

Through the Lens of *Ubuntu*: The Value of Partnerships and Corporate Social Responsibility towards Community Development in the City of uMhlatuze, South Africa

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ABSTRACT The paper explores partnerships among the multinational corporations (MNCs), local municipalities and host communities in a bid to establish what informs corporate social responsibility (CSR). MNCs are essential in improving the wellbeing and living standards of host communities. The philanthropic activities have to be ethical, legitimate and guided by the spirit of giving back, informed by the philosophy of ubuntu (humanity). The qualitative approach was adopted to gather in-depth understanding of the existence and nature of partnership among MNCs, local municipalities and host communities. The participants were purposefully selected based on their expert knowledge and engagement in community development initiatives. The findings indicate that CSR operations are characterised by an absence of formal partnership between MNCs and host communities. A pragmatic policy framework needs to be developed to guide the philanthropic activities aimed at enhancing the socio-economic development of host communities.

INTRODUCTION

Multinational corporations (MNCs) are economic firms that operate in host countries where they establish associates but have their head offices in their countries of origin. The aim of this paper is to explore the existence of partnerships among selected MNCs with local municipalities and host communities. This is informed by the assertion that local development has to be informed by local needs and the local municipalities are in possession of concentrated or detailed information on the needs and local conditions of host communities. This paper is grounded on the belief that multinationals do play a significant role in the development of host countries. Kuswanto et al. (2017) assert that local governments need MNCs for their capital to ascertain that development is realised in their areas. MNCs, in contrast, need local governments in host countries to pursue their economic and financial objectives. In the same manner, local leaders have to protect and promote the interest of their communities, and this requires enhancing their socio-economic well-being. The central assumption in this paper is that for effective socio-economic

development to be realised in developing countries, philanthropic initiatives have to be guided by the local development agenda.

Conversely, there are varied views about the presence of multinational or transnational corporations in developing countries. An extensive body of literature, Ondabu and Macharia (2014), Mustapha and Mendi (2015), Williams et al. (2017), Ollong (2019) and Narula and Pineli (2019) attest to the contribution of multinational corporations towards the development of less economically developed countries.

One cannot dispute that multinational corporations have often been associated with economic growth, employment creation, poverty alleviation and the general social development of the host countries. The MNCs are generally viewed as essential conduits for the international diffusion of new technologies and foreign innovations that contribute to the socio-economic development in host countries. Williams et al. (2017) argue that investments from MNCs have proved to be the major source of revenue in most host countries, contributing to socio-economic development. In the context of this study, MNCs, through their operations in the host countries, may help in realising the sustainable development goals (SDGs) of targeting poverty

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reduction, employment creation. In addition, Gerrefi and Memedovic (2003), Whellams and MacDonald (2007), Williams et al. (2017) and Guinot et al. (2020) affirm the understanding that the cycles of poverty, unemployment and adequate and equal access to basic facilities in the developing countries will never be broken from within the capacity of the domestic economy, primarily because the level of investment needed to raise productivity, income and later promote development is not possible. Foreign direct investment through multinational corporations helps realise increased productivity and thus bridges the cycle of poverty and addresses all other related challenges.

In support, Guinot et al. (2020) refer to the CSR approach adopted by multinational corporations as a compassionate approach rooted in the core values of *ubuntu*, which essentially means care and compassion. Additionally, the authors argue that a compassionate approach yields collective benefits and sharing of wealth, cannot be substituted or imitated and tends to be advantageous in the long run. The paper associates the approach to compassionate capitalism with a move from 'profit driven' to being more compassionate, humane, just and fair and thus moving beyond the 'profit at all costs' paradigm to a people-centredness paradigm, where the benefits of development put communities at the centre, above the mindless pursuit of profit. This links the operations of the MNCs to the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which is described by Sigger et al. (2010) as a humanistic ethos with a special focus on human engagement, interdependent relations, caring, sharing, justice and fairness. Khomba and Kangaude-Ulaya (2013) perceive Africans as social beings and that their survival is dependent on other people in the community and society, and, conversely, others are also dependent on them.

