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# Guest editorial: Investigating and evaluating multi-level analysis of sustainable business practices in emerging countries

Guest editorial

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## Introduction

Several emerging economies and regions have been following developed countries in being proactive in terms of setting sustainability standards in various industries and in accordance to the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals. With the aim of transforming their countries into competitive, responsible and sustainable participants in the global economy, governments across many emerging countries are refocusing their efforts on economic development, particularly since the global financial crisis of 2008. These efforts come on the back of government policy initiatives which encompasses environmental, economic, cultural and social standards to foster sustainable business activities. Today, companies from emerging countries account for about one-third of the Fortune Global 500 list of the largest corporations (Global 500 website; Meyer and Peng, 2016; Pereira and Malik, 2017), and they significantly contribute to the evolving and complex global economy and competition landscape.

However, there is limited knowledge of how the above prescriptions and recommendations at the above supranational, regional or national levels are followed at industry and organizational levels. Moreover, while the existing management, strategy and organization strands of literature have focused predominantly on the BRICS countries, there are far fewer studies on many of the other important emerging countries, such as those in the emerging South American, African, Eastern European and other Asian countries (Buckley *et al.*, 2007; Luo and Tung, 2007; Gaur *et al.*, 2018; Khanna and Palepu, 2004; Aulakh *et al.*, 2016; Contractor *et al.*, 2014; Ciftci, 2019). This is an important gap in the literature due to the heterogeneous nature of emerging countries and their companies' involvement in sustainable business practices. There is certainly a difference across multiple levels.

The literature shows at the macro-level (i.e. at supra-national, regional and country level) that one can identify differences of the national sustainability agenda and to what extent this is linked to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (George *et al.*, 2016). At the meso-level (i.e. at industry level), there are several key industries that would generate most of the emerging countries GDP (McKinsey Global Institute, 2018). In this sense, it is important to highlight the industry differences when it comes to sustainability practices. At the micro-level (i.e. organizational, team or group and individual level), there is evidence of firm-specific activities that lead to differences in sustainable practices, which in turn is able to set some firms apart from their competitors (Duarte, 2017; El Haddad *et al.*, 2018).

However, apart from the lack of evidence from many wider emerging countries, there is a recent emphasis on micro-foundational analysis in various contexts, such as the general strategy literature and increasingly the global strategy literature (Contractor, Foss, Kundu and Lahiri, 2018). This type of analysis allows the researcher to delve into decision-making processes at the individual level. It is envisaged that there would be several positive advantages for different levels of stakeholders by identifying the root nature, motivation



and thought processes of the management in deriving at certain sustainability practices. This highlights the urgent need for research that investigates the many unique and complex micro-foundational characteristics that influence a firm's sustainability decisions.

### **Papers in this special issue**

The focus of this special issue is to offer new insights into the unique aspects of sustainability activities from a micro-foundational perspective which can then be linked to firm-, industry-, country- and supranational-levels. More specifically, we aim to show how local, as well as foreign firms, align their sustainability activities to the national and supranational agenda. Based on this, we attracted ten good contributions on this topic. Our call welcomed conceptual and empirical papers using quantitative, qualitative and or mixed-methods approaches that address one of the indicative (but not exclusive or intended to be comprehensive) following themes:

- What are the unique sustainability practices of local and foreign firms in emerging countries? (Local versus foreign, glocal, indigenous practices).
- How do local and foreign firms align their sustainability practices with the national and supranational agenda's? (convergence, divergence, crossvergence, multivergence).
- How do local and foreign firms formulate optimal sustainability practices? (optimization of sustainable practices).
- How do domestic and foreign multinational firms cope with the challenges when entering and operating in other emerging countries, in terms of other unique political, religious, cultural and commercial environments? (overcoming challenges in the context of sustainability practices).
- How do firms compare in their sustainability practices across emerging countries? (comparing and contrasting).
- To what extent do firms in emerging markets follow the same path of global best practices elsewhere? (best practices versus best fit).

We received 18 paper submissions of which we accepted a total of ten papers for this special issue. In what follows, we categorize the accepted papers based on the above bullet points. In doing so, we have identified several thematic areas on the topic of sustainability in an emerging country context. We, thus, contribute to an important topic of discussion and debate, and we envisage that this special issue will encourage scholars to extend scholarship in this area.

