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Sustainable development, corporate social responsibility, and international business

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ABSTRACT

Although awareness of the social and environmental effects of international business (IB) is not new, recent years have witnessed a resurgence of interest owing to urgent global issues including poverty and climate change. Given their worldwide impact and activity, multinational businesses (MNEs) are seen to perform a particular role. In both their home and host nations, they deal with a variety of challenges, stakeholders, and institutional frameworks. Research interest in corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts and the implications of IB for sustainable development has highlighted their potential to be both part of the issue and maybe part of the solution. However, there hasn't been enough systematic research or inclusion in the literature. The degree to which these ideas have been explored in IB research is examined in this article, which also highlights several gaps in the current body of information and methodologies. Additionally, it presents current research with intriguing results that suggest viable directions for future investigation.

KEY WORDS

corporate social responsibility; Multinational Enterprises; sustainable development; sustainability; consumers; stakeholders; developing countries; emerging markets; international business

INTRODUCTION

Although there has always been awareness of the social and environmental effects of international commerce, recent years have witnessed a resurgence of interest owing to urgent global issues including HIV/AIDS, poverty, climate change, and human rights abuses. Businesses are being asked more and more to contribute to a more sustainable development by playing a constructive role. This is especially true for multinational corporations (MNEs) because of their worldwide reach and operations, which expose them to a variety of problems, stakeholders, and institutional settings in both home and host nations. Prior to the current focus in MNEs' role in "solving" issues, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) fought against the detrimental effects of globalization in general and MNEs' influence in this process in particular. However, due to the wide range of issues involved, the majority of which are international in nature and necessitate a much wider consensus and harmonization of rules and implementation mechanisms than are technically and politically feasible, attempts to regulate corporate behavior have not been very successful overall.

For MNEs, the lack of broad international legislation on social and environmental concerns may be seen as both a challenge and an opportunity. Whatever one's opinion, it implies that there is a "moral free space" where "managers must chart their own course" and "there are no tight prescriptions" for MNEs (Donaldson, 1996: p. 56). Even if certain areas of corporate operations are regulated, this is often not the case everywhere, and regulations, as well as monitoring and compliance, are likely to vary across nations and regions. MNEs must thus strike a balance between the elements of their "regular" internationalization plans and more general corporate social responsibility (CSR) concerns in the "modern era of globalization." Because of this, entry strategies, subsidiary relationships, and the selection of country, product, and market portfolios—both upstream and downstream—involve intricate decision-making processes where a number of trade-offs—economic, legal, ethical, environmental, and social—come to light at the same time. In this way, the IB landscape has evolved, and as part of the challenges to globalization or the quality of global capitalism and its institutions, CSR should be explicitly considered in the study of MNEs (e.g. Buckley & Ghauri, 2004; Dunning, 2006, 2009; Griffith, Cavusgil, & Xu, 2008; Peng, Sun, Pinkham, & Chen, 2009). CSR appears to be more than "beyond compliance" and promoting a social cause (Rodriguez, Siegel, Hillman, & Eden, 2006: p. 736), nor does it involve "systematic overcompliance" (Portney, 2008) or only "sacrificing profits in the social interest" (Reinhardt, Stavins, & Vietor, 2008), though a discussion of definitions is outside the purview of this paper. Instead, corporate social responsibility entails running a company in a way that makes it "economically profitable, law abiding, ethical, and socially supportive" (Carroll, 1999: p. 286). This is challenging when working in a variety of settings with frequently conflicting perspectives on the place of business in society (cf. Devinney, 2009). The confluence of these factors poses difficulties for multinational enterprises (MNEs) in their internal operations as well as in their interactions with stakeholders and other businesses, with consequences for society at large.