One would be naïve to ignore that community development is not the prime concern of MNCs but that of the host government. Gupta (2021) asserts the view that MNCs sometimes expand into different countries for their own good and benefits and that they have the power to rule the market, are influential and usually succeed in building a monopoly. This confirms the fact that MNCs are profit driven organisations that may aid community development through corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Preuss et al. (2016) contend that MNCs adopt a multinational corporation code of conduct as a

tool governing CSR in a host country, but the code does not have the same influence as government regulations. Buckley et al. (2008) and Williams et al. (2017) acknowledged the need by host countries for a pragmatic policy framework to guide MNC activities and to meet the developmental agenda of the country. The corporations seem to be constantly under pressure to be more open and accountable in their actions, and have to report on their performance in economic, social and environmental arenas. Researchers such as Khomba and Kangaude-Ulaya (2013) raise questions on the operations of corporations, such as to whose benefit should corporations be governed? Furthermore, discussions on the value of *Ubuntu* and its two-pronged approach are brought to the fore, that, whilst *Ubuntu* encourages sharing, caring and engagement, it also places emphasis on equality and morality in operations. The socio-economic contribution of MNCs through social responsibility is viewed as an act towards becoming caring, understanding and sharing. Therefore, the compassionate approach by MNCs through social responsibilities is extended by giving back to communities within which the corporations do business. This means caring for each other's development as required by humanist *Ubuntu* philosophy (Khomba and Kangaude-Ulaya 2013).

The main question addressed in this paper is:

- What is the nature of partnerships between the MNCs and local municipality including the community members?

Emanating from the question are the sub-questions:

- What type of partnerships exists?
- How effective are the partnerships in terms of achieving socio-economic development?
- What strategies are used to ensure that the partnerships are developed and maintained?

Kuswanto et al. (2017) claim that MNCs tend to be more effective when local government and local communities need them but also argue that local municipalities have power because of their control over natural resources, labour, local markets and knowledge and understand their environment better than the MNCs. This suggests reciprocity among the stakeholders, which requires partnerships for equal distribution of benefits.

The paper is organised into four sections, starting with a detailed introduction and background; and

the theoretical frameworks. This is followed by the research methodology used and the presentation and discussion of the results and, lastly, the conclusion and recommendations emanating from the study.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the nature of partnerships between host communities and MNCs
- To conceptualise the partnerships using *Ubuntu* philosophy
- To analyse the effectiveness of partnerships on CSR

The objectives intended to explore the existence, breadth and the depth of partnerships to unpack the effectiveness and ethical behaviour of MNCs in their effort to plough back to host communities. Partnerships play a pivotal role in addressing socio-economic development issues and tensions that have potential to arise during operations in the host communities.

Theoretical Framework

The paper used a hybrid of theories because of the nature of the research questions which required answers from different perspectives. The theoretical frameworks adopted to form the basis of understanding the operations of MNCs.

The legitimacy theory is one of the most discussed theories to explain the phenomenon of voluntary social and environmental disclosures in companies (Mousa and Hassan 2015). Legitimacy is viewed as a generalized perception of the actions of an entity to be desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, and beliefs. It clearly states that a business is a social institution that must use its power responsibly. Davis (1973) and Eweje (2006) argue that society grants legitimacy and power to business, which then means, should a business fail to use its power responsibly, society may revoke it. Therefore, the expectation is that corporations do use the legitimacy theory to gain and maintain strong roots with their host countries or communities, by addressing and adapting to social and environmental issues.

Henceforth, Eweje (2006) contends that multinational companies require legitimacy to maintain functional, long-term relationships with communities on which they depend. It is of utmost importance

to stress that society judges the legitimacy of a company against its image; as a result, the corporation's image and societal expectations from the corporations are the most important factors that should be properly managed. Should businesses or corporations ignore society's social expectations, they are likely to lose control over their internal decision making and external dealings (Sethi 1979).

The African philosophy of *Ubuntu* extols the human qualities of brotherhood, compassion, generosity, justice and fairness (Ojatorotu and Olajide 2019). According to Metz (2011), *Ubuntu* is the underlying motif of the South African Bill of Rights though *Ubuntu* cannot apply to every single right, such as the value of an individual's right. The essentiality of *Ubuntