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Stakeholder engagement and sustainable procurement among multinational enterprises in developing countries: a case of Nigeria and Kenya

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Abstract: Sustainable procurement (SP) serves as a strategic lever within sustainable supply chain management (SSCM), with a significant role in environmental sustainability. Nevertheless, empirical research on SP is limited, especially from developing African countries. This research investigates the role of stakeholders in promoting SP practices among multinational enterprises (MNEs) operating in Africa. The qualitative study is guided by abductive reasoning and incorporates semi-structured interviews with representatives and stakeholders of MNEs operating in Nigeria and Kenya. The findings reveal that SP can be a product of coercive relationships resulting from a power imbalance between actors. MNEs in Africa leverage dominant buyer power to enforce sustainability compliance from suppliers through contractual mechanisms. The findings offer insights into the dynamic interplay between internal and external stakeholders as it relates to SP to inform sustainable practices in developing countries.

Keywords: multinational enterprises; MNEs; stakeholder engagement; sustainable procurement; manufacturing; developing countries; Nigeria; Kenya.

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1 Introduction

Multinational enterprises (MNEs) operating in developing countries have been criticised for not diligently pursuing environmental sustainability in their business operations (Ordonez-Ponce and Talbot, 2023). Specifically, there is a lack of knowledge about sustainable procurement (SP) in developing countries (Kwabena Anin et al., 2023) compared to developed ones, despite sustainability becoming an increasingly important characteristic of today's globalised supply chains. Globally, stakeholders are exerting pressure on firms and their supply chain partners to become more sustainable in their production processes (Boruchowitch and Fritz, 2022). The International Organisation for Standardization (ISO) 20400 defines SP as encompassing any purchase that considers criteria devised to protect the environment, promote social progress, and enhance economic development, while maintaining a balance between stakeholder interests (Boruchowitch and Fritz, 2022).

Buyers from developing countries are generally less motivated to stimulate SP among MNEs as compared to their counterparts in developed countries (Agyapong et al., 2024). This is as a result of certain dynamics such as the perception of SP as a complex undertaking (Etse et al., 2023) owing to the fragmented nature of supply chains and the inadequate logistics infrastructure. Additionally, Jeníček (2011) highlights other reasons as a per capita income lower than USD 750 per annum; economic vulnerability stemming from shortcomings in exports and agriculture; natural calamities; and corruption. Accordingly, buyers are more preoccupied with easing those pressures than with

sustainability. Prahalad (2010) argued that most countries in sub-Saharan Africa fall under the classification of developing countries due to the striking resemblance of its economic and political challenges. Despite these challenges, Africa is undergoing economic restructuring supported by regional integration efforts like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), abundant natural resources, and a growing consumer market to boost its manufacturing sector (UNCTAD, 2023). This economic restructuring also comes with a shift in supply chain models towards sustainability (Klibi et al., 2025), which inevitably calls for the integration of ecological performance, social impact, and regional development into sustainability decision-making processes.

Foreign companies, mostly MNEs, have penetrated many African countries in search of new markets and they have relied on their own sustainability policies because most host countries lacked robust sustainability legislations (Ngwakwe, 2008). However, the situation has since improved as most governments have enacted sustainability laws and delegated regulatory bodies to formulate policies and enforce them. Therefore, organisations are now reconsidering how they source, produce, and deliver goods because of this growing environmental and social awareness. This transformation is driven by two key concepts: sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) and SP. The former involves managing material, information, and capital flows in ways that meet sustainability goals across the supply chain (Seuring and Müller, 2008). The process involves incorporating environmental, social, and economic considerations along the entire supply chain, from the procurement of raw material to production, delivery, and ultimate disposal of the product (Agyapong et al., 2024). SP focuses specifically on the purchasing function and ensures that buying decisions support broader sustainability objectives, such as reducing the environmental impact of goods procured (Walker and Brammer, 2009). As such, SP is a vital enabler of SSCM, helping to deliver sustainability goals along the supply chain.

As the sustainability goal spreads globally, local stakeholders such as non-governmental organisations and consumer interest groups have joined government agencies to pressure MNEs to refocus their efforts away from short-term economic gain and embrace long-term sustainable strategies (Burritt et al., 2020). For example, stakeholder pressure can force a company to think about supply chain sustainability, or a specific form of SSCM activity (Meixell and Luoma, 2015).

Importantly, cultural differences between an MNE's country of origin and its operating territory mean that managers of MNE subsidiaries in developing countries must carefully identify their stakeholders while considering the nuances of cultural differences (Hofstede, 2011; Jamali and Karam, 2018). For instance, cultural orientations that lean towards collectivism and non-avoidance of uncertainty can support cross-cultural negotiations and foster collaboration of supply chain partners (Acquah et al., 2021). Therefore, it is imperative for MNEs managers in host countries to develop cultural intelligence to enable them navigate cultural diversity when collaborating with indigenous stakeholders.

Failing to acknowledge influential stakeholders can make the subsidiary appear disconnected or exploitative, hence damaging its reputation. This may also lead to social sanctions, and even regulatory backlash. Stakeholders can influence a firm's economic, social, and environmental decisions (Papagiannakis et al., 2019). For instance, investors may prioritise investments in companies with strong environmental and social initiatives. Customers, too, can influence firms by demanding environmentally friendly products. Local employees and management from the MNEs' headquarters in developed countries

might pressure their subsidiaries to adopt the same environmentally sustainable standards or initiatives. Similarly, local communities could pressure firms to invest in projects that impact environmental performance, while regulatory bodies might also enforce compliance with environmental laws (Awa et al., 2024). It is almost impossible for organisations to achieve long-term success if they do not consider the needs and expectations of their stakeholders (Neely et al., 2002).

The empirical context of our study is Nigeria and Kenya. These countries have vibrant civil societies, enlightened consumers, similar policy enforcement agencies, and, most importantly, they host similar MNEs. We primarily focus on environmental sustainability; its key aspects – environmental activities and performance – influence a company's strategic position in the marketplace (Zhao et al., 2015). However, MNEs operating in some developing countries do not clearly exhibit environmental protection consciousness (Akyildiz, 2006). Therefore, our study aims to understand how MNEs in developing countries engage with their focal stakeholders to enhance SP.

We aim to fill gaps in the academic research related to incorporating sustainability in procurement in developing countries (Jia et al., 2018; Ogunsanya et al., 2022). This includes lack of convergent sustainability perspectives of both buyers (MNEs) and suppliers. While suppliers perceive sustainability initiatives as complex due to heavy investment in resources and expertise (Nand et al., 2022), buyers consider it a necessity for long-term competitiveness and an undertaking to satisfy or appease stakeholders such as their shareholders, customers and government regulatory bodies (Adomako and Tran, 2022; Touboulic and Walker, 2015). To address the latter's needs and expectations; a buyer with sustainability orientation may support the development of a supplier's capabilities (Qiao et al., 2024). We therefore argue that stakeholders can drive sustainability by harmonising the divergent perspectives into a common understanding for both buyers and suppliers leading to its successful implementation. This argument is supported by Siems et al. (2023) and Vidal et al. (2022) who underscored the mediating role of stakeholders in sustainability achievement through a strong buyer leadership. Additionally, many extant studies on sustainability in Africa have also disproportionately focused on the oil and gas sector, (e.g., Ahenkan et al., 2023; Angela et al., 2021; Motilewa, 2018) compared to other sectors such as manufacturing. Consequently, sustainability research focusing on the African manufacturing sector is scarce especially given the SP concern in the continent. This creates a knowledge gap in the full understanding of sustainability implementation (Kauppi et al., 2018). Accordingly, our study specifically addresses both empirical and contextual gaps by exploring the role of stakeholders in achieving SP goals among MNEs in Nigeria and Kenya. Further, this inquiry is justified by the proliferation of empirical studies on stakeholder engagement and SSCM of small and medium enterprises in Africa while excluding MNEs (e.g. Agyabeng-Mensah et al., 2022; Okeke, 2024). Moreover, it is in response to the call by Siems et al. (2023) for exploratory case studies on the same. Thus, the following research questions guided a detailed inquiry of the subject matter:

RQ1 How do MNEs involve stakeholders to promote their SP goals?

