



A thematic analysis of the links between multinational enterprises' corporate social responsibility and the Sustainable Development Goals in Myanmar

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Abstract

Adopting textual analysis, we examine the links between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 30 foreign subsidiaries in Myanmar, a Country of Concern (CoC). The analysis covers the period from 2001 up to 2020. Our work contributes to the literature on SDGs and CSR in a CoC. We find that although multinational enterprises (MNEs) address community issues via philanthropy unrelated to their principal business, in some cases CSR is related to their core capability. Despite some diversity in CSR processes, we find that MNEs tackle limited CSR issues. Furthermore, MNEs' CSR generates positive externalities rather than reduce negative externalities. This finding confirms the discourse in international business policy suggesting MNEs focus on only positive externalities and ignoring negative externalities, and this neglect of negative externalities could result in a net-negative impact from their CSR. Nevertheless, we observe that CSR activities map onto all but one SDG, thus demonstrating the potential for further investment in CSR in Myanmar. Our study highlights that given a CoC is all about institutional weakness, MNEs' CSR must focus on strengthening institutions to bring about systemic changes in these contexts, as opposed to short-term 'bandage' approaches, otherwise, gains to SDGs will be short-lived.

Keywords Corporate social responsibility · Foreign direct investment · Multinational enterprises · Myanmar · Sustainable Development Goals · Country of Concern

Introduction

Sustainability and development have become the focal points on the agenda of governments across the globe. Global institutions such as the United Nations have adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Though SDGs are considered effective plans to achieve development (Liou & Rao-Nicholson, 2021; Rao-Nicholson & Liou, 2021; Wettstein et al., 2019; Zhan & Santos-Paulino, 2021), it is unclear how international business research contributes to solving grand challenges facing sustainability and development by incorporating SDGs (Buckley et al., 2017; Lashitew, 2021; van Tulder et al., 2021; Zhan, 2021). It has been observed that multinational enterprises (MNEs) may undertake international corporate responsibility to align with societal challenges such as SDGs (van Tulder, 2018). Montiel et al. (2021) have grouped 17 SDGs into six categories and suggested implementing these SDGs within an extended value chain and multinationals'

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investments in host-country communities. Liou and Rao-Nicholson (2021) argued that adopting a suitable subsidiary identity might help MNEs address their SDG goals in the host country. Furthermore, Rao-Nicholson and Liou (2021) note the potential role of national factors in explaining some of the differences observed in the SDG attainment from the activities of the MNEs.

In a similar vein of research, scholars have queried the role that context can play in limiting development, especially in conflict-affected and fragile states (Luiz et al., 2019) or states with dubious governance records like the apartheid government in South Africa (Ndiweni & Sibanda, 2020). For example, Knight (1990) notes that the US Anti-Apartheid Movement and the European Community-enforced trade sanctions (Lavery, 2007) influenced the businesses and institutional investors to reduce their activities in apartheid South Africa. The 1986 US Congress approved the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act, which led to further divestment from South Africa (Lavery, 2009; Levy, 1999). Similar sanctions in Iran led to declining living standards, increased unemployment, reduced opportunities, and job insecurity for women (Seyfi et al., 2022). Other countries like Myanmar, Cuba, Venezuela, Sudan, Pakistan, Libya, and Zimbabwe have experienced or are experiencing ongoing regional and international sanctions. Though these divestment activities were done as part of socially responsible corporate actions, they reduced foreign investment in this country, weakened several development indicators, and increased societal inequality.

Eid and Loon (2023) examine the context in Lebanon from the MNE perspective and note the development of several new capabilities by the MNE while operating in a fragile state. Furthermore, these MNEs were able to embed themselves in these communities and develop a strong socially responsible ethos. Nevertheless, none of the extant studies explicitly link these socially responsible corporate actions to SDGs. Therefore, following the call of van Zanten and van Tulder (2018), it is critical to consider the host country's institutional fragility and identify suitable corporate social responsibility (CSR) mechanisms to target SDGs and solve challenges in sustainability and development.

We selected Myanmar as a Country of Concern (CoC) case study due to concern over its political system and historical and contemporary rights violations, including those that impact personal religious freedom and cronyism (Asian Development Bank, 2018; Ford et al., 2016; Wintour, 2018). In this study, the categorization of Myanmar as a CoC is inspired by (and follows) Brammer et al. (2009). The period considered for this study (2001 to 2020—beginning with the economic opening up followed by a democratic change which was abruptly ended by a military coup in February 2020) is particularly pertinent because this brief era of 'openness' and investors' enthusiasm for Myanmar

(which peaked especially in 2011 until the military coup in 2020) was sandwiched between the socialist era and the return of the military era.

Throughout Myanmar's history, politics has dominated the economic structure and participation in the economy. From the political economy perspective, Myanmar has gone through the following five phases—isolation under the socialist party (until 1988), reopening and reintegration under military rule (1989 until 2010), the quasi-democratic period (until 2015), the democratic change (2016 until 2020) (Ford et al., 2020; Win, 2021), and the current coup era (February 2021 until the present). Ford et al. (2016), in their seminal paper on Myanmar's political economy, analyzed the development of the military-owned conglomerates, namely the businesses operated by the close associates of the military (locally known as 'cronies) and how these have impacted the economic structure where they occupied a disproportionately large share of the economy whereby large-scale projects were operated directly by a military company or its associates. When the military attacked the Rohingya ethnic minority groups in 2017/18, the UN Fact-Finding Mission report called on foreign investors to cut ties with the military (the Economic Interests of the Myanmar Military, 2019). A few years later, when the military staged a violent attack on protestors and civilians following the 2021 coup, this call was heightened, leading to sanctions being imposed on the military conglomerates, individuals, and associates, and some state-owned enterprises (Burma sanctions, 2019). In such an economy dominated largely by successive military governments and international advocacy groups' call to cut ties with the military, foreign investors have faced operational and reputational risks. Considering a country context where the government is unpopular with the international business community (especially with Western governments and institutions), we examine the CSR of foreign MNEs, mapping it to SDGs.

This study adds to previous works in Myanmar by authors like Meyer and Thein (2014) by exploring MNEs' CSR while maintaining operations in CoC. In contrast, Meyer and Thein (2014) studied MNEs' responses to pressure to divest from Myanmar in the 15 years of Western isolation (1997–2011), when Western investors faced pressures from their home-country stakeholders to disengage from Myanmar where the government had poor human rights records. Montiel et al. (2021) noted that MNEs have the potential to make the broadest and biggest change to the institutional environment of institutionally weak countries and address SDG gaps in these countries. MNEs can also play a role in filling the institutional void and forming institutions that can guide their activities towards sustainable development (van Zanten & van Tulder, 2018). Furthermore, Luiz et al. (2019) note that business environment reform has the potential to achieve sustainable development. Thus,

Myanmar, which was in transition to a semi-democratic rule (2001–2020) presents an interesting context to examine the MNEs' CSR activities and their potential links to SDGs.

Despite evidence that stakeholder management has helped bolster MNEs' legitimacy and reputation in Myanmar, a CoC, we know little about the issues and processes surrounding CSR and its links to SDGs. We ask: *How does foreign MNEs' CSR map to SDGs, what issues do they address, and through what processes do they achieve CSR in Myanmar?*

In addressing this question, our study makes two significant contributions to understanding how MNEs' CSR activities can address SDGs in the context of CoC. First, this study contributes to the stream of international business research, namely literature on global corporate sustainability. It echoes the call for international business research to contribute toward grand challenges such as SDGs (Buckley et al., 2017; Lashitew, 2021; Liou & Rao-Nicholson, 2021; van Tulder et al., 2021; van Zanten & van Tulder, 2018; Zhan, 2021; Zhan & Santos-Paulino, 2021). Since most prior literature considers one or two SDGs for their studies or considers SDGs as a single coherent, homogenous set for examination, they miss the differences in 17 targets and their implication for business activities (Montiel et al., 2021). Our study fills the gap in understanding how MNEs' CSR activities map onto SDGs in the local context and helps unpack the nuances of MNEs' CSR-SDG links in addition to the sustainability and CSR reports (van Zanten & van Tulder, 2018). We observe that although some MNEs leverage their core capability to address local issues, they typically rely on financial support and staff volunteering in most cases.