#### *Theme 1: Local versus foreign, glocal, indigenous practices*

This first paper under this first theme titled "Challenges and opportunities for social entrepreneurs in civil engineering in Brazil," by Vasconcellos, Leso and Cortimiglia. This paper systematically aims to identify challenges and opportunities for social entrepreneurs in civil engineering in Brazil to support researchers, entrepreneurs, government and other actors. Based on the UN's Social Development Goals, the authors created a framework, which focused on the social enterprises (SEs) in the context of civil engineering. The authors used a grounded theory approach, involving interviews with entrepreneurs and researchers from each category of the framework. The 39 SEs found are equally divided into four categories: "sustainability," "housing," "transportation" and "sanitation." The authors found six dimensions of challenges and/or opportunities for social entrepreneurs. Three elements

of these dimensions describe relevant opportunities. These include opportunities for SEs with ecosystem supporters, specialized investors and partnership with major companies. Government and early investment are the most relevant sources of challenges. The authors also identified practical implications, such as how the government should offer financial and technical support for SEs in civil engineering, using the “Startup Brazil” as a case and further define how supporters and its investment would generate social and financial value. Overall, in terms of its contributions, this paper provides evidence of originality/value by focusing on civil engineering SE in Brazil, wherein it sheds relevant light in a high impact sector, not previously studied. In conclusion, we the editors recommend that as this research focuses on a highly specific sector and country, in future this focus needs to extend to other sectors and countries.

The next paper under this theme is titled “Prioritizing Green HRM Practices from policy maker’s perspective: a study of United Arab Emirates (UAE),” by Mehrajunnisa and Jabeen. The purpose of this study is to identify and prioritizing Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) practices from policymaker’s perspective in the UAE-based manufacturing and service sectors. In terms of its methodological approach, this study uses the analytic hierarchy process (AHP) to prioritizing GHRM practices from policymaker’s perspective in the UAE-based manufacturing and service sectors. The AHP model was developed with seven criteria and 28 sub-criteria based on previous literature. Data included interviews with 24 policymakers at top management level. The respondents were selected from UAE-based manufacturing and service units. The data collected were interpreted, and a priority vector was assigned to each criterion and sub-criterion. The findings of this research portray themes such as- Top Management Orientation for Green, Green Organizational Culture, and Green Organizational Strategic Planning, which are the most important enablers that promote GHRM practices in the UAE manufacturing and service units. We suggest that in future there is a need to conduct similar studies in other Gulf Cooperation Council countries, due to the governmental and cultural homogeneity. Overall this study contributes by helping policymakers and organizations in the developing countries to adopt the best GHRM practices towards green goal agenda and sustainable economy and facilitating green performance. Further, in spite of the theoretically important role of GHRM, when it comes to lack of studies ranking or prioritizing the enablers to various GHRM practices in the developing countries, there are scant studies. The authors claim that this study is the first of its kind to propose an AHP model based on AMO theory that ranks the GHRM practices from policymaker’s perspective in the UAE, based on major GDP contributing sectors.

*Theme 2: convergence, divergence, crossvergence, multivergence*

This is the first paper under this research theme, titled “Impact of online social media activities on marketing of green products” by Gupta and Ali. The focus of this paper is to identify and empirically analyze and validate the relationship between various social media marketing activities influencing attitude of Indian consumers towards green products available in the market and their willingness to pay a premium price for them. The methodology adopted by these authors for this study was through collection of responses from 536 respondents, who not only uses various social media channels for purchases and gaining information, but also prefers and buys green products across India. The authors used exploratory factor analysis for the refinement and validation of the questionnaire items. Further, the authors of this paper used structural equation modeling (SEM) to analyze the relationship among various variables. The key findings of the empirical study confer consumer’s attitude towards green products, shaped by four main social media marketing

activities, namely, word of mouth, interaction, entertainment and customization while trendiness was found to be insignificant towards predicting consumer's attitude. This paper provides evidence of a positive attitude formed, which has a significant and positive impact on willingness of consumers to pay a premium price for green products. Thus, this paper contributes as it has practical implications that involve helping policymakers and marketers in identifying various social media marketing approaches that create an optimistic attitude of Indian consumers for the different green products and services available in the market. The strategy makers and the proactive marketers would thus be able to formulate strategies for creating willingness of consumers to purchase green products. Overall, this research takes a lead in analyzing the construct Willingness to Pay a Premium for green products, less explored in an Indian context.

