Meta-organizations and Environmental Sustainability: An Overview in African Context

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Abstract

This paper offers a conceptual overview of the role of meta-organizations in environmental sustainability in an under-researched context of Africa. The current paper is one of the few studies to offer a specific differentiation concerning meta-organizations concerning environmental sustainability in developed vs. emerging economies' settings. Then the paper further offers an in-depth assessment of meta-organizations' role in environmental sustainability in Africa, with reference to major hurdles in this concern. Our analysis reveals several problems with business only meta-organizations in Africa, which significantly limit meta-organizations' role in ensuring environmental sustainability in this region. These problems include competing interests resulting in failure to accommodate multiple stakeholders, lack of responsible investing and environmental stewardship, along with institutional voids. Finally, the paper offers several solutions, implications, along with pinpointing specific areas of research related to meta-organizations and sustainability in Africa, that future studies can pursue.

Key Words: Africa, Environmental sustainability, Emerging Economies, and Meta-organizations.

1. Introduction

The global interest in environmental sustainability at both academic, managerial and policy levels has increased significantly in the last two decades due to increased awareness as well as visible influences of environmental degradation on both humans and nature (e.g., Chaudhury *et al.*, 2016; Sowman and Wynberg, 2014). At the same time the questions have been raised concerning validity of sustainability solutions developed in advanced economies in the emerging and developing economies (Ostrom, 2010). In this concern, the need for socially constructed solutions to address environmental sustainability challenges has been stressed by scholars (Adger *et al.*, 2005; Chaudhury *et al.*, 2016). Prior research has found that environmental sustainability initiatives must be negotiated nationally, be locally adaptable, and, as such, must be compatible with the needs of the local institutions and environments particularly in emerging economies (Brown and Stigge, 2021; Conway and Mustelin, 2014). Keeping in view, multilevel difficulties linked to achieving sustainability, it

has rightly been argued that such endeavours go beyond the effort of any single actor/organization (Chaudhury *et al.*, 2016), hence, the need for meta-organising becomes paramount. Despite its importance, meta-organizations are a rather under-researched topic in management studies; a gap which our paper aims to fill in an interesting context.

Coined by Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008), 'meta-organization' is more than just a word. It is a 21st century idea for stimulating collective actions at macro level (Garaudel, 2020), towards major issues such as corporate social responsibility, human rights, and sustainable development (Carmagnac and Carbone, 2019). A meta-organization has other organizations as members (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2005, 2008), and thus there is a competition over authority, autonomy, and identity, while decision making is based on consensus (Garaudel, 2020). Indeed, the theorising behind meta-organizations explains an inter-organizational collaboration among member organizations (e.g., trade associations and a range of international organizations) for collective actions (Ahrne *et al.*, 2016; Brankovic, 2018; Malcourant *et al.*, 2015). Given such heterogeneity of meta-organizations (Garaudel, 2020), more academic work is needed particularly in emerging economies (Valente and Oliver, 2018), to further understand their different forms, structures and processes.

Within emerging economies, Africa in particular is a relatively less researched context, especially in the management studies realm (e.g., Amankwah-Amoah, 2018). This dearth of research in Africa becomes even more visible when looking at the literature addressing the role of meta-organizations in environmental sustainability (e.g., Berkowitz et al., 2017). Although there are a few studies on corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Eweje, 2006; Hinson *et al.*, 2019) and sustainability in Africa (Anwana, 2020), there is still a paucity of studies examining the role of meta organizations in the environmental sustainability of the continent. Studies are needed to evaluate the impact of the collaborative actions and collective capabilities of the firms and industrialists in confronting the sustainability-related challenges facing the African continent. Although some international scholars (e.g., Chaudhury *et al.*, 2016; Valente and Oliver, 2018) have begun to show interest in this new area of research, more studies are still needed to show how country-specific attributes and indigenous institutions can influence meta-organizations' capacity to design and implement sustainability initiatives in response to global climate change in Africa. Against this backdrop, this paper has two goals. Firstly, it aims to offer a conceptual overview of meta-organizations and specifically highlight the differences in the research undertaken on them developed vs. emerging economies, as very limited scholars work has explored such differences. Secondly, it specifically focuses on challenges and difficulties faced in the

context of environmental sustainability in Africa and the role (or lack of it) of meta-organizations. By doing so, our paper contributes to the extant meta-organizations literature by being one of the first papers to undertake such an assessment in African context; thereby opening several avenues for future researchers.

