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Social strategies of emerging market multinationals in developing countries: The case of Polish firms in Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of the article is to explore the social strategies of Polish multinational enterprises (MNEs) entering Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

Research Design & Methods: We employed qualitative research methods and conducted a comparative case study of three Polish MNEs operating in SSA.

Findings: The social involvement of Polish companies in SSA is very limited. Forms of community involvement include knowledge-sharing and sporadic philanthropic activities, usually initiated by Polish stakeholders located in SSA. Polish companies engage socially because of market and relational reasons.

Implications & Recommendations: We developed a theoretical model explaining the low importance of social strategies in the activities of Polish firms in SSA. We argue that none of the companies surveyed felt strong stakeholder pressure in either the country of origin or the country of destination. We also explain the reasons for this.

Contribution & Value Added: We identified key factors shaping the social strategies of MNEs abroad and included them in a theoretical model to be tested in further research.

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INTRODUCTION

This article aims to address two important gaps in the literature. First, although the idea of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has attracted wide scholarly attention (e.g., Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Frynas & Yamahaki, 2016), the social strategies of multinational enterprises (MNEs) operating in developing countries remain relatively underexplored (Park & Ghauri, 2015; Pisani *et al*., 2017; Zhao *et al*., 2014). This is a paradoxical situation as CSR research is particularly needed in regions suffering from poverty, environmental degradation, and institutional governance issues, as is the case in most developing countries (Egri & Ralston, 2008). In recent years, the transparency of corporate behaviour has risen (particularly due to the Internet), provoking civil society actions against socially irresponsible MNEs (Spar & La Mure, 2003) and increasing the role of CSR in the strategy of MNEs operating in developing countries (Vertigans *et al.,* 2016; Luo *et al*., 2019). Given the growing social demands (Scherer *et al*., 2013), there is an urgent need for more research into the social strategies of MNEs in developing countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

Second, we know relatively little about the legitimacy strategies of the 'new breed' of MNEs from emerging markets that have recently populated the world's economy. These firms face particular obstacles in their internationalisation path. Not only do they need to overcome the 'liability of foreignness' and the 'liability of foreignness'. I widely discussed in International Business (IB) literature, but they also suffer from the 'liability of origin' (*e.g*., a poor reputation of the country of origin, lack of accumulated international experience) (Pant & Ramachandran, 2012). Despite a rich literature discussing how these firms overcome their resource limitations (*e.g*., Mathews, 2006; Bruton *et al.*, 2013; Obloj *et al.*, 2010), their stakeholder strategies remain much less explored. Given the fact that EMNEs are exposed to higher scrutiny and pressures to conform to host country societal rules (Cavusgil, 2021), our understanding of how stakeholder pressures influence the internationalisation choices of EMNEs is an important research gap (Bıçakcıoğlu-Peynirci, 2023).

We followed the call to widen the geographic reach of research on MNE stakeholder strategies (Pisani *et al.*, 2017) by focusing on infant multinationals from Poland venturing into the markets of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). While the classification of Poland and other Central and Eastern European (CEE) markets varies, with some reports considering Poland an advanced economy (*e.g.*, UNCTAD, 2023), this article considers Poland an emerging market, following the classification of MSCI (2024). This classification is based on criteria such as openness to foreign ownership, ease of capital inflows and outflows, and stability of the institutional framework. Companies originating from Poland and other CEE countries have traditionally expanded into markets that shared geographical, cultural, and institutional proximity with their home markets, as noted by Trąpczyński *et al*. (2015) and Maciejewski and Wach (2019). However, there has been a shift in this trend with a growing number of CEE firms now starting to explore distant markets such as those in SSA. This global expansion has garnered significant attention from both the media and think tanks, as exemplified by Cibian (2017). Entries to SSA by companies from CEE represent an extreme case of the internationalisation of a complex, distant, and unknown environment by 'infant MNEs.' Our understanding of how these firms navigate such a difficult environment and whether they engage in social strategies is very limited. Possibly, in the 'infant' developmental phase, MNEs focus primarily on business strategies. However, if a rapid catching-up has occurred and these companies engage in social activities in these environments, the question arises as to how they do it and why. Against this backdrop, we asked the following exploratory research question:

RQ: Do Polish infant multinationals engage in social strategies during their expansion into Sub-Saharan Africa, and if so, how and why do they do it?