The next study under this research theme is titled "Green technology transfer in developing country: mainstream practitioner views," by Hoang, Hoang and Nguyen. This paper aims to explore green technology transfer through the perceptions of both business managers and technology specialists, identified in this paper, as the foremost practitioners of this exercise. The authors conducted twenty-two semi-structured interviews with business leaders and technology scientists. The interviewees shared their views on the motivations for importing green technology; their familiarity with, knowledge of, and understanding of green technology transfer and the current green technology performance in their organization; the key strengths of green technology transfer and its limitations; the barriers to the use of green technology; and their usefulness. The authors employed Oliver's (1991) theoretical framework of actors' resistance to institutional demands, as a theoretical lens to investigate the perceptions of the interviewees. Key findings from this study suggests that despite some benefits of the adoption of green technology, such as increasing competitive advantage and improving green operations, there are huge concerns over the use and importation of green technology. More specifically, results from this study also suggested that almost all the technicians were concerned about the technical risks resulting from the lack of operational tests, the old technologies and the lack of knowledge transfer. Interestingly however, it was reported by respondents (business managers) that the paucity of specific regulations, guidance and environmental standards was one of the primary constraints for this movement. Overall, this research contributes to the emerging literature on green technology transfers in the developing world. It proves that the lack of communication and the scarcity of a true champion for green technology efforts have reduced the efficiency of green technology transfer. Practically too, this piece contributes as it sheds light on the intricate nature of the relationships arising from GT adoption in organizations. In doing so, this paper aims to support business leaders and standard setters in making a decision regarding the implementation and promotion of green technology transfer, especially in the context of developing countries. The author here claim that this is one of the first studies to explore eco-friendly technology transfers in a developing country from the micro-level perspective of both business and technology practitioners of green technology-recipient organizations.

### *Theme 3: optimization of sustainable practices*

The first paper under this research theme is titled "Internal flexibility in healthcare organizations: a value-laden perspective on sustainability," by Kumar. This study aims to identify the constituents of internal flexibility in health-care organizations for achieving sustainability. The study incorporates resources-based theory and resource dependence theory to illustrate how health-care organizations exhibit internal flexibility to redress environmental uncertainties and maximize organizational responsiveness. This paper

conducts a case study in a health-care organization to explore how health-care organizations acquire several resources for attaining internal flexibility. The authors conduct a survey of health-care professionals, to assess the relevant relationships, using PLS-SEM. Key findings from this study indicate and identify the dimensions of internal flexibility in health-care organizations. This study also established internal flexibility as a higher-order factor and explained its underlying aspects as a value-laden perspective on sustainability. As this study was conducted in the public health-care context in India, we as editors suggest that in future this framework needs testing in other country and industry contexts. Further, we envisage that in future, the sample size for studies is not limited to health-care professionals and that customer's perspective is included. Overall, this study contributes to the extant literature by identifying the specific dimensions of internal flexibility and explains as a higher-order factor. The authors further claim that it further contributed by enhancing the understanding of sustainability from a flexibility perspective of the firm.

The next submission contributing to this research theme titled "MNE's sustainability strategies in emerging and developing markets" is by Garri. It focuses on how in today's day and age, companies move away from their traditional rent-gaining strategies. It identifies how they pursue triple bottom-line results by implementing economic, environmental and social sustainability strategies. This paper unravels the main drivers of MNEs sustainability behavior in emerging and developing markets. In addition, it clarifies whether sustainability is industry-specific, highlighting the effect of the industry on sustainability development. In terms of its methodology, this paper uses the lens of positivism and a deductive research approach to develop and test propositions through a case study strategy. They analyze the sustainability strategies and practices of five MNEs belonging in five different industries. The key findings from this paper identify and show that strategic leadership and strategic behavior/orientation are among the most important drivers of sustainability strategies development in emerging and developing markets. The sustainability strategies and practices are partially industry-specific. Some of them relate to the industry the company belongs. The paper also however identifies that all the companies they studied had undertaken activities that go beyond the mitigation of their negative impact, by offering support to local communities and by protecting the environment in numerous ways. Overall, the paper contributes in the following way. In terms of its originality/value, the majority of literature has explained sustainability as an attempt of the MNEs to cover institutional voids and the absence/failings of the state. This paper contributes to the exploration of sustainability strategies of MNEs in developing and emerging markets, by identifying the internal influences that drive sustainability (strategic leadership/behavior) and by linking this behavior to industrial influences.

