Are we really doing the "right thing"?
From sustainability imperialism in global supply chains to an inclusive emerging economy perspective

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Abstract *There is a notable gap between the vast theoretical desires regarding supply chain sustainability and actual implementation in practice. The drawback situation exists in every part of the world with remarkable evidence of poor environmental and social practices in the emerging economies. This paper suggests a deficiency in the understanding of the complex realities in emerging economies. The paper draws on a discussion of existing literature, empirical insights in a developing country and the application of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. We suggest a multilevel and systemic view of the issue and articulate a number of propositions to guide future research.*

1. Introduction

It has become evident for both the private and public sector that there is a need to develop sustainable production and consumption systems [1]. However, there is a notable gap between the vast theoretical desires and actual implementation practice. The drawback situation exists in every part of the world with remarkable evidence of poor social and environmental practices in the emerging economies. But why is this the case? And how can we improve the situation?

This paper is an attempt to question the underlying assumptions that drive current approaches to sustainability in global supply chains. Central to our argument is the view that sustainability as defined by large multinational corporations, a large group of NGOs and international institutions attempts to define a normative pathway to improvement that primarily relies on Western values and in some part is rooted in the vested interests of a minority of players. A common premise for sustainability practices in the developed economies places premium on the standard of regulatory bodies and the consciousness and influence of stakeholders. In contrast in the emerging economies, regulatory bodies are often non-existent or

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inherently incapacitated. Stakeholders in the emerging economies are rarely aware or concerned about environmental issues. This is almost certainly due to the existence of other pressing distresses as well as the prevalent cultural/societal dispositions. In situations where stakeholders are directly affected by environmental concerns, they are often voiceless or silenced by the hierarchical structure and high power distance prevalent in emerging economies. This paper suggests a deficiency in the understanding of the complex realities in the emerging economies hence rated the least in capacity to manage social and environmental issues.

The paper seeks to explore the phenomenon of progressing towards sustainability from an emerging economy perspective. The primary aim of the paper is to offer some exploratory evidence and build on relevant conceptual lenses to suggest propositions and hence identify promising avenues for future research. We attempt to address the following research question: *How can supply chain sustainability practices be successfully developed, implemented and managed in the context of emerging economies?*

Empirically we draw from the experience of the first author, who has over 15 years work experience in related fields in an African country and has conducted some primary data collection on the topic. Theoretically, we propose a multilevel, systemic view of the issue and draw specifically on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory [2] to understand the motivational implications and ability to deal with environmental and social issues in an emerging economy context.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First we provide some background on the questions of corporate sustainability and sustainable supply chain management (SSCM). In this section we identify the key challenges in current SSCM research in relation to addressing sustainability in an emerging economy context, which we call the "imperialism problem". Second, we present some empirical insights gained by the first author in Africa. Third, we introduce Maslow's theory of needs [2] and discuss its relevance to our problem. Finally, we discuss the multilevel practical and research implications of attempting to develop a multilevel and systemic view of sustainability from an emerging economy perspective.

2. Sustainability, Sustainable Supply Chains and the "imperialism problem"

2.1 The concept of corporate sustainability and CSR: biased and narrow views?

There are diverse interpretations of the concept of sustainability; however the triple bottom line (3BL) approach has been widely adopted by researchers and

businesses to operationalise sustainability. This institutes the environmental, economic and social dimensions [3]. Dyllick and Hockers [4] framed these three dimensions of sustainability as the business case (economic), the natural case (environment) and the societal case (social).

The usual representation of the 3BL is three interconnected circles of equal size, each representing a dimension of sustainability. This in line with the business case for sustainability that views the sustainable development challenge as providing greater business opportunities for creating value and gaining competitive advantage [5-7]. In this sense corporate sustainability is associated with specific measures looking to improve the social and environmental conditions in which businesses operate while maintaining a certain level of profitability [8].

This approach has been criticised by authors such as Griggs et al. [9] who instead propose an ecocentric view of sustainability, placing the Earth's life-support systems at the core of their definition. Their representation of the three dimensions of sustainability uses concentric circles to show how the economy and society are embedded within and ultimately depend upon the preservation of the natural system. The argument against the three equal circles is that it makes it look like addressing each dimension is optional, as all of them have the same weight.

Another recent conceptualisation of corporate sustainability reasserts the necessity to adopt a systemic and ecocentric view. In this sense sustainability is about envisioning a prosperous future within planetary boundaries [10] and the framework proposed by the authors calls for an assessment and a re-embedding of corporate activities' impact within socio-ecological systems. From this perspective, companies are viewed as operating within society and the natural environment and therefore must take into account a broader network of actors within their strategy and not only focus on satisfying the economic interests if their shareholders. According to the authors, understanding firms' impacts on the planetary boundaries is a first step to take action and they encourage a change and action approach to sustainability research.

The persistent ambiguity of the notion of corporate sustainability is largely due the fact that it has been developed and evolved in a context dominated by an economistic view of the firm [11] or technocentric paradigm as described by Gladwin et al. [12]. In particular, despite the proliferation of corporate attempts to address sustainability challenges, the primacy of a narrow stakeholder capitalist framework is obvious. The phrase " as long as it makes business sense" is not uncommon when discussing sustainability with business employees. Whether this is a reflection of their personal values or simply of the system they find themselves in is another debate entirely.

Beyond the context in which the concept of corporate sustainability has emerged and evolved, there is also a concern about the interests that it is serving. Going

back to early work on sustainable development such as that report by the Brundtland commission [13] reveals that individuals and society are key protagonists in this development, in order to ensure that future generations can satisfy their own needs. However, this concern about the role of individuals and society seems to fade when considering corporations as central agents of sustainability. Much emphasis in the corporate sustainability literature has been put on incremental improvements and green metrics [14]. In many cases, the major human and change implications of sustainability are underplayed and "sustainability initiatives" seem implemented from the top to the bottom with little concern about and consultation with those that it is supposed to affect.

This question is not new and there has been a large amount of work done by economists on the role of international institutions in addressing global development issues such as poverty, economic prosperity and so on. For example, Joseph Stiglitz' book [15] is very critical of the ideological foundations of institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, and openly questions the credibility of their policies that promote a development that is damaging for ecosystems and favours investors. As another example, Amartya Sen's contributions on questions of ethics, justice and poverty [16] have certainly moved the international development debate forward. His ideas have served to question the value of commonly adopted international indicators such as the Human Development Index.

It is quite striking that much of the corporate sustainability literature seems to remain centred on issues that are viewed as priorities in developed economies despite evidence that stakeholders in developed and developing countries do not actually perceive the urgency of these issues in the same way [17]. This point is very relevant when considering global supply chains, which straddle national boundaries and bring together multiple actors in different socio-economic contexts [18, 19].

2.2 Sustainable supply chains: a tale of control and compliance

In line with current debates regarding the definition of corporate sustainability, Pagell and Shevchenko [20] argue that current SSCM research primarily reflects a narrow shareholder view and overly focuses on the economic (i.e. profit) implications of being sustainable. In addition, they argue that much research has focussed on investigating how SC could be more sustainable rather than how they could become truly sustainable.

In spite of the growing demands to implement social and environmental issues in supply chains there is a notable gap between the theoretical desires and actual implementation in practice [21, 22]. This gap is apparently more evident in the emerging economies where the focus is more about using available resources to

meet the needs of the present rather than considerations about sustainability for future generations to meet their own needs [23]. There are particular references to countries in Africa. This is because the African continent is highly dependent on natural resources hence issues relating to business and environment are often linked in a complex manner. The continent is widely accepted as the most vulnerable to social and environmental sustainability issues and also rated as probably the least in capacity to manage these issues [24]. This research therefore considers it a worthy option to explore the phenomena focusing on a particular African country or selected countries in Africa.

The dearth of contributions related to the interests of developing country or emerging economy stakeholders is actually quite striking. When papers deal with a developing country context it is very much from a top down compliance approach and looking at suppliers' "misbehaviours". Examples include studies that explore the introduction of codes of conducts or implementation of certification programmes by large multinationals in their global SCs [for e.g. 18, 25]. A mechanistic view of sustainability implementation in global SCs prevails and it seems that the underlying assumption of all studies is the existence of a "sustainability imperative" which justifies interventions, and taking responsibility for the behaviour of least advantaged players

Nonetheless, there are many examples that discuss sustainability initiatives in the Chinese context [for e.g. 26, 27, 28]. It remains debatable whether China can be considered an emerging economy as such. Interestingly most of these studies focus on green/environmental initiatives and remain fairly quantitative. The social inequalities and issues in Chinese SCs also remain relatively under-explored.

