

Closer, stronger, and brighter: bringing IB and IHRM together through the lens of Sustainable Development Goals

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ABSTRACT


Despite the shared research interest in multinational enterprises (MNEs) in international business (IB) and international human resource management (IHRM), the two fields of studies have been criticized for the lack of dialogues and collaborations that might be beneficial to extending the scope of knowledge in each. At the same time, both IB and IHRM have expanded into the international development area, evidenced by the growing interest in the role of MNEs in promoting or hampering the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This perspective paper aims to address some of the critiques, challenge existing assumptions, and provide examples of research that critically examines the role of MNEs in promoting or hampering the realization of the SDGs. This paper highlights the emerging common ground between IB and IHRM, and identifies agendas for future theoretical and applied enquiries.

KEYWORDS

International business; international human resource management; sustainable development goals; climate change; political economy; diversity and inclusion

1. Introduction

Despite the shared research interest in multinational enterprises (MNEs) in international business (IB) and international human resource management (IHRM), these two fields of study have been criticized for the lack of dialogues and collaborations that contribute to extending the knowledge in these fields (Andersson et al., 2019). Nachum et al. (2023, p. 1) also ‘contend that there is a need for IB theorizing to place greater emphasis on the role of people, to balance IB’s traditional emphasis on institutions, location-specific assets, and other macro-level attributes’. IB

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and IHRM research are in fact interconnected, interdependent, and complementary, and may strengthen each other through shared interests in theoretical underpinnings and subject matters. While IB research includes international trade, foreign direct investment (FDI), the management of MNEs, cross-country comparative studies, and so on, IHRM covers global mobility of human capital, strategic and functional HRM, employment relations issues, cross-cultural management, cross-country comparative studies, and so forth. Market, institutions, culture, technology, people, politics, risks, and more recently, turbulence and uncertainty run through the themes of many IB and IHRM studies (Budd et al., 2023; Zahra, 2020); in short, there is emerging common ground.

At the same time, within both the IB and IHRM fields, there have been growing concerns about the practical relevance of their research in a decontextualized manner and an elitist approach (Hauff et al., 2021; Teagarden et al., 2018). Much of this is due to presenting measures and categories that are ideologically loaded as objective measures for comparison, and at times, through an overly narrow assumption as to what the firm can or should do. For example, the World Bank Doing Business project is widely seen as both ideologically flawed and influenced by political expedience (Adams et al., 2019; Deakin, 2021). However, such measures are widely used to compare countries; for example, a strong World Bank rating is seen as intrinsically better for business (Adams et al., 2019; Deakin, 2021), although there seems little link with the actual investment decisions (Wood et al., 2016). There is much more concern about the demands being placed on MNEs in corrupt environments than the potential role of MNEs as active instigators of corruption (Cooke et al., 2022). Once more, neat distinctions between developed vs. developing countries, or, the presently fashionable terms mature and emerging markets, mask more complex realities; for example, several countries in the latter category surpass some major mature markets when it comes to physical infrastructure provision, access to health care, equity, and educational attainments (Wood et al., 2016).

At a theoretical level, this would suggest the need to supplement or sequentially incorporate a broader range of perspectives from around the world, and, reevaluate the utility of assumptions underlying mature paradigms (Bruton et al., 2022). It would highlight the need for a closer understanding of the origins of specific theories, and the value assumptions underlying them (Bruton et al., 2022; Valeri, 2021). In short, greater awareness is needed of the history of specific ideas and how they have provided the building blocks of theory, and in terms of different ways of understanding the firm as more than a simple vehicle for value release through its employees.

At an applied level, what these different concerns have in common is that they highlight the need for a broader set of measures or constructs

in benchmarking what is optimal for firms and societies in the medium and long term. There are many measures for Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) status at the firm level, and there have been numerous efforts to compare nations in terms of sustainability criteria, one of the most influential of these being the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). In 2015, the UN launched the 17 SDG goals, with the aim that they are attained by 2030 (see [Appendix A](#)). According to the UN, SDGs are the blueprint for achieving a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice (UN, 2015). Kolk and Van Tulder (2010, p. 120) contend, the 'absence of widespread international regulation on social and environmental issues can be considered as both a problem and an opportunity for MNEs'. In terms of the former, a cross-section of work has highlighted potential negative effects of their activities (aka 'dark side'), including environmental degradation, corruption, and exploitation (e.g. Michailova et al., 2020; Villo et al., 2020). Other work has highlighted the potential of MNEs to work with civil society groupings in increasing the positive social footprint of their activities in a wide range of countries of domicile (Kolk, 2005), and explored how they may both undermine and promote the generation of decent work (Barrientos et al., 2011). Goal 8 of the SDGs focuses on the provision of decent work, productive employment, and job creation. There is a very long-standing 'soft' tradition in HRM that highlights the value of cooperative production paradigms and rewarding work, but often the potential outcomes are depicted in performance terms (Truss et al., 1997), rather than positive goods in their own right. Although there is a comprehensive industrial relations literature that highlights job quality and working life (Warhurst & Knox, 2022), this has had a more limited impact on the IHRM literature, one notable exception being a 2008 special issue on the same in *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* (Burgess & Connell, 2008).