More than 20 years ago, the Brundtland Commission voiced concerns about more sustainable development in terms of achieving economic growth "that is forceful and at the same time socially and environmentally sustainable" (WCED, 1987, p. xii). In order to help shape the (sustainable) future of societies worldwide, managers must concurrently focus on the social, environmental, and economic aspects of corporate activity. This has led to the coining of the term "triple P," or People, Planet, Profit, in the last ten years (cf. Henriques & Richardson, 2004; Kolk, 2009; Van Tulder with Van der Zwart, 2006). However, there is still much to learn about how MNEs affect sustainable development (Dunning & Fortanier, 2007; Meyer, 2004). The idea that corporate engagement might "easily" address complicated development challenges has been questioned, for instance by Frynas (2008), especially in light of the lack of data to support such a claim. Furthermore, although many MNEs support sustainable development and the triple P, it is debatable to what degree this is a true strategy or just public relations and window dressing.

However, MNEs' CSR initiatives are perceived as becoming more strategic in the sense that they impact the company's core operations, growth, profitability, and survival (Kolk & Pinkse, 2008; Verbeke, 2009), with CSR serving as a possible source of competitive advantage (Porter & Kramer, 2006). In order to manage global operations and get a "license to operate" in various institutional and cultural contexts, several businesses are actively looking to connect their CSR strategy to core activities. In some instances, CSR seems to transition from a public relations issue to a fundamental strategic endeavor. Important considerations in this respect include whether and how to take issue-, stakeholder-, country-, industry-, and firm-specific elements into account. Although the worldwide aspect of these issues is very pertinent, international business research has not yet methodically addressed them. Sustainable development and corporate social responsibility (CSR) provide rich fields for testing current theories of international business and generating fresh perspectives on the dynamics of MNEs' interactions with their domestic and global environments.

This special issue of International Business Review contains papers on CSR and sustainable development, thus helping to fill some of the gaps in these emerging areas of interest. While this is only a start for further research, it brings together a number of innovative papers, conceptual and empirical, qualitative and quantitative. In order to frame the five papers that were selected for this special issue, we will first discuss the extent to which CSR and sustainable development have been covered in existing IB research and briefly compare that to other managerial disciplines. Subsequently, a number of conceptual and methodological challenges are indicated, as well as novel approaches that have emerged. The collection of articles yields interesting findings and also points at a promising future research agenda.

RESEARCH ON CSR AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development and CSR have only slowly been taken up as relevant concepts of study in mainstream management journals in general, and in International Business publications in particular. If we consider leading journals in four categories (general management; functional areas; international business; and specialised journals) searching for these two key words in the 1990-2008 period, the number of articles is relatively limited. Table 1 shows the distribution of the more than 1,700 articles published in twenty leading journals that makes a reference to the terms. It should be noted that the number of articles that actually has CSR or sustainable development as prime topic of research is considerably smaller. But even when using this very lenient criterion, it is still remarkable that, except for specialised journals on business ethics and business and society where CSR has received most attention, more than 97% of the articles in main management journals over the past two decades have not referred to either CSR or sustainable development at all.

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While the prominent consideration of CSR (and to a lesser extent, sustainable development) by specialised Business Ethics and Business & Society journals is not that surprising, the four main IB outlets (*Journal of International Business Studies, Management International Management Review, Journal of World Business and International Business Review*) have mentioned 'sustainable development' slightly more often than their mainstream management counterparts. This signals the growing attention for emerging-market multinationals perhaps much more than the attention for sustainable development per se. As regards CSR, the differences between the categories of journals are neglible; percentages are a little higher than for sustainable development for management, but not for the IB journals. Overall, recognition has been relatively scant.

If we look in more detail at the IB articles in the various journals, some interesting aspects can be noted.[1] Firstly, more than 70% of the articles referring to sustainable development originate from JWB, with most of them (25) being published in the first half of the 1990s, presumably due to attention to the 1992 Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. In the 1990-1994 period, JWB also accounted for all publications relating to CSR. In that sense, the journal was a relative 'early mover'. Apart from the spike mentioned for JWB, we see a gradual increase of publications on both topics (see Figures 1 and 2)[2]. If we add up numbers for the two topics (90 articles in total), 46% was published in JWB, 33% in JIBS, 11% in IBR, and 10% in MIR. Perhaps more relevant for the current situation is that in the last four years, all four journals published at least a few articles on both topics, but JIBS considerably more, particularly on CSR, thus being responsible for most of the increase in Figure 1.