Second, our findings contribute to the literature on CSR issues and processes in Myanmar, a CoC. Our findings show that MNEs' CSR investments cover all but one SDG goal. Regarding CSR issues in Myanmar, our finding further reinforces Brammer et al.'s (2009) finding that in countries with limited political rights, it is common for MNEs to focus on issues unrelated to core business offerings. We find that MNEs engage in CSR activities that are focused on both SDGs and the firm's economic outcomes, though they engage in philanthropic responsibilities more often than CSR investments related to potential economic outcomes (Montiel et al., 2021), similar to what was evidenced by studies in other contexts (Muthuri & Gilbert, 2011; Visser, 2006). Williams and Barrett (2000) have shown the link between philanthropy and reputational effect. Yet, studies have also noted the Marmite effect of philanthropy in international business as it can be perceived as being linked to corruption in the host country (Luo, 2006; Rodriguez et al., 2006), or it can be seen as a vehicle for improving local living standards and international relations (Youde, 2019). Van Zanten and van Tulder (2018) find that 21 out of 81 surveyed Financial Times Global 500 MNEs with high engagement with SDG targets, tend to focus on internal actionable SDG

targets (90%) over external ones (10%), avoiding harm (71%) than doing good (29%). Furthermore, MNEs' CSR activities seem to be aimed at generating positive externalities rather than reducing negative externalities in this context (Montiel et al., 2021). However, van Zanten and van Tulder (2021) have pointed out that solely focusing on general positive externalities without addressing negative externalities can result in a significant net-negative impact.

The rest of the study is organized as follows: we develop the theoretical perspective of CSR-SDG implications for MNEs and discuss the institutional context of Myanmar. We follow this with data, methodology, and findings. We then conclude with a discussion section on the theoretical, policy and managerial implications of our study, the limitations of this study, and future avenues for research.

Literature review: SDGs, CSR issues and processes

The MNEs, which typically operate in multiple countries, might experience institutional contexts that are either conducive or challenging for international investments. Some of these countries might lack functional institutions, and an institutional voids perspective considers both market and non-market interactions of MNEs in addressing institutional limitations (Doh et al., 2017). Though most of the earlier works on CSR and SDGs consider domestic or stable host countries, the emerging research in this area has also focused on how MNEs can engage in conflict-ridden, volatile countries—CoC. In this research area, some studies have gone further and called for clear actions by MNEs to address the humanitarian crisis. It is observed that certain actions by the MNEs to do business in fragile states could perpetuate the crisis, implicitly condone the belligerents and aggravate the crisis. For example, the MNEs pay corrupt, authoritarian, and violent regimes for the safety of their operations and their employees in the host country (Hotho & Girschik, 2019). Thus, it is pertinent to look at works in the area of SDGs and CSR and identify a framework to conduct our examination of CSR and SDG activities in a CoC.

Sustainable development goals

The United Nations (UN) initiated eight Millennium Development Goals in 2000 to help transform developing countries (United Nations, 2000). It has expanded the eight goals into 17 SDGs to be achieved by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). Compared to the Millennium Development Goals that focused on developing countries, SDGs call upon equal participation in all countries, including least developed, developing, and developed countries. However, SDGs are ambitious and comprise 17 goals,

169 targets, and 232 unique indicators (United Nations, 2015). According to UNCTAD (2023), the investment in sectors relevant to SDGs has increased substantially, but the growth is unbalanced among sectors, and according to UNCTAD (2014), the gap in investment among all SDG sectors has increased from \$2.5 trillion to more than \$4 trillion per year now.

While the environment, ethics and social responsibility, and sustainable development are considered three promising subthemes in international business research fields, sustainable development will provide a broader context to CSR and international business studies than the conventional focus on the impact of MNEs on economic development (Kolk, 2016). For example, MNEs like Nestle (2017) have already incorporated UN SDGs directly into corporate strategy. However, little is known about how MNEs incorporate these societal goals in strategies (Buckley, 2018; Witte & Dilyard, 2017) and it is critical to understand how MNEs engage with international business policy and governance (Kolk et al., 2018; van Zanten & van Tulder, 2018). Van Zanten and van Tulder (2021) have integrated 67 business activities into a typology to explain business strategies supporting or hindering SDGs. Thus, a long-term perspective should incorporate sustainable development as the underlying focal point (Montiel et al., 2021).

Though studies have examined the impact of MNEs' CSR activities on certain SDGs targets like SDG 1 poverty (Kolk et al., 2018), SDG 2 hunger such as food security (Santangelo, 2018), SDG 3 health such as disease (Gruber & Schlegelmilch, 2015; Tempels et al., 2020), SDG 4 education (Eweje, 2006; Kolk & Lenfant, 2013), SDG 8 working growth such as work conditions (Berkey, 2021), SDG 10 reduced inequality such as migration (Reade et al., 2019), SDG 11 sustainable cities and communities such as corporate disaster aid (Ballesteros et al., 2017; Mithani, 2017), SDG 12 responsible consumption and production such as environmental sustainability (Maksimov et al., 2022), SDG 14 life below water such as ocean pollution (Dauvergne, 2018), SDG 15 life on land such as biodiversity and natural resources (Boiral & Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2017; Shapiro et al., 2018) and SDG 17 global partnerships such as MNE-SME cooperation (Prashantham & Birkinshaw, 2020), there are limited studies that have explored how MNEs conduct business operations to achieve SDGs (Munro & Arli, 2020; Witte & Dilyard, 2017). These studies have not systematically observed the links between MNEs' CSR activities and their links to SDGs in their host country context. Although MNEs may undertake CSR activities to divert stakeholders' attention (Tashman et al., 2019) or obtain stakeholders' support and trust in host countries (Ghoul et al., 2017), they do not proactively participate in CSRs that are targeting SDGs. Instead, MNEs continue to

carry on practices that do not necessarily contribute to enhancing their CSR footprints (Rabbiosi & Santangelo, 2019).

Kolk et al. (2017) have claimed that MNEs can implement SDGs to make impacts through collaborations. MNE also acts as an engine for sustainable development utilizing natural resources (Narula, 2018). Van Zanten and van Tulder (2018) have explored how MNEs engage with SDGs within their value chain operations and target to reduce negative externalities. Eden and Wagstaff (2021) have applied an evidence-based policymaking approach to identify the wicked problems of SDG 5 Gender Equity. Perez-Aleman and Ferretti (2023) have integrated innovation capabilities with SDG 3 health and wellbeing via national policy in Brazil. Van Holt et al. (2021) have compared the coconut value chain in the Philippines and the beef value chain in Brazil around a large MNE to explore how MNEs integrate SDGs 8 decent work and economic growth and 12 sustainability practices in global value chains into their supply chain in cooperations outside their direct control. Ramirez (2021) has provided a public policy framework for transitioning to sustainable energy partnerships in Mexico by integrating SDGs 4 quality education, 8 decent work and economic growth, 10 reduced inequality, 13 climate action into public policies with SDGs 16 peace, justice and strong institutions and 17 partnerships for the goals to boost SDG 7 affordable and clean energy. Liou and Rao-Nicolson (2021) have linked subsidiary identities with SDGs across four levels of wickedness in MNE's engagement. Lewis et al. (2021) have explored the interactions and examined the dynamic synergies between 17 SDGs and goals of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Furthermore, this initiative helps with SDGs 1 poverty, 9 infrastructure and 10 inequality and will act as a tool for achieving the SDGs in key parts of Asia and Africa (Li et al., 2022). However, none of these studies has explored how implementing CSRs could help MNEs address SDGs at the firm level.

Van Zanten and van Tulder (2018, p. 210) argue that MNEs' engagement is influenced by traits of MNEs and SDGs: "the ethical duties conveyed by the SDG target, which can be positive ('doing good') or negative ('avoiding harm')". Montiel et al. (2021) condense the 17 goals into six categories based on two criteria—goals aiming to "increase positive externalities (knowledge, wealth, or health)" versus goals aiming to "reduce negative externalities (the overuse of natural resources, harm to social cohesion, or overconsumption)". The authors have also provided a prescriptive framework aimed at MNEs' implementation of the SDGs at the firm level, such as firm-level investments in subsidiary activities and firm's outward investments in host country. We link MNEs' CSR activities to the SDGs' agenda using this lens for analysis.