RQ2 What is the role of stakeholders in enhancing MNEs' SP goals?

To this end, the study builds on stakeholder engagement, the industrial marketing and purchasing (IMP) interaction approach (Håkansson, 1982) and SSCM literature in the context of developing countries. We apply the IMP interaction approach via the *actor*

bonds, resource ties, *and activity links* (ARA) model to reveal how the integration of sustainability into supply chain management is achieved. Even though sustainability comprises the triple bottom line strands (Elkington, 1998), it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate all of them. Instead, it concentrates on environmental sustainability due to its fairly developed global research portfolio that allows for comparison.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature and presents the theoretical underpinning. Section 3 describes the research methodology applied. Sections 4 and 5 report empirical findings and discusses the findings in relation to the literature, respectively. The final section presents the conclusion, contributions, limitations of the study, and suggestions for further research.

2 Literature review and theory

Our study focuses on the concepts of SP and SSCM, which are analysed through two complementary approaches: stakeholder engagement, a concept derived from stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), and ARA model from the IMP group (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). The following section addresses these approaches and concepts in relation to SP and the African context.

2.1 SP and SSCM

SP is a term encompassing buying goods and services in a way that achieves value for money while minimising the negative environmental effects associated with a product. Miemczyk et al. (2012, p.489), define SP as:

> "the consideration of environmental, social, ethical and economic issues in the management of the organisation's external resources in such a way that all goods, services, capabilities and knowledge that are necessary for running, maintaining and managing the organisation's primary and support activities provide value not only to the organisation but also to society and the economy."

While this definition is generic, we heed the advice of the authors to customise it to our study by only considering its environmental dimensions and the network level analysis as pertinent to this study. Literature places procurement at the centre of a company's sustainability achievement through its interaction with suppliers that either have sustainability capabilities or are ready to develop such capabilities (Gualandris and Kalchschmidt, 2016; Jia et al., 2023; Krause et al., 2009). Therefore, SP orientation of a buyer can drive improvement among suppliers, influencing how they react to sustainability practices, and vice versa. It also inspires innovation and supports the alignment of business operations with sustainability standards (Ahmadi et al., 2020).

On the other hand, SSCM refers to a holistic approach to managing materials, information, and financial exchanges among supply chain partners, taking into account the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, environmental, and social responsibility (Seuring and Müller, 2008). It is considered as a supply chain management that integrates environmental, economic, and social considerations to progress sustainability (Leppelt et al., 2013). The SP functions as a strategic lever within SSCM and the overall sustainability realm (Krause et al., 2009). Accordingly, SP plays an important role within SSCM, influencing upstream suppliers and ensuring that the entire

supply chain is sustainable. SSCM has increased in prominence as firms acknowledge the critical role of purchasing and supply in achieving lasting performance and meeting sustainability goals (Hall and Matos, 2010).

SSCM is an integral approach to sustainable development (Dai et al., 2021; Moumeni, 2024) and vital to a business's competitiveness and environmental stewardship (Samper et al., 2022). As production and distribution strategies increasingly affect the environment, supply chain management has become more concerned with environmental issues; and the reduction of environmental effects that requires all stakeholders involved to intervene along the entire supply chain (Alzubi and Akkerman, 2022). It is also concerned with organisational environmental performance and the sustainability of an entire supply chain, including the final product (Kumar and Rahman, 2016; Leppelt et al., 2013). Sustainability initiatives in supply chains are largely driven by three institutional pressures: governance, customer, and competitive pressure (Dai et al., 2021). SSCM aims to contribute to economic, social, and environmental sustainability, including the management of material, information, and capital flows (Khan et al., 2021; Seuring and Müller, 2008).

2.2 SP in developing economies

The reality of sustainability of supply chains is complex for developing economies (Etse et al., 2023; Galal and Moneim, 2016) and many firms remain indifferent to their environmental and social responsibility (Frei et al., 2022; Ngwakwe, 2008). Many MNEs in developing countries, such as Nigeria, behave in a manner that suggests they can meet corporate goals even while disregarding environmental and social responsibility (Ngwakwe, 2008). Although SSCM is in its infancy in Nigeria and Kenya, a few companies are becoming environmentally sustainable (Andersen et al., 2022; Ngwakwe, 2008), however, there is still room for improvement (Owie, 2019). Kenya has gone a step further to legislate on the sustainability requirements of companies operating in its territory. Important examples include *The Environmental Management and Coordination Act*, which banned the production and use of single-use plastic bags for commercial and household packaging in the country (The Kenya Gazette, 2017). There is also *The Sustainable Waste Management Act* that provides a legal framework for producers to safely dispose of their waste including, but not limited to, after-use packaging materials (The Republic of Kenya, 2022). It is therefore imperative for MNEs to align with their major stakeholders to improve the sustainability of their supply chains.

2.3 Stakeholder engagement

As a construct, stakeholder engagement is premised on its application to the understanding of how firms interact with their stakeholders for collective value creation, strategic planning, learning and knowledge creation, innovation, sustainability, among others (Alvarez and Sachs, 2023; Freudenreich et al., 2020; Kujala et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2022; Scuotto et al., 2020). It underscores the importance of developing collaborative relationships, albeit with regard to a broad spectrum of stakeholders (Plaza-Úbeda et al., 2010), for example, suppliers, regulators, investors, political groups, customers, communities, employees, and trade associations (Donaldson and Preston, 1995). Although there are divergent views on the origin of the concept thereby hindering its progression (Kujala et al., 2022), we anchor it on the stream of literature that

associates it with stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984; Sachs et al., 2017). Reason being, the stakeholder theory extends the conceptualisation of stakeholder engagement towards organisational and societal benefits (Desai, 2018). The theory pitches stakeholders at the centre of strategic thinking and making the relationships with stakeholders the locus of analysis (Freeman, 1984). Accordingly, stakeholder engagement as a construct operationalises the stakeholder theory. For example, it assumes that integrating stakeholders' concerns into a company's strategy can enhance corporate performance and environmental performance in particular (Salem et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2025). Accordingly, the construct is frequently applied in sustainability management research (Hörisch et al., 2014; Montiel and Delgado-Ceballos, 2014).

The involvement of stakeholders in an organisation's sustainability agenda can be viewed from two angles. Firstly, through the requirement of traditional supply chain partners (e.g. suppliers) to align their operations to that of a focal firm's sustainability goals (Seuring and Müller, 2008). Secondly, through the pressure exerted by non-traditional supply chain partners (e.g. regulators, competitors, NGOs, local communities) to comply with the global sustainability requirements (Pagell and Wu, 2009). Both perspectives have been heavily researched for example, Bello-Pintado et al. (2023), Freudenreich et al. (2020), Hörisch et al. (2014), Seroka-Stolka (2023) and Sun et al. (2025). However, it is in the interest of the present study to embed stakeholder engagement construct into IMP interaction approach with a view of analysing its influence on SP.

2.4 IMP approach and stakeholder engagement

The application of IMP interaction approach to this study is informed by its ability to examine business markets through the lens of interactions and networks between commercial organisations (Håkansson, 1982). This interaction involves an exchange, cooperation, and adaptation (Metcalf et al., 1992). The exchange processes comprise four elements: products or services, money, information, and sociality. Cooperation comes from the exchange process to describe the appropriate role and scope of interaction between both firms. Lastly, adaptation is the extent to which partners in an interactive exchange make substantial transaction-specific investments in the relationship by committing resources. Thus, the approach shows how companies can influence one another by emphasising the dynamic and reciprocal nature of business relationships, characterised by long-term relationships rather than discrete transactions (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995).