A special issue in 2006 seems to have played a role, and with one forthcoming in JWB and one in IBR, numbers are bound to increase in the coming year.

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The above is not meant to provide an extensive 'state-of-the-art' overview, but rather to supplement and support earlier, more detailed studies from a different perspective. Lockett, Moon and Visser (2006: p. 133), for example, concluded, after having looked at 176 CSR articles in ten management journals over ten years (1992-2002), that knowledge appeared to be 'in a continuing state of emergence', with ethical and environmental issues being studied most frequently, usually in a quantitative manner. A similar observation was made in a review article of the marketing field (54 articles in the 1995-2005 period) by Vaaland, Heide and Grønhaug (2008), who noted that social issues were predominantly addressed conceptually. They included one international marketing journal, but it contained no CSR articles, and the international dimension did not receive attention. This also applied to Lockett et al. (2006), who focused merely on US journals (only one was European).

International Management was explicitly addressed by Egri and Ralston (2008), who collected 321 articles for the 1998-2007 period, using a range of keywords related to governance, CSR, ethics and environment. They concluded that overall 'mainstreaming' (as regular articles) has remained limited as there were quite some special issues. It should be noted, however, that Egri and Ralston (2008) included regional (European/Asian) journals in addition to IM/IB journals. Moreover, they cast a very wide net with their search terms, which means that articles were included that might be regarded by others as 'mainstream' articles (e.g. those related to governance in a more generic sense). Despite these caveats, which particularly seem to affect the governance category, ethics clearly predominated in their sample, having twice as many articles as environment and CSR (and with no special issues dedicated to ethics).

With regard to the underlying empirical evidence, quantitative research using primary data was most common, with half consisting of surveys and one third of cases; the remainder used databases and content analyses. Interestingly, more than 50% entailed single-country studies. Of the articles with country-specific data, almost one third focused on the US. In general, the developed economies in North America, Western Europe and East Asia received most attention in primary data collection. This led Egri and Ralston (2008: p. 325) to conclude that 'it is particularly troubling that there has been relatively little on-the-ground CR research in countries where the need for corporate responsibility is most pressing due to greater poverty, environmental degradation, and institutional governance issues'. This statement applies even more when extended to sustainable development.

Africa as a region of in-depth investigation turned out to be strongly underrepresented. If we consider the list of articles included in Egri and Ralston (2008), most African countries are either not covered or are included only once or sometimes twice at best. The only exceptions are Nigeria and South Africa, but more attention to these two countries has been found more generally in CSR research on Africa (Kolk and Lenfant, 2009; Visser, 2006). Looking in more detail at the articles relating to the other African countries, it turns out that in almost all cases they examine broader governance and corruption issues in a multi-country database set-up; research which, as noted, frequently uses single indicators for countries without much attention for within-country variability or differences (Egri and Ralston, 2008). In effect, only three studies of this kind account for almost all the output on African countries included in their list, leaving just one HRM study on Tanzania as the IM 'CSR output' in addition to two studies that include Nigeria and three South Africa. So the picture for Africa is even worse than it appeared

at first sight. Reasons explaining this absence appear to be the difficulty of doing research and collecting primary data in Africa as well as the more limited
presence of MNEs than in some other regions (Kolk & Lenfant, 2009).
Together with the small number of IB studies on CSR and sustainable development in general, the very unbalanced geographical distribution of empirical research is notable. In a sense this contradicts the more generic interest as expressed by several IB scholars and the apparent relevance to the field, as mentioned in the preceding section. Interestingly, a recent paper used a Delphi method amongst the most prolific authors in the period 1996-2006 to identify emerging issues in IB (Griffith et al., 2008). CSR and ethics came out amongst the secondary priority themes; NGOs, globalisation and emerging economies belonged to the primary category. At the same time, according to the same Delphi study, the top ten influential books in IB featured four books (by Dunning, Friedman, Stiglitz and, most prominently, Prahalad on the 'Bottom of the Pyramid) which might be considered as vital reading for understanding the relationship between MNEs, CSR and sustainable development.