Corporate social responsibility

Issues

In terms of CSR issues, the extant literature has identified issues like community relations (Attig & Brockman, 2017; Park et al., 2015; Darendeli & Hill, 2016), environmental issues (Ambec & Lanoie, 2008; Wettstein, 2012; Zhan, 2021) and employee and workplace management (Bolton et al., 2011; van Tulder & Kolk, 2001) as some of the critical issues that MNEs focus their CSR activities on. Amongst various issues in the host-country context, community relations feature predominantly in the MNEs' CSR activities as this helps to reduce uncertainty in the business environment as well as build their local legitimacy and this is pertinent in CoC (Amos, 2008; Eweje, 2006; Lashitew, 2021; Reimann et al., 2012). Corporations' CSR activities reflect what society values and expects (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Marquis et al., 2007); this is especially true for foreign companies as they build legitimacy in their foreign markets.

Community-oriented CSR is central to how organizations are perceived in society because MNEs' commitments to social-benefit projects serve as a protective shield against political risk as they enhance firm legitimacy with local stakeholders. The MNEs who made a point of engaging in social-benefit projects are found to survive in cases of political turmoil. Darendeli and Hill's (2016) study on MNEs in Libya found that MNEs who engaged with local stakeholders through their committed involvement in social-benefit projects and found ways to keep a distance from the Qadhafi family gained a wider base for their organizational legitimacy, which enabled their survival when the government was thrown out of office.

Similarly, environmental issues also feature prominently in MNEs' CSR activities as many host countries do not have established and enforceable environmental practices and policies (Bento & Moreira, 2019; Lund-Thomsen et al., 2016). Lastly, as MNEs go global (especially for manufacturing in global supply chains in developing countries), there is greater scrutiny of whether they maintain ethical conduct consistently throughout their supply chains despite a general lack of stringent laws and regulations in developing countries (Arnold, 2010; Wettstein, 2012; Zhan, 2021). Furthermore, the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (Ruggie, 2007) also requires MNEs to respect human rights at home and in host countries.

One of the responses of MNEs to such normative and/or regulative pressures relating to the global governance of MNEs' operations is for MNEs to voluntarily develop ethical values such as codes of conduct (van Tulder & Kolk, 2001). While studies focus mainly on

external pressures in the institutional environment to take up CSR (Matten & Moon, 2008), scholars have also begun to investigate how CSR programs impact internal stakeholders such as employees. Bolton et al. (2011) studied how corporate CSR policies interact with employees and the role of CSR in contributing to "dignified workplaces" (Bolton & Wibberley, 2007). CSR programs that place employees at their core are also found to develop commitment and motivation in their employees (Farrelly & Greyser, 2007).

These various issues related to the community, environment, and workplace in the CoC context can provide an opportunity for MNEs to develop CSR activities that help them build legitimacy and reputation in their host countries (Luo, 2006; Marquis & Qian, 2014), where the host country's institutional context might have institutional gaps which do not adequately support MNEs' global practices (Barkemeyer et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2020; Luiz et al., 2019).

Processes

Regarding CSR processes, one dimension of CSR processes—corporate charitable giving or corporate philanthropy—is important in the corporation's relationship with its stakeholders, as evidenced in studies conducted by Brammer and Millington (2004) and Godfrey (2005). Hence, corporate charitable giving is a strategic intent by a corporation to enhance its relationship, image, and reputation with its stakeholders (Brammer et al., 2009); likewise, corporate charitable giving can protect a corporation's reputation (Brammer & Millington, 2005; Williams & Barrett, 2000). Brammer et al., (2009, p. 593) found in their study of large UK firms that the characteristics of the host countries play a noteworthy role in determining corporate social performance than the level of internationalization. Moreover, they also found that when investing in a country with negative social issues or is dimly viewed by stakeholders due to the host government's reputation for lack of political rights and civil liberties, which is typical in a CoC, a foreign investor tends to increase charitable giving in that host country. While studies cannot confirm a direct and positive relationship between charitable giving and profit (Seifert et al., 2004), it is the reputational effect that studies have found charitable giving contributes to. For instance, Williams and Barrett's (2000) study of the influence of corporate charitable giving on the link between corporate crimes and reputation confirms the positive effect of charitable giving on reducing the damage to the company's reputation by corporate crimes. From the CoC perspective, the reputational effects of corporate charitable giving can insulate MNEs from any negative domestic perception arising from investing in these volatile countries.

Table 1 Coding of CSR orientation

Dimension of CSR	Coding categories	Theoretical underpinning
Issues	Community	Attig and Brockman (2017), Muthuri and Gilbert (2011), and Park et al. (2015)
	Environment	Ambec and Lanoie (2008) and Muthuri and Gilbert (2011)
	Workplace	Bolton et al. (2011), Muthuri and Gilbert (2011), and van Tulder and Kolk (2001)
Processes	Philanthropy	Brammer et al. (2009), Carroll (2004), Muthuri and Gilbert (2011), and Parboteeah et al. (2009)
	Employee volunteering	Basil et al. (2009), Brammer et al. (2009), Gilder et al. (2005), Muthuri and Gilbert (2011), and Rodell et al. (2016)
	Partnerships	Brammer et al. (2009), Johnson et al. (2011), Seitanidi and Crane (2009), and Muthuri and Gilbert (2011)
	Environmental management	Brammer et al. (2009), Muthuri and Gilbert (2011), and Wiig and Kolstad (2010)
	Stakeholder engagement	Brammer et al. (2009), Husted and Allen (2011), and Muthuri and Gilbert (2011)

Source compiled by authors

Companies provide employees with an opportunity to pursue socially beneficial issues and actions on company time, and these actions are known as employee volunteering (Basil et al., 2009; De Gilder et al., 2005; Rodell et al., 2016). These employee volunteering initiatives are increasingly included in corporate social responsibility strategies as the newest generation of employees considers this factor while evaluating the employer. In this type of CSR activity, the focus is on giving time to socially relevant activity rather than just providing finance; the activities carried out do not necessarily relate to employees' work-related skills and capabilities though they provide the opportunity to relate to employees' social vision and motivation (Rodell et al., 2016). Companies have been encouraging employees to undertake such activities due to the multi-fold benefits these activities generate. On the one hand, these employee actions develop corporate visibility in the local economy (Rodell et al., 2016). On the other hand, these opportunities to conduct social activities have generated higher employee engagement with their work and improved motivation and retention (Gilder et al., 2005; Purdy et al., 2010; Rodell et al., 2016).

Environmental issues are widely prevalent in CoC countries since they are typically developing countries (Wiig & Kolstad, 2010). As such, foreign firms develop various processes to mitigate or eradicate issues in the destination country to manage stakeholder expectations (Wiig & Kolstad, 2010) as well as transfer their international best practices (Jamali, 2010; Muller, 2006). Given the weak environmental standards in developing countries, foreign firms tend to transfer their global best practices across geographical locations (Jamali, 2010).

Lastly, firms have also been known to be involved in several partnerships with NGOs and governments to establish their corporate social missions in foreign countries (Johnson et al., 2011; Seitanidi & Crane, 2009). One such example is companies' work with several NGOs in the community and climate change domains (Dahan et al., 2010). In the context

of CoC, it can be argued that CSR activities are carried out with the help of these partnerships where NGOs can provide knowledge of local needs. Examining MNEs and non-business partners in Central Africa, Kolk and Lenfant (2013) observe that partnerships that work in this environment of institutional complexity and weakness are those that take the conflict scenario into planning, have capability-building activities included in the CSR activities, make micro-community related adjustments to their development plans, and engage actively with the issues that matter for the local community like governance, artisanal mining, and transparency. Furthermore, Luiz et al. (2019) highlight the need for broader reforms in the business environment using the context and experiences of four African countries—Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Uganda, and Ethiopia—and suggest assimilation of three objectives, namely, the stimulus for economic growth, increasing opportunities in the local markets, and removal of drivers of conflict, are crucial for achieving sustainable development. Thus, MNEs can no longer be just participants in these fragile contexts; rather, they will need to take ownership and work to improve the ecosystem in these contested countries.

In summary, from the above literature review and based on the works of Chapple and Moon (2005), Maignan and Ralston (2002), and Muthuri and Gilbert (2011), we derive Table 1, which identifies the key theoretical constructs for CSR activities.