The rest of this paper is structured as follow. Section two reviews the extant literature on meta-organizations. Section three compares the role of meta-organizations in sustainability in developed versus emerging economies settings. After that specific discussion on meta-organizations and their role in environmental sustainability in Africa is discussed. The paper concludes with a discussion on implications, limitations, and future research directions.

2. Theorizing Meta-Organizations

Given the increasing need for collective actions in confronting the world's sustainability-related challenges (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2008; Spillman, 2018), 'meta-organizations' (i.e., organizations which are themselves members of other entities) has witnessed a growing research interest. By uniting diverse stake holders (Berkowitz, 2018), raising public awareness about sustainability, condemning multinational companies' lack of responsibility (Carmagnac and Carbone, 2019), and through quality control (Gulati *et al.*, 2012), meta-organizations create a stage for taking collective actions against reckless business practices (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2008; Berkowitz and Bor 2018). 'Meta-organising' (a.k.a. "meta-governance") is a coordinated collective action at the industry level (Berkowitz, 2018; Berkowitz and Bor, 2018), which is a necessity for development (Berkowitz, 2018) and for winning in emerging economies (Khanna and Palepu, 2010). Although meta-organised firms may lack a formal authority, or consensus on standards for collaboration (Chaudhury *et al.*, 2016), the role of the architects in binding these organizations through communications and delivering the desired objectives has been emphasised (Gulati *et al.*, 2012).

Viewed as unconventional organizations (Berkowitz, 2018; Bres *et al.*, 2018), or associations of organizations (Cropper and Bor, 2018), meta-organizations focus on social responsibility (Berkowitz *et al.*, 2017), climate change mitigation (Chaudhury *et al.*, 2016), general management practices (Leys and Joffre, 2014), and tackling environmental sustainability issues at sectoral level (Berkowitz *et al.*, 2017). Yet, there is still a paucity of studies addressing the role of meta-organizations in tackling environmental sustainability issues in emerging economies, which these authors suggest is a significant omission in the theoretical development of the meta-organizations' literature. With a few notable exceptions

(e.g., Berkowitz *et al.*, 2017; Chaudhury *et al.*, 2016; Valente and Oliver, 2018), existing studies have focused on sustainable innovation (Berkowitz, 2018), meta-organizations' diversity and agency (Garaudel, 2020), general management practices (Leys and Joffre, 2014), and sustainable supply network (Carmagnac and Carbone, 2019). More studies are needed to examine the crucial role of meta-organizations in achieving environmental sustainability in emerging economies. Building on Chaudhury *et al.* (2016), this study draws upon Berkowitz et al (2017) to provide complementary but distinctive insight into the role of meta-organizations in environmental sustainability across emerging economies.

Despite their pluralistic nature (Bres 2013; Helms *et al.*, 2012) and conflicting agendas (Chaudhury *et al.*, 2016), which contradicts the unitary model of conventional organizations (Bres *et al.*, 2018), through meta-governance, meta-organizations create opportunities for collective learning, cooperation, competition, knowledge transfer, and collective action among 'coalitions of actors' (Berkowitz, 2018). By uniting local actors from networks that span organizational levels (van Kleef and Roome, 2007, p. 44), meta-organizations provide a platform for confronting sustainability issues. Gawer (2014) and Gawer and Cusumano (2014) also believe that through collaborative structures, a meta-organization can create a system of assets for members to benefit from. Based on such benefits to members, Berkowitz (2018) has identified various types of meta organizations, such as, Fab Labs which provide technical prototyping to encourage innovation and invention's development (of members), and incubators of start-ups which are exclusively committed to nurturing innovative companies. The role of such meta-organizations in collectively building members' capabilities is also emphasised. Yet, meta-organizations lack the necessary resources to carefully monitor their members, or the authority to punish them (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2008); hence they are partial organizations (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011; Berkowitz, 2018; Berkowitz and Bor, 2018).