This perspective paper aims to address some of the critiques, challenge existing assumptions, and provide examples of research avenues that may critically examine the role of MNEs in promoting or hampering the achievement of SDGs through their management practices. We chose SDGs as a focal point for the discussion of this paper not least because this is an important agenda for building equitable and sustainable businesses, communities, and societies but also an area in which both IB and IHRM research can contribute to identifying challenges and lessons to learn in achieving SDGs through in-depth examinations of MNEs' strategy, policy and practice and the role of other key stakeholders at various levels. We argue that by working together more closely and by engaging in topics that

are highly relevant to society, such as the role of MNEs in sustainability in general and in achieving SDGs more specifically, IB and IHRM can create synergy and develop into a stronger field with intellectual, policy and practical impacts globally. It will also help illuminate some of the ‘dark side’ (including both negative and unknown aspects) on topics related to each field and sustainability. This is because achieving SDGs is a formidable task that is challenged with gaining the universal acceptance of their value, the willingness of MNEs to embrace and implement them in their strategy, policy, and practice, and stakeholders’ diverse priorities, interests, power structures, and resource constraints. A fuller appreciation of these challenges will help illuminate not only *what* needs to be done (i.e., implementing SDGs to create more equitable and sustainable societies) but also *how* it can be done by taking into account contextual complexities.

We argue that both the fields of IB and IHRM could benefit from ideas, theories, and research angles found in international development studies and regional (country and region-oriented) studies, becoming more critical in the choice of metrics in comparing economies and in exploring industry effects. There is little doubt that the contemporary condition is beset by great events—climate change; pandemics; persistent macro-economic volatility; a long energy transition; and a breakdown of social contracts in many nations (Phan & Wood, 2020). Many of these issues center around or represent a product of economic models and firm practices that over-prioritize short-term returns over the long-term well-being of stakeholders and the environment. This has vested calls for sustainability with a greater salience, and it is around this dimension that we seek to identify research challenges in both IB and HRM, and new ways forward centering on greater interdisciplinarity and the infusion of new ideas from other fields.

2. What have IB and IHRM scholars been calling for?

2.1. Current state of play of IB research

Several influential IB scholars have criticized the current state of play in IB research as lacking practical and policy relevance, being detached from reality, and having no impact on policy decision-making. For example, Buckley et al. (2017, p. 1045) cogently argue that ‘existing major areas of IB research on important global phenomena have had little influence outside of IB’ and ‘only limited effects on business or government policy’, that ‘IB research should focus on ‘grand challenges’ in global business’, and that ‘IB can play a more constructive and vital role by tackling expansive topics at the business–societal interface’. Similarly, Delios (2017, p. 391) pointed out that ‘IB research has become detached from new phenomena in the globalizing world’, that ‘IB research needs to be more vibrant, energetic, curious, creative, risk-taking, and engaging

to reflect the IB world' and that 'reforms are needed through three leverage points: context, journals, and the design of research and inquiry'. IB researchers were urged to engage with phenomenon/practice-driven research (e.g., what is confronting the world, the business, and the society) (Buckley et al., 2017), 'the real-world problems related to the impact of policies' toward MNEs (Doh, 2017, p. 2), and the 'new realities', such as the rise/resurgence of populism and economic nationalism, sustainable development and climate change, new forms of digital technology and changes in power relationships (Ghauri et al., 2021).

While Kolk (2016, p. 25) observed that academic and managerial agendas are (already) 'to some extent influenced by policy debates', the relevance issue remains an abiding concern. Although relevance is often seen in terms of accessibility to the practitioner community (which is undeniably important), it is also about taking account of world-changing events, and, indeed, being able to recognize them when they first unfold (Tourish, 2020). It is furthermore about recognizing that scholarship is never neutral and the relative place of particular paradigms within histories of thought and their underlying ideological assumptions (Tourish, 2020). Hence, there have been calls for approaches that are more deeply grounded in contextual history and are critical of sources and measurement (Buckley, 2021), and to play a more constructive and vital role by tackling expansive topics at the business–societal interface (Buckley et al., 2017). Other recent work has also highlighted the limitations of measures in widespread usage (Casson, 2018), and for a closer look at politics and power in IB research (Child, 2018).

These self-reflections of the IB discipline should not be seen as a derecognition of the great scholarship that has been achieved by the IB research community. Rather it is an urge from influential IB scholars how IB scholars can contribute more to building an equitable and sustainable society by engaging with phenomenon-based research with policy implications. Research related to SDGs offers such an opportunity due to its wide-ranging topical coverage and the need to involve multiple stakeholders at various levels to address local needs and concerns. It will also help illuminate why the uptake of SDGs by MNEs remains relatively slow and what can be done to accelerate the pace (Van Tulder et al., 2021).

However, only a relatively small number of articles have been published in leading IB journals on SDGs so far (e.g., Ghauri et al., 2021; Montiel et al., 2021), although research activities and outputs in this area are now gathering quite a rapid momentum. Moreover, industries that have the most direct and significant impact on sustainable development, such as the natural resources and the energy industries, have not featured prominently in IB research (e.g., Shapiro et al., 2018). Into the 2020s, IB journals have started to ramp up their research efforts on SDGs, as evidenced in several special issues on SDGs (e.g., Zhao et al.,

2021). IB conferences and research seminars have also featured sustainability issues more and more prominently in their conference themes to build dialogues between academics, policymakers, and practitioners. Clearly, sustainability issues are very much more on the agenda. However, by the same measure, this is often seen as a distinct area of enquiry, rather than an issue that is relevant to all areas of IB research. In short, progress has been made, but there remains more to be done.