Country context: Myanmar since 2011

Countries of Concern (CoC) are business environments where host governments' violations of rights, freedom, and international norms are so serious that they present a clear challenge to multinational enterprises with potential reputational and economic risks. CoC-designated countries are dimly viewed by stakeholders due to the host government's

reputation for the oppression of political rights and/or civil liberties, including the oppression of religious freedoms, and doing business with a CoC presents a clear challenge to foreign companies making investments in these countries.

When entering CoC—for violations in areas including human rights, terrorism, religious freedom, wildlife trafficking, money laundering and financial crimes (U.S. Department of State, 2022)—multinational enterprises bear the risk of losing business, capital, and reputation from their shareholders, stakeholders, and consumers (Brammer et al., 2009). In addition, concerns about these countries can be so strong that there is also a threat of ‘sanctions’ regimes supported by national governments or by supranational authorities. The U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) currently lists the following countries as sanctioned countries—“the Balkans, Belarus, Burma, Cote D'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Cuba, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran, Iraq, Liberia, North Korea, Sudan, Syria, and Zimbabwe” [Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC, 2020)]. The U.S. Department of State publishes annual reports that designate countries for violations of international religious freedom, international narcotics control strategy, and wildlife trafficking. Myanmar is currently named in all three reports (U.S. Department of State, 2022). In this study, the categorization of Myanmar as a country of concern is inspired by (and follows) Brammer et al. (2009), which studies countries named in the FTSE4Good list.

Thus, we selected Myanmar as the subject of our study due to longstanding concerns over its political structure, historical and contemporary rights violations, including those that impact personal religious freedom, and cronyism (Asian Development Bank, 2018; Ford et al., 2016; Wintour, 2018). This study focuses on the period between 2001 and 2020 (marked by Myanmar's re-opening after abandoning socialism until the 2021 military coup). Although Myanmar has attracted foreign direct investment (FDI) since the door opening, it was 2011 when the FDI spiked (albeit from a low base), The year 2011 was significant in Myanmar's history as there was a political transition from a military to a quasi-civilian rule. It was in this period between 2011 and 2014 (under the civilian rule of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which was born out of the previous military regime) that Myanmar began to attract foreign investor's renewed interest in the country because of the USDP's change in economic policies and associated reforms (Cheesman et al., 2014; Ford et al., 2017). As Myanmar's political situation has improved along with the West's attitude towards Myanmar, FDI jumped in 2011 to an unprecedented level, according to figures released by the Department of Investment and Company Administration (DICA). While Myanmar enjoyed economic openness to an unprecedented level under the civilian government, a big emphasis is put on conducting ‘responsible business’, that

contributes to nation-building and sustainability development (Ford et al., 2017).

In addition to Myanmar's CoC status and the country's transitional politics and economy, since 1987, Myanmar has ranked among the world's least developed countries (LDCs), with a GDP per capita of \$1255 (United Nations, 2018). Myanmar also ranked 103 out of 163 regarding the country ranking in overall performance mapping to SDGs according to Sustainable Development Report 2022 (Sachs et al., 2022). Out of the 17 SDGs, Myanmar has only achieved SDG 12, and of the remaining 16 goals, there are still challenges remaining in two goals, significant challenges in three goals, and eleven goals that are facing major challenges (Sachs et al., 2022). Despite the efforts of more than 187 of its members to prepare at least one voluntary national review as a proxy measure of their commitment to the SDGs, Myanmar has failed to submit any review since 2016 (United Nations, 2022). Therefore, in a context such as Myanmar, the role of business in society deserves careful examination in that this paper aims to focus on the CSR issues and processes of top taxpayers in Myanmar and how MNEs' CSR activities align with SDGs.

Methods and data

Data collection

As this study focuses on Myanmar, we attempted to identify suitable sources of data as noted below. The data was collected following several intensive processes to remove any issues concerning selection bias and internal validity concerning our data.

First, to establish our sample, we look at the top 50 taxpaying companies in Myanmar using a list provided by the Ministry of Planning and Finance's Internal Revenue Department. These foreign companies (subsidiaries) operated in the country through wholly owned subsidiaries or joint ventures. We chose to focus on the top 50 taxpaying companies due to their likely visibility in the new media outlets of Myanmar and the increased scrutiny from both their home- and host-country governments (Maignan & Ralston, 2002). The selection of only foreign companies was also in alignment with our study's purpose to explore the CSR of foreign subsidiaries in a host country environment of a CoC.

The next stage involved locating information on the sample firms, as well as conducting data collection through various mediums such as corporate websites, newspaper articles, reports from NGOs, and consulting firms. Our previously developed coding framework emerges from the work of Chapple and Moon (2005), Maignan and Ralston (2002), and Muthuri and Gilbert (2011). Prior works have argued

that a company's website is a formal and official presentation of the company's ideologies, practices, and policies and that companies have used this medium to further their corporate objectives and convey to their stakeholders the company's intentions and future actions (Chapple & Moon, 2005; Muthuri & Gilbert, 2011). Similarly, other studies have suggested that companies' formal communications are directly aligned with their actions and represent their values, and thus, mentions of CSR activities on their websites will indicate the company's continuing focus on ethics and transparency in CSR activities (Fukukawa & Moon, 2004). Some studies have indicated that firms might adopt CSR as an opportunity to obfuscate their wrongdoings or not do things the right way from an ethical point of view (Tashman et al., 2019) and ceremonially participate in CSR activities while carrying out practices that do the opposing (Rabbiosi & Santangelo, 2019), by adopting the process of triangulation and external validation, we assure the robustness of our analysis and findings.

During this initial data collection, we observed that few firms had a dedicated website for CSR activities or only some mention of these Myanmar-related activities under their global stewardship. We exclude the details of other regional and international CSR activities from our analysis. In all cases, the data on CSR activities for our sample firms was obtained from consulting reports, newspaper articles, or NGO reports. The triangulation of CSR information from company websites with material from other independent sources like the NGO's websites/reports and newspaper articles, especially independent reporting, provides a valuable way of validating the work carried out by the companies.

During this data collection process, we observed that 20 firms had no information regarding their operations in Myanmar. Thus, we had a final sample of 30 firms operating in Myanmar with details on their CSR activities. The closer examination of these 20 missing firms from our final sample suggested that most of these firms were either domestic-owned firms operating in the construction and hotel industry (two firms) or the services (s firms) or were foreign-owned and operating in sectors as the missing domestic firms [services (six firms), construction and hotel industry (two firms), others (four firms)]. Thus, we find that our sample does not include any firms from Myanmar, as discussed further in the proceeding limitations section. Table 2 presents the summary of our data.

Out of 30 firms, we observe that 24 firms have a parent company from other Asian countries demonstrating high intra-regional investment activities and the rest from non-Asian countries. We also find that the parent companies of 17 firms are from developed countries in the West or high-income countries in Asia, and 14 firms are owned by developing-country MNEs. Due to a few joint ventures in our sample, these numbers do not add to 30. Out of the 24 Asian MNE

Table 2 Summary statistics of data

Countries	No. of firms
Cambodia	1
China	2
France	3
Germany	1
Hong Kong SAR	1
Japan	4
Malaysia	5
Singapore	3
South Korea	3
Switzerland	2
Thailand	6
US	1
Grand Total	32 ^a

^aJVs have multiple ownerships and are counted independently for this tabulation

Source compiled by authors

subsidiaries, 15 firms emerged from three Asian countries, namely, Thailand (six), Malaysia (five) and Japan (four).

Our study covered parts of three critical periods in Myanmar's history—military rule under the SLORC/SPDC (1989–2010), the civilian era (2011–2015), and the democratic era (2016 to February 2021). Table 3 shows companies' participation in our sample over the three periods and their maintain-or-withdraw status following the 2021 military coup. We note that most of our sample firms have continually operated during the period of our study. Furthermore, we note that nine (30%) firms have withdrawn from Myanmar following the coup.

Data analysis

As our analysis method is driven by the literature review carried out in the previous section, we use a coding technique developed a priori following our literature review. Our previously developed coding framework emerges from the work of Chapple and Moon (2005), Maignan and Ralston (2002), and Muthuri and Gilbert (2011). We also decided to further expand on these earlier coding categories to provide additional fine-grained analysis of our sample. For example, we classify philanthropic activities as related to infrastructure, healthcare, education and so on. Also, discussions presented in the earlier section led us to include an additional category on local capacity and governance. The CSR orientation of the firms in our sample is coded using the framework presented in Table 1. This detailed framework helps us distil the information presented in various sources and gain insight into the activities of firms engaging in Myanmar.