Focusing on the oil and gas industry, Berkowitz et al (2017) has identified a typology of meta-organizations. These include the infra-sectoral (i.e., meta-organizations that specialise on segments of the oil and gas industry value chain), sectoral (i.e., involving only organizations from the oil and gas industry alone), cross-sectoral (e.g., meta-organizations created by multiple unrelated industries), and supra-sectoral (i.e., meta-organizations created by organizations from related industries, e.g., oil and gas and mining). Berkowitz and colleagues also examined the crucial roles of these varieties of meta-organizations in addressing environmental sustainability issues in the oil and gas sector. For instance, issues relating to marine-mammal impacts would need to be tackled by organizations drawn from

say, oil, fishing, and tourism industries (i.e., by supra-sectoral meta-organizations), while issues such as oil spillage should be referred to sectoral meta-organizations (Berkowitz *et al.*, 2017). Other forms of meta-organizations found in the oil and gas literature include the *'exclusive'* meta-organizations (i.e., those that take collective action aimed at restricting output to increase prices), e.g., the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2008; Olson, 1965). There is also the *'inclusive'* (i.e., those meta-organizations that seek to lobby legislation and as a ploy to increase their membership base) (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2008). All these types can play a critical role in ensuring environmental sustainability; however, more empirical research is needed to better understand their processes, strategies, and structures.

3. Meta-organizations and environmental sustainability: Developed versus emerging economies' settings

The section compares the role of meta-organizations in achieving sustainability in developed economies and emerging economies' settings. Given the undeniable environmental impacts of the oil and gas industry in emerging economies, the industry, in particular, has been facing severe scrutiny and criticism (Frynas 2005, 2009; Perks *et al.* 2013). This sector is dominated by some of the world's leading companies who are expected to blaze the trail in confronting environmental sustainability issues, and yet these global giants are the ones responsible for some of the most careless business practices. Second, the fact that the oil and gas industry in emerging economies' settings must face corrupt political systems, diverse cultural norms, pressures from the civil society organizations, and impoverished neighbourhoods, these make confronting environmental sustainability issues even more complex (Berkowitz *et al.*, 2017). Yet, sustainability initiatives are mere ploys by senior managers of these oil and gas companies (Cai *et al.*, 2012) to make their activities acceptable to both their employees (De Roeck and Delobbe, 2012) and their host communities (Castello' and Lozano, 2011; Du and Vieira Jr, 2012).

Although the oil and gas industry has been examined in Sub-Saharan Africa, such studies have focused on the role of the oil and gas companies in CSR, instead of analysing the role of their meta-organizations in environmental sustainability. For instance, Idemudia (2009) examined the role of the community development partnership (CDPs) initiatives employed by Shell, Exxon Mobil, and Total in poverty reduction within their host communities in the Niger delta region of Nigeria. Aaron (2012) also examined the role of the oil companies in sustainable community development in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Focusing on Chad, Cash (2012) examined the level of transparency in managing the revenue generated from oil projects in oil-rich sub-Saharan Africa and how this reflects in their CSR projects. In Angola, Tallio (2015) examined the impact of the oil companies' CSR policies in rebuilding the country's public health sector following the country's 30 years' war, through a process known as *Angolanisation*. Frynas (2005) examined how the oil and gas companies in the Niger delta region of Nigeria have been failing to rebuild and develop the region after they have destroyed it through their operations. Despite the lack of studies examining the role of meta-organizations in tackling sustainability issues in Africa, several factors explain the high level of failure of environmental sustainability initiatives of these multinational oil and gas companies in Sub-Saharan Africa. These include the high level of corruption (Frynas, 2010, 2012; Hilson and Maconachie, 2008; Kolstad and Wiig, 2009, 2010; Smith *et al.*, 2012), underdevelopment (Frynas, 2010, 2012), ignorant of key issues at the sub-national level (Van Alstine, 2014), and lack of willingness for social reforms (Pitlik *et al.*, 2010). Yet, the sustainability initiatives of these multinational oil companies sometimes conflict with the existing legal frameworks of their host countries/communities, thus making implementation very difficult (Mayer, 2009).