This question is addressed through a comparative case study of three Polish MNEs operating in SSA. The limited size of our sample results from the embryonic nature of the phenomenon, specifically the expansion of Polish companies into SSA markets, as well as the very restricted scale of investments by Polish firms in this region so far. The structure of this article is as follows. Firstly, we will present an overview of the theoretical framework. Then, we will discuss the research methods. Next, we will present the research findings. Finally, we will present conclusions discussing the theoretical and practical implications of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Two streams of International Business (IB) and strategy literature guide this study, *i.e.* MNEs' nonmarket strategy research and MNEs' legitimacy research. The mainstream strategy and IB literature focused on firms' behaviour serving the needs of 'market shareholders,' *i.e*., customers and value chain partners (Baron, 1995). Only recently have these fields started to consider the power of 'nonmarket stakeholders,' *i.e.,* government regulators, NGOs, special interest groups, *etc*. A firm's actions to actively manage the institutional and societal context, composed of these 'nonmarket stakeholders,' have been referred to as a nonmarket strategy (Mellahi *et al*., 2016). There are two different strands of literature on 'nonmarket strategies,'. namely corporate political activity (CPA) and strategic corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Frynas *et al.*, 2017; Mellahi *et al*., 2016). In this article, we focused on the latter, also exploring social strategies defined as 'the firm's plan[s] to allocate resources to achieve long-term social objectives and create a competitive advantage' (Husted & Allen, 2000, p. 25).

Luo (2006, p. 750) defines CSR of MNEs as a company's configuration of social responsibility, social responsiveness, policies, and programs,' which promote its relationships with society (both at home and abroad). As they grow and globalize, MNEs need to consider the social, environmental, and economic demands of various stakeholder groups. Park and Ghauri (2015) argue that given the critical opinions portraying MNEs as exploiters of host countries' resources, the satisfaction of local society's expectations is crucial, especially in developing countries.

Studies on MNE legitimacy initiated by the seminal paper by Kostova and Zaheer (1999) focused on the problems raised by MNEs' multiple embeddedness (Meyer *et al.*, 2011). Since MNEs operate in many institutional contexts, they have to manage conflicting stakeholder pressures (Jackson & Deeg, 2008). Conflicts over MNEs' legitimacy are likely to be more intense if the home and host country institutions are dissimilar (Meyer *et al*., 2014). Existing studies reveal several ways to establish and protect legitimacy in a foreign market such as cooperating with actors enjoying a higher level of legitimacy (Lu & Xu, 2006), imitating local practices and structures of other firms in the same field (Chan & Makino, 2007), CSR reporting (Marano *et al.*, 2017), listing on foreign stock markets, using quality certifications, pursuing collective actions (*e.g.*, trade associations) (Pant & Ramachandran, 2012), and using 'low-profile strategies' (Meyer & Thein, 2014). Tashman *et al*. (2019) reveal that while emerging market MNEs use CSR reporting as a legitimizing strategy, it is often disconnected from the actual CSR performance.

However, these studies typically address the issue of emerging market MNEs seeking legitimacy in developed countries and they are predominantly concerned with market stakeholders. Exceptions include a study of MNEs during the political turmoil in Libya, which revealed that social strategies (*e.g.*, maintaining strong ties with important social groups, providing socially valuable goods) complement, and sometimes substitute for, political strategies focused on government (Darendeli & Hill, 2016).