Table 3 Operational details of our sample firms

Sr. No.	Taxpayers	Period of paying tax			
		SLORC/SPDC (1990–2010)	U Thein Sein (2011–2015)	NLD (2016– 2020)	Military coup SAC (2021– present)
1	Moattama Gas Transportation Co. Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Taninthayi Pipeline Co. Llc.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	PTTEP International Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4	Myanmar Brewery Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
5	Unocal Myanmar Offshore Co. Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
6	Nippon Oil Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
7	Myanmar CP Co. Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
8	Petronas Myanmar Inc.	No	Yes	Yes	No
9	PC Myanmar Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
10	Total E&P Myanmar Co. Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
11	Goldpetrol Company Inc.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
12	C.P. Yangon Co. Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
13	EXE Co. Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
14	UMW Engineering Services Co. Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
15	Huawei Technologies (Yangon) Co. Ltd.	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
16	DKSH (Myanmar) Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
17	EXE Design (Myanmar) Co. Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
18	DKSH SERVICES Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
19	Traders Yangon Co. Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
20	Lluvia Ltd.	No	No	Yes	Yes
21	Straits Greenfield Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
22	Myanmar DHL Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
23	Aceda MFI Myanmar Co. Ltd.	No	No	Yes	Yes
24	Myanmar Mamee Double Decker Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
25	Myanmar POSCO Steel Co. Ltd.	No	Yes	Yes	No
26	Mega Lifesciences Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
27	Myanmar Daewoo International Ltd.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
28	Camusat Myanmar Co. Ltd.	No	Yes	Yes	No
29	ZTE Myanmar Co. Ltd.	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
30	Hyundai Heavy Industries Co. Ltd.	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source compiled by authors

In this analytical method, sentences and parts of sentences are used as a unit of analysis, and much of the information in this type of analysis emerges from observing material in their context as well as within the framework used for coding. To ensure reliability and consistency in coding, the researchers coded material in the first five cases independently to verify the researchers' understanding of the material and ability to arrive at the same codes independently. We observed a 90% match in the researchers' coding results. Following a discussion to reach a consensus on coding practice, the researchers worked on the rest

of the material together to code all the information for our sample of 30 firms. To further validate our work, we presented our material on three firms and coding framework to an academic with advanced theoretical knowledge of CSR. They independently coded the information on these three firms, and the results of their coding, namely coding CSR issues and processes into various categories, were similar to our results. We adopted a similarly rigorous approach to mapping CSR activities to SDGs and aimed to achieve a 90% match in the researchers' coding results. The results presented in this paper adhere to these targets for matching.

Table 4 Results of CSR coding for firms in Myanmar

Dimension of CSR	Coding categories	Number of obs. (%)
Issues	Community	28 (53)
	Environment	14 (26)
	Workplace	11 (21)
Processes	Philanthropy-others	14 (11)
	Philanthropy-infrastructure	2 (2)
	Philanthropy-disaster relief	11 (9)
	Philanthropy-health	12 (10)
	Philanthropy-education	10 (8)
	Employee volunteering	3 (2)
	Partnerships	10 (8)
	Environmental management	12 (10)
	Stakeholder engagement-others	5 (4)
	Stakeholder engagement-health	12 (10)
	Stakeholder engagement-education	16 (13)
	Stakeholder engagement-infrastructure	9 (7)
	Stakeholder engagement-financial	7 (6)

Source compiled by authors

Findings

Table 4 presents the results of the analysis of the MNEs' CSR activities. These CSR activities are also mapped to SDGs and presented in Table 5.

Issues addressed by CSR activities

Table 4 shows over 50% of the CSR activities undertaken by the firms in Myanmar are associated with community-related issues and addressing challenges emerging from a paucity of resources, social welfare, and government healthcare inadequacy. These subsidiaries tend to take either an active or proactive approach towards SDGs, as guided by the headquarters of the parent company from their home country. POSCO Steel Co. Ltd, a South Korean firm, organized an eye camp to increase access to eye care facilities in impoverished areas in Myanmar. It also provides free craniofacial surgeries to children in underprivileged regions of Myanmar. POSCO Steel Co. Ltd wants to lay the groundwork for Myanmar's medical establishments to start their autonomous surgical facilities by sharing Korea's advanced medical know-how and surgical services with Myanmar (POSCO, 2013).

Environmental issues also feature highly amongst the CSR issues addressed by foreign companies in Myanmar. Myanmar Brewery, a Singaporean company, has invested heavily in improving its environmental management system. Their environmental policy in Myanmar is geared towards

reducing waste and pollution within the brewery. To further maintain the standards within the organization in Myanmar, Myanmar Brewery has adopted the ISO 14001 standards within its company structure as it helps provide a structure for the setting and revising environmental objectives and targets. The company also periodically communicates its environmental objectives to its employees (Kirin Holdings, 2018).

Similarly, companies have worked within the restrictions of Myanmar's local laws while maintaining the higher standards of their worldwide, company-specific CSR policies. UMW noted that when it began operations in Myanmar, as local Myanmar laws did not permit labor unions, they were constricted from implementing one for their employees; nevertheless, to encourage employees' rights and collective bargaining power, they have opened channels for dialogue between the management and employees. They have used other employee benefits to circumvent any negative impacts associated with the lack of unions in Myanmar (UMW Group, 2010).

Process for implementing CSR activities

The CSR activities by foreign firms were driven to address different issues in the Myanmar context and consequently took various forms to meet local CSR needs.

One of the most common CSR activities by the foreign MNE, Myanmar Brewery, was to conduct disaster relief programs. Myanmar has faced several challenges due to either man-made or natural disasters. Myanmar Brewery organized disaster relief programs in Myanmar to overcome destitution from floods and fire. Myanmar Mamee Double Decker Ltd, a Malaysian company, following cyclone Nargis, deployed its employees for the distribution of its instant noodles to affected areas (Burma Library, 2011). To support this relief initiative, the company increased the shifts at its Myanmar factory to ensure supply. Similarly, during Cyclone Giri, the company donated instant noodles to support the relief efforts of NGOs.

Companies also provide healthcare facilities to their local employees and support the healthcare needs of the local community. Petronas of Malaysia organizes primary healthcare services in the regions where it operates in Myanmar. EXE Corporation supports the activities of Japan Heart, an organization that provides healthcare access in Myanmar. Similarly, POSCO offers a medical volunteer service in Myanmar; they also support free surgical treatment for children and donate surgical devices, medical supplies, and medicine to local hospitals in Myanmar. Following a health assessment of pregnant women in Myanmar, Total, the French company, organized safe motherhood programs in the regions where it operates and offers training facilities for midwives (Total, 2017).

Goldpetrol invested in local education programs; for example, it donated \$100,000 for the betterment of education and sport in the Chauk and Yenangyaung communities (Interra Resources, 2017). Hence, companies have invested in CSR activities that transcend beyond their industry sector and might demonstrate their willingness to develop local CSR policies suitable for this country. DKSH Myanmar, a Swiss-headquartered company, organizes its employees to work closely with the community and provide voluntary lessons in the orphanages and nunneries of the local communities. According to the company, these activities are geared towards emphasizing the importance of education. Traders Yangon Co, from Hong Kong, supported the procurement of schoolteachers' uniforms and donated school materials to 600 students.

Some businesses also extend their CSR activities to their partners in Myanmar, thus, generating some valuable network-based synergies from the CSR activities. Myanmar CP promotes ethical business conduct amongst its business partners in Myanmar and works with these partners to enhance their CSR capabilities and sustainability practices. Businesses also use environmental management as one of the mechanisms for implementing their CSR activities. PC Myanmar, a Malaysian company, has included biodiversity conservation measures as a part of its environmental management processes while also aligning this activity with its community development program.

Some of the other stakeholder engagement activities include, among others, the ethical management of practices that might be perceived as corrupt or exploitative. ACLEDA MFI Myanmar Co, a Cambodian company, has introduced an equality policy in its dealings with the general public, customers, and staff alike and applied a "zero tolerance" approach towards corruption both internally and externally (ACLEDA MFI Myanmar Co, 2017). Similarly, firms have used healthcare and education as a means to engage with their stakeholders through CSR activities.