While IMP approach focuses primarily on the interaction of industrial commercial business networks, which consists of primary supply chain partners of a focal company, stakeholder engagement extends its sphere of influence beyond the primary supply chain partners to include secondary supply chain partners. According to Siems et al. (2023), this inclusion enables holistic involvement of all supply chain partners of a focal firm towards value creation for customer satisfaction. This is a significant distinction that Lindfelt and Törnroos (2006) also found when comparing the two concepts in terms of value creation and ethics. From the IMP interaction perspective, a focal company relies on its primary supply chain partners for achieving SP in a network environment, and vice versa (Johnsen et al., 2017). However, this is limiting since stakeholders that do not operate commercial enterprises are largely excluded from this interaction yet they are instrumental in overall sustainability achievement (Pagell and Wu, 2009).

Some studies have attempted to address this limitation by complementing the IMP approach with other frameworks. However, there are only a small number of peer-reviewed studies applying the IMP approach to SP outside traditional B2B contexts. For example, public actors are increasingly included in IMP studies (Holma et al., 2022; Taheriruh et al., 2025). Still, some studies have attempted to complement the IMP approach with other frameworks such as relational sociological theory (Dessaigne, 2024); and classical stakeholder theory (Vildåsen and Havenvid, 2018). Although the relational sociological perspective offers a solution, it is biased on the social aspect of sustainability. The classical stakeholder theory, on the other hand, is limited to elevating a focal firm as the central actor of its network over other stakeholders (Johnsen et al., 2017), thus, underestimating the dynamics of inter-firm relationships (Vildåsen and Havenvid, 2018). These shortcomings are overcome in the present study by jointly applying stakeholder engagement construct and IMP approach for sustainability achievement. Therefore, the point of intersection between the two theoretical perspectives with SP lies in their complementary contributions to holistic sustainability achievement of a focal firm.

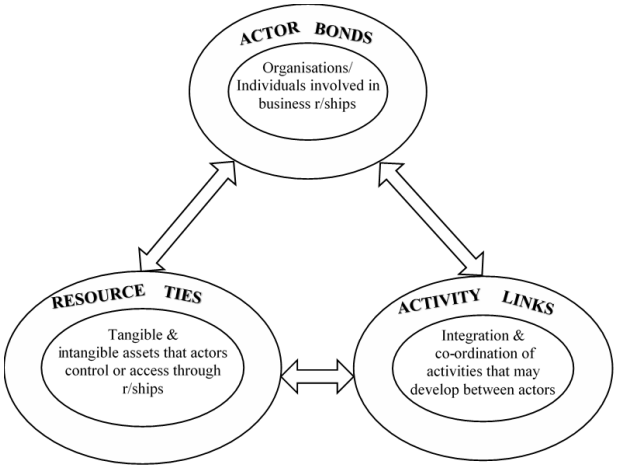
IMP perspective enables the understanding of business relationships through the analysis of how the primary elements affect the way relations are developed (Ford, 1980). Thus, it analyses the interaction and interplay among the relationship primary elements such as actors, resources, and activities, (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995) popularly known as the ARA model. Actor bonds are relationships built between two business entities to mutually acquire meaning in their reciprocal acts and interpretations (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). Through these bonds, companies develop trust, expectations and commitment in their relationships. An actor's identity is revealed by the specific interaction in its relationships within the network (Gadde et al., 2010; Håkansson, 1982). The bonds are created for resources sharing since no single company has all the resources it requires for its operations. Accordingly, through inter-firm relationships, firms acquire access, provide and develop resources that eventually tie them together (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). And resources, being heterogeneous, their efficacy results from how they are combined within and across firm boundaries (Dos Santos et al., 2019). Lastly, activity links occur when what is happening in one company is related to the activities of another company within the same network. That is, the various activities in different companies are dependent on the activity structures of other companies (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995).

We, therefore, applied the ARA model to explain how purchasing strategies between buyers and stakeholders are shaped, and how SP is embedded in the three dimensions. Firstly, actor bonds involve business organisations, suppliers, internal and external customers, regulatory bodies, competitors, consumer groups, and NGOs inclined towards sustainability achievement. Secondly, resource ties are the exchanged or shared tangible and intangible assets including sustainability knowledge, sustainable technology, sustainable materials, sustainable products, and sustainability expertise (Kumar and Rahman, 2016; Seuring and Müller, 2008). Lastly, activity links comprise interactions and processes linking actors, for example within the SP process, developing suppliers' sustainability capacities, enforcement of sustainability requirements, among others (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Gualandris and Kalchschmidt, 2016; Krause et al., 2009; Qiao et al., 2024). Figure 1 illustrates the patterns of these interactions.

In summary, applying the IMP approach and stakeholder engagement jointly reveals that successful relationship management involves more than the interaction between

business entities. It also involves addressing the needs and expectations of stakeholders outside of the immediate network, such as government and regulatory bodies, the communities, and civil society (Kujala et al., 2022).

Figure 1 The ARA model



3 Research methodology

This is an exploratory study that applied a qualitative approach based on multiple cases, comprising selected MNEs from both Nigeria and Kenya and their respective stakeholders (Yin, 2011). The choice of a qualitative approach hinged on its ability to enable a thorough analysis of participants' holistic view of the phenomenon through flexible data collection and free interaction (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). The exploratory nature of the study was informed by the novelty of the topic and the need to investigate this phenomenon within the current context.

3.1 Research setting

The research setting was MNEs in the manufacturing sector that operates in Nigeria and Kenya. Their products were in the categories of alcohol and non-alcoholic beverages, cement, personal care, and food and beverage. Researchers had access to one of the largest producers of fruit juice drinks, dairy products, and snacks in sub-Saharan Africa. One of the largest alcoholic beverage manufacturers in Nigeria and Kenya, with operations spanning the continent, also cooperated with the project. Another contributor was one of the largest cement manufacturers and a global leader in innovative and sustainable building solutions.

These MNEs were selected based on their commitment to environmental sustainability, which is an essential part of their corporate philosophy. Additionally, their operations are subject to government regulations, particularly by the environmental regulatory agencies. Manufacturing companies were chosen because of the environmental effects of their operations and also due to the scarcity of empirical research in this sector.

It was therefore interesting to explore how they interact with their various stakeholders in operationalising SP.

One sample area was Lagos State, Nigeria, because it is the major economic centre of Nigeria and would be the fifth-largest economy in Africa if it were a country (Ekundayo, 2013). Similarly, we focused on MNEs operating around Nairobi in Kenya, which is the leading industrial hub of East Africa (UNIDO, n.d.). We considered Nigeria and Kenya suitable representatives of developing countries. The MNEs are shown in Table 1 alongside their product categories and the most locally sourced raw materials. The names of the MNEs have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

Table 1 MNEs and their product categories

MNE	*Product category*	*Raw materials*
Zeta	Alcoholic beverages	Wheat, sorghum, and barley, packaging materials
Alpha	Alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages	Wheat, sorghum, and barley, fresh fruits and vegetables, and packaging materials
Delta	Food and beverage	Additives and preservatives, grains and cereals, and packaging materials
Barvo	Alcoholic beverages	Wheat, sorghum, and barley
Tango	Personal healthcare	Retinol, niacinamide, salicylic acid, fluoride, packaging materials
Lima	Non-alcoholic beverages	Juices are made from fruit juice concentrate produced from fresh fruits and vegetables, and packaging materials
Romeo	Cement	Asbestos, packaging materials
Promo	Food and beverage	Dairy products, additives and preservatives, packaging materials

3.2 Data collection

The primary data collection process ran from March 2023 until February 2025. In total, 13 interviews were conducted with respondents drawn from MNEs and stakeholders operating in the two countries: five from stakeholders and eight from MNEs. We began by conducting ten interviews by evenly dividing stakeholder firms and MNEs. However, during data analysis, we conducted three more interviews with MNEs to clarify certain first-order codes – an exercise that led us to additional codes. This was consistent with our inductive thematic saturation approach that yielded code saturation (Bouncken et al., 2025). Our purposive sampling approach was inherently heterogeneous, which naturally resulted in some variation within the final dataset. That is, stakeholder firms and MNEs, both in Nigeria and Kenya, collectively showed heterogeneous characteristics by dint of their different geographical locations and different business operations. Therefore, our reliance on the 13 interviews was justified by Hennink and Kaiser (2022) who established that data saturation can be achieved by between 9 to 17 interviews even if different approaches are used to assess such as different datasets, heterogeneous study populations, varying saturation goals, among others. With data saturation reached, the study attained both credibility (content validity) and transferability (external validity). While credibility was exhibited by surpassing the ninth interview to reach the 13th (Bouncken et al., 2025), transferability was dependent on the heterogeneity of informants and diversity of participating firms (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022).

