usually take a benevolent route toward local or communal development against providing accurate unbiased information about their operations to safeguard their reputation (Lashitew, 2021).

Evidence of sustainable development goals' activities by MNEs

The private sector has a vital role to play in the implementation of SDGs as it represents 75% of the global GDP. As an essential stakeholder, collaboration with other stakeholders such as governments and civil society actors is required (Sachs, 2015). However, a gap stands in how MNEs translate their local sustainability goals on the ground although there is an admitted desire to carry out these activities (Wilkinson & Mangalagiu, 2012). *Self-reports* published indicate there are positive steps made and being processed to affect the communities and host countries whilst few are called to book on the negative effects of their operations. However, these positive impacts have fewer progressive measurements based on targets and indicators. On the other hand, scholars have revealed that awareness of SDGs is known among top management level or dedicated sustainability departments. Thus, this awareness is not entirely embedded in the firm's operationalization (Mhlanga, Gneiting & Agarwal, 2018).

Sustainability reporting

Sustainability reporting is providing proof, feedback, response, or evidence to sustainability issues within the global, regional, or national context by the government or an MNE in published documents. However, the outlook of these responses varies across nations and companies. In addition to this, environmental awareness within the nations or localities is a major driver for publishing which displays steps taken to address some of these issues often within their business operation (Kolk, 2018). This is important because MNEs translate their understanding and solutions to stakeholders for easy accessibility and assimilation of the impact made (Higgins &

Coffey, 2018). The constant backlash from community members and media houses forces MNEs to disclose their reports because of social and environmental degradation. To this effect, there has been external encouragement from renowned internal bodies such as the United Nations Global Compact and the Global Reporting Initiative to partake in this exercise of publishing their impact on society, the environment, and the economy (Witte & Dilyard, 2017).

Themes adopted in sustainability reporting by MNEs

Firms are most likely to be glued to goals connected to their client's expectations and the operation of the sector or industry. A typical example will be a construction company that tends to resolve challenges related to recycling and waste management. On that note, SDGs are embedded in their publications as strategic goals and achievements (Higgins & Coffey, 2016). Similarly, companies in pharmaceutical companies are most likely and well-positioned to contribute to challenges in health whilst agriculture companies address issues of food security (Hall & Vredenburg, 2003).

Secondly, standardization is a key theme to ensure uniformity in publication. Standardization is followed by MNEs and accepted by Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) for evaluating the impact of SDGs on firms (GRI, 2017). MNEs are encouraged to have these publications implemented despite the inconsistency or little information in Sub Sahara Africa. Two common issues in these reports include standardization and the use of terminologies. For example, some reports often interchange Triple Bottom Line and Corporate Social Responsibility in their reports. Hence, it distorts the distinct meaning of each word (Buhr & Gray, 2012).

Role of MNEs in promoting sustainable development

MNEs play a positive or negative role in sustainability development. One is the ability to maximize profit at the expense of environmental preservation (Welford, 1997). However, MNEs contribute to achieving sustainable developments such as the socioeconomic well-being of stakeholders around the globe (Ledgerwood & Broadhurst, 2000). *Enabling and facilitating roles* are two main categories being reviewed below:

Figure 1: Summary of Roles by MNEs

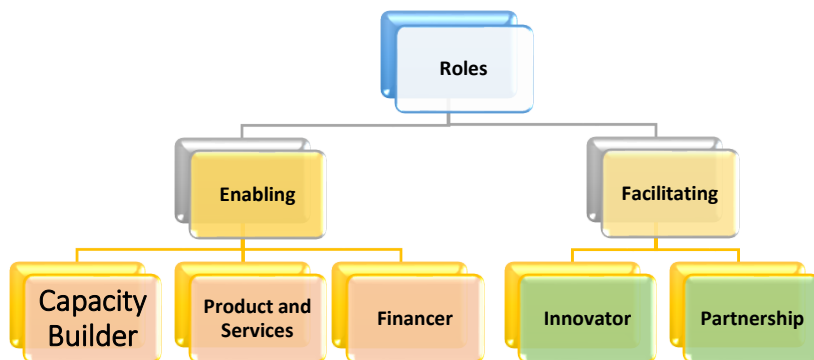


Table 1: Categories of roles played by MNEs

No.	Categories	Roles	Operationalization	Source
1	Enabling	Financer	Capital is raised or injected into the community through microloans, sponsors, donations, grants, etc. to sustain local development	Kolk et al,2017
		Capacity Builder	Both community members and employees receive the necessary skills, knowledge, training and education to improve local economic and social development	Newenham-Kahindi, 2015
		Product and Service Provider	Services or products such as healthcare, education or infrastructure are handed over to the community either independently or in support of a government agency to fill an institutional void.	Newenham-Kahindi, 2015
2	Facilitating	Partner	Partners with individuals, organizations, or communities in multi-stakeholder processes,	Kolk et al., 2008