2.2. Current state of play of IHRM research

Research on IHRM has proliferated since its emergence as a research field in the late 1980s (Brewster et al., 2016). Despite significant advancement and scholarship, the IHRM research topics are relatively narrow and orientated toward several key thematic areas such as employee behavior (e.g., citizenship behavior, job satisfaction), cultural knowledge/intelligence, knowledge management, talent management, and organizational performance are among the main topics published, as identified in several review studies (e.g., Bonache & Festing, 2020; Cooke et al., 2019; Schuler et al., 2002). Fan et al. (2021, p. 1) 'bibliographic analysis of 1924 articles published in the field of IHRM' shows 'three clusters of existing knowledge: (a) expatriation management; (b) global human capital; and (c) international human resource policies and practices'. Sanders and De Cieri (2021) review of IHRM research also reveals major research gaps, such as the need to pay more attention to the research context and the process of HRM, and the need to adopt a longer time span of research to address the limitations of the predominant cross-sectional studies. We do not intend to reproduce a comprehensive list of critiques of IHRM from previous reviews here but would like to draw attention to three related aspects that are most relevant to what we discuss in this paper.

First, extant review studies of IHRM research have pointed out the need to engage with context, because HRM policy and practice are embedded in institutional, cultural, and organizational settings developed and evolved over time (e.g., Cooke, 2018; Sanders & De Cieri, 2021). Meyer (2013, p. 12) also argued for the importance of local context for IB research because any 'social phenomenon is shaped by its context'. However, reflecting the trends in HRM research, especially those published in top journals, IHRM research has increasingly become positivist-oriented, focusing on the micro-level with little policy relevance (Aguinis et al., 2022). In-depth qualitative studies have become increasingly rare. Understanding the challenges and opportunities of implementing SDGs as a global vision and universal value requires insights into local contexts and conditions, thus creating new avenues for IHRM researchers to address some of the critiques of IHRM research. At the same time, and as with IB research,

relevance is not just in terms of accessibility to the practitioner community; it is also about understanding how micro-level phenomena fit into national political economies and the global ecosystem (Lazonick & Shin, 2019). Taking account of this will facilitate seeing a much wider range of seemingly neutral HR practices in SDG terms.

Second, again, reflecting the trend of HRM research, it has been argued that IHRM research has increasingly adopted an elitist approach, with a narrow focus on those employees that can add value to the organization (e.g., Harney & Collings, 2021; Marchington, 2015). Marchington (2015) was highly critical of the direction that HRM research and practice has been heading in, namely the obsession with strategic HRM to prove the legitimacy of HRM as an organizational function, and the increasing focus on talent management as a small group of elites that are believed to create value for the organization and thus need to be nurtured. HRM research and practice have become (implicitly) short-term oriented, focusing on a narrow range of organizational responsibilities and the types of leadership that would yield the most productive reaction from the employees. By contrast, 'employee-focused HRM responsibilities and ethics activities' have been neglected (Marchington, 2015, p. 180). Moreover, the favorable policy and practice toward talent management means that the value of fairness and equity is undermined. Harney and Collings (2021) also warn us that HRM research is at a crossroad within a disruptive context of the confluence of mega-trends. All these concerns cannot again be divorced from context. For example, high levels of social inequality are both reinforced and reflected in firm-level practices (Cumming et al., 2020). A focus on talent often defaults to those who have the most inherited social capital doing well, discounting the importance of latent talent that may be unlocked through employment security and investment in people (Reichelt et al., 2019). In other words, the organization picks up where society has failed. Engaging with SDG topics necessitates a focus on the grassroots workers as research targets since poverty reduction, eradication of inequality, voice and inclusion are key to the SDG agenda (e.g., SDGs 5, 8, 10, and 16).

Third, and somewhat related to the second point, a considerable body of IHRM research continues to focus on the debate of standardizations *vs.* local responsiveness (or localization) or hybrids, and the power relationships between the headquarters and the subsidiaries. In other words, research on HRM in MNEs remains internally focused, involving managers and professional employees. Although research on international skilled migrants in the HRM context is now emerging (e.g., Hajro et al., 2019; Mahadevan & Kilian-Yasin, 2017), the informalization of employment practices and the growing use of low-skilled and undocumented migrant workers have featured much less prominently in IHRM research. Such

practices, while affording cost benefits to the firm, may bring significant legal, economic, and social implications, thus calling for a much stronger level of policy intervention at the international, bi-national, national, and sub-national levels. It is an area that the SDGs are concerned about. To date, this body of research has been carried out very much outside the IHRM field. In summary, although a great deal of research in IHRM takes account of contextual effects, there is a default towards looking at intra-organizational processes, rather than how they interact with contextual dynamics. Research on HRM in MNEs has primarily focused on formal employees within the MNE's organizational boundary. By contrast, IHRM practices, especially in staffing, have increasingly moved outside the formal employment setting. Such practices open up research and practice implications in terms of how these workers are sourced, managed, remunerated, trained and developed, and displaced, as well as the role of informal institutions in shaping informal employment.

In short, while research on sustainable HRM has proliferated in recent years (e.g., Aust et al., 2020; Richards, 2022), research on the role of MNEs' HRM in sustainable development has yet to gather momentum (Ren et al., 2023; Stahl et al., 2020). Although there is now a growing body of research on gender, equality, diversity, and inclusion in the MNE context, other dimensions of SDGs remain under-researched. There is, furthermore, the role of politics and power. For example, the lack of employment and income security—which reflects not only structural realities in the labor market but also real HR choices by firms—has resulted in an upsurge of right-wing populism (Cumming et al., 2020). An integral part of the agenda of the latter is explicit hostility to measures to bring about greater sustainability (Wanvik & Haarstad, 2021). In turn, political turbulence may favor more opportunistic firms, leading to a self-reinforcing cycle of extremism (Cumming et al., 2020). Moreover, a further defining feature of right-wing populism is hostility to migration; invariably, this places low-skilled expatriate labor in an ever more precarious situation, whilst ever more stringent visa regimes may challenge the global mobility of even highly skilled individuals (Ewers et al., 2022).