Amid the growing literature on SSCM issues, there are few examples of studies that specifically address the question of sustainability from the perspective of the "least advantaged players". These include Hall and Matos' study [29] that explores the integration of impoverished communities in sustainable SCs; and Huq et al's [30] recent paper specifically focuses on social sustainability and reveals that differences in cultural practices and social priorities affect ability of suppliers to comply with Western buyers' requirements.

Methodologically speaking currently most research reports on organisational activities related to sustainability and limits itself to providing accounts about the control mechanisms that are put in place by large organisations to address the "misconducts" of their suppliers [20, 31]. This distanced and mostly rationalist approach to research very much goes hand-in-hand with the theoretical bias towards top-down SSCM. There is a dearth of research that seeks a deeper exploration of these issues, and in particular that engages with the relevant stakeholders in attempts to change the situation [20].

From this brief discussion of the literature on sustainable global SCs it is questionable whether or not corporations practices go beyond paying lip service as most of them do not seem to take into consideration the complex socioeconomic context in which their suppliers are operating when developing and implementing their sustainability policies. One of the major shortcomings of current SSCM literature noted by a number of different authors [20, 31-33] is the predominance of a large buyer firm perspective, to which we could add Western. There is a clear lack of understanding of supplier's perceptions and actions in SSCs and in particular developing country suppliers.

3. Insights from an African case study

Having established a lack of understanding of an emerging economy perspective on the question of sustainability in global SCs, in this section we present some empirical insights from Africa that can serve to enrich our discussion.

3.1 Research context, motivation and approach

The study presents a problem situation that the researcher had lived with in the public sector. The situation is characterised by the accumulation of obsolete items leading to lack of storage space with far reaching implications on health and safety risks as well as environmental concerns in view of the sensitivity of the items. The methodological approach combines a study process 'on' stakeholders involved with the phenomenon as well as an enquiry process 'with' stakeholders. The preliminary study is akin to an action research-collaborative inquiry considering the position of the inquirer who is involved in the situation with experiences in varied capacity; as a pilot, engineer and procurement officer as well.

The insights reported in this paper are those gathered through a preliminary enquiry, and also based on the first author's extensive experience in the field. The preliminary enquiry aimed to explore and define the problem situation to facilitate the main study. The rationale for this preliminary study was to surface some of the challenges in the field, and confront them with our understanding of the literature. The conduct of the preliminary study involved interviews with six stakeholders in the public sector organisation of the targeted case. The stakeholders interviewed are practitioners in a public sector aviation industry in Nigeria. The 6 stakeholders include 2 pilots, 2 engineers and 2 procurement officers who are key stakeholders in the operations and SCM functions in the organisation all with over 10 years working experience and a minimum of 2 years international experience in institutions of developed economies. This choice was to ensure for reflexive input from the participants considering their years of experience and their exposure to the workings of the developed economies. The participants were asked an open ended question which sought to get input about their perception of supply chain sustainability practices in the context. The unstructured interviews designed to ask questions about the perception of the stakeholders about the lingering challenges

associated with supply chain sustainability practices in the organisation. The broad questions in the interview sought to find their views about the sustainability challenges, describe their personal experiences in relation to the phenomenon as well as elicit information about strategies aimed at addressing the observed challenges.

3.2 Preliminary enquiry insights

A common premise for sustainability practices in the developed economies places premium on the standard of regulatory bodies and the consciousness and influence of stakeholders. In contrast in the emerging economies, regulatory bodies are often non-existent or inherently incapacitated. Stakeholders in the emerging economies are rarely aware or concerned about environmental issues [29]. This is almost certainly due to the existence of other pressing distresses as well as the prevalent cultural/societal dispositions. In situations where stakeholders are directly affected by environmental concerns, they are often voiceless or silenced by the hierarchical structure and high power distance prevalent in emerging economies. It is therefore viewed that the theoretical concepts in the literature are appropriate for the situation in the developed economies were the studies have been conducted. Ojo et al. [34] support this view in their study analysing green supply chain management in South Africa and Nigeria. Their study corroborates the gap in the literature of supply chain sustainability realities in the emerging economies and therefore called for further study in this aspect. While the concepts in the literature are obviously beneficial for overall understanding of supply chain sustainability practices, the approaches are considered deficient for all-inclusive use in the emerging economies.