Obtaining data in African countries is usually a challenge owing to the few repositories of information. Consequently, primary data collection is the best alternative to obtain pertinent data. Still, convincing target respondents, usually experienced and knowledgeable informants, requires formal permission from the management of the selected organisations, which is a protracted process that may lead nowhere. In the African context, trust and cultural alignment are vital; without them, subjects might be unwilling to be interviewed (Ado and Wanjiru, 2018). Accordingly, data was collected by Nigerian and Kenyan researchers, which helped secure the respondents' trust and encourage their participation. Informal meetings with the informants were arranged through mutual acquaintances and snowballing. The interviews were mostly held through online communication platforms, and informants were asked whether they could be audio-recorded. Almost all interviews were audio-recorded, and the data transcribed. For those respondents who were averse to being recorded, interview notes were taken.

Two separate interview protocols were designed for informants from MNEs and stakeholders. The former protocol sought information on MNEs' operations and environmental sustainability achievements and engagement with their stakeholders. The second interview protocol focused on the information regarding stakeholders' sustainability adoption, requirements, and the engagement process with the focal MNEs. We relied on the concepts and constructs obtained from the literature to design both sets of interview protocols. For instance, relationship management questions came from Ford et al. (2011); questions on SP from Boruchowitch and Fritz (2022); on SSCM practices from Alzubi and Akkerman (2022); stakeholder engagement questions originated with Bal et al. (2013), Gong et al. (2019), Papagiannakis et al. (2019), and Scuotto et al. (2020); and environmental sustainability questions derived from Ras et al. (2007). This enabled the strengthening of the study's confirmability since the interview protocols contained concepts and constructs that had already been tested by the cited studies, thus eliminating the researchers' bias. The participants were then drawn from the pool of supply chain professionals assigned to the supply chain management/operations/ production departments of the selected organisations. The participants were selected because of their in-depth knowledge of and experience in their organisations' supply chain operations. Therefore, they could comprehend the interview questions and supply useful data. Archival data was also utilised to supplement or corroborate the interviewees' input. The archival data comprised company documents related to sustainability reporting accessible from websites. This data guaranteed the credibility of the protocols via data triangulation as suggested by Yin (2003). Overall, the study achieved dependability by standardising of both sets of interview protocols for stakeholders and MNEs and the follow-up interviews that yielded additional codes; providing detailed profiles of informants and their suitability; and by providing a thick and rich descriptions of the MNEs and stakeholder (Nowell et al., 2017). Table 2 illustrates the participants' demographic information.

3.3 Data analysis method

The data analysis process followed the Gioia (2021) method, and some aspects of the Eisenhardt method. We prioritised the voices of the participants to obtain the most accurate information. Using an abductive approach, we synthesised the received information and interpreted it to obtain the best possible theoretical explanation of the phenomenon. The multiple-case format resonated with Eisenhardt's method of

multiple-case study analysis, which requires analysis of at least four cases. Most importantly, using multiple cases was justified because it provided a broad and rich context to elicit theoretical inferences (Schilpzand et al., 2015).

Table 2 Participant demographics

Organisation	*Country*	*Position*	*Archival data*
MNEs			
Zeta	Kenya	Head of logistics	Sustainability report
Alpha	Nigeria	Quality system manager	ESG report
Delta	Nigeria	Quality and environmental manager	None
Barvo	Nigeria	Environmental manager	Sustainability report
Tango	Nigeria	Environmental manager	None
Lima	Nigeria	Quality and environmental manager	None
Romeo	Nigeria	Procurement manager	Sustainability report
Promo	Nigeria	Procurement manager	None
Government regulators (stakeholders)			
Eta	Kenya	Senior environmental inspector	Environmental policy
KF	Nigeria	Regulatory compliance manager	None
SIM	Nigeria	Regulatory compliance auditor	
Suppliers (stakeholders)			
Theta	Kenya	Assistant production manager	None
KCF	Nigeria	Procurement manager	None

The Gioia method was used to code the data by developing a data structure beginning with the basic first-order coding, then to the second-order coding, and ultimately to aggregate themes. With the aid of MAXQDA 12 software, two researchers conducted a first-order coding exercise independently using the in-vivo approach to retain as much of the participants' terminology as possible. Where necessary, we added descriptive codes during this exercise. Locke et al. (2022) reported that in-vivo coding enables researchers to keep the informants at the centre to maintain the originality of their views. The independent coding by individual researchers enhanced dependability and ensured the fitness of codes in relation to the data and literature (Elliott, 2018). Researchers jointly repeated this exercise to remake and re-adjust codes to clarify ideas and data labels (Locke et al., 2022). The joint deliberation process refined the set of first-order codes and was followed by further iteration and abstraction to derive second-order codes. The abstraction process was repeated and reflected against the literature to elicit aggregate themes that informed the theoretical inferences made. Figure 2 illustrates the coding process undertaken, while Figure 3 presents the data structure as the outcome of the coding process.

The data structure illustrated in Figure 3 was obtained after completing the coding process. Open coding yielded 23 first-order codes obtained through a combination of in-vivo and descriptive coding exercise. Homogeneous first-order codes were grouped into six groups to come up with second-order codes, which were then distilled through iteration and abstraction to finally obtain three aggregate themes. The latter provided the basis for thematic analysis in the next section. This account of data analysis process was

instrumental in building an audit trail that is necessary to assess the dependability of this study (Nowell et al., 2017).

Figure 2 The coding process using the Gioia method

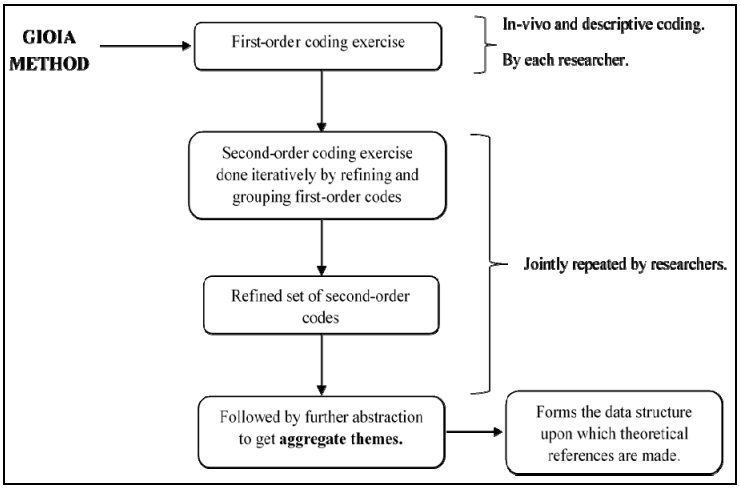
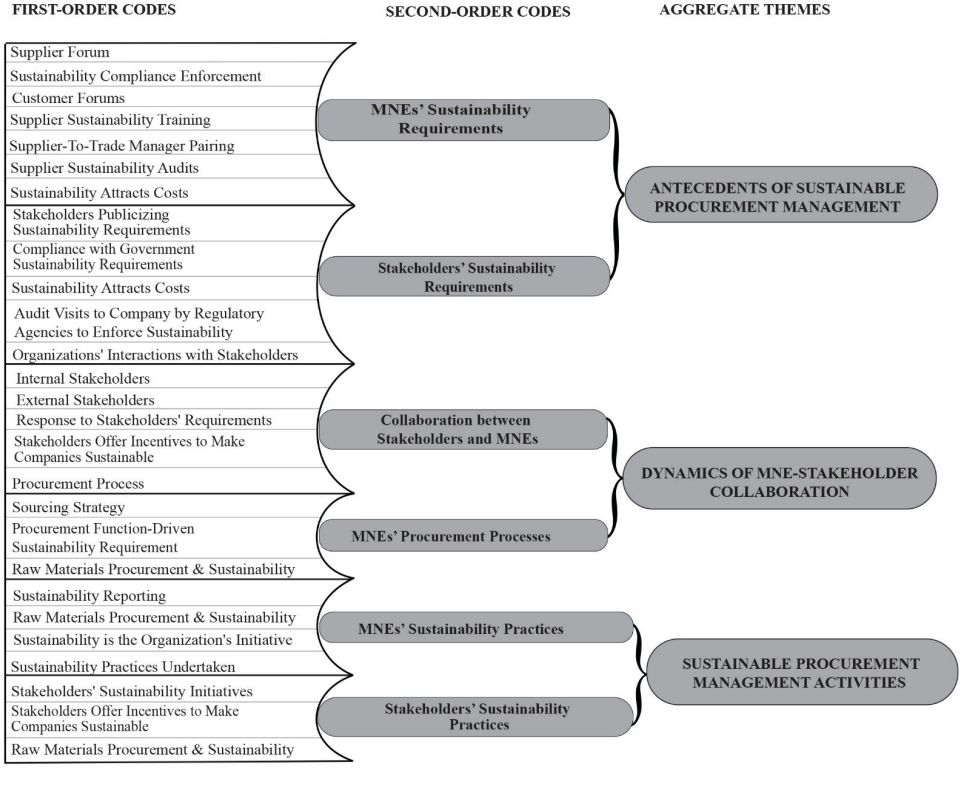