To gain and retain their 'license to operate' and achieve a competitive advantage, firms need to 'win the hearts and minds' of key stakeholders (Henisz, 2017). This may be particularly challenging in the complex, dynamic, and uncertain environment of SSA, where the crucial stakeholders are host country states (An *et al.*, 2024) and typically located in rural, poor areas, and preserving the land as a heritage from their ancestors (Olabisi *et al.*, 2019). Despite some evidence of increased sensitivity towards 'responsible investment' by MNEs in SSA (Freitas & White, 2018), we know little about the 'social' legitimizing strategies used by MNEs in this region. A recent exploratory study of MNEs from Western Europe operating in Cameroon revealed that these firms gain legitimacy and try to build competitive advantage by engaging with local stakeholders through CSR and political strategies (An *et al.*, 2024). Selmier *et al.* (2015) examined MNEs operating in East Africa and revealed that some of them employ local leadership practices and regional languages such as Swahili to build sustainable relationships with stakeholders. D'Amelio *et al.* (2016) noticed that MNEs' engagement in increasing access to electricity in SSA countries is, at least to some extent, motivated by legitimacy seeking. They also found that MNEs from institutionally weak countries (*i.e*., those that generally suffer from a more acute lack of legitimacy), are more likely to use this legitimizing mechanism. Garrone *et al*. (2019) found that multinational enterprises (MNEs) are more successful in adopting electric infrastructure strategies if they come from countries with institutions similar to those in Africa.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We addressed a new and poorly recognized phenomenon and our research question was exploratory. Therefore, we used qualitative research methods, specifically employing a multiple-case study. To select case companies, we utilized purposeful sampling, focusing on Polish multinationals venturing into Sub-Saharan Africa, identified from publicly available data provided by the Ministry of Development and the Council of Investors in Africa. In 2016, when we were planning this research project, the Council of Investors in Africa comprised 10 firms. Contrary to the Council's name, most of its member enterprises were not actively involved in direct investment expansion into the African markets. However, some of the firms from the initial group that we originally wanted to include in our research project either withdrew from SSA (*e.g*., Navimor), stopped exporting to SSA (*e.g*., Feerum), or went bankrupt (Ursus). In the final sample used in the study presented in this article, we included three Polish MNEs that, as of 2023, had branches and subsidiaries registered in SSA countries and were actively selling their products and services in the region.

The primary source of data on the studied companies was semi-structured interviews conducted with key informants about the internationalisation strategy and social strategies used in SSA. Our interviewees were members of the management responsible for the internationalisation process and employees engaged in activities in African markets as indicated by them. All interviewees were males aged 40 to 55. In Company A, the largest in our sample and characterized by the greatest scale of operations in Sub-Saharan African countries, we conducted seven interviews, in Company B, the second-largest in size – five interviews, and in Company C – two interviews. We recorded and transcribed verbatim most interviews. In other cases, we took notes.

As our study is part of a larger research project: (Wąsowska *et al.*, 2024), data triangulation was possible by using diverse empirical material. Firstly, we utilized publicly available sources (financial reports and annual reports of the studied enterprises, newspaper articles, TV programs, and websites). Secondly, to better understand the context in which Polish enterprises operate, we conducted interviews with their stakeholders (diplomatic missions, non-governmental organisations, government agencies, and representatives of local communities) in Poland, Angola, and Nigeria. The latter two countries are among the largest economies in Sub-Saharan Africa and are important directions for the expansion of Polish enterprises. Thirdly, we used archival sources (gathered, among others, in the Archive of Modern Records in Warsaw), and we conducted interviews with eight diplomats with experience in African countries. In total, the study utilized interviews with 13 representatives of Polish enterprises (see Table 1). We used additional 40 interviews in triangulation (including eight with Polish diplomats in SSA countries and 32 with other stakeholders, including politicians, researchers, and NGO activists).

Table 1. Firm characteristics

Firm	Industry	Year of establishment	Employment	Sales revenues (in mln PLN)	Markets	Informants
A	IT services	1991	32 700	17400	SSA: Nigeria, Ethiopia, Angola	- Member of the supervisory board - Member of the management board - 3 middle-level managers - Managers of 2 subsidiaries in SSA
B	Semi-trailer production	1996	3100	3433	SSA: Cote d'Ivoire	- Member of the management board - Regional director - Legal counselor - Manager
C	Geosynthetic products and geotechnical services used in civil engineering	1960 (tannery) 1990 (PVC windows producer) 2010 (geosynthetic products and geotechnical services)	250	64	SSA: Rwanda, Nigeria	- Member of the management board - Communication Director

Source: own study.