Infrastructure building has also been another process through which MNEs have adapted their CSR strategies to meet the needs of their Myanmar stakeholders. Goldpetrol, a Singaporean company, as part of their "Chauk township development project, in collaboration with the local government, committed more than US \$60,000 to provide garbage collection trucks, power supply transformers, and water supply storage tanks and to build drainage ditches and access roads" (Interra Resources, 2017).

MNEs have also provided financial support to local stakeholders and supported local development, which would have otherwise stagnated without clear and easy access to capital. Lluvia, a Japanese company, worked meticulously with farmers to enable access to funding and improve farming approaches through knowledge transfer with Mitsubishi Corporation while also increasing food safety

and decreasing Myanmar's reliance on imports. MNEs have subsidized local economic development via affordable access to financing for infrastructure developments like dams and roads, which benefit not only the local stakeholders but also local governments.

Next, we map these CSR activities with SDGs that these can address. Table 5 shows that these CSR investments cover all but one SDG. Some of the SDGs are addressed both via philanthropic activities as well as approaches that are derived from the MNEs' core capability. For example, EXE Corporation built toilets in schools and Huawei's deployment of CDMA network in Myanmar. As these cases show, MNEs have deployed CSR activities that address SDGs in the local context.

Finally, we map MNE CSR-SDG links to the Montiel et al. (2021) model in Table 6 to identify whether our MNEs' activities related to SDGs are linked to generating positive externalities or reducing negative externalities. In the context of Myanmar, we observe the tendency of MNEs to make proactive investments that could generate positive externalities as compared to deep engagement with activities that reduce negative externalities (namely, only a few activities related to environmental management and labor rights), and this is further materialized by the MNEs' reluctance to advocate the creation of institutions that uphold peace and democracy in this context. Thus, they do not engage with a key democracy enabling SDG, namely SDG16—Peace, justice, and strong institutions.

Discussion

Though it has been observed that MNEs may undertake international corporate social responsibility activities to align with SDGs (van Tulder, 2018), little is known about how MNEs tackle SDGs. Furthermore, when MNEs act as substitutes for missing domestic institutions (Boddeyn & Doh, 2011), it is critical to understand how MNEs will incorporate SDGs given there is a lack of national policy in promoting SDGs. Van Zanten and van Tulder (2021) also call for more IB-related research in: identifying the factors and processes that can help MNEs contribute to SDGs either alone or via cooperations; examining more firms from different regions and governance structures to understand the antecedents of integrating SDGs into business activities. The unique setting of Myanmar provides a novel opportunity to observe CSR adopted by firms in a CoC. Given this institutional setting (i.e., military domination of the economy, a transition from isolation to openness, prolonged periods of military rule, successive governments with poor human rights records, and persistent calls from MNEs' home-country stakeholders to cut ties with the military), there is an interesting gap in the literature that can be addressed by Our

Table 5 Mapping CSR practices with SDGs

Dimension of CSR	Coding categories	SDGs	Sample of representative cases
Issues	Community	SDG1, SDG2, SDG3, SDG4, SDG5, SDG6, SDG7, SDG9, SDG10, SDG11	Huawei, China; CP, Thailand; POSCO Steel, South Korea; Myanmar Mamee Double Decker Ltd, Malaysia; DKSH Myanmar, Switzerland; PC Myanmar, Malaysia; ACLEDA MFI Myanmar Co, Cambodia; Goldpetrol, Singapore; Lluvia, Japan
	Environment	SDG7, SDG9, SDG12, SDG13, SDG14, SDG15, SDG17	PTTEP, Thailand; Taninthayi Pipeline, JV; Myanmar Brewery, Singapore; CP, Thailand; PC Myanmar, Malaysia; Nippon Oil, Japan; Petronas, Malaysia; Straits Greenfield, Singapore, Acleda MFI Myanmar Co, Cambodia
	Workplace	SDG8, SDG3	PTTEP, Thailand; CP, Thailand; UMW, Malaysia, Nippon Oil, Japan; PC Myanmar, Malaysia; Goldpetrol, Singapore; UMW, Malaysia; Mega Lifesciences, Thailand
Processes	Philanthropy-others	SDG1, SDG3, SDG5	Myanmar Mamee Double Decker Ltd, Malaysia; Traders Yangon Co, Hong Kong; Lluvia, Japan
	Philanthropy-infrastructure	SDG1, SDG7, SDG9, SDG10, SDG11	Huawei, China; POSCO Steel, South Korea; Goldpetrol, Singapore
	Philanthropy-disaster relief	SDG1, SDG2, SDG3, SDG6, SDG10, SDG11	Huawei, China; Myanmar Mamee Double Decker Ltd, Malaysia
	Philanthropy-health	SDG1, SDG3, SDG11	POSCO Steel, South Korea; Petronas, Malaysia; EXE Corporation, Japan; Total, France
	Philanthropy-education	SDG1, SDG4, SDG11	DKSH Myanmar, Switzerland; Traders Yangon Co, Hong Kong
	Employee volunteering	SDG8, SDG11	Myanmar Mamee Double Decker Ltd, Malaysia; POSCO Steel, South Korea; DKSH Myanmar, Switzerland
	Partnerships	SDG11, SDG17	PC Myanmar, Malaysia; CP, Thailand; ACLEDA MFI Myanmar Co, Cambodia; Lluvia, Japan
	Environmental management	SDG11, SDG12, SDG13, SDG14, SDG15	PTTEP, Thailand; Taninthayi Pipeline, JV; Myanmar Brewery, Singapore; Petronas, Malaysia; Goldpetrol, Singapore
	Stakeholder engagement-others	SDG1	Myanmar Mamee Double Decker Ltd, Malaysia; CP, Thailand
	Stakeholder engagement-health	SDG1, SDG3, SDG11	Total, France; Goldpetrol, Singapore; Petronas, Malaysia; PC Myanmar, Malaysia; CP, Thailand; Myanmar Brewery, Singapore
	Stakeholder engagement-education	SDG1, SDG4, SDG11	Goldpetrol, Singapore; Petronas, Malaysia; PC Myanmar, Malaysia; CP, Thailand; Total, France; Myanmar Brewery, Singapore
	Stakeholder engagement-infrastructure	SDG1, SDG9, SDG11	Moattama Gas Transportation, JV; Myanmar Brewery, Singapore; Goldpetrol, Singapore
	Stakeholder engagement-financial	SDG1, SDG10, SDG11	Lluvia, Japan; Moattama Gas Transportation, JV; Taninthayi Pipeline, JV; Unocal, USA; PC Myanmar, Malaysia; Total, France

Source compiled by authors

Table 6 Mapping MNE CSR -SDG links to Montiel et al. (2021) model

Translating SDGs into actionable goals		SDGs	CSR issues	CSR processes
Increasing positive externalities	Goals			
	Increasing knowledge	SDG4—Quality education, SDG9—Industry, innovation, and infrastructure	Community, Environment	Philanthropy-infrastructure, Philanthropy-education, Stakeholder engagement-education, Stakeholder engagement-infrastructure
	Increasing wealth	SDG1—No poverty, SDG5—Gender equality, SDG8—Decent work and economic growth	Community, Workplace	Philanthropy-others, Philanthropy-infrastructure, Philanthropy-disaster relief, Philanthropy-health, Philanthropy-education, Employee volunteering, Stakeholder engagement-others, Stakeholder engagement-health, Stakeholder engagement-education, Stakeholder engagement-infrastructure, Stakeholder engagement-financial
Reducing negative externalities	Increasing health	SDG2—Zero hunger, SDG3—Good health and well-being	Community, Workplace	Philanthropy-others, Philanthropy-disaster relief, Philanthropy-health, Stakeholder engagement-health
	Reducing the overuse of the natural resources	SD6—Clean water and sanitation, SDG7—Affordable and clean energy, SDG13—Climate action, SDG15—Life on land	Community, Environment	Philanthropy-infrastructure, Philanthropy-disaster relief, Environmental management
	Reducing harm to social cohesion	SDG10—Reducing inequality, SDG11—Sustainable cities and communities, SDG16—Peace, justice, and strong institutions ^a , SDG17—Partnerships for the goals	Community, Environment	Philanthropy-infrastructure, Philanthropy-disaster relief, Philanthropy-health, Philanthropy-education, Employee volunteering, Partnerships, Environmental management, Stakeholder engagement-health, Stakeholder engagement-education, Stakeholder engagement-infrastructure, Stakeholder engagement-financial
	Reducing overconsumption	SDG12—Responsible consumption and production, SDG14—Life below water	Environment	Environmental management