CHALLENGES AND SOME 'ANSWERS'

Hence, while often mentioned as relevant topics for the study of MNEs, the number of articles published in IB journals on CSR and sustainable development has been very limited so far, and the literature might consequently be considered as rather 'embryonic' (cf. Rodriguez et al., 2006). This may have to do with problems related to definitions, the relative novelty of the themes, or their broadness, which complicates matters as big themes are difficult to nail down into publishable papers; this requires specific skills and capabilities. A peculiar challenge related to CSR is how to distinguish public relations (or stated preferences) from actual strategies and performance. And whereas Daft and Lewin (2008: p. 178) noted 'creeping parochialism' and narrowness as something that 'can happen to any journal', this might be assumed to be less applicable to the interdisciplinary area of IB (although some have expressed concern that it is multi- disciplinary rather than interdisciplinary, e.g. Shenkar, 2004).
A crucial limitation seems to be the availability of data. There are hardly large- scale databases on CSR or on the impact of MNEs on the various dimensions of sustainable development which can be used for IB research purposes, and primary data collection is very difficult and time consuming. This seems to be the reason behind the focus on the US and some other Triad countries, and on topics such as corruption and environmental standards (e.g. ISO 14001) for which rankings, adoption rates or other information can be obtained. Settings where doing research is complex, for cultural, political, linguistic or security reasons, tend to be avoided, leading to studies characterised by lack of local knowledge and context-rich approaches (cf. Shenkar, 2004). Such absence is understandable in terms of a publication strategy, because risks are higher from that perspective as well. This is also due to the fact that more innovative or unusual data collection and research methodologies need to be adopted, and arriving at sufficiently large sample sizes for adequate quantitative analyses is hard.
However, it is also the case that these difficulties should not hamper research on relevant topics. The challenge for those interested in CSR and sustainable development is to move to the mainstream, not only in terms of outlets but also when it comes to embedding and relating to IB theories and themes. This special issue has aimed to do exactly that, and called for papers that established the relationship, while being open to a variety of approaches. Although obviously a double-blind review process was followed, the five papers that we could include after several rounds of revision (out of the 40 that were submitted) show an interesting spread of themes underexposed so far, covering environmental and social aspects, with innovative and original primary data collection methods, and some specific attention to Africa as well.
The first article, by Miguel Rivera-Santos and Carlos Rufín, focuses on an issue that has

received much attention in relation to both CSR and sustainable development: the Base (or Bottom) of the Pyramid (BOP). BOP assumes that business can help alleviate poverty by servicing the poorest and bringing them into the global economy, while concurrently developing new profitable markets. Theoretical insights and systematic empirical evidence supporting these claims have been limited, however. 'Global village vs. small town' compares and contrasts business networks at the Base with those at the Top of the Pyramid (TOP, i.e. everything outside the BOP), given that the two are said to be significantly different, and thus require major innovations by MNEs to be successful in BOP markets. The authors identify peculiarities of the competitive and institutional BOP environments, develop propositions on structural characteristics, network boundaries, tie characteristics, member diversity, and evolution over time of both BOP and TOP, and analyse implications for MNEs.

In the second article, Pat Auger, Timothy Devinney, Jordan Louviere and Paul Burke empirically examine the importance of CSR product attributes in consumer purchasing decisions in developed and emerging economies (Germany, US, Spain, Turkey, South Korea and India). A multi-attribute design was used to force respondents to make tradeoffs, for both a higher and a lower involvement product. The choice experiment included both tangible (functional and price-related) and intangible attributes; with the latter category including labour conditions in the production process (in the case of athletic shoes) and environmental aspects (for batteries) in addition to brand and country of origin. Consumers in the purchasing middle class in the respective countries turned out to place value on CSR attributes, but these were generally found to be more influential in developed than in emerging economies for both higher and lower involvement products. The article adds the consumer perspective and sheds light on emerging markets, which both deserve further research attention, also considering a broader set of combined CSR dimensions.