We conducted the interviews between 2019 and 2020, and then, after the lifting of restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2022 and 2023. We conducted the first round of interviews in Poland, and the second round – mainly in Angola and Nigeria, in both English and Polish. We completed the data collection process in December 2023.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The studied companies had a diverse approach towards social strategies (Table 2).

Table 2. Social strategies: Firm comparison

Activity	Firm A	Firm B	Firm C
Transfer of know-how from HQ to local subsidiary	X		
Transfer of knowledge from home country to local business partners		X	
Corporate philanthropy initiated by the company	X		
Support of charity initiatives organized by Polish stakeholders in the SSA (embassies, religious communities)			X
Avoiding potential pressure from social stakeholders (low capital commitment)		X	

Source: own study.

When asked about their social strategies in SSA, managers of Company A provided three examples. Firstly, they emphasised the role of the transfer of know-how from Polish headquarters to subsidiaries in SSA as an example of 'social value creation.' For instance, the company created a team composed of Polish and local employees, who worked partially in Poland and partially in Ethiopia. Over the four years of the project's realisation, approximately 50 Ethiopian employees visited Poland to learn and take this knowledge back to their home country. This attempt to create 'social value' in host societies constitutes a source of differentiation vis-à-vis developed markets MNEs, compared to which Company A – despite being one of the largest Polish MNEs – is considered 'small.' As one of our informants explained:

> We believe that this is our attribute or something that we want to give to our partners in Africa, something which these big corporations do not give (...). We offer them the opportunity to work together and transfer know-how to them. In our strategy, we strongly emphasize the so-called local component, *i.e.*, we want to build skills on-site. We also aim to develop services through this social dimension based on the people we educate locally. This strategy has started to yield very good results. [A2]

Company A is one of the largest Polish MNEs. However, when compared to Western competitors, its scale is limited. The company's founder is still present on the management board, the firm's structure is flat, the decision-making process is flexible, and African operations are run mostly on an 'entrepreneurial' basis with a broad scope of autonomy for decision-makers responsible for the region. According to our informants, these are the reasons why Company A is more adaptive when it comes to formulating its social strategy. In contrast, Western competitors are unwilling to transfer their knowledge to African countries. As explained:

> It is because of corporate rules. They do not share knowledge about their data sources. These companies are spread across Africa and have branches also in trade. They operate only in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, and Egypt. In four places. In other countries, they operate through local companies that represent them or, at best, have a single person that they hire as a representative. And they sell their licenses there, and that is all they care about. So, from that point of view, we are the ones who are attractive. We offer something more in Africa; we offer them on-site competence building and on-site service. [A1]

Secondly, besides the transfer of know-how, Company A engaged in corporate philanthropy, albeit to a limited extent. For example, they invited one of the best-known Ethiopian pianists to Poland and financed his recordings of an album with music composed by Chopin. Apart from being purely philanthropic, this initiative aimed at bridging the distance between Poland and Ethiopia. As our informant explains:

> What we did was not well thought out, [but] somehow smart. We just agreed and did it. We walked around, gave away his albums to our local partners, etc. It was kind of maybe accidental, and the average Ethiopian did not get anything out of it. Besides, you cannot help 100 million Ethiopians. [A1]

Thirdly, Company A supported charity initiatives organized by Polish embassies in SSA. For example, it co-financed the so-called 'diplomatic fairs' organized on the occasion of national days, when the embassies buy sweets and other food from each other, and they offer their earnings to charity.

Company A resists pressure from host country stakeholders to offer its products on non-market terms. As one of our informants explains:

> For example, in Nigeria, we were giving a presentation to energy companies in the presence of the Minister of Energy, and suddenly one of the directors of these energy companies asks, 'If you want to do something here, then give it to us for free.' And we keep hearing it over and over again-give something for free, provide subsidies, make donations. It is so obvious to them that it is really bad. That is how I see it because it should not be obvious. I believe that these countries should be helped, but not in such a way as to bring them more and more money. [A1]

Managers of Company B admit that they do not follow any specific social strategies in SSA, other than supporting their local partners so that they can develop their businesses. Other than that, the Company managers do not feel the need to engage in social initiatives. As explained by one of our respondents:

> We do not have the scale, or the reach that would make us visible in the eyes of local communities. [B2]

The company limits its capital exposure to SSA markets to a minimum and its operations have a purely commercial nature. The regional manager of Company B has extensive experience in SSA, gained in other companies, and he is well aware of the social complexities involved in operating in SSA. As he explains:

> Of course, ESG has a pragmatic dimension, *i.e.*, certain *strings attached* to specific projects, for example, in a situation where production activities run through areas where people live – actions are taken with the anticipation that they will make local stakeholders happy. I used to work in a cement plant and we had to build a wall for our business, which could potentially disturb people on site. We had two choices: either we go in the direction of confrontation, and someone breaks down this wall, or we try to prevent it, for example, by building a hospital or a school. [B2]

Although Company B is involved in large infrastructure projects, its business relies on delivering semi-trailers to the construction sites. The responsibility for legitimizing the construction projects in the eyes of local communities is in the hands of the partners of Company B. As the manager explains:

> We are currently involved in a project in Guinea where one of the partners (the mine) is making efforts to please the local community (*e.g.*, by drilling for water). We provide transport equipment for the project. It is a significant project with a considerable environmental impact in an area where nothing has happened so far. However, the mine has to take responsibility for that. [B2]

For Company B, avoiding pressure from government and community stakeholders is an important factor in shaping the internationalisation strategy. One of the reasons why Company B decided to make a negligible capital commitment abroad is not to feel this pressure. As our interlocutor explains:

> I avoid working on public projects. In fact, we have not had interaction with a public institution for a long time. Our model is 'asset light.' While these markets are quite numerous, they are small from our perspective. This model allows us to avoid getting involved in the long-estab-

> lished, laborious, and complicated process that often generates corruption when building relations, especially with the administration. To a lesser extent, we have to consider complicated social dependencies and government interdependencies. [B2]

Company C focuses its CSR activities in SSA on supporting Polish missionaries and religious communities engaged in charitable activities in SSA. For example, it supports the Congregation of Franciscan Sisters Servants of the Cross from Poland, which operates a school for blind children in one of the poorest regions in Rwanda. As described by our informant:

> We try to do our best to meet their needs—whether their car breaks down, they have an accident, or they need support in any other way. [C1]

Managers of Company C admit that cooperation with missionaries and religious communities gives them access to local knowledge and understanding of the society. As our informant explained:

> The administration presents to a potential investor a very rosy picture, one that does not reveal the darker sides. On the other hand, the monks, some of whom were in Rwanda during the civil war and the genocide, know how these tensions in society were distributed then and how they are still prevalent. They are a valuable source of information about a potential investment but also about local people – their needs and shortcomings. [C1]

While the approach to social strategies of the studied companies differs, none of them encountered any specific pressures or threats from host country stakeholders. In the broader material gathered in the process of data triangulation, we found an example of a Polish company (which no longer operates in SSA) that engaged in 'reactive' CSR to mitigate dangers and establish legitimacy in the eyes of local stakeholders. A manager of this company declared in the Polish press:

> We had a problem with fuel thefts. Every now and then our trucks or diggers had tanks totally emptied. Our managers started to visit the neighbouring villages, meeting important people. The company gifted some oxen, and some notebooks for the children. Then the thefts stopped. [Rzeczpospolita, 2013].