^aAs noted elsewhere, SDG16 activities are not undertaken by the MNEs in Myanmar

Source compiled by authors

study makes two significant contributions to understanding how MNEs' CSR activities can address SDGs. First, our study contributes to the literature on MNEs' CSR and its link to SDGs. We found that there was only one SDG that these MNEs did not directly engage with, or at least we did not find evidence of this, namely—'Goal (16) Peace, justice, and strong institutions.' The current transitional phase of the country is likely impacting the risk awareness of MNEs as they steer clear of what might have been seen as political interference by the government. As a result, addressing the rule of law and institutional weaknesses may not be seen as a top priority for them compared to other pressing community issues. However, MNEs in Myanmar are not alone in this area as it has been noted that MNEs generally do not prioritize SDG16 (van Tulder & van Mil, 2022). MNEs targeting SDG16 tend to incorporate SDGs in CSR strategies as more of an effort to avoid harm and minimize negative impacts rather than actively creating positive impacts, echoing studies by van Zanten and van Tulder (2021) and Montiel et al. (2021). For instance, in the case of Myanmar, once the democratic changes were in full swing, MNEs could have cut ties with military-owned businesses (i.e., not contribute to the military's finances), however, it would not have been either feasible (given the dominance of the military in Myanmar's economy) or 'prudent' as it would aggravate the military preventing MNEs operation in the country as despite democratic changes they yielded significant power within the country.

Second, our study contributes to the CSR literature by shedding light on the CSR issues and processes of MNEs in a CoC. We observe that a large majority of MNEs focus their CSR issues on philanthropic programs targeting the community's health and education needs. The aims of CSR initiatives in Myanmar being geared towards focusing on areas of greatest need in the broader community make sense, given the huge health and education institutional voids after decades of political and economic isolation. Furthermore, the CSR issues MNEs in our study focus on are unrelated to their core offerings. In mapping CSR activities onto SDGs following Montiel et al.'s (2021) categorization of "increase positive externalities" versus "decrease negative externalities," our findings show that country context matters in that MNEs are inclined toward implementing CSRs that are aligned to increase positive externalities. There could be possible explanations for CSR's inclination to this other than an obvious need for corporate philanthropy in a country as poor and underdeveloped as Myanmar—(1) CSR focusing on community needs has higher visibility compared to internal CSR for employees; hence, this helps to enhance MNEs reputation with both host and home stakeholders; (2) CSR focusing on community needs would be more favorably viewed by the CoC government authorities compared to CSR to reduce negative externalities such as tackling

corruption and reducing harm to marginalized populations. In retrospect, these community-focused CSR appeared to come in handy when the MNEs, especially the Western MNEs, found themselves having to 'defend' their decisions to continue operating in Myanmar despite the call to cut ties with the military and to divest from Myanmar, when the military staged a coup in February 2021 against the National League for Democracy (NLD) which was a democratically elected government of Myanmar (Thein & Gillan, 2023).

The advent of CSR in Myanmar coincided with the country's opening up economically and politically is a phenomenon the study observed, inspired by phenomenon-based research as scholars like Doh (2015) opined. Regarding CSR issues, our finding suggests that MNEs predominantly focus on community issues with their CSR—disaster relief, health and education, and building infrastructure—contributes to the extant literature on community relations in CSR (Attig & Brockman, 2017; Husted & Allen, 2006; Park et al., 2015). These studies have shown how foreign businesses focus on community issues in their CSR programs to reduce uncertainty in the business environment as well as build their local legitimacy (Amos, 2008; Eweje, 2006; Luiz et al., 2019; Reimann et al., 2012). Building legitimacy is paramount when operating in a CoC like Myanmar which has just recently recovered from the West's isolationist stance and many in the West were still concerned about the military's rights violations, violence, and corruption. Furthermore, these CSR activities address some of the SDG targets in this context. For example, SDG 1—ending poverty in all forms everywhere—can be targeted by good access to education (SDG 4) and health (SDG 3), among other supporting mechanisms for access and opportunities in this context.

Myanmar has a flood-prone area along the coastline, and communities who live there risk their lives and livelihoods. In recent years, many floods have devastated their communities (Human Rights Watch, 2009), and a government as poor as that of Myanmar needs help from NGOs, religious organizations, and businesses, and the latter do join in these disaster relief efforts. MNEs have provided CSR activities during disaster relief which consistently address not only the short-term impact of flooding but also the long-term impact of malnutrition (SDG 2) and poor access to clean water (SDG 6). Interestingly, in Myanmar, the core of CSR activities is often unrelated (or marginal) to the businesses' core activities; for instance, the CSR of oil and gas companies are directed toward health or education issues. The aims of CSR initiatives in Myanmar being geared towards focusing on areas of greatest need in the broader community make sense, given a huge health disparity and education-related institutional voids after decades of isolation. These findings add to studies by Brammer and Millington (2004), Campbell (2007), Doh and Guay (2006), and Matten and Moon

(2008) in supporting the view that business has to respond to social expectations (to be socially accountable), despite not being legally obliged to take up CSR. This finding further reinforces Brammer et al.'s (2009) finding that in CoC with limited political rights, it is common for CSR to focus on issues unrelated to business core offerings with an aim to offset stakeholders' legitimacy concerns relating to entry into a CoC. Such community-oriented issues focus on CSR (often marginal to the businesses' core activities) that we found in our study are consistent with Maon et al.'s (2017) categorization of "*Discretionary, community-oriented non-embedded approach to CSR.*" This is because, at a nascent stage of market entry and operating in a CoC (characterized by being a former pariah and military domination), businesses are compelled to focus on the community as their initial CSR issue focus (Luiz et al., 2019).

Regarding CSR processes, our study's finding on the dominant use of corporate philanthropy by top taxpayers in Myanmar supports other scholars who found corporate philanthropy to be critical to the corporation's relationship with its stakeholders, as evidenced in studies conducted by Brammer and Millington (2004) on the UK listed companies; Godfrey's (2005) conceptual study; Brammer et al. (2009) on large UK firms and Williams and Barrett (2000) on Fortune 500-listed companies. Our study extends this notion by exploring philanthropy in a CoC with not only institutional weakness but also where, although changes towards democratic governance were occurring, there were still significant concerns and uncertainty about genuine transitions and the role of the military and its associates.

Analysis of CSR processes in Myanmar revealed that Carroll's pyramid of global CSR (Carroll, 2004) was upside down in that of MNEs in Myanmar. Therefore, we joined authors who have also discovered the upside-down nature of Carroll's pyramid in their studies. For instance, Muthuri and Gilbert's (2011) study on CSR approaches in Kenya and Visser (2006) found Carroll's pyramid structure did not fit well in explaining CSR in the African context as business's philanthropic responsibilities moved down to level 2, just above economic responsibilities at the lowest level, level 1. Thus, our study extends these earlier works and shows that Carroll's pyramid is not only inverted for stable economies of Africa, but this unique feature is also demonstrated in CoC because of MNEs' desire to 'look good' in the eyes of both home and host stakeholders, and to respond to concerns regarding MNEs' contributions towards nation-building. Thus, this links to other works that have noted the influence of contextual factors on CSR and SDG activities (Rao-Nicholson & Liou, 2021).

Also, these CSR processes are aligned with several SDGs pertinent in this context and holistically address multiple institutional voids. Some of these MNE activities also involve active engagement from their employees, thus,

promoting the beneficial values of employee volunteering. For example, firms encourage their employees to undertake activities in school and provide mentoring programs for school children (SDG 4). Furthermore, working with multiple partners, both government and NGOs, these MNEs championed the values of SDG 17.

Policy implications

The MNEs' overwhelming use of philanthropy as a CSR process has policy implications in that MNEs should have a clear guideline on recipients of such philanthropic activities. In particular, the MNEs must have a policy to conduct due diligence to monitor where their philanthropic donations go, the target recipients, and how they use the funds. These are particularly important for a CoC such as Myanmar, where the military owns a large part of the country's economy, and not doing business with the military is the call made by the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission (UNFMM) report (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2019). Such a policy should be understood and adhered to by the employees and throughout the organization's supply chains to protect the company's reputation both in the home and host countries. Philanthropic contributions can be detrimental to the donor's reputation, as experienced by Kirin Holdings, which made cash donations totaling US \$30,000 to the military and Amnesty International called for the Japanese authorities to investigate the case given the donations was made "at the height of an ethnic cleansing campaign against the Rohingya population in late 2017." (Amnesty International, 2018).