Figure 3 The data structure



4 Findings

4.1 Antecedents of SP management

The data revealed key antecedents that could be constructive for MNEs to establish SP practices, since they signalled the preparations required for MNEs to integrate SP strategies into their operations. It showed that MNEs must fulfil certain sustainability requirements prior to fully becoming sustainable, and even then, some of the requirements were counterproductive. For example, it emerged that SP required the MNEs to devote resources to training their suppliers on sustainability; organising customer (distributors) forums on the best sustainability practices; pairing category managers with respective suppliers; among other activities. These required adequate resources, especially in monetary terms, which ideally should be obtained through firms' sales revenue streams. However, customers in the two countries were resolutely opposed to price increases triggered by sustainability. They would rather purchase cheaper products produced unsustainably than spend more for sustainable products. Consequently, MNEs had to shoulder the financial burden of implementing an SP strategy without recourse to sales revenue. These sentiments were captured in the following excerpts:

> "Not every customer can pay the price for sustainability … A large population [of customers] in Lagos, for instance, does not care so much about sustainability because they cannot afford it." (*Promo*)

> "Price is a big deal for customers here [Nigeria] compared to sustainability expectations. This is unlike the developed economies, where customers are very interested in what the organisation does in terms of sustainability."(*Sim*)

Nevertheless, the focal MNEs were committed to SP processes and forced their suppliers to comply with sustainability standards. To address resource limitations, they provided sustainability training to both current and potential suppliers. A demonstration of their commitment included requiring suppliers to obtain membership of Suppliers Ethical Data Exchange (SEDEX), which facilitates information exchange on ethical and sustainable practices within global supply chains. Additionally, the focal MNEs typically had environmental policies that they communicated to suppliers, who were needed to agree to the terms in writing before any transactions could occur. This process often followed supplier training organised by the focal MNEs. Finally, the case MNEs conducted audits at supplier locations to ensure adherence to sustainability practices. These audits focused on maintaining control over sustainability processes rather than penalising non-compliance. The following excerpts offer an illustration:

> "We visit supplier premises to ascertain the level of sustainability, in addition to holding monthly supplier performance meetings. Lastly, all the company's suppliers must be members of SEDEX. …Suppliers must be able to demonstrate that they can source their supplies responsibly by considering the environmental impact and social impact of their activities and products before supplying to the company." (Zeta)

The role of stakeholders, particularly suppliers and government regulatory bodies, is crucial in guiding the MNEs towards SP. Government regulatory sustainability requirements facilitate MNEs' sustainability efforts, highlighting their influence on the focal MNEs' achievement of sustainability goals.

As external stakeholders, these regulatory authorities determine sustainability requirements by overseeing MNEs' business operations and products within their jurisdictions. Similarly, suppliers are also subjected to sustainability rules by regulatory authorities. It emerged that the relationship between MNEs and suppliers is mutually beneficial – providing support to the continuity of their business activities. Nigeria and Kenya's major regulatory agencies focus on a safe environmental that is not overly affected by pollution, representing the institutional context critical to advancing sustainable practices. The following excerpts demonstrate this claim:

> "NESRA [the National Environments Regulations Authority] … is a regulatory authority that checks air emissions and other pollutants. Every month, the company monitors and records the extent of its impact on the environment and reports to NESRA for accountability." (*Alpha*)

> "The MNEs are members of KAM [the Kenya Association of Manufacturers] and Kenya Private Alliances, through whom the authority [National Environment Management Authority] … educates them on the importance of sustainability. With the introduction of the new law [The Sustainable Waste Management Law, 2022], the authority can provide timelines on compliance with this aspect so that the MNE can undertake a gradual transition to environmentally sustainable operations." (*Eta*)

We found that sustainability imposes costs on both MNEs and their suppliers. Suppliers depended on MNEs for guidance and partial funding to cover sustainability expenses through measures such as training sponsorship, incentive support for sustainability operations, and guidance on achieving ISO certification. This assistance helped suppliers to reduce the financial burden associated with meeting MNE sustainability requirements. The following excerpt shows how MNEs were instrumental in supporting suppliers in achieving sustainability:

> "We also ensure that we develop our suppliers to enable them to provide us with what we need. For example, in some regions where sorghum is grown, we guide our suppliers to buy the variety of seed with the best yield." (*Zeta*)

Notably, suppliers and MNEs could access government subsidies, especially in Kenya, which reduced their cost of investment in sustainability practices. For instance, we discovered that the government subsidises the adoption of solar energy by industries through the Ministry of Environment, the Ministry of Energy, and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning. This is done through tax exemption on imported solar panels and batteries.

4.2 Dynamics of MNE-stakeholder collaboration

The current research highlights the critical role of collaboration between MNEs and various stakeholders in the successful management of SP. The findings suggest that the nature of this interaction is governed by mutual interests, where both MNEs and stakeholders align their objectives. Specifically, the engagement manifested through several channels: external stakeholders, such as government regulatory bodies that provide oversight; MNEs offered support and guidance to their suppliers regarding sustainability initiatives; and internal stakeholders, particularly corporate management and procurement departments that offered substantial backing to MNEs. Such dynamic collaborations contributed significantly to the effective implementation of SP practices

within MNEs, demonstrating the importance of stakeholder involvement in sustainable development efforts.