Unlike the bleak picture presented above on meta-organizations and sustainability in emerging economies, Berkowitz et al. (2017) semi-directive interviews with leaders of meta-organizations in Europe-based oil and gas sector provide some positive findings on the roles of meta-organizations in confronting environmental sustainability issues in developed economies. For instance, CONCAWE (conservation of Clean Air and Water in Europe) is an infra-sectoral meta-organization that deals with fuel quality and emissions, air quality, water quality, soil contamination, waste, occupational health and safety, petroleum product stewardship and cross-country pipeline performance. The International Petroleum Industry Environmental Conservation Association (IPIECA) is a sectoral-level meta-organization that has working groups assigned with responsibilities for compliance with biodiversity standards, environmental responsiveness, and for detecting oil spillage. API (American Petroleum Institute) is another sectoral level meta-organization that focuses on clean air, climate change, clean water, health and safety, energy efficiency, recycling, process safety, and environmental performance. However, it is a business only meta-organization, which is also active in lobbying as well, which can perhaps influence their environmental sustainability initiatives focus also. Another sectoral level meta-organization in oil and gas industry is the ARPEL (Asistencia Recı´proca Petrolera Empresarial Latinoamericana) which focus on environmental performance, oil spill preparedness and response, particularly in Latin

America. At the infra-sectoral level is the IOGP (Oil and Gas Petroleum), which focus on sustainability issues, such as, climate change, Aviation safety, Biodiversity, diving operations, and environmental. The WBCSD (World Business Council for Sustainable Development) is a cross-sectoral meta-organization which focus on ecosystem solutions, forest solutions, water solutions, energy and climate, electric utilities, and GHG Management. At the supra-sectoral level is the WOC (World Ocean Council) which is responsible for Ocean's sustainability (i.e., involving invasive species, ocean noise, marine mammal impacts, marine debris, and Arctic conditions) (Berkowitz *et al.*, 2017).

Unlike the above optimistic assessment of meta-organizations and environmental sustainability in developed economies, Chaudhury *et al.* (2016) studied emerging meta-organizations and their adaptation to global climate change, and their study provides some pessimistic results in Nepal, Pakistan, and Ghana. Their studies found that while Nepal preferred a formal process to approaching sustainability issues, this is to the detriment of a scheduled implementation. Yet, given Nepal's political instability, coupled with the recurring violence and recurrent changes in the country's leadership, amendments to the constitution are usually delayed, and thus a delayed consideration of sustainability initiatives by each new regime (p. 248). Pakistan has a decentralised approach to environmental sustainability, but this lacks national approval. Yet, '*climate change ranks low on Pakistan's list of priorities in sustainable development because immediate returns appear low'* (p. 249). In Ghana, the country's decentralised structures and budget has put other developmental concerns ahead of climate change adaptation (Chaudhury *et al.*, 2016). This has resulted in significant delays in the release of money to finance climate change initiatives in Ghana. Yet, owing to Ghana's low income and development baselines, the capacity to raise funds locally (by these meta-organizations) is limited (p. 251). Furthermore, while meta-organizations are viewed as innovative ways to confronting environmental sustainability issues in emerging economies, Valente and Oliver's (2018) cross-case comparison of multiple case studies in sub-Saharan Africa found that some of the nine focal firms (studied) did not confront sustainability through a meta-organization. Such emerging economies' delayed adaptation to global norms and conventions for climate change due to ignorance, lack of accountability, and lack of legitimacy shows that sustainability initiatives still lack the needed attention and action in emerging economies. Table 1 summarises the key differences in meta-organization research in confronting environmental sustainability issues in emerging versus developed economies, based on the above discussion. We have specifically focused on assessing the few studies undertaken in emerging economies to show the limitations and challenges. As the body of

literature in emerging economies' context is extensive, so we have referred to the key aspects only in the table.

Insert Table 1 here

4. Meta-organizations in Africa and Environmental Sustainability

This section is focused on environmental sustainability issues in Africa, brought about by the business only meta-organizations in the continent.