None of the studied firms encountered strong pressures from home country stakeholders either. One of our informants, a representative of the NGO sector, explained the lack of interest in the activities of Polish MNEs in SSA among the general public by the relatively early stage of development of civil society in Poland:

> What I see is that in fact, in some countries*, e.g.*, in the Scandinavian countries, or in the United Kingdom, civil society is able to create social pressure on large corporations that, for example, violate human rights by investing somewhere far away at some other end of the world, and this is the difference, because, for example, in Poland, I do not see such possibilities. (…) That is just the way it is and we do not ask companies such questions, especially large companies, because the small ones usually just follow the lead of the larger ones. [T1]

Another reason is the relatively low interest in developing countries in general, and the region of SSA in particular, both in the government, the public, and NGOs. As explained by our informant:

> Everything that appears in the media about poorer countries is a very stereotypical message. It is unfortunate but in my opinion, NGOs often contribute to the perpetuation of this stereotypical image of poorer countries, according to which they have nothing and people are unaware of anything which is obviously untrue. [T1]

One further reason is the lack of pressure from governmental institutions. Although some Polish firms receive state support in their internationalisation efforts (*e.g.*, by receiving export insurance), it is not used as leverage to put pressure on CSR, a fact that raises critical comments from activists:

> There are those moments when the private sector uses public money, and then, in my opinion, this is the moment when we can say that this public support is followed by some

> standards that should be met. (…) But in our country, all this is done in such a way as to make the life of our companies as miserable as possible, and, of course, the assumption is always that because they compete in this global market and do not have such a strong position, the Polish state must do everything to support them. We absolutely cannot do anything that could in any way discourage them from investing. [T1]

Activists do criticize the state's insufficient interest in the corporate responsibility of Polish MNEs operating in developing countries. However, they, or the NGO sector in general, do not exert pressure on any specific Polish firm operating in SSA. The only example of activists' criticism directed towards Polish MNEs was related to one MNE operating in the extractive industry (which, as of today, has almost entirely divested from SSA). The daughter of the founder (and sister of the family successor) runs a charity organisation active in SSA and is a public figure, hosting her own TV show about developing countries. One of our informants critically notes:

> On the occasion of her TV show and her work with this foundation, [she] has kind of taken over the narrative about how [the company] does good in the world. It. is very incomprehensible to me that it is so easy to adopt this narrative, and that basically, no one asks the question 'What about the core business?' [T1]

A critical article appeared in one of the leading Polish opinion magazines, in which activists criticized the 'hypocrisy' of the family and the discrepancy between 'signalling' CSR through philanthropic activity and low transparency regarding the social and environmental impact of the 'core business.' In response to this article, there have been other articles defending the activity of multinationals as actors 'implementing the market principles of the economy' and thus contributing to poverty reduction in host countries. This case illustrates ideological divisions, evident in the discourse on the activities of international corporations in developing countries. However, the existing research shows that the impact of MNEs is multifaceted and cannot be analysed in 'black' or 'white' terms. On the one hand, MNEs, the key actors of globalisation, play an important role in the development of both home and host economies and often become agents of positive changes in the institutional environment of the countries they operate in (Oetzel & Doh, 2009). However, they may also behave in a 'socially irresponsible' way, supporting corrupt regimes, and contributing to pollution and human rights violations (Giuliani *et al.*, 2023; Iborra & Riera, 2023). In summary, their socioeconomic value depends on specific actions they undertake in a given setting and the extent to which these actions are aligned with the ideas of CSR, responsible investment, and fair trade (*e.g.*, Rosińska-Bukowska, 2022; Zysk, 2016).

Discussion

Our research question focused on if, how, and for what reasons Polish companies entering the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) markets undertake social strategies. From the theoretical and practical point of view, like many other corporate activities, social strategies can be accidental or systemic. Accidental strategies would consist of occasional moves addressing temporal pressures or opportunities, while systemic strategies would be elaborate, ongoing, and linked to the company's overall strategy and especially the need for legitimisation (Frynas *et al.*, 2017). At the same time, we can associate social strategies with low or high engagement in terms of resources and time devoted to these activities. Based on the conducted research, we can conclude that the social involvement of Polish companies in SSA is limited, as the social strategies of the studied companies are low-engagement and accidental.