By examining the role of MNEs in several SDGs, IHRM research can extend its scope and foci. We provide indicative examples of research avenues in the next section.

3. Advancing IB and IHRM research through the lens of Sustainable Development Goals

IB and IHRM can join forces together in the research of SDGs in the context of MNEs in that IB often focuses on the business strategy and the strategic management of the firm without contemplating the role of

HRM, whereas IHRM research tends to examine HRM issues without situating them in the MNE's business strategy and its evolution closely (Xie & Cooke, 2019). A major barrier to sustainability in practice is the exigencies of short-term competition and opportunism, making for a veritable tragedy of the commons. However, such broad rationales partially summarize a much more complex picture, leading to a series of provocative questions, embodying important agendas for research. The examination of the role of MNEs in achieving SDGs thus requires us to take into account a broader research setting that goes beyond the organizational boundary and the consideration of a broader range of workers associated with the MNEs. It also requires us to adopt a more inquisitive and critical approach to challenging existing assumptions/intellectual perspectives, embracing new methodology, subject matters, operational context, and analytical frameworks, and shifting away from an elitist approach to HRM (see Table 1). We provide a few avenues in this section for illustration. We wish to note that although all 17 SDGs are relevant to IB-IHRM research and practice. Due to the space constraint and to keep the paper on a tight thread, we only selected a few of the SDGs for illustration at the expense of excluding others. We strongly encourage IB-IHRM researchers to engage with all aspects of SDGs.

3.1. Adopting a pluralistic, interdisciplinary, and critical approach

3.1.1. Adopting a pluralistic and interdisciplinary approach

Research on the role of MNEs in SDGs would benefit from adopting a pluralistic view in contemplating how different political and social groups may compete with each other which would undermine the efforts of achieving SDGs. For instance, an important mission of SDGs is to achieve gender equality (Goal 5), the focus is to empower all women and girls and through other SDGs, such as education, Goal 4 (Terpstra-Tong, 2017). In countries and sectors where the barriers to hiring migrant workers are low and the cost is lower than hiring local women, educating and empowering women may not be able to bring them gainful employment to achieve gender equity. Instead, different social groups may compete against each other and raise to the bottom.

Although both IB and IHRM have been quite receptive to new theoretical accounts, widely drawing from developments in the heterodox political economy literature (e.g., GVC theory, comparative institutional/variety of capitalism theories), this has often gone hand in hand with the usage of measures that have a much narrower theoretical (and, ideological) grounding. For example, in comparing institutional effects, there is often a focus on 'voids', in other words, on what institutions fail to do, rather than exploring how even dysfunctional institutional regimes may

Table 1. Advancing IB and IHRM research through the lens of Sustainable Development Goals.

| Future research suggestions | Example of key questions for IB-IHRM research | Indicative theoretical perspectives |
|--|--|--|
| Intellectual approach: pluralistic and interdisciplinary | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the roles of international, national, and regional governments in climate change actions? • How do these roles affect the national and regional economic structure? • What types of industries and workforces are most affected? • How do MNEs impact national government political responses to sustainability issues and vice versa? • What are the roles of MNEs, as active agents in potentially working towards or undermining a more sustainable future? • And what are the HRM implications? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International politics • Global governance and competition • Institutional dynamics at various levels • Political economy • Human capital • Strategic management and leadership |
| Intellectual approach: a critical perspective of the implementation of SDGs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can the values underpinning the SDGs best serve the interests of poor people? • What systems are/will be adopted? Will the adoption of new systems (e.g., technological, production) from Western countries/MNEs lock developing countries into a new dependency mode? • Can the co-creation and co-configuration of systems (e.g., institutional, technological, eco-system) be achieved between the global north and global south when the Western ideology dominates to gain legitimacy? • What is the role of MNEs in these processes? And how do these processes inform organizational/management learning and are reflected in people management? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical management studies • Post-colonialism • Stakeholders • Power • Legitimacy vs. utility • Dependence • Organizational learning |
| Scope: the purpose of the MNE and labor strategy—migrant workers as an example | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the purpose of the MNE and the role of its subsidiaries beyond releasing value to shareholders? • What is the nature of the labor strategy of the MNE and its subsidiaries, especially in developing countries? • How can MNEs contribute to improving labor standards including the prevention of modern slavery? • How do ever more onerous visa regimes affect global mobility and weaken worker rights? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International development • Humanitarianism • Social justice • Human rights |
| Methodology: qualitative and historical lens | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How may the history (e.g., institutional, cultural, and economic) of the site of study and the country more broadly influence the production system of particular industries? • What are the historical origins of key theories, and how does this impact their understanding of the world? • What may be the outcomes of pressure from lead firms and other key stakeholders in the GVC in improving human rights? • Is sanction an effective way for industry upgrading (technology and labor standards) globally? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical perspective • Evolutionary perspective • Political economy • Global governance and competition • Institutional dynamics at various levels • Regional studies • Strategic management and organizational learning |