4.1. *Failure to Accommodate Multiple Stakeholder*s

Academic research examining Africa's readiness to attain sustainability has been on the increase since last couple of decades to increased visibility of the environmental problems (e.g., Abdaless, *et al.,* 2015; Sowman and Wynberg, 2014). These studies have given particular attention to Sub-Saharan Africa as it has a large presence of multinationals operating in extractive sectors including oil (e.g., Berkowitz *et al.,* 2017; Sowman and Wynberg, 2014). The increased awareness of environmental problems in Africa (Barlow, 2021; Nhamo and Inyang, 2011) has forced political leaders in Africa to urge companies in the region to engage in sustainable environmental management. Consequently, we see a proliferation of trade associations, e.g., Petroleum Technologist Association of Nigeria (PETAN), Oil and Gas Trainers Association of Nigeria (OGTAN), in addition to prevailing ones, e.g., the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas workers (NUPENG), Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN), Independent Petroleum Marketers Association of Nigeria (IPMAN), etc. Unlike the multi-stakeholder meta-organizations, which integrate both profit and non-profit driven stakeholders, these business-only meta-organizations involve only profit-driven stakeholders (Berkowitz *et al.,* 2017; Carmagnac and Carbone, 2019), and thus are less likely to tackle sustainability issues (Berkowitz *et al.,* 2020; Marques, 2017). Yet, given the intrinsic complex nature of the oil and gas industry, and coupled with the wide range and variety of stakeholders affected directly or indirectly by its operations, sustainability issues in the industry cannot be tackled exclusively at the industry or firm levels, instead, should require the participation of a wide range of other affected stakeholders (Berkowitz *et al.,* 2017). Amoah and Eweje (2022) also found failure to accommodate the multiple and competing interests, values and logics of various stakeholders of multinational mining companies in Ghana a significant barrier to tackling the environmental sustainability issue in the industry. Hence, competing interest

groups and failure to accommodate multiple stakeholders inhibit the effectiveness of meta-organizations in tackling environmental challenges in Africa.

4.2. *Lack of Responsible Investing*

One of the major problems with business-only meta-organizations is that they tend to lack responsible investing (Buijs *et al.,* 2009). Given the proliferation of hotels in Africa and the resultant waning of natural resources, through the generation of waste, environmental pollution and degradation caused by the industry, hotels in Africa are advised to engage in responsible investing and sustainable **environmental** management practices (Sucheran, 2015). Yet, a group of South African hotel managers have revealed a lack of knowledge and expertise around sustainability initiatives, lack of resources to implement certain **environmental** management practices, lack of government assistance, lack of legislation and regulation and high costs of RI, as their key barriers to achieving environmental sustainability (ibid). Although a sustainability assurance statement has been recommended to boost organizational transparency and accountability to stakeholders, without multiple stakeholders' engagement in the assurance process, the limited scope of the assurance engagement and the lack of compliance by the assuror combine to limit the credibility and efficacy of a **sustainability** assurance practice (Bepari and Mollik, 2016). Consequently, there is an urgent need for cross-sector and multiple stakeholder meta-organizations in Africa to overcome the problem of lack of responsible investing.

4.3. *Lack of Environmental Stewardship*

Thirdly, business only meta-organizations also lack environment stewardship, as a lack of multiple stakeholders – non-governmental and governmental bodies, participating firms and the local community – limits environmental stewardship (Barendse *et al.,* 2016). This is due to lack of bridge between the various stakeholders' actions and interests (Tilt *et al.,* 2021). Research in South African mining industry highlights the role of multiple stakeholders – partnership between companies, the government and civil society, and a commitment to local communities' rights to informed prior consent and authentic participation – in achieving environmental sustainability initiatives (Hamann, 2003). Such partnership has been described as both enabling (Painter-Morland and Dobie, 2009) and providing an important bridge between embedding informal norms and changes to regulatory requirements (Tilt *et al.,* 2021). Similarly, despite new investment and efforts to minimise environmental impact of unsustainable logging operations in the Congo Basin, failure to respect the rights of the local communities in the tropical forests of this African country was highlighted as the major cause of continuing high rates of deforestation in the region. Sizer

and Plouvier (2000) found that almost all of the new investment focuses on short-term "cut-and-run" activities, perpetrated by the business-only meta organizations. Yet, Africa remains the most affected by environmental degradation due to lack of policy that ensure punishment for violation of greenhouse strategies in Africa (Adekunle, 2021). These findings suggest gaining the support of the affected local communities (Abensperg-Traun, 2009), which also highlights the role of multi-stakeholder meta-organizations in achieving environmental sustainability objectives. Yet, the literature linking meta-organizations and sustainability in Africa is limited by a paucity of research and a lack of formal organizational structure (Andrews, 2016), which these authors believe is a significant omission in the theoretical development of the meta-organization literature.