The third article deals with the environmental strategy of a single MNE, BASF, and consists of a multi-level case study, covering corporate headquarters in Germany, the US-based regional headquarters in the US as well as two subsidiaries in the US. In 'On the implementation of a 'global' environmental strategy: The role of absorptive capacity', Jonatan Pinkse, Matthias Kuss and Volker Hoffmann explore what role the uptake and integration of external knowledge plays in the chemical company's attempts to roll out its environmental standards internally outside the home country. The study shows the complexities of integration and responsiveness even across developed- country settings, with the US as host country. This results in propositions on 'green' absorptive capacity considering different levels within an MNE. Further research could extend these to larger sets of firms and subsidiaries, also in institutional contexts that may be more divergent than the US and Germany.

A very different (host-)country context, i.e. Angola, is the subject of an industry- specific case study by Arne Wiig and Ivar Kolstad reported in the fourth article of this issue. Interviews with MNE oil executives and government officials were held to find out to what extent CSR activities matter for obtaining licenses and contracts. In a country characterised by governance issues and abundant oil resources, a key question is whether MNE activities play a positive or negative role. In Angola, it appears that CSR is overall not particularly important for obtaining contracts, but some aspects (particularly local content requirements, use of local staff and environmental issues) matter and appear to be used strategically by MNEs for that purpose. The exploratory case findings lead to propositions suggesting that this dynamic may facilitate patronage, exacerbate the resource curse and fail to address governance problems, on which follow-up studies can build.

The final article that is part of the special issue also focuses on Africa, on the social dimensions of MNE activity in three countries (Ethiopia, Mozambique and Tanzania) and a sector that are underexposed in IB research. In their study on sustainable tourism, Fabienne Fortanier and Jeroen van Wijk explore the consequences of foreign hotels for local employment, an aspect that can be considered as important for stimulating sustainable development in both social and

economic terms (the environmental implications were not covered). A qualitative and quantitative analysis of interview data of 123 foreign and locally-owned hotels in the three sub-Saharan countries showed that employment effect of foreign hotels was larger than local hotels, but only as a result of their larger size. Moreover, there appeared to be reverse knowledge transfer, meaning that foreign firms hired well-trained staff from local hotels rather than training employees themselves. This seems to have implications for local firms' willingness to engage in schooling opportunities, which is a scarce good in general in these countries.
Overall, the set of articles pays attention to several dimensions of CSR and sustainable development, and contributes to a research agenda that can hopefully inspire further studies.