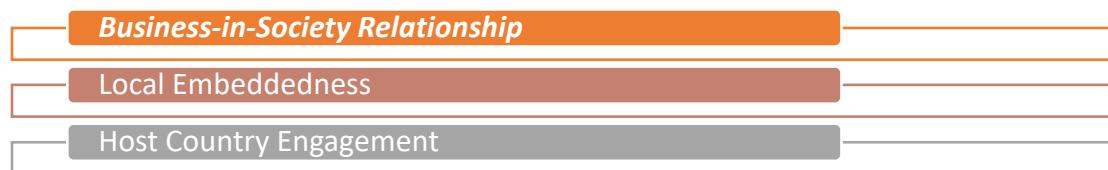
		such as partnerships and joint ventures.	
	Innovator	Solutions are developed in an innovative way to tackle local sustainable issues through research and development. These solutions benefit the organization, customers, communities, government and partners.	Kraemer & van Tulder, 2009

Business-and-society relationship

This framework engagement dwells on guidelines or plans for achieving local sustainability development. Plans are implemented based on partnerships, corporate citizenship, and corporate social responsibility at the national or local level (Muthuri, Moon & Idemudia, 2012). The concept of business society relationship stems from studies by Valent (2012). This deals with mutual agreements or partnerships with governmental agencies, MNEs, and NGOs. Although three partnerships are factored in there, other scholars do not recognize MNEs’ engagement. Secondly, a corporate citizen is synonymous with the citizenship duties of an organization or human citizenry. This is title is rendered as a result of the active participation of the company in social activities and the provision of goods and services. The positive relationship observed by the community members is welcomed and MNEs are perceived as corporate citizens. This foster a voice for the community when political local developments are void. However, they are criticized by some scholars as monopolistic mechanisms to control job creation and economic growth with less government interference (Adelman, 2018). In that regard, MNEs respond to some of these outcries (Crane, Matten & Moon, 2008). Lastly, the focus on CSR activities is seen as corporate gesture to tackle issues of low literacy rate, pollution of water bodies, control of diseases such as malaria which is dominant in developing countries, etc. (Muthuri, Moon & Idemudia, 2012). However, other scholars perceive that CSR does not take consider the real plights of the communities which will not be conducive to local development (Daouda, 2014). This institutionalized approach also increases market share expansion, social capital and appropriate networks relevant to sustain the business in the long haul (Newenham-Kahindi, 2015). Brand image or reputation is established through communal partnership (Clarke and MacDonald, 2019). These communal partnerships ensure MNEs operate responsibly. Unfamiliarity with the modus

operandi of a locality drains capital from the business in the host country. To address this, the MNEs tread cautiously on social and environmental issues based on country-specific advantages (Pinkse & Kolk, 2008). The engagement of MNEs in local communities has an influence on the industry it operates within. For example, companies in the food and beverage sector have production policies in line with environmental and social safety activities or operations (Codita, 2007). The Figure below summarises the framework for local development sustainability.

Figure 2: Summary of a framework for local development sustainability



Governments and MNEs

Multinational enterprises are regulated by institutions or governmental bodies at the micro (i.e. company level), meso (i.e. inter-organizational level), and macro (international or national level) (Campbell, 2004). Thus, governments in developing and developed economies have enacted policies to ensure a conducive environment is made accessible to provide social and environmental protection (Wijen, Zoeteman, Pieters, & van Seters, 2012). It is essential to have institutional bodies actively engage MNEs as some have grown in influence, power, and finances to distort everything in society in their interest.