#### *Theme 4: overcoming challenges in the context of sustainability practices*

The first paper under this research theme is titled "A multi-level analysis of sustainability practices in Ghana: examining the timber, cocoa, and goldmining industries," by Hess. The purpose of this paper is to examine the macro-, meso- and micro-level approaches to building sustainability in Ghana's timber, cocoa and goldmining industries as Ghana works to align sustainability efforts with the Sustainable Development Goals proposed by the UN. The authors contribute through a synthesis of contemporary literature on Ghana's timber, cocoa and goldmining industries was used to provide a descriptive evaluation of sustainability efforts in those industries. The authors find that at the macro-level, Ghana continues to invest in infrastructure, privatize industries and develop an urban development agenda to encourage FDI, improved forest management and green building policies and there is a reduction of galamsey. The authors also find that at the meso-level, the timber industry

encourages land reclamation and green building technologies; the cocoa industry works to replenish lost trees, develop supply-chain partnerships and encourage certifications. The authors of this paper argue that goldmining industry works to regulate informal mining and reduce galamsey and the use of toxins in exploration. Further findings from this paper suggest that at the micro-level, alignment has developed between the micro- and meso-levels in the cocoa and goldmining industries, whereas micro-level players in the timber industry are less successful given its large, unregulated informal sector. Overall, though the literature is missing discussion on the alignment of macro-, meso- and micro-level approaches to sustainability in Ghana's timber, cocoa and goldmining industries with attention to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, this is a timely attempt to address this crucial gap.

The next paper identified as part of this research theme is titled "Sustainable business practices and challenges in Asia: a systematic review," by Lathabhavan. The purpose of the study is to review and analyze the sustainable business practices prevailing in different emerging countries in Asia. This paper also describes the challenges these emerging countries face for the implementation of sustainable practices. The method chosen for the study was a computerized search of available materials using the keywords relating to sustainable business practices in selected emerging countries in Asia and latest reports from international organizations. Key findings from this paper include the authors identifying that organizations in Asian countries are more concerned about environmental aspects and start investing more on sustainable business practices. The authors also identify that this fact is though Asian organizations face many challenges during the implementation. Overall, this study contributes by helping to understand the current sustainable practices, helping organizations and policymakers to think about new practices or improvisation on the existing scenario. We, the editors, note that as the study is limited to restricted geographical reach, future studies can consider more geographical areas and more sectors for analysis, as well as empirical studies. This paper also contributes by identifying for managers and policymakers, how organizations can adopt sustainable practices and employee requirements while implementing such training based on the need of the organization. The authors finally claim that they contribute through this paper as they analyze the challenges, the policymakers can implement policies considering the shortcomings in the existing system.

#### *Theme 5: comparing and contrasting*

This paper fits under the above research theme and titled "Impact of perceived organizational support on employee performance in IT firms – a comparison among Pakistan and Saudi Arabia," by Sabir, Ali, Majid, Rheman and Mehmood. The purpose of this research is to evaluate the influence of perceived organizational support on employee's performance of employees working in IT firms of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The authors claim that, organizational support is critical as it ensures support given by organization to workers, as this aids in employees to complete their job proficiently and effectively. Methodologically, the authors collected data from employees working in IT firms. In terms of numbers, 400 questionnaires were distributed, 200 in each country's IT firms. A total of 383 completed questionnaires were received (190 from Pakistan and remaining 183 from Saudi Arabia) representing a response rate of 95%. The authors developed relevant hypothesis and tested these using confirmatory factor analyses. The authors then analyzed the direct relations confirmed using AMOS v25. The key results from this study indicate that the perceived organizational support and affective commitment have significant positive impact on employees job performance. Further key findings from this study suggest that perceived organizational support and affective commitment directly and