4.4. *Institutional Voids*

Institutional voids have been referred to as a major barrier to environmental sustainability generally in African countries (e.g., Nhamo and Inyang, 2011). Furthermore, problems associated with institutional voids like corruption, lack of domestication of green economy objectives, weak policy implementation, and inability to match individual country's interests with the global initiative on the green economy are also visible in most African countries (Ganda, 2020; Iheonu *at al.*, 2021; Nhamo, 2013). Scholars have also found that copying western sustainability ideology in the African context to be also problematic as it does not account for the problems such as institutional voids (Andrews, 2016). Despite the differences in the drivers and causes of environmental problems between the West and in Africa, sustainability initiatives in Africa often tend to ignore indigenous theories such as Ubuntu, African Renaissance and Omuluwabi (e.g., Dartey-Baah and Amponsah-Tawiah, 2011). Yet, sustainability is about the need for organizations to align their values with societal and environmental expectations (Camilleri, 2017). This highlights the need for a change in legislation to accommodate the unique African values, along with ensuring meta-organizations to be comprising of multiple stakeholders rather than business only lobbying ones. Finally, the sustainability literature also stresses the crucial role of education in realising environmental sustainability in Africa, as lack of pressure from internal stakeholders e.g., top officials of companies on firms to report sustainability is the reasons for non-reporting of sustainability (Abdullahi and Makama, 2021). Organised conferences, workshops and seminars have therefore been suggested such that non-reporting firms can be educated and enlightened on the benefits of sustainability reporting (Abdullahi and Makama, 2021; Tikly, 2019). Also, such educational events can increase awareness of cross-sector

collaboration which has been found to be important to address pressing societal issues in the emerging economies including African countries (Arslan *et al.*, 2021). Hence, for meta-organizations aiming to contribute to environmental sustainability, cross-sector collaboration should be more visible in Africa because in the contexts with institutional voids, it has been found very effective.

5. Discussion, and implications

5.1 Discussion

The purpose of the current paper was to offer a conceptual overview of meta-organizations' role in environmental sustainability particularly in the emerging economies' setting of Africa. We firstly presented an analysis of the differences in role of meta-organizations in confronting environmental challenges and ensuring sustainability in developed vs emerging economies. We further found that business-specific meta-organizations have emerged in African countries in response to continued pressure from industry watchdogs and stakeholders. However, instead of confronting sustainability issues, these meta-organizations merely lobby and endorse legislation in favour of their members. We further found that, with mounting pressure from critics, firms, including multinational corporations (especially in the oil and gas sector) have been forced to create some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and departments whose responsibility is to develop and pursue CSR policies, instead of confronting sustainability challenges specifically (Berkowitz *et al.*, 2017). The presented discussion has further revealed that CSR initiatives are not a replacement for meta-organizations with multiple stakeholders dedicated to sustainability in Africa. We further found that lack of capabilities to include multiple stakeholders from different sectors, lack of responsible investment and environmental stewardship further hinder the potential and operations of meta-organizations in Africa. Along with these meta-organization specific challenges, a broader challenge of institutional voids further complicates the situation. Environmental sustainability agendas of meta organizations in many emerging economies often lack national approval and are thus illegitimate. This is partly due to a *concern* (in many emerging economies) that the immediate financial return from environmental sustainability initiatives is rather too low, and thus climate change is not of a prime concern in their sustainable development agenda (Chaudhury *et al.*, 2016, p. 249). Hence, there is a need for increased awareness using multiple channels concerning the potential of meta-organizations for sustainability as well as utilisation of cross-sector

collaboration to overcome the environmental challenges in African countries. Based on the nature of the African business environment and the inherent sustainability issues involved, we also highlight the need for applicable legislation/institutions, as well as effective mechanisms that foster multi-stakeholder meta organizations to accommodate multiple stakeholders' interest, aimed at tackling the lack of responsible investing, lack of environmental stewardship, and institutional voids in Africa.