Examples of forms of community involvement include knowledge transfer (Company A and, to a small extent, Company B) and sporadic philanthropic activities (Company A and Company C), usually initiated by Polish stakeholders located in SSA (*e.g.*, embassies and religious congregations). We can divide the reasons why Polish companies engage socially in the market and relational ones. The former includes knowledge transfer aimed at differentiating competitors from Western countries (Company A) and supporting the development of local business partners, thus contributing to the development of the company itself (Company B). To some extent, philanthropic activities seem to focus on creating relations with local partners and building a positive image of Poland, as the country of origin, in the eyes of stakeholders. An example of this is the co-financing of an album with Chopin's music by Company A. At the same time, an important reason for undertaking philanthropic activities seems to be the desire to maintain friendly relations with stakeholders from Poland (Company A, Company C). None of the surveyed companies engaged in social activities aimed at mitigating potential threats posed by stakeholders (*e.g.*, local communities).

We propose the following explanation of the surprisingly limited and accidental engagement of Polish companies in SSA in their social strategies. Firstly, the limited social involvement of companies operating in SSA is linked to external conditions and the lack of pressure from both stakeholders in the home country and the target market. Secondly, it is associated with the characteristics of the examined companies, particularly the small scale of their operations. Model 1 illustrates the hypothetical relationships between these two answers, which should guide future research on this phenomenon.

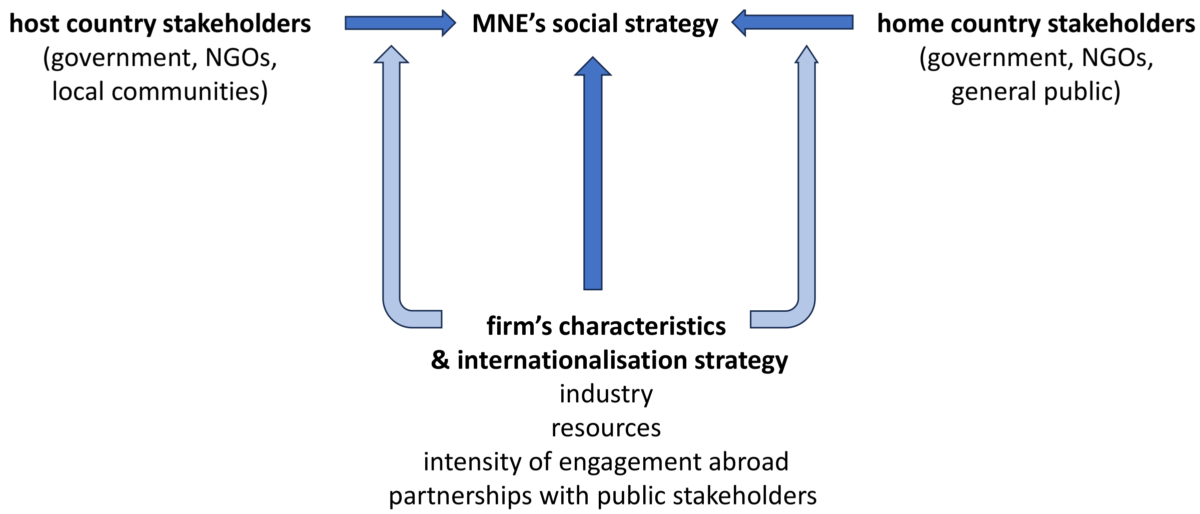

Figure 1. Drivers of MNE's social strategy
Source: own elaboration.