The views from the participants who took part in the preliminary enquiry were similar, highlighting various shortcomings about sustainability practices. There was a scorching remark calling for the need to redefine sustainability concept from the perspective of the emerging economies. An illustration relating to local means of water distribution involving boys using water jerry cans carried in locally made carts was highlighted. The participant assert that while this may not be considered a sustainable approach from the perspective of the mechanised developed economies, the local approach was however noted to be void of gas emission etc and probably a more sustainable environmental practice. The proposed idea to redefine supply chain sustainability practices from the perspective of the emerging countries was seen as a potentially viable idea hence this illustration was documented for further review. Other notable remarks from the stakeholders were comments bothering on the conduct of the research. A stakeholder believed that the project was an uphill task, which can clash with the interest of the political/leadership class. Another remark emphasized was that it was unfortunate that they (stakeholders) were not particularly aware or bothered about the crucial environmental issues. A third notable remark was that the proposed study was particularly relevant in the prevailing situation. This was followed by a question from the interviewee; 'but where do we start from'? The question posed by the interviewee underpins the objective of this research, which seeks to develop a road
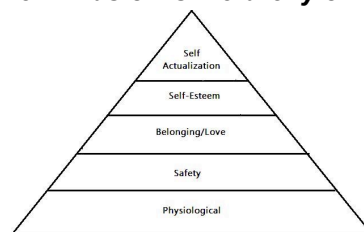
map to facilitate the introduction of supply chain sustainability practices in the context.

4. Maslow's theory of needs and its relevance to emerging economy SC sustainability

As mentioned previously, the notions of sustainability and sustainable development are contentious and there is much debate on their meanings and scope. It is particularly complex to try and establish a definition, which can encompass both developed and developing country perspectives. The findings from our preliminary enquiry confirm that sustainability and sustainable development may indeed hold different meanings in an emerging economy context where priority is given to issues that seem most critical locally and where infrastructures and systems may be very different from those in developed economies. In light of our discussion above we propose to draw on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory [2] to theoretically make sense of the question of the sustainability in global SCs. We were motivated to explore this theory in more depth, as it appeared to help us conceptualise the prioritisation differential between developing vs. developed economies. In addition we feel that there is a need in SSCM research to further explore the interaction between the national, organisational and individual levels of analysis in order to grasp the complexity of moving towards sustainability. This has already been suggested by a number of authors in the field [31, 32]. Maslow's framework emerging from psychology represents a starting in our attempt to move towards this more multilevel understanding. Furthermore, it can potentially be a step forward in reflecting about the question of perception, values and ethics, and reintroducing the notion of change in SSCM research.

Maslow suggests that all individuals face different levels of needs from basic to more advanced. He argues that unless the most basic of needs are catered for, individuals will not develop and feel the other needs and hence will not respond to them. Hence there is a hierarchy of needs. Beyond needs identification, Maslow's theory provides insights into motivational aspects of human behaviour in view of needs satisfaction. The following figure depicts a typical Maslow pyramid of needs.

Figure 1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs

There are five levels of needs according to Maslow, and the pyramid can be viewed as stage model. The first level corresponds to basic physiological needs such as air, food, shelter, drink, warmth, sex and sleep. The second level relates to safety needs and the need to feel protected, have security, order, law, stability and freedom from fear. The third level corresponds to belonging and love and includes aspects such as friendship, intimacy, affection from family, friends, etc. The fourth level is esteem needs such as achievement, mastery, independence, status, prestige, self-respect and respect from others. Finally, the fifth level relates to self-actualisation needs and the realisation of personal potential and self-fulfilment.