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Considering the small number of publications to far and the new studies mentioned above, we will provide some closing remarks on research on CSR and sustainable development that pertains to IB in this last part. The difficulties in connecting CSR and sustainable development to mainstream IB discussions may be one of the causes for the lack of attention. The works in this special issue will be related to five aspects that have emerged in the IB literature and are still very relevant for CSR and sustainable development research in the future.
In recent years, requests for more focused research have coincided with an upsurge in interest in institutions. CSR has been specifically highlighted in a number of concepts, including the human environment (Dunning, 2006), an institution-based perspective of IB strategy (Peng, Wang, & Yiang, 2008), and the co-evolution of MNEs and the institutional environment (Cantwell, Dunning, & Lundan, forthcoming). Most notably, Dunning (2006) highlighted the inadequacy of the institutional framework that underpins global capitalism and the significance of gaining further understanding of the organizational entities and the new "rules of the game" required to rectify market, regulatory, and moral/ethical shortcomings.
This special issue contains several essays on institutions. According to papers by Fortanier and Van Wijk (2010), Rivera-Santos and Rufín (2010), and Wiig and Kolstad (2010), this has especially affected developing nations. According to Peng et al. (2008), institutional factors are even more important in emerging markets than in more developed ones; this is especially true in developing nations, where problems with governance and (re)distribution are common. In order to facilitate a comparison with TOP markets, Rivera-Santos and Rufin (2010) explain the function of formal and informal institutions in BOP contexts as well as the consequences for MNEs wishing to participate in BOP projects. Wiig and Kolstad (2010) investigate the effect of CSR factors in securing contracts and licenses in Angola, offering insight into how the nation's institutions impact MNEs and may be impacted by them, either favorably or unfavorably. "If 'good' institutions are so important to corporations, why do we see so little corporate activity to improve institutions, particularly in resource rich countries?" is a pertinent point that arises throughout their essay. According to Fortanier and Van Wijk's (2010) examination of three sub-Saharan countries, MNEs push out local businesses from the labor market by employing their most skilled workers, suggesting that FDI will not be the primary driver of human capital development in the hotel industry. This suggests that for FDI to have a good impact, institutions must be well-developed (in this instance via training and education systems). Additionally, Auger, Devinney, Louviere, and Burke (2010) took into account country-of-origin factors for both customers from six different nations and the items included in their analysis.
In order to investigate how a "global" approach created in the former may be used in the latter, Pinkse, Kuss, and Hoffmann (2010) start with the distinctions between the German and US environments. It goes without saying that there are several additional institutional factors that may be further examined, taking into account "formal and informal constraints" as well as the

harmony between self-regulation and regulation (cf. Kolk & Van Tulder, 2005). Along with the other two, more conventional legs of the strategy "tripod," industry dynamics and firm-specific resources and competencies are still crucial factors to take into account (Peng et al., 2008, 2009). In order to account for the unique competitive and corporate social responsibility characteristics of each sector, a number of the articles in this collection concentrate on a single industry. The oil sector was chosen by Wiig and Kolstad (2010), services (hospitality) by Fortanier and Van Wijk (2010), and certain consumer goods (batteries and sports shoes) by Auger, Devinney, Louviere, and Burke (2010). The research by Pinkse, Kuss, and Hoffmann (2010), which examines absorptive ability as it manifests in a chemical MNE's effort to execute its environmental strategy in a host nation, at different organizational levels, highlights firm-specific resources and capacities.

Downstream and upstream views are pertinent to add to the three elements identified by Peng et al. (2008, 2009), both for IB generally (e.g., in connection to firm-specific benefits, Rugman & Verbeke, 2008) and for CSR/sustainable development specifically. A variety of CSR issues, such as the environment, health, safety, and labor conditions, are directly linked to the nature and location of international supply and production networks. This has prompted MNEs to take risks and vulnerabilities into account, such as by creating codes of conduct targeted at suppliers (e.g. Van Tulder, Van Wijk, & Kolk, 2009). Although considerable study has previously been done on this, the consumer viewpoint has gotten much less attention. In contrast to upstream operations, which include MNEs' business partners and require two-sided obligations (see Rugman & Verbeke, 2008), sales activities are one-sided and lack customer assurances. This means that MNEs will have more liabilities and that adopting CSR across the whole value chain—from start to finish—would be more difficult. Businesses and governments interested in advancing sustainable development must deal with this. While Rivera-Santos and Rufín (2010) discuss many aspects of BOP/TOP marketplaces including consumption, distribution, and manufacturing, Auger et al. (2010) provide intriguing insights into how much customers care about CSR features of items.

In conclusion, a more explicit focus on these factors might be beneficial for a future research agenda on international business, corporate social responsibility, and sustainable development. It appears important to take institutional, industrial, organizational, and supply and demand forces into account in order to better comprehend the circumstances in which MNE may not only get a sustainable competitive advantage but also contribute to the advancement of sustainable development. Even while the articles in this special issue have already provided some insight into the various viewpoints, each one points to a wide field of study for which this book can only serve as a starting point. It will hopefully stimulate other scholars to continue on this road.

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