Government regulatory agencies in Nigeria and Kenya, specifically NESRA and NEMA, play a crucial role in overseeing the implementation of sustainability policies for MNEs and their suppliers. They ensured compliance with environmental standards by issuing licences, shutting down non-compliant operations, and collaborating with other government departments to provide tax exemptions for sustainable practices. Additionally, MNEs contributed valuable information on global environmental and social developments, which helped these agencies to refine their sustainability policies. Ultimately, it emerged that MNEs managed their own environmental sustainability requirements alongside those imposed by regulatory bodies. By aligning these policies, they enhanced their performance in sustainable practices. The excerpt below summarises the interaction between government agencies and MNEs that advances SP:

> "[The company] also works with government agencies, such as the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, and with the forest reserve to plant trees that retain water, so that when it rains, the water is retained in the aquifer without running off to the ocean. The reason behind this partnership is to replenish the water [used by the company]. It obtains that water from the environment, and the logical thing to do is to replenish it in an area (Ogun State) that is water-stressed." (*Tango*)

The collaboration between MNEs and suppliers revealed an imbalance, with the initiative for sustainability primarily driven by MNEs. Suppliers tended to comply with MNE requirements, and MNEs actively supported their suppliers in achieving the sustainability standards necessary for procurement contracts. Where direct support was lacking, MNEs required suppliers to obtain specific certification and licences. The MNEs enforced stringent sustainability criteria, conducting audits at supplier facilities to assess sustainability practices and offer additional assistance. Although many suppliers aligned with MNEs' sustainability demands, some had their sustainability policies in place prior to MNEs introducing compliance requirements:

> "There are also some of the organisation's suppliers who are ahead of it in terms of sustainability performance. For instance, there is a supplier who distributes waste bins to collect paper waste and then converts that into egg-trays." (*Promo*)

> "At the beginning of the partnership, [the company] had its own environmental sustainability policy, and the stakeholders also had theirs. At the time of signing the contracts, all these environmental sustainability policies are combined, thus forming a basis for future continuous improvement." (*Tango*)

Therefore, while the focal MNEs emerged as champions of sustainability in the global south, their suppliers also played a complementary role in the achievement of SP goals.

The data described the significant role of corporate MNE headquarters in providing sustainability support to their affiliates in the global south. The customers of MNEs in the global north clearly prioritise sustainability in both products and processes, which aligns with governmental demands for adherence to sustainability laws. Consequently, sustainability has become ingrained in the organisational culture of MNEs, influencing their strategic practices globally, including in their operations in the global south. The following quote from an interviewee captured this observation.

> "Most multinationals have management systems that are more or less the corporate requirements, where the corporate headquarters requires its subsidiaries to have such systems. The drive towards sustainability is largely from the multinationals' corporate headquarters." (*Sim*)

The procurement function plays a crucial role in executing sustainability initiatives within organisations, serving as a key internal stakeholder. Its significant contribution to implementing sustainability policies is based on sourcing materials and facilitating supplier training. For instance, within one of the MNEs, a committee evaluated potential suppliers to ensure they met specific environmental management system (EMS) requirements that aligned with the organisation's sustainability goals. This pattern was observed in several MNEs, highlighting the procurement function's input to achieving sustainability outcomes.

The excerpts below underscore the role of the procurement function in the achievement of both sustainable products and processes for MNEs:

> "Sustainable procurement is one of the organisation's sustainability pillars. There are three: supplier due diligence, climate, and the supply chain, and nature and the supply chain. Supplier due diligence is managing the special adverse effects of an ESG [Environmental and Social Governance] impact on the supplier." (*Delta*)

> "The starting point is to avoid importing materials, which could lead to a negative carbon impact. The company starts [buying] from the farm (barley) to ensure that the suppliers are not engaged in activities that harm the environment, such as the use of fertilisers (chemicals). Similarly, the logistics department, where there are transporters, also follows the company's agenda of cutting down on carbon emissions by using trucks that run on gas instead of diesel." (*Tango*)

4.3 SP management activities

The data indicated that MNEs and stakeholders engaged in SP in complementary ways. MNEs implement headquarters' sustainability policies, which are customised by subsidiary management to suit local market needs. Internal stakeholders provided essential insights into executing those sustainability practices. Key activities included promoting environmental sustainability through eco-friendly sourcing. To meet their objectives, MNEs had to ensure that suppliers also committed to sustainability goals. The interviews indicated a widespread adoption of the reduce, reuse, and recycle (3R) model, emphasising waste reduction and conservation of natural resources. Additional support from MNEs to stakeholders ensured correct inputs for operations, since a lack of such support could hinder procurement efforts advancing sustainability goals. A summary of illustrative quotes related to MNEs' SP activities is presented in Table 3.

The data highlighted the role of stakeholders in enhancing sustainability practices related to SP within MNEs. Stakeholders were classified into two categories: internal and external. Internal stakeholders, including management at both local and global levels, were responsible for policymaking and implementation of SP practices. In contrast, external stakeholders comprised suppliers, government regulatory agencies, and customers (including distributors). Government agencies established sustainability frameworks, while suppliers often depended on MNEs for assistance in meeting these standards. Customer perceptions regarding sustainability requirements varied: affluent customers were inclined to demand sustainable products and operations, whereas those

from lower economic backgrounds prioritised product affordability over sustainability concerns. Nevertheless, customers could still support SP practices, albeit subtly. Table 4 provides a summary of illustrative quotes of stakeholders' SP activities.

Table 3 Illustrative quotes on MNEs' SP activities

S/N	*Illustrative quotes*	*Interviewee*	*MNE*
1	When we are procuring, we target raw materials that are sustainable and can make reusable and recyclable products.	JY	Alpha
2	On the logistical aspects, every department has its own EMS requirements. This is in line with transportation using vehicles that produce fumes such as carbon monoxide that pollute the environment. As such, the company conducts vehicle inspections to ensure that it does not produce such pollutants.	JY	Alpha
3	We commit to conducting operations responsibly and protecting the environment and the community in which we operate. It is also our responsibility to have effective controls and effective management of this environmental policy to protect our community. We recycle, reduce, and do not dispose (of substances) indiscriminately.	CHI	Lima
4	We do reduce, reuse, and recycle (3Rs). Cartons used for transportation are made of three-ply cartons to reduce materials and achieve the environmental sustainability agenda … [The company] goes for recycled paper to make cartons, unlike before when virgin craft that relied on trees was used.	NW	Unl
5	SP is one of the organisation's sustainability pillars. It is categorised into three: supplier due diligence, climate and supply chain, and nature and supply chain. …nature and supply chain speak to driving supply chain decisions to reduce the company's dependency on natural resources and the negative impact on biodiversity and water. Prioritising materials that are regenerative and/or reusable over those that are not.	EZ	Delta
6	The company subscribes to ISO1400:2015 Environmental Sustainability Management, which ensures all its operations and products are environmentally sustainable.	BOL	Tango
7	The company ensures that waste is minimised. For example, [it] partners with glass bottle manufacturers to reduce the thickness of their bottles without compromising their quality. Similarly, they partner with PET manufacturers to ensure that colourless bottles are produced instead of coloured ones. The reason is that they can easily be recycled. Brown bottles are difficult to recycle.	BOL	Tango
8	We are pioneering end-to-end supply chain sustainability in all our operations and engagement with suppliers. In Kenya, we are the biggest consumers of water, and the Nairobi Water and Sewerage Company has to negotiate with us and give us special treatment whenever water rationing occurs within the Nairobi metropolis. Together with our supplier of this commodity, we engage in the conservation of water towers through joint tree planting exercises.	YY	Zeta

Table 4 Illustrative quotes of stakeholders' SP activities

S/N	*Illustrative quotes*	*Interviewee*	*Firm*
1	Distributors offer collection points for returned packaging materials that are then returned to the company for reuse. The company usually charges a certain amount per bottle delivered to the distributors. When retailers are supplied with the product, they leave a deposit equivalent to the price of one bottle, which is then refunded upon returning the empty bottle.	YY	Zeta
2	The National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NERSA) proposed regulations about environmental issues such as pollution, water pollution, etc. This provides a framework for implementation that ensures compliance.	BO	Sim
3	Incentives are given in the form of a subsidised rate at which the company charges its clients who have provided cullet. Usually, the company pays off external suppliers of broken bottle waste (which they crush to form cullet). However, when their clients (MNEs) bring cullet, say from the factory, they are given a discount on the final product (glass packaging) based on the quantity of cullet brought. This motivates them (clients) to clean their environment and get something in return.	JJ	Theta
4	This [joint training on environmental sustainability] is done whenever the authority [National Environmental Management Authority] rolls out new regulations or standards, or whenever they are doing policy updates. It reaches out to its stakeholders through industry-specific workshops or is open to members of the public.	KK	Eta
5	The movement towards the utilisation of standards framed by stakeholder materiality assessments is a key driver for the incremental growth of sustainability reporting.	Sustainability Report_2022 Nigeria	KPMG
6	Recycled glass (cullet) is prioritised in the production process, hence making over 50% of the raw materials used for glass manufacturing … [The] good thing about glass is that it can be recycled indefinitely, and we encourage our clients [MNEs] to reuse glass packaging and to give us the broken ones for recycling.	JJ	Theta
7	Stakeholders largely care about the sustainability of products and processes, and that is what eventually brings them profit. It is difficult to separate economic sustainability from social and environmental sustainability. Only government agencies aim to achieve sustainability without an economic agenda.	YY	Zeta