significantly correlated ( $r = 0.439^{**}$ ;  $P < 0.05$ ) and ( $r = 0.489^{**}$ ;  $P < 0.05$ ) with dependent variable employees performance, respectively. On other hand, results of SEM based on maximum likelihood estimates indicate that perceived organizational support and affective commitment have significant and positive impact ( $\beta = 0.284$ ;  $P < 0.01$ ) and ( $\beta = 0.370$ ;  $P < 0.01$ ) on employees' performance. Moreover, findings also indicate that the affective commitment partially mediates the relationship between perceived organizational support and employee's job performance. As editors, we note that though these outcomes are not generalizable, the authors analyzed working employees in the IT firms in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The authors too raise this and state that the relationship among perceived organizational support and employee's performance. We suggest that in future the topic needs researching and studying, longitudinally. Further, because of the ambiguity of human feeling and acknowledgment, the authors also acknowledge that assessing employee's performance and their needs accurately is a challenge. However, this research proposes, what the authors claim, a straightforward and handy model that supports managers to feature most powerful factors in building up their employee's performance. Overall, this study contributes by proposing practical ways, in which the managers provide opportunities to proficient advancement, to improve occupations and to satisfy the necessities identified with deference, mindful and endorsement. Furthermore, the authors suggest that organizations ought to provide working conditions, for example, by supporting workers in their wants for self-improvement and accomplishment. The research additionally recommends recording the unmistakable standard operation procedure to clarify understanding for employees. In conclusion, the authors recommend that managers invest time and effort in their front-line employees through socialization and training. These efforts, the authors claim, could limit passionate fatigue work fulfillment, organizational duty and enhance performance.

*Theme 6: best practices versus best fit*

This contribution fits the above research theme, titled "Corporate social responsibility disclosure on the websites of coffee chains in Turkey," by Tosun. The focus of this paper is on coffee chains in Turkey. The authors make a string argument for the rational of the choice of this topic by arguing that coffee is among the primary products that attract public attention to the social and environmental responsibilities of companies. They argue how coffee shops have a big carbon footprint because of their daily operations. Thus, with the rising consciousness about sustainability in developing countries, online disclosure of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is becoming increasingly important for not only multinational but also local coffee chains, is what the authors claim. The purpose of this study is thus to analyze the extent to which coffee chains include CSR on their websites. As Turkey is a large emerging economy with an expanding coffee chain market, the authors selected it as their research context. Methodologically, the authors claim that the CSR disclosure on the websites of coffee chains, examined for this research, and that content analysis according to CSR dimensions, would help answer their research questions. A sample of 27 coffee chains with more than ten stores is included in the analysis. Key findings from this research suggest that foreign coffee chains disclose more information on the environment and fair-trade than local coffee chains. On the other hand, CSR content on websites of foreign and local coffee chains does not differ significantly in human resources and community dimensions. Foreign coffee chains have comparatively longer brand history, more rooted brands and larger networks than local coffee chains. In conclusion, the authors claim that this study is the first that used a content analysis about CSR on the websites of coffee chains in Turkey. Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of CSR

### Conclusions and reflections

The world is beset by challenges that threaten people's health, the environment, sustainable economic progress and prosperity for all. The management and organizational literature sheds some light on how the UN Sustainable Development Goals are incorporated at different levels in society. However, this effort is still in infancy due to many unanswered questions with regards to theoretical and empirical understanding of the relationship between how best to achieve sustainable business practices in different countries, particularly in emerging markets that will experience the highest growth rates in the world for the foreseeable future.

The articles we present in this special issue add new insights and understanding to the way in which emerging market firms in the mining sector, manufacturing as well as the services sector can achieve sustainability in all its facets. These range from indigenous practices of social entrepreneurs in Brazil, green HRM practices in the UAE, the impact of social media on the marketing of green products, a practitioner's view on how to transfer green technologies, internal flexibility in health-care organizations among other important issues. Each of the papers covers a different emerging market context from South America to Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Southern Europe. In addition, each paper uses different research methods across quantitative and qualitative designs in the quest for advancing theory and conceptual understanding on sustainability and each paper, importantly, offers recommendations to inform practice.

Recent events triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic have yet again highlighted the many shortcomings in management across public and private spheres across countries, industries, organizations and individuals. At the same time, however, we have seen the renewed resilience, ingenuity, innovativeness, agility and flexibility of people in their lives as well as employees in organizations in achieving best practice now as well as working toward the future. We hope that the management and organization literature continues to uncover how businesses resolve the sustainability challenge as well as practitioners and managers have the vision and will to transform their organization with the help of their governments.

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### Further reading

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