While the MNEs' CSR has an orientation towards community needs (e.g., health and education), the focus should also be on employees and their rights. Rights-based policies reflect MNEs' commitment to and responsibility towards their employees, while these CSR processes might not yield as much visibility as community-oriented activities in the short term. While the MNEs focus on philanthropy to contribute to community issues, what was absent was a focus on activities that will build stronger institutions. There is a need for international policymakers to use statecraft to actively pursue CoC governments to encourage them to engage in institutional development to receive foreign investment. The need for stronger institutions in Myanmar as a CoC is paramount where the society has weak institutions, underlying socio-political conflicts, and problems with the rule of law. The military coup in February 2021 and subsequent withdrawals of MNEs have amplified the disastrous impact the lack of institutional development has on both business and society.

Lastly, our study's context, a CoC, gives an insight into the type of CSR issues and processes that MNEs target and how these are pertinent from the policy perspective

for SDGs. The policymakers, both domestically and internationally, need to develop balanced policies that provide support to MNEs while monitoring MNEs not to be complicit in a CoC's weak institutional environment where opportunities for rights abuses and corruption are ripe, especially the MNEs' direct or indirect relationship with the military and its businesses.

Managerial implications

Our work shows the CSR issues and initiatives currently observed in a CoC as well as how these link to the SDGs. Our findings offer some crucial insights for managers wanting to engage with Myanmar or other CoCs. The top taxpayers' CSR strategies in Myanmar are designed to offset the negative consequences of having entered and operated in a CoC. This work shows limited diversity in the issues addressed by CSR activities by MNEs. Furthermore, our finding shows the reluctance of MNEs to engage with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), which might be a thorny issue in most countries, more so in CoC, where freedoms are severely restricted. This is notably significant in the current context of Myanmar as SDG 16 is the only goal showing a decreasing trend while facing major challenges out of 17 goals (Sachs et al., 2022). Therefore, from the policy perspective, despite MNEs introducing several SDG-oriented activities, without adequate focus on institutional development (SDG 16), several of these activities are undermined in an unstable environment in a CoC characterized by the military coup staged in February 2023.

Community-based issues feature most prominently in the sampled MNEs' CSR work in Myanmar. This degree of isomorphism would suggest that foreign firms entering Myanmar will need to imitate these CSR practices. Also, as shown by some examples, some CSR activities will need to be adapted due to local legal and institutional requirements. Managers need to be aware of local legal requirements and work within these to develop CSR strategies that will benefit Myanmar while still meeting the global organizational standards of practice, especially when the CSR standards in Myanmar might differ from global standards. It can be noted that though isomorphic, these CSR strategies are well adapted to meet the local SDG issues, namely, lack of access to education, health and energy infrastructures.

The current study shows why and how a CSR strategy is used to reduce the negative consequences for foreign investors for having to operate in a country of concern and how the investors meet the SDG targets. In Myanmar's setting, businesses that are intent on tapping into the resources the country has to offer and its strategic location between China and India, need to know how to navigate the business in the country without losing stakeholders'

trust and support in their home country. The need for the employment of CSR as an offsetting strategy (Brammer et al., 2009) is likely to be paramount in the future in Myanmar because its status as a CoC has eased somewhat but not disappeared, given renewed concerns over human rights violations and the functioning of institutions. Most of all, management must ensure that CSR strategies in a CoC focus on due diligence to ensure the investors' likelihood of being accused of aiding and abetting rights abuses by the host government.

Furthermore, our findings can be generalized to other CoCs like Iran and Venezuela, among others, and provide managers with suitable information as well as warnings for focusing on certain CSR issues and adopting a particular CSR process to achieve the SDG. For example, in countries like Iran, managers can focus on health and education to achieve SDGs.

In conclusion, our study has shown that given a CoC is all about institutional weakness, MNEs' CSR strategies should focus on strengthening institutions, as opposed to short-term 'bandage' approaches. That way, investors can be prepared for long-term viability and sustainability in a CoC. In the Myanmar case, when political instability ensued following the 2021 military coup and resultant rights violations, its institutional weakness was amplified, and investors faced ethical dilemmas amid calls to cut ties and market exit.

Limitations and future avenues for research

We note a few limitations of this study that might be addressed by future research. This study uses secondary data to analyze the firms' CSR strategies, and future research can focus on managers who might give a better idea of CSR activities. Furthermore, scholars should aim to collect information on the firms' CSR strategies from the stakeholder perspective aiding data triangulation and rigor. We could not include domestic firms due to their missing data, and future research should attempt to include domestic firms to give a comparative view of the CSR strategies implemented in Myanmar and whether these are geared to address SDGs in the local context. Following the 2021 coup, the government of Myanmar has fallen foul of the international community; it would be interesting to observe if and how MNEs' CSR scene has changed in a CoC like Myanmar. Similarly, it would be interesting to consider foreign firms vs domestic multinationals and observe their respective CSR and SDG strategies. As they do not feature in our sample, we suggest that future studies could potentially extend the research to these types of firms as well as explore other contexts where there might be a higher likelihood of finding domestic multinational firms, for example, China and India.

It would also be interesting to study the impact of regulations on CSR in Myanmar, including the 2017 Companies Law; 2013 Anti-Corruption Law; and 2011 Income Tax Law. As the Myanmar government (before the 2021 military coup) has begun to regulate corporate activities around philanthropy and tax, for instance, it would be interesting to see how the current lack of embedded CSR activity development at the organizational level might start to change. The transitory and non-embedded nature of CSR, varying with stakeholders' requirements (Husted & Allen, 2011; Park & Ghauri, 2015) limits the overall sustainability of these activities (Maon et al., 2017). Furthermore, firms do not generate long-term CSR plans and processes within their organization based on these activities (Elms, 2006). This has wider implications for the SDGs since superficial CSR activities are unlikely to generate long-term benefits that need to accrue for SDGs to be met. Similarly, the role of the recent pandemic can be explored in this context. For example, companies donated essential medical equipment to the community in Myanmar (Myanmar Brewery, 2020).

Although studying the underlying reasons is beyond the scope of this research, this could be a good avenue for future research which could study the intrinsic motives of corporations (Muller & Kolk, 2010; van Tulder, 2015) in engaging in philanthropy in future years once these programs have proliferated and data accessibility is enhanced. However, the military coup on February 1, 2021, has drastically reduced the country's attractiveness as a foreign investment destination. Since the coup, many investors have suspended their operations in Myanmar until democracy is restored. For those investors who have remained in Myanmar (despite the coup), they would have to enhance their CSR process further to tighten up their due diligence and to continue to justify their investment in Myanmar, given the international community's concerns over human rights violations. Therefore, this study would make a useful precursor to a future study exploring MNEs' CSR under the military government.

Myanmar as a pariah and its recent status as a conflict zone and a fragile state, the role of business, in particular foreign MNEs, will always be scrutinized in terms of its contribution to peace and nation-building (Oetzel & Miklian, 2017) and this certainly provides another avenue for future research. This is also critical in the context of our findings that MNEs did not make a clear contribution to only one SDG, which relates to establishing peace and strong institutions in the host country.

Also, we acknowledge that the weakness of our analysis is that while the programs were implemented, they might not have been tracked and monitored to gauge the outcome, as many of the programs ran only for a short time. Yet, we argue that these companies' activities can be evaluated and held to account by local and international stakeholders. For example, the case of Moattama Gas Transportation Co.,

Ltd—which received summary judgment for its actions in Myanmar (Earthrights, 2000).

Another area of interesting research would be to compare the historical and contemporary perspectives of CSR and SDGs in the home country of the MNEs (Rao-Nicholson & Liou, 2021) and how these impact operations in CoC. This is pertinent since our sample comprises predominantly Asian firms operating in Myanmar. These Asian firms might have a different history than European and American firms operating in this context.

Finally, future research can see whether the results from this context are applicable in other CoC and extend our contributions by conducting comparative research in other countries, especially in the context of exploring links between the SDGs and MNEs' CSR activities.

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