However, the activity of these institutions is regarded as less effective in the global south compared to the global north. Whilst some MNEs in Africa are perceived to do less in social and environmental initiatives due to poor institutional framework, other companies are doing quite well. For example, South Africa has in place regulations that require the empowerment of previously disadvantaged people to aid overcome the injustice of the apartheid regime (Arya & Bassi, 2011). To ensure such proactive participation from MNEs, policies from governments must encourage and stimulate such investments.

Furthermore, it is Africa's quest to eliminate extreme poverty and achieve sustainable and inclusive growth. However, Africa faces a variety of complex challenges across all sectors. One critical challenge is the excessive power of the executives, which constrains economic growth. In response to changing the narrative, stronger constraints on government executives could increase the prevalence of growth-enhancing 'syndrome-free' regimes (Fosu, 2013). Employment challenges are key issues across African countries hence the implementation of demand-side

policies can be rolled out to address job shortages. Rodrik (2013) pointed out that ‘two dynamics tend to drive growth: fundamental capabilities and structural transformation. Industrial policy - that is, the prioritization of high-potential sectors - is instrumental for structural transformation in sub-Saharan Africa. (Rodrik, 2013). In this regard, new jobs need to be created in productive and employment-intensive sectors in collaboration with well-resourced MNEs.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this review show that the activities of MNEs impact the environment and society as a whole. However, there is little or passive interaction of MNEs with government policies which causes a major delay in the implementation of the SDG agenda (Tulder et al, 2021). Therefore, the initiatives of MNEs toward addressing SDGs can be supported through necessary policy reforms and institutional arrangements by governments in sub-Saharan Africa. Further, a commitment by MNEs to the SDGs can be influenced by the home/host country context and industrial sectors they belong to.

The findings are critical for extending sustainability and international literature in two specific ways. First, by identifying and helping to fill theoretical gaps in international business research on MNEs' active participation in driving SDGs in sub-Sahara Africa. The findings of the review suggest that MNEs in sub-Saharan Africa can exploit resources, However, the government and policymakers can introduce institutional reforms that help MNEs to place greater emphasis on addressing SDGs and promoting social and economic growth. Further, a strong linkage between key stakeholders like MNEs, government, non-profit organizations, and community members can help them to undertake social initiatives that are conducive to achieving SDGs. Second, extending research questions on which SDGs provide promising platforms for MNEs' visibility in Africa's international business.

Beyond the theoretical implications, this review has practical implications. First, it highlights how MNEs publicly make accessible their SDG activities through their annual reports. Also, it gives vital exercises of their strong leadership in their implementation process given the global influence and managerial capacity (Tulder et al, 2021). Second, policymakers and MNEs managers could benefit from the findings by reviewing and addressing the gaps to establish a stronger relationship and engagement between all stakeholders. This is critical as the role of MNEs remains largely unfulfilled, especially in the global south. Whilst many untapped resources remain to meet SDG targets, billions of dollars may pour in and create millions of jobs to bridge the poverty gap in Africa. To effectively tackle poverty, African countries should adopt appropriate national and

regional policies and capitalize on opportunities in the global forum. A partnership both at the global and local level would enable sub-Saharan Africa to meet stringent SDGs targets and deliver value to local communities.

Limitations and future research direction

There are some limitations that should be addressed by future studies. First, despite a plethora of studies, there remained a gap in SDGs literature particularly in the context of sub-Saharan Africa and other global south countries. For example, it is worthwhile to study how MNEs influence the achievement of SDGs through sustainable innovation and responsible collaboration. In this regard, researchers can focus on emerging economies such as China, India, and Pakistan and conduct cross-country and cross-industry analysis. Second, the institutional conditions in developing markets make it vital to understand the role of stakeholders in SDGs (Kawai et al., 2018). While there are strong institutions present in western countries, there are weak institutional reforms in developing countries. It would be interesting to understand whether developed countries' MNEs' voluntary participation in sustainable practices is positively perceived by local citizens or actors in host countries located in developing countries, such as sub-Saharan Africa. Third, a recent stream of research is delving into the impact of COVID-19 on developed markets but leaves a caveat in sub-Saharan African countries. This calls for future research on the holistic impact of the triple bottom line and strategies adopted by MNEs and institutional actors to recover from further repercussions. In addition to this limitation, it is important to investigate the ways in which sustainable operational procedures can be established post-pandemic through social innovation. Fourth, scholars can emphasize the role of synergy between local governments, community stakeholders, and MNEs in achieving environmental and social performance in developing economies.

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