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

| Future research suggestions | Example of key questions for IB-IHRM research | Indicative theoretical perspectives |
|---|--|--|
| Research context: operating in high-risk environment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What roles do MNEs play in international sanctions and how may these roles impact SDGs in the sanctioned countries? • What risks may international sanctions create for MNEs and their the employees operating in and outside the sanctioned country? • How should MNEs evaluate risks and protect their workforce in post-conflict infrastructure rebuilding? • How can MNEs develop a physically and psychologically safe work environment for the global workforce in high-risk operational environment? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International relations • Geopolitical studies • Corporate political responsibility • Network theory • Dynamic capabilities • Resource-based view |

confer some benefits on players. In turn, this may lead to an under-estimation of how existing institutions may help promote greater sustainability, and an over-emphasis on the autonomous firm agency (Luiz et al., 2017). In addition to its undeniable influence in the policy domain, and as noted above, the World Bank Doing Business Index is widely used by IB researchers as a definitive measure of particular conducive discounts, and of the extent to which many of these measures undermine, rather than contribute to, firms' attainment of SDG settings. The now-defunct, but still influential Doing Business index rewards flexible labor markets and poor worker rights, which is likely to curtail investment in organization-specific human capital. Other indexes from the likes of the Heritage Foundation (<https://www.heritage.org/index/>) and the Fraser Institute (<https://www.fraserinstitute.org/>) are widely used in IB research, but intrinsically problematic in terms of the ideological freight they carry. Even if authors may commence such studies from very different theoretical starting points and research agendas, the 'taken for granted' nature of this and similar metrics means that important questions about sustainability are not asked, and, indeed, rules conducive to unsustainable practices receive the mark of academic approval. In short, there needs to be a closer alignment between the theory deployed and contextual metrics, and a closer reflection on what the latter are really measuring, and telling us, about different settings.

Research on the role of MNEs in achieving SDGs necessitates a pluralistic and interdisciplinary approach to taking into account the interests of various stakeholders, the emergence of new institutional actors (formal and informal), and the conflicting agendas and resource competition that may arise. It calls for the inclusion of a broader range of institutional actors at various levels in the SDG context that may not be directly related to the MNEs but is critical to understanding the role of MNEs in promoting SDGs as well as the impact of SDGs on MNEs. This creates opportunities to tap into comparative studies

of political systems, economic institutions, and national models, with implications for MNE strategy, business model, and operation across countries. For instance, as Wood (2020) argued, climate change (SDG Goal 13) amplifies the role of the state and, in some cases, may lead to statism in various forms. However, not all national governments will embrace the notion of climate change and energy transition with the same level of enthusiasm or capacity. Finnegan (2020, p. 264) conceptualized ‘climate change politics as distributive politics’, and argued that ‘climate change is one of the most difficult policy challenges’ governments across the advanced capitalist democracies face. Yet, there is little ‘cross-national climate policy research that takes seriously variation in the political and economic institutions that underpin distinct capitalist models’ (Finnegan, 2020, p. 264). Climate policies and actions promoted by national governments will have a significant impact on the way MNEs can operate for a lower carbon future, with strong implications for the workforce skills and environmental behavior required. For example, the closure of coal power plants will lead to massive job losses, and the development of renewable/green energy production systems will require workers with different skill sets that the former may not be able to fill without retraining, even if they are based in the same location as the new energy plants.

Adopting a pluralistic and interdisciplinary approach has the potential to extend the strategic management perspective that is premised, often implicitly, on a unitarist perspective, with the firm’s interest as the focal point of study. It also broadens the examination of power relationships from those predominantly within the MNEs to include those between the MNEs and their networks and an expanded set of external stakeholders, particularly governmental organizations at various levels. After all, pressures to adopt SDGs are often exerted from international (government) organizations to national and local governments which is then castigated down to the firm level (e.g., COP 26 and COP 27). Here, MNEs’ business environment, strategies, and practices will be shaped by the alignment of formal institutions, new institutions, international, national, and sub-national institutions; misalignment of formal and informal institutions; the rise of international (albeit transient) institutions; different foci of the institutions (e.g., behaviorally-oriented, demand-oriented); and the clashes of their values (e.g., Sartor & Beamish, 2020; Scheyvens et al., 2016). All these have implications for MNEs’ strategy, leadership, and human resources required for successful operations.

3.1.2. Adopting a critical perspective toward SDGs: western-centric value vs. developing country values

The great potential of SDGs in achieving good for the human world is for sure. However, how we get there remains a serious challenge, and its solution would benefit from critical research insights. SDGs have attracted

criticism for their ideological values, measures, actionability, and so on. For example, Scheyvens et al. (2016) criticize the dominance of Western MNEs and their interests in the SDGs, arguing that the structural causes of poverty are not addressed. Research on the role of MNEs in achieving SDGs should not only examine what MNEs could do to add value and mitigate harm but also question more fundamental issues, such as how did modern salves occurred in the first place? How can the values underpinning the SDGs best serve the interests of poor people? Can the co-creation and co-configuration of systems (e.g., institutional, technological, eco-system) be achieved between the global north and global south when the western ideology dominates to gain legitimacy? What is the role of MNEs in these processes? And how do these processes inform organizational/management learning and are reflected in people management?

A central question to achieving SDGs is what systems to adopt. In the MNE context, the adoption of one particular business model, technological and managerial system will impinge on the opportunity or, or may even determine the path of, host country development. For example, the adoption of a Western-developed digital system will have implications for digital inclusion/inclusiveness/digital empowerment due to regime competitions in this space, as manifested in global vs. local applications for instance. Equally, poor labor and environmental standards may be particularly associated with primary industries (e.g., agribus, mining), but may even seep into the supply chains of high technology (e.g., coltan production) and premium goods firms (e.g., designer clothing). Nor is it only in resource extraction and manufacturing; within the service industry, the usage of call centers in developing nations may also be associated with poor labor standards and other dubious practices (Poster, 2007). Although there are many instances of MNEs actively encouraging and supporting destructive policies within their subsidiaries, franchise holders, or suppliers (Schuessler et al., 2019), a further challenge is that, with the complexity of global value chains and the rise of intermediaries and brokers, there is also a lack of knowledge among firms at the apex of the GVCs as to what goes on further down the chain (Reinecke et al., 2018). If production is globalized, the sourcing of materials and components from different parts of the world may be driven by questions of cost and speed, making for all manner of compromises, especially when it comes to sourcing raw materials and basic parts (Dibben et al., 2020). The global supply chain disruptions of late 2021 serve to highlight the inherent precarity of such production networks, and that the costs of running such risks are greater than those directly borne by workers of low-tier suppliers and their communities.