5 Discussion

5.1 Stakeholders' role in promoting SP among MNEs

Our findings address the central research problem regarding the role of stakeholders in SP performance among MNEs in Africa. However, the genesis of the pursuit of sustainability among MNEs operating in Africa differs from elsewhere, specifically the global north. The *Brundtland Report* of 1987 signalled that firms must implement

sustainability policies (Chang et al., 2017), a cue acted upon by firms in the West. Customers, governments and employees also joined the rallying call for sustainability, thereby compelling compliance from firms (Dai et al., 2021). In Africa, this has not always been the case until recently, when governments realised the need to legislate and implement sustainability requirements. MNEs operating in the continent are associated with international brands headquartered in the West that practice sustainability, hence, the need to follow suit. Therefore, it is not surprising that internal stakeholders, specifically the corporate head offices, fuel or stimulate sustainability practices among MNEs in both Nigeria and Kenya, which is in accord with the findings of Burritt et al. (2020). This scenario demonstrates the interaction between MNEs and stakeholders in achieving sustainability. We now look at how MNEs integrate their stakeholders into advancing SP performance.

The procurement function, as an internal stakeholder, is fundamental in enabling the interaction between MNEs and suppliers. In handling material MNEs' purchases, the procurement function enforces the sustainability requirements upon suppliers. Villena (2019) observed that MNEs must engage their procurement departments to cascade their sustainability requirements to suppliers because they wield the power to apply aspects of sustainability (economic, social, and environmental) that suit the organisational need for accountability. However, Schneider and Wallenburg (2012) note that this power must derive from the corporate guidelines; otherwise, procurement will drift towards its traditional objectives of cost-saving, quality supplies, and reliable suppliers, after all, sustainability is costly. Therefore, the intersection between stakeholder engagement and the procurement function points to the fact that SP performance is contingent on the functional-level and corporate-level strategy. Moreover, the procurement function's salient role comes from its interaction with multiple external stakeholders such as suppliers, contractors, and internal customers. Therefore, the following proposition reinforces the finding that internal stakeholders played a significant role in effecting SP changes in the organisation.

Proposition 1: MNEs in Africa rely on the corporate head office to provide sustainability guidance upon which procurement functions base their interaction with suppliers to enforce sustainability compliance.

The majority of first-tier suppliers were reported to be heavily reliant on MNEs for sustainability capacity building, perhaps due to their indigenous provenance, which comes with insufficient resources and technology. Amiri et al. (2024) observed that buyers (MNEs) can join forces with other supply chain stakeholders to streamline supplier capacity development to achieve sustainability outcomes. However, such interaction between suppliers and MNEs was characterised by a power imbalance in favour of the latter. They have the financial capability that confers the freedom to switch suppliers easily if their demands are not met. Secondly, they have the technological knowledge that shapes sustainability, owing to their global presence, which they could share with suppliers. Lastly, they are the dominant buyers of the local suppliers' products. All these qualities empower MNEs to pressure supplier firms to focus on their sustainability demands (Gualandris et al., 2015). However, this power must come with legitimacy to enable suppliers to transition to SP and sustainable business models. By embracing MNEs' supplier development programmes on building sustainability capacity, suppliers recognised the legitimacy of MNEs and registered their acquiescence. This recognition alone does not guarantee sustainability support from suppliers, for it is

limited by contracts and susceptible to misrepresentation (Trapp and Sarkis, 2016). We thus formulated the following proposition, which contrasts with the findings of a study conducted in the USA by Ahmed and Shafiq (2022). The latter stresses strategic sustainability alignment as the basis of long-term sustainability relationships between the MNE and supplier, because of its propensity to yield desirable supplier behaviour as opposed to contractual terms.

Proposition 2: MNEs in Africa leverage dominant buyer power to enforce sustainability compliance from suppliers through contractual mechanisms to obtain SP support.

Another very important external stakeholder, the government, has a regulatory role, ensuring that sustainability legislation is introduced and implemented. Therefore, MNEs must comply with legislation by implementing sustainable business practices. Suppliers are also required to comply with the regulatory agencies' sustainability rules. The findings align with Tilt et al. (2020) on the role of government legislation and enforcement in driving organisations' sustainability compliance and reporting. This corroborates the findings of Biswal et al. (2017) on how stakeholder pressure drives SSCM. However, these sustainability policies are fairly new in Africa and were mostly enacted after the adoption of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals in 2016, ostensibly to streamline economic, social, and environmental operations (Omisore, 2018). Kenya, for example, introduced two pieces of sustainability legislation since 2016 (The Kenya Gazette, 2017; The Republic of Kenya, 2022). Nevertheless, the interaction between MNEs and regulatory agencies such as NEMA and NESRA can be categorised under commensal relationships where MNEs and the agencies collaborate towards the realisation of sustainable development. In this arrangement, the focal MNEs benefit from the agencies' sustainability guidance and legitimacy, while the agencies advance their respective governments' sustainable development agenda. This is in line with Fischler's (2011) observation that commensality involves sharing by assuming a degree of dependence or reciprocal commitment among commensal partners. Accordingly, we formulate the following proposition:

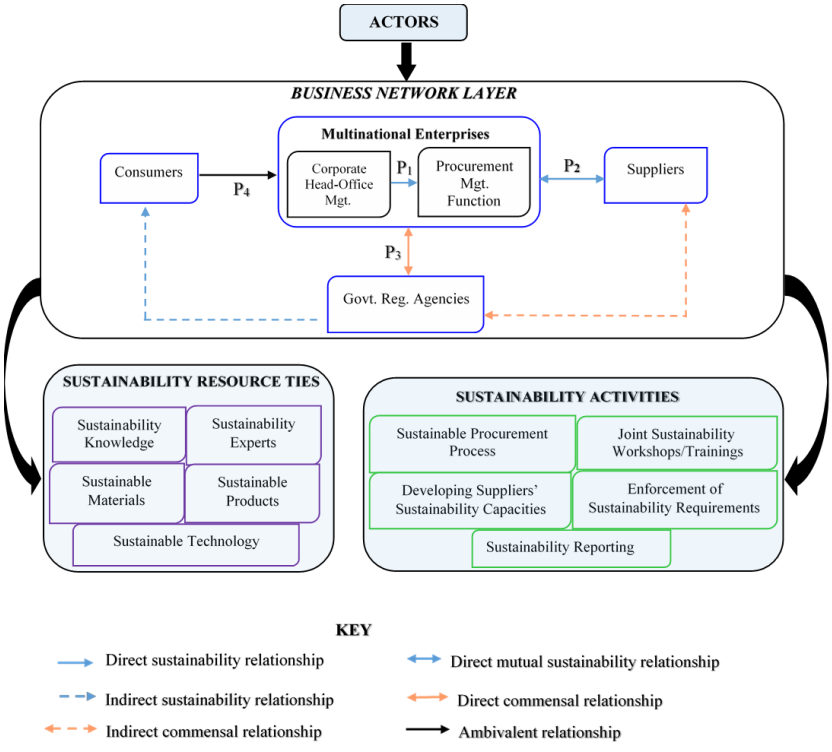
Proposition 3: Commensal interaction between the focal MNEs in Africa and government regulatory agencies lead to practices that support sustainable development.

Low income levels in African countries mean customers are not keen on promoting sustainable business practices because doing so will cost more. Since sustainable products are usually costly, end-user customers respond to upward marginal price changes by avoiding such products and opting for cheaper and less sustainable products (Muposhi et al., 2015). This consumer purchasing behaviour makes them hesitant to champion MNEs' SP, contrary to trends in developed countries, where consumers pressure organisations to adopt sustainable business practices (Jaca et al., 2018). However, distributors (also considered customers) repositioned themselves with end-user customers and joined other stakeholders in promoting SP through planning and organising the packaging product reverse logistics at their own expense. We thus formulate the following proposition, which challenges the prevailing global trend.

Proposition 4: Customers in Africa are indifferent to promoting SP practices of MNEs because of price differentials between sustainable and unsustainable products.

Figure 4 provides a summary of the relationships between stakeholders and MNEs using the ARA model.

Figure 4 Interactions between stakeholders and MNEs for SP promotion (see online version for colours)



5.2 *Theoretical implications*

Having discussed the impact of the various stakeholders on the achievement of MNEs' SP practices in Africa, the emerging narrative is that of shared resources, both tangible and intangible, within a framework designed to promote sustainability adoption. Mirroring the ARA interaction model, the framework delimits the relationships between MNEs, internal and external stakeholders as they act to fulfil its objectives. Raskovic (2015) reported how actors are inter-organisationally connected through bonds at a network level where their positions are revealed, and influence is determined through transactional and relational strength invested in goal accomplishment. The present study reveals that relational bonds within the actor network may not be mutual because of a lack of trust among the actors (Ford et al., 2011). It could also be coercive. This is exemplified by the strict compliance with sustainability requirements imposed on suppliers by MNEs. Therefore, suppliers might be forced to comply to secure contracts, but are not necessarily driven by conviction. Secondly, the regulatory agencies acted as a watchdog, ensuring adherence to sustainability goals among both suppliers and MNEs. Whereas MNEs appeared reconciled to that demand, suppliers had to adapt by making costly sustainability investments. Ultimately, this study addresses the research gap on negative ties and ambivalent network ties raised by Raskovic (2015) by demonstrating that, contrary to expectations, the outcome is positive. The ambivalent and negative bonds revealed by the study at the business network level potentially motivate focal

actors to achieve SP goals. Accordingly, we modify the ARA interaction model by extending the boundaries of its network structure and relationships within the context of SSCM literature.

5.3 Managerial implications

The salient outcome of the relationships between MNEs and stakeholders in promoting SP is strategic cooperation led by the latter. By internalising sustainability culture from their global headquarters and prevailing on suppliers to follow suit, local corporate managements not only pioneer SP practices but also leverage them to drive competitiveness against the smaller indigenous companies (Torres-Baumgarten and Rakotobe-Joel, 2023). However, it is noteworthy that MNEs cannot achieve this feat without suppliers and should use their dominant buyer power to influence cooperation among suppliers instead of compelling sustainability compliance. Influencing behavioural change among one's stakeholders leads to a sustainable, long-term relationship with mutual benefits (Ahmed and Shafiq, 2022). Secondly, consumers' ambivalence to MNEs' sustainability agendas does not help promote SP practices. Reason being, customers avoid costly sustainable products thus reducing sales revenue for MNEs. Therefore, managers should actively sensitise customers to the importance of sustainable business practices through frequent customer forums and also via distributors. This could change the customer perception of sustainable products.

6 Conclusions, limitations, and further research

The study investigated how MNEs engage with stakeholders to advance SP and the stakeholders' corresponding roles. Utilising the ARA interaction model inspired by the IMP framework, the research focused on foreign-owned MNEs in Nigeria and Kenya. The findings revealed that MNEs predominantly initiate stakeholder interactions. Notably, MNEs from the global north have robust sustainability practices ingrained in their organisational culture, which are transferred to their African subsidiaries and integrated into their business strategies. This research addressed a contextual gap in stakeholder engagement concerning SP practices in the manufacturing sector involving MNEs. Secondly, the research gap focusing on the types of stakeholders involved in sustainability was addressed through the inclusion of local suppliers, albeit through compliance with sustainability requirements as a condition for selection. Government agency, as a stakeholder, was instrumental in enforcing sustainability requirements among MNEs and suppliers. Though, a notable hindrance to advancing SP was customer ambivalence in interactions with MNEs. Therefore, MNEs must find innovative ways to secure customer support for SP and ensure beneficial customer interactions.

We reiterate that stakeholders are central to advancing sustainability practices among MNEs, particularly in Africa. Internal stakeholders, including corporate management and headquarters procurement functions, initiated the sustainability agenda. Meanwhile, subsidiary corporate management was responsible for its execution by engaging external stakeholders, with suppliers being the most significant among them. Suppliers contributed essential sustainable materials through eco-friendly processes and secured certification from prestigious global organisations advocating sustainability, such as SEDEX and the ISO 1400 group.

Lastly, government regulatory agencies played a crucial role in promoting sustainable practices among MNEs by publicising sustainability policies and regulations derived from laws enacted by national parliaments. These agencies not only enforced sustainability requirements but also guide MNEs and their suppliers, helping them align with sustainability objectives. Consequently, MNEs, alongside stakeholders, developed strategies to meet their sustainability goals through carefully curated interactions within business networks. The desired outcomes resulted from the strategic acumen and diverse resource portfolios of the actors involved that influenced their interactions.

This study advances theory in three key ways. First, it extends stakeholder engagement theory (Freeman, 1984; Greenwood, 2007) by demonstrating how engagement processes unfold in developing African contexts characterised by institutional voids, informality, and power asymmetries. Prevailing understandings of stakeholder engagement and corporate social responsibility are largely influenced by the western or developed countries (Min Foo, 2007). The study contributes thereby broadening the contextual boundaries of stakeholder engagement research. Second, the study contributes to theory by integrating stakeholder engagement construct with the ARA model (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995), offering a relational explanation of how MNE-stakeholder interactions are promoted through networks of actors, resources, and activities. This integration moves beyond dyadic firm-stakeholder perspectives and conceptualises engagement as a dynamic network process shaped by resource interdependence. Third, the study identifies non traditional stakeholders such as government regulatory bodies, and theorises their influence on MNE operations. This expands the stakeholder classification and highlights how these actors shape engagement outcomes through their legitimate power. In doing so, the study provides a more nuanced, context-specific understanding of stakeholder importance (Mitchell et al., 1997) in developing-countries.

This study offers several practical insights for managers in MNEs in developing African contexts. First, the findings provide managers with an understanding of engagement strategies and recognition of the networked nature of stakeholder relationships. By applying the ARA model, the study shows how managers can more deliberately mobilise resources, coordinate activities, and identify influential actors such as their suppliers, customers and government regulatory bodies. Second, the study highlights the importance of context specific engagement practices. MNEs operating in African host countries often rely on standardised global engagement guide that overlook local norms. The insights from this study help managers adapt their engagement processes to local realities, as such encouraging trust-building, long-term relationships, and collaboration.

The study was conducted in Nigeria and Kenya, which limits the extent to which it can be said to represent the wider African context. It specifically targeted foreign-owned MNEs and their stakeholders, excluding home-based MNEs that might present alternative insights into sustainability campaigns. Consequently, the findings are confined to the context of these two countries, which exhibit similar demographic patterns and homogenous MNEs, making them unique and possibly non-replicable in other African nations with varying MNE characteristics. Additionally, the study's abductive qualitative approach induced limitations. Janiszewski and van Osselaer (2022) outline how such a method is subjective, localised, and sensitive to the sampled population, data collection, and analysis methods. This may give the impression that the study is compromised.

These limitations illuminate the following potential study areas. First, researchers could investigate more manufacturing organisations, comprising both MNEs and home-grown companies, to ascertain the state of sustainability adoption in African countries. There is some variance in population demographics across Africa, and therefore, the responses to sustainability demands by firms and how customers receive them could be explored further. Second, future researchers could apply quantitative research methods to explore the phenomenon and assess the extent of congruence with the findings of this study. Finally, African customers' fixation with the cost of a product versus the sustainable quality requires further research to find an intersection point of sustainability collaboration with manufacturers.

Declarations

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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