A number of authors have already considered the fit of Maslow's theory to the question of sustainability [17, 35]. In particular these contributions do highlight that the theory can be adapted beyond the individual to encompass the community and broader society. In his contribution, Datta [35] shows that there may be an additional level of needs – transcendent needs – when taking an ecological view of Maslow's theory. He views this level as the final highest level, which corresponds to the needs to care for beyond the oneself and have a need to address the concerns of the local, national and global communities as embedded in the natural environment.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory [2] can be particularly valuable to understand the motivational implications and ability to deal with environmental and social issues in an emerging economy context and at different levels of global SCs. If we consider the development and implementation of sustainability policies from Maslow' lens we may be able to make sense of why some practices are successful and others fail as they do not address the needs of those they are targeted at. In other words, it is difficult to expect individuals in very poor communities in an emerging economy to care for climate change, as it may seem a very distant issue compared to their immediate needs to feed their families. This means that this theoretical can be valuable in mapping the gaps between different levels of the SC. In parallel, Maslow's theory may be valuable to understand how corporations may fulfil a critical role in addressing the needs of the local communities they work with or have an impact on. For example, this has been described by Pulver [36]. Finally, Maslow's theory calls for an exploration of the individual and community levels of analysis when addressing the question of sustainability in global SCs. We remain aware that Maslow's framework has been extensively criticised, notably for its lack of empirical grounding. This is a tentative lens from our part and we seek to develop a more robust framework going forward.

5. Discussion: Multilevel practical and research implications

5.1 Multilevel research implications

In light of our discussion of the literature, the preliminary findings presented earlier and Maslow's framework, we propose that advancing supply chain sustainability in the context of an emerging economy necessitates a multilevel and systemic understanding of the salient issues at these various levels. We do not prescribe a "one-size-fits-all" but rather to better contextualise sustainability practice and research. We suggest the following propositions to guide future research:

Proposition 1: More attention needs to be paid to the context in which sustainability initiatives are developed in contrast to where they are implemented in order to be able to understand the gaps and discrepancies that are likely to emerge.

Proposition 2: Research needs to go beyond the Western buying firm level and explore the perspectives of supplier firms, in particular developing country suppliers, in order to shed light on under-explored aspects of sustainability.

Proposition 3: Considering the interactions between the individual, organisational and national levels of analysis is necessary to understand the way in which sustainability issues may be successfully addressed and implemented in global SCs.

Proposition 4: Making sense of sustainability in global SCs through Maslow's theory of needs can enable a more inclusive and systemic perspective to emerge.

Finally, we contend that our paper does not simply interrogate what we research but how we do research. Our argument is in line with Pagell and Shevchenko's [20] as we see value in adopting more qualitative and participative research approaches to explore sustainability issues in global SCs.

Proposition 5: Research in SSCM must go beyond positivist and quantitative paradigm and embrace qualitative and participatory research approaches in order to be able to develop an emerging economy perspective of sustainable development.

5.2 Practical implications

There are strong implications for practice. In particular, considering the challenges that managers face to go beyond compliance and low-hanging fruits, an emerging economy perspective is topical and pertinent. While top-down approaches may be more straightforward to implement, there is value in considering what a more inclusive and contextualised approach to sustainability may look like in global SCs. Businesses operating on a global scale may seek the support of local communities and actors to ensure that their approaches make a meaningful impact.

5.3 Future work

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This paper represents the first step in a broader research project where we seek to develop a more complete framework to understand SSCM from an emerging economy perspective by drawing on and adapting Maslow's theory. An important newt step is to conduct a more thorough review of the literature on sustainability in developing economies. In the following stages of the research we intend to conduct further qualitative exploration of the issue in additional developing countries, in order to gather sufficient insights that can help us develop our framework. At the beginning of the paper we mentioned that overall the ambition of the research is to answer "*How can supply chain sustainability practices be successfully developed, implemented and managed in the context of emerging economies?".* In line with our 5th proposition, we would like to conduct a full participatory research project, involving stakeholders from developing economies to address this overarching question. The nature of participatory research is such that we will engage in different cycles of inquiry, addressing more specific research questions that will eventually help us answer this ambitious initial question.

Conclusion

This paper aims to pave the way for research that seeks to enhance our understanding of supply chain sustainability practices from an emerging economy perspective. We suggest that existing conceptual frameworks in the literature are premised on perceptions from the developed economies, which are at variant with the realities of emerging economies. It appears that existing conceptual frameworks in the literature do not capture pertinent realities of the complex and inherent dynamics of environmental sustainability issues in the emerging economies. As such, existing concepts are considered deficient to drive the institution of sustainability practices in emerging economies.

The paper is clearly limited by its exploratory nature and further research is needed to support the proposed framework. An obvious avenue for future research would be to explore the propositions that we have suggested. Further work is needed to refine our theoretical contribution and explore more systematically the connection and relevance of Maslow's theory and sustainability in global SCs. Despite limitations this paper has identified important research and practical implications.

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