Accordingly, researchers in IB and IHRM need to look much more closely at the core business models of firms and industries, rather than

taking them for granted, which leads to assumptions that poor standards and scandals represent an exception of some sort. Some progress has already been made in IHRM; for example, in accounts that place scandals such as Rana Plaza within the wider operation of GVCs in clothing (Reinecke et al., 2018; Schuessler et al., 2019). In summary, both IB and IHRM could cast a more critical eye on the sustainability of specific business models.

3.2. Examining the purpose of MNEs and the types of workers they use

Much of the research focus in IHRM and IB has been on documenting challenges faced by managers that may hamper competitiveness and how these may be overcome (e.g., better talent and expatriate management; ambidexterity among managers; greater cross-cultural awareness). This raises a much broader question as to what the dominant roles of the firm are, what they have been, and what they could be in the light of SDGs. Through much of the twentieth century, firms made investments, not only in management processes but also in production and distribution, to reap economies of scope and scale (Chandler, 1992). Many firms have contracted in size and what they do (Chandler, 1992); with this, the need to invest in people and processes has narrowed. Accordingly, this has diminished the purposes of the firm, which encompass dimensions such as the building and sustaining of a community of knowledge and skills, physical facilities, and all means for communities to generate returns (Chandler, 1992). There are many instances of MNEs actively encouraging and supporting destructive policies within their subsidiaries, franchise holders, or suppliers (Schuessler et al., 2019). Accordingly, researchers in IB and IHRM need to look much more closely at the core business models of MNEs, rather than taking them for granted and examining the type of staffing strategy they deploy.

There has been increasing research attention on global mobility in IB/IHRM research, often in the form of expatriate management and global talent management (Collings et al., 2019). Figure 1 charts the path of research interest in the types of global mobility in IHRM research. Each category represents distinct forms of HR practices, which may be adopted by the same MNE simultaneously. The literature on protean careers highlights the subjective nature of success and that individuals need to have a strong internal moral compass, given the proliferation of major ethical challenges (Hall, 2004). In other words, careers are about both personal identity and values (Cortellazzo et al., 2020). Among Generation Z employees, there is a stronger awareness of environmental issues, both on an individual and collective basis and this is likely to help drive career choices within and between countries (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021).



Figure 1. The evolution of types of human capital (human value chain) in global mobility research.

A growing body of literature is now available from the perspective of GVC and decent work (mostly published outside the IB/HRM journals) highlighting the exploitative practices of lead firms at the upper end of the GVC, especially the western MNE giants (e.g., Morris et al., 2021). Much less attention, in comparison, has been paid to MNE subsidiaries that have subcontracting firms whose workers work on the same site doing similar tasks as the formal employees of the former, but under substantially inferior employment terms and conditions. These subcontracting firms and their workers may be migrant workers from other countries. There has been research on these issues from the international and comparative employment/industrial relations field, which typically examines management issues and labor practices from the workers' perspective and adopts a pluralistic approach and a multi-level analytical framework. By contrast, IHRM research has often focused on formal employees without contemplating the growing variety of employment practices of the MNEs and the implications for HRM and other functions of the organization.

One type of worker that is particularly relevant in the context of SDGs is migrant workers at the grassroots level (e.g., low skills, undocumented). Research on migrancy at the grassroots level in recent years has yet to attract research interest in IHRM, whereas the employment and management of grassroots migrant workers have long been a research focus in fields of work sociology, employment relations, and migrant studies (Joy et al., 2020). Empirical evidence suggests that MNEs, including large and reputable ones, are deploying a variety of staffing practices in response to cost pressures, and some are rather controversial (Kaine & Jossierand, 2018; Michailova et al., 2020). In the SDG context, IHRM research would benefit from further extending the types of workforce covered, building on existing research that takes account of workers beyond formal organizational bounds (i.e., not necessarily direct employees, but also those who work in the GVC [Reinecke et al., 2018]), and the dark side of global mobility [human trafficking, modern slavery, undocumented migrant workers (Stringer & Michailova, 2018)] (see Figure 1). Indeed, there have been calls for the IB research community to take fuller account of these issues (e.g., Bozkurt & Geppert, 2021; Michailova et al., 2020; Zagelmeyer & Sinkovics, 2019). The role of institutional actors, particularly the state and networks of the MNEs, would be highly relevant to understanding how these types of workers are sourced in the first place, and how employers have been able to bypass labor

regulations and laws without sanction. IB/IHRM research would benefit from insights from employment studies, labor market studies, and employment/industrial relations. Equally, IHRM research can look at MNEs' motivation for and process of employing migrants and refugees in a humanitarian program, and assess the likely effects on the inclusion and integration of these workers into the workplace, community and society. The research of grassroots migrant workers including refugees contributes directly to SDGs as this is a type of worker who is mostly likely to be exploited and marginalized with little voice or power. In doing so, the research perspective on global mobility can be broadened from elitism to developmentalism to humanitarianism, by linking human capital development and utilization more closely with equity, and poverty reduction with policy implications for international bodies, national and sub-national policymakers, and firms.