Africa is home to many multinational mining and oil and gas companies. In addition, the continent has been experiencing a mounting sustainability barrier – situations of complicit commonality, institutional complexity, institutional voids and a resultant lack of sustainable outcomes (Amoah and Eweje 2022). Although the pursuit of sustainability initiatives through a coordinated and collaborative effort via meta-organization is a critical first step in tackling these sustainability issues (George *et al.,* 2016), a number of challenges – exploitative labour, biodiversity, aging societies and climate change – have been found to limit the pursuit of sustainability initiatives (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer, 2022). Furthermore, along with business owners' perception of compliance with environmental requirements as a business cost that is not transferable to customers in terms of added benefits, there is also their limited awareness of the link between sustainability agenda and competitive advantage (Taylor *et al.,* 2003). These issues jointly prevent a business only meta organization from committing to tackling sustainability issues (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer, 2022), especially, as some members tend to benefit from irresponsible business practices (Berkowitz *et al.,* 2020). This highlights the need for multi stakeholders' meta organizations. Multi stakeholder's meta organization has been found an effective structure that accommodates multiple and competing interests in the pursuit of environmental sustainability initiatives, hence an effective device for tackling the contradictory fundamental challenges of environmental conservation (Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer, 2022). Yet, there are lack of research examining the role of multi stakeholder meta-organizations in tackling sustainability issues in Africa, or research that examines the organizational mechanisms required for meta organizations in Africa to succeed in confronting the sustainability issues facing the continent.

Researchers have also found that most of the sustainability issues not only result from human activity but also from governance failure, and thus addressing them requires applicable legislation, governance framework, effective institutions (Amoah and Eweje 2022), and rethinking governance systems (Berkowitz *et al.,* 2020; Crowder *et al.,* 2006). For instance, sustainable whale population management have been found to play a key role in

fostering marine ecosystems' conservation (Berkowitz *et al.,* 2020; Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer, 2022; Kojima, 2019; Normile, 2019). Furthermore, following a complicated and dynamic environment for China's SMEs to engage in sustainability, an improvement in China's government legislation has been found a key driver behind these firms' sudden decision to now pursue sustainability agenda (Yu and Bell, 2007). In the UK, applicable institutions with local support services and associated information on sustainability has been the key for South Yorkshire firms' greater involvement in environmental best practice (Taylor *et al.,* 2003). Also, research has revealed that UK owner-managers resistance to environmental management due to its perceived cost seems to be changing slowly for good (Revell *et al.,* 2010). In their cross-sector survey of 220 SMEs in the UK, Revell and colleagues found that (unlike in previous years) a higher percentage of the owner-managers were found to be actively involved in recycling, energy efficiency, responsible buying and selling, and efforts to reduce their carbon emissions, mainly due to tougher environmental regulations, taxation, potential cost savings, new customers, higher staff retention and good publicity for their firms (p. 273). Sjåfjell and Richardson (2015) also argue that sustainability initiatives should not be left in the hands of businesses alone but requires an applicable legal framework that go beyond conventional environmental regulation to entrench with company law the necessary standards and procedures. Adopting such multi stakeholders' approach to meta organising has also been linked to responsible sustainability business model (SBM). Stubbs and Cocklin (2008) found that organizations adopting a SBM must first develop both internal structural and cultural capabilities to achieve firm-level sustainability and collaborate with key stakeholders to achieve sustainability for the system that an organization is part of. Finally, given that Africa is facing complex, multi-scale sustainability challenges, addressing such issues (such as lack of responsible investments, lack of environmental stewardship and institutional voids) call for joint action from multi stakeholders – small and medium-scale businesses, large firms, environmental protection arms of the United Nations, and government (Berkowitz *et al.,* 2020; Crowder *et al.,* 2006). Drawing on the stakeholder's theory of the firm, the importance of cooperation between the different stakeholders – SMEs, large companies and non-governmental organizations in promoting sustainable development – have also been highlighted (Harangozó and Zilahy, 2015). Yet, the ultimate responsibility for change lies with the host government via legislation (Forsyth, 1997).

Insert Table 2 here

5.2 Implications, Limitations and Future Research Directions

Our paper offers both academic and policy implications. From an academic perspective, our paper has depicted clear differences in the role of meta-organizations in developed vs. emerging economies, in the specific context of environmental challenges and sustainability. This leads to the argument for context specific theorisation where African indigenous theories such as Ubuntu, and Omuluwabi in relation to environmental sustainability are incorporated is needed to enrich meta-organizations research. This would also offer researchers focusing on Africa a more localised and applicable theoretical lens to understand both meta-organizations as well as their role in environmental sustainability, rather than generic frameworks.