Firstly, we propose that the social strategy of an MNE will depend on the firm's characteristics and its internationalisation strategy. This relationship reflects the internal drivers of MNEs' social strategies, grounded most probably in the firm's resources and its overall internationalisation strategy. Secondly, we argue that the MNE's social strategy will depend on external pressures from stakeholders in the destination country (including government, NGOs, and local communities) and in the country of origin (including government, NGOs, and the public). The strength of this pressure depends on stakeholders' values, needs, and organisation. At the same time, the strength of this pressure is moderated by company-specific factors (such as the size of the company and the industry in which it operates) and its internationalisation strategy, including the intensity of its involvement abroad and the extent to which the company benefits from the support of (and thus is dependent on) the public sector in its internationalisation. Companies that are larger and more endowed in resources (and, therefore, more visible) and operate in industries with a high environmental impact (*e.g.*, mining) will be more affected by stakeholder pressure. Similarly, firms that are more heavily involved in a particular market and more dependent on the government sector (acting as a customer in the target market or as a financing provider in the home country) will feel more pressure from stakeholders.

None of the companies included in our sample felt strong stakeholder pressure in either the country of origin or the country of destination. The lack of strong pressures in the host countries may be due to the fact that all the surveyed companies were relatively small (compared to their competitors from the West) and operated in industries that are relatively neutral for the environment and local communities. Company B was the only one participating in projects with potential environmental impact. It manages potential stakeholder pressure through a specific internationalisation strategy, which involves minimal asset involvement in the foreign market. On the other hand, the lack of pressure from stakeholders in the country of origin may result from the relatively low interest in the SSA region as well as its rather stereotypical image in Polish society and among agencies overseeing this region. Moreover, the issue of social responsibility of Polish multinational corporations does not seem to be an important area of interest for Polish stakeholders. For example, for the Polish government, supporting the very presence of companies abroad (through the "Go Africa" program) seems to be more important than promoting 'socially responsible' activities or assessing the business or social effects of this program.

CONCLUSIONS

We conclude that Polish infant MNEs undertake social strategies in SSA to gain legitimacy and build competitive advantage, which makes them similar to developed market MNEs, as recently studied by An *et al.* (2024). However, the strategies employed by Polish firms are characterized by low engagement and are often accidental. The limited social involvement of companies operating in SSA is due to external conditions (*i.e.*, lack of pressure from both stakeholders in the home country and the target market) and the characteristics of the examined companies, particularly the small scale of their operations. Unlike MNEs from developed countries or large developing economies, such as China (*e.g.*, Garrone *et al.*, 2019), Polish firms are in the early stages of their SSA expansion. Our study suggests that, at least at this stage, they do not engage in systemic social strategies in SSA markets.

The study allowed us to formulate some practical conclusions. Firstly, operating in a demanding institutional environment, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, requires managers to navigate often conflicting pressures from social and political stakeholders in the target market. Companies with limited resources, such as Polish infant multinationals, can address this challenge by avoiding stakeholder pressure (by limiting capital engagement) or by initially building relationships with stakeholders from their home country who are present in African markets (*e.g.*, religious communities or diplomats). Secondly, any institutional attempts to increase pressure for socially responsible activities (whether in the home country or in the target market) should be undertaken with caution, due to the risk of CSR decoupling or greenwashing.

Our findings have clear limitations which future research could address. Firstly, owing to the nascent stage of internationalisation among Polish firms in Africa, our sample is confined to three instances of MNEs in Sub-Saharan Africa. As more companies from Poland or CEE explore opportunities in Africa, a more comprehensive understanding should emerge to ascertain whether the observed patterns are widespread or if variations exist based on the characteristics of the studied companies. For instance, exploring how companies engaged in more 'sensitive' industries (*e.g.*, the extractive industry) navigate their relationships with stakeholders could provide valuable insights. Secondly, our model, developed on the basis of qualitative data, requires validation through quantitative data, preferably in diverse home and host country settings. Thirdly, our model contains three main independent constructs that are rather general: pressures of country-of-origin stakeholders, pressures of host country stakeholders, and firms' characteristics and internationalisation strategy. Further research should make these variables more specific and allow for the evaluation of their dynamics. Finally, further comparative research should address the question of whether and how the social strategies of emerging market MNEs entering SSA differ from those of developed market MNEs.

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