3.3. More in-depth qualitative studies from a historical perspective

Eradicating poverty and inequity issues as one of the important agendas of the SDGs requires a nuanced understanding of historical and cultural reasons that shaped these disadvantages, especially in poor countries and regions. Buckley (2021, p. 797) draws our attention to 'four aspects of the increasing role of history in international business—history as an underpinning for international business theory, history as evidence, history as a source of research practices and history as a source of research methods.' Buckley (2021, p. 797) calls for IB researchers to build on the success 'in utilizing spatial comparisons' by developing 'temporal and counterfactual comparative analyses'. This suggests that IB/IHRM research would benefit from gathering empirical data on the production sites where activities take place. We illustrate the need for an in-depth qualitative study with a historical perspective to inform the role of MNEs in SDGs with two empirical examples below that were drawn from the authors' research experience.

3.3.1. Example 1

MNEs' staffing and other HR practices may differ significantly across subsidiaries in different parts of the world even within the same MNE. For instance, an MNE's garment factories in Sri Lanka are staffed primarily by the country's nationals (the majority of whom are Buddhists), mainly young workers from villages, but the same MNE's garment factories in Mauritius are staffed mainly with young migrant workers from South Asian countries, the majority of whom are Muslim. This has major implications for the way the MNE subsidiaries implement SDGs in terms of poverty reduction, diversity and inclusion practices, and the benefits that the host countries may reap from these MNE subsidiary practices.

Cross-MNE survey studies are unlikely to capture the nuances of the multiple reasons, including racial relations, welfare systems, and labor market systems that are informed by the value systems of the host countries, which, in turn, underpin the differences in HR practices across the subsidiaries of the same MNE for workers engaging in similar production activities.

3.3.2. Example 2

In 2020, Western MNEs initiated a campaign led by *H&M* to boycott Xinjiang cotton on the grounds of China's violation of the human rights of its ethnic minority workers in the region, claiming that forced labor was much more widespread than initially thought in the China region that supplies a fifth of the world's cotton (*The Guardian*, 2020). A deeper investigation of Xinjiang's cotton production history reveals a much more complex process of socio-economic evolution in contemporary China, with considerable implications for rural migrant workers, particularly older women who worked as seasonable cotton pickers. In the 1980s, cotton harvest activities were organized by the local government by mobilizing local public sector employees, parents and university students, and school children. In the 1990s, cotton picking was mainly carried out by young rural migrant workers from poor inland provinces, often facilitated by local governments and employment agencies. Since the mid-2000s, cotton picking was mainly attracting older, female rural migrant workers in their late 40s and 50s who would earn a whole year's income in 2–3 months of hard work. However, their chance of making this earning has been significantly diminished as a result of the rapid automation of the cotton harvest—in 2020, over 70% of the cotton harvest in Xinjiang was carried out by machines (*Global Times*, 2021), a figure that reached by 80% in 2022 (*People's Daily Online*, 2022). The poor social welfare provision for the rural population in China means that these families and particularly older women are less well supported financially as a result.

This example shows the benefit of adopting a historical perspective to investigate the evolution of the production and employment regimes of the Xinjiang cotton production industry as China transforms its economic landscape. It unfolds a much deeper and wider-scale socio-economic problem beyond the industry and region with strong policy implications if China were to continue to reduce poverty and increase equity. It also raises some pertinent research questions, for example, what may be the motivation of the MNEs' campaign? Will their shift to other countries to source their cotton products improve the MNEs' SDG achievements? If so, how, and at whose cost? What may be the unintended impacts of the MNEs' political actions/non-market strategy and how can the MNE

overcome the impacts? What is the role of technology in improving labor standards and job quality without undermining employment prospects? What role can MNEs play in raising product quality as well as human capital through their direct and indirect interventions in the supplier firms through their efforts to achieve SDGs?

3.4. Broadening the research context: operating in high-risk environment

In the global landscape of heightened geopolitical tension, MNEs are increasingly operating in high-risk environment of various nature, including for example, terrorism, military conflicts, and international sanctions. These environments pose distinct threats to MNEs and their employees (Dickmann et al., 2019; Meyer & Thein, 2014). There is now emerging IB and IHRM research that examines how high-risk environment may impact MNEs and IHRM. For example, Bader and Schuster (2015, p. 63) studied international assignees in terrorism regions and found that ‘social networks are more beneficial on expatriates’ psychological well-being in countries which suffer from terrorism’. Bader et al. (2019) edited a special issue on managing employees in hostile environment and proposed a Situation—Response—Outcome framework of HRM in hostile environments.

It has been argued that business can be a force for good (McPhail et al., 2022) and foster peace during war times through business-for-peace initiatives (Melin et al., 2023). This contributes directly to SDG 16 (Peace and justice strong institutions). From the IHRM perspective, this could be achieved by engaging in humanitarian actions through their HRM policy and practice. However, there is little knowledge about the humanitarian role of MNEs in the context of international sanctions and inter-state conflicts. This is despite the fact that targeted sanctions often have detrimental humanitarian effects that have worsened livelihoods and poverty, particularly on the well-being of vulnerable groups such as children, mothers, and ethnic minorities (Peksen, 2016; Pindiriri, 2020). Nor has the labor market effect of economic sanctions on MNEs received adequate research attention (Kelishomi & Nisticò, 2022). What can MNEs do in terms of providing employment and education to reduce poverty and worsened gendered inequality as a result of international sanctions (this will contribute to several SDGs)?

Some MNEs are engaged in infrastructure (re)building in high-risk countries, often partnered with organizations and governments abroad for economic growth. This has implications for IB-IHRM research related to multiple SDGs (e.g., SDG 9 Industry, innovation, and infrastructure—Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation; SDG 17 Partnership for the Goals). For

example, how can MNEs mobilize smart technology in infrastructure rebuilding and foster innovation on the ground? What may be the skill and staffing implications? How can MNEs provide support and protection to their expatriates operating in hostile environments? How can MNEs work in collaboration with other institutional actors to alleviate the negative impacts on people in high-risk situations? In short, engaging in research on MNEs operating in high-risk contexts opens up rich opportunities for IB-IHRM researchers, which will contribute to advancing our knowledge for achieving several SDGs.