The main practical implication of our paper is aligned with above mentioned theoretical implication, where based on our assessment, we recommend the policymakers to incorporate unique African values while legislating meta-organizations, along with ensuring that they comprise of multiple stakeholders rather than business focused lobbying organizations. Also, conscious efforts to raise awareness concerning the potential of meta-organizations in addressing environmental and sustainability challenges specifically and societal challenges generally, is strongly recommended. It needs to be stressed that membership of meta-organizations needs to align with both the operations and strategic goals of individual organizations to make them join such initiatives. However, by developing communication channels with various participants (Valente and Oliver, 2018), and through quality control (Gulati *et al.*, 2012), meta-organised firms have a cohesive stage and solid ability to confront sustainability issues during closed-door meetings (Valente and Oliver, 2018). Yet, taking collective actions against reckless business practices (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2008; Berkowitz and Bor 2018) requires cohesion among the multiple stakeholders (Valente and Oliver, 2018). Hence, for the organizations part of meta-organizations in Africa, a key recommendation is to set some baseline in the sustainability context, crossing which may result in collective action from others. African legislators can also play a role in this concern by more specifically regulating these aspects, while for the firms which are part of a meta-organizations it offers an opportunity to take a proactive approach, which can ultimately result in reputational advantages as well.

Our paper has limitations as well, like any other study. Firstly, it is a conceptual work where no empirical research has been undertaken. Hence, the arguments presented have not been validated. However, still our research has opened several avenues for future scholars in

Africa to pursue. Firstly, the constraints highlighted in our paper can be empirically investigated by the future scholars in different African countries and industries (sectors) to offer specific and in-depth understanding. Such research will also be able to offer specific practical implications. Moreover, further conceptual, as well as empirical (both qualitative and quantitative) work on the incorporation of indigenous African elements in theorisation of meta-organization and sustainability, is also needed to strengthen the research areas as well as enhance context specific understanding.

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Table 1: The role of meta-organizations in confronting environmental sustainability issues in emerging economies versus developed economies (based on prior research)

S/N	Key Indicators	Developed Economies	Emerging Economies (including Africa)
1	**Constraints / Strengths**	• Transparency • Availability of Funding • State Support • Supported by existing legal framework	• Corrupt political systems, • Diverse cultural norms, • Pressures from the civil society organizations, • Impoverished neighbourhoods (Berkowitz *et al.*, 2017). • Underdevelopment (Frynas, 2010, 2012), • Ignorant of key issues (Chaudhury *et al.*, 2016; Valente and Oliver, 2018) at the sub-national level (Van Alstine, 2014), • Lack of willingness for social reforms (Pitlik *et al.*, 2010), • Lack of accountability (Valente and Oliver, 2018), • Lack of legitimacy (Chaudhury *et al.*, 2016), • Poor economic condition, political instability, conflicts, frequent changes in countries' leadership and their resultant amendments to the constitution (Chaudhury *et al.*, 2016).
2	**Focus of existing research**	Environmental Sustainability	Mainly on CSR
3	**Research Strategy**	The literature linking meta-organizations and environmental sustainability highlights a typology of meta-organizations – the sectoral, infra-sectoral, supra-sectoral, and cross-sectoral – and their roles in confronting environmental sustainability issues in the developed economies.	Existing literature largely examines the role of the community development partnership (CDPs) initiatives employed by multinationals and some local players, in poverty reduction or sustainability in CSR context, in their host communities in Africa.
4	**Scope**	Robust – Wealth of Literature	Weak – Relatively lack of studies
5	**Summary**	Optimistic	Pessimistic due to lack of multiple stakeholder meta-organizations and visibility of lobbying focused

			business meta-organizations.

Table 2: Business Only Meta-Organizations in Africa: Problems and Potential Solutions

S/N	Key Issues Raised	Potential Solutions
1	1. Failure to accommodate Multiple Stakeholder interests. 2. Merely lobbying and endorsing legislations in favour of their members. 3. Using designated departments and NGOs to develop and pursue CSR policies and agendas instead of using multi stakeholders' meta organizations to confront sustainability challenges.	Instituting mechanisms that encourage formation of multi stakeholders' meta organizations.
2	Lack of Responsible Investing	Introducing tougher environmental regulations and taxation, while promoting awareness on the importance of good publicity for their firms, owing to responsible business practices.
3	Lack of Environmental Stewardship	Adequate funding, empowerment and encouragement of multi stakeholders' meta organizations to scrutinise sustainability policies before their implementation, while continuously punishing offenders to serve as deterrent.
4	Institutional Voids	Adopting applicable legislation, governance framework, effective institutions, and rethinking

		governance systems.