4. Conclusions

This paper makes the case for extending the domain of common ground research between IB and IHRM by taking account of a fuller range of contexts, sectors, firms, types of workers, business operational contexts, and subject matter through a broadened set of intellectual perspectives and methodological lens. In doing so, we reflect on both development and change in the global political economy and the limits and possibilities of existing research. Central to this paper is the assumption that many 'goings on' are directly or indirectly connected, and in rethinking how we see context and the role of the firm, whilst building on what is already known, we can open up a new horizon for IB-IHRM research, bringing both fields closer through research on MNEs and SDGs. A problem with both fields is a certain discounting not only of long historical legacies but also in accounting for the scale and scope of events. Recourse to SDGs helps anchor the discussion within a set of criteria that have broad relevance in many or most societies at different times; the shared sustainability turn in IB and HRM research facilitates bridge-building in these areas.

Moving forward, there are three related priorities from a perspective rooted in the SDGs for IB-IHRM scholarship. The first is a closer evaluation of underlying assumptions regarding the role of MNEs. In turn, this encompasses the underlying question as to the purpose of the firm, whether as a vehicle for maximizing returns (whether the longer term, or even, short term value release) or something that plays much wider roles and, accordingly has responsibilities, to local and global society, and, indeed to the entire ecosystem (Lazonick & Shin, 2019). A limitation is a tendency to see the firm as an essentially neutral agent, or one that can be enticed to do better; and to assume managers and firms acting in basically good faith with any wrong decisions being the fault of extraneous circumstances. This view needs to be balanced to take account of instances where firms act in a socially and environmentally corrosive manner as active agents, rather than as a product of national institutional and

regulatory failures (Cooke et al., 2022). A robust and critical investigation of the role of MNEs in achieving SDGs provides a great opportunity to shed light on variations in, and the dark side of, corporate behaviors, motives, opportunities, strategies, challenges, agencies, and impacts.

A second related priority is how we compare and extend contexts in IB-IHRM research. Established metrics for comparison may treat real differences between countries in ideological terms which are often Western-centric; over simplistic conclusions as to the relative functionality of contexts may often encompass pre-existing prejudices or beliefs, rather than simply facts on the ground. Whilst it is necessary to take context more seriously, this can further lead to a focus on the relative shortfalls of institutions and states in promoting competitiveness, rather than seeing their potential as enablers of sustainability. In other words, departures from a preferred institutional recipe do not necessarily lead to inferior growth, and indeed may also open the way for novel policies to promote greater sustainability (Muffels et al., 2014). Extant research on MNEs should also keep up with the real-world development of geopolitics by extending its research context to high-risk environments. Engaging in in-depth qualitative field research from the SDG angle helps address these research limitations by uncovering complex and diverse contexts, and generating insights to make authoritative metrics more appropriate for implementation or benchmark on the ground, to develop new conceptual frameworks and theoretical models, and to inform MNE policy and practice.

A third scholarship priority is, as this paper highlights, to develop an awareness of how seemingly disparate issues have a commonality around the theme of sustainability, this would underscore the relevance of more theory-building around the interconnectedness of phenomena (Doh et al., 2021), rather than seeing each as discrete. Although both IB and IHRM research has now turned to sustainability as a commonality, in each field, much of the focus on sustainability is as a distinct area of enquiry, rather than something relevant to all. Engaging in SDG research in the IB-IHRM context necessitates researchers to adopt a more holistic approach to examining the intersectionality within SDGs and between firms and society in the global landscape.

In sum, this perspective paper explores how IB and IHRM research can join forces to create synergy and address their critical thinking to engage in phenomenon-driven research that is of global relevance, using the role of MNEs in achieving SDGs for illustration. As an aspiration, the UN SDGs project a visionary paradigm of ‘people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership’ (Brown & Rasmusen, 2019). In IB/IHRM research, it needs to capture/be framed as (global, regional, national, and sub-national) *politics* → (macro and firm-level) *policy* → (mode and site of) *production*

→ (HR/employment) *practices* → *people* (different groups of workers operating in different contexts) → *partnership* (with institutional actors/stakeholders) → *prosperity* (poverty reduction, education, equality, inclusion, well-being, and innovation). We should not forget that the SDG agenda is not only a social and economic but also a political agenda, in which MNEs are but one actor, albeit a powerful and never disinterested one. The assessment of their role, therefore, needs to be situated in the broader political, institutional, and cultural context informed by the politics of development and varieties of development models. It should seek to strike a balance between strategic vision and aspiration on the one hand and embracing a sense of critical realism on the other.

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Data availability statement

De-sensitized empirical data used in this paper can be made available upon reasonable request.

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Appendix A. Sustainable Development Goals

Sustainable Development Goals

- Goal 1: No poverty—End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
- Goal 2: Zero hunger—End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.
- Goal 3: Good health and well-being—Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
- Goal 4: Quality education—Ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
- Goal 5: Gender equality—Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
- Goal 6: Clean water and sanitation—Ensure available and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
- Goal 7: Affordable and clean energy—Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all.
- Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth—Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.
- Goal 9: Industry, innovation, and infrastructure—Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation.
- Goal 10: Reduce inequality—Reduce inequality within and among countries.
- Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities—Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.
- Goal 12: Responsible consumption and production—Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
- Goal 13: Climate action—Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
- Goal 14: Life below water—Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development.
- Goal 15: Life on land—Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems.
- Goal 16: Peace and justice strong institutions—Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development.
- Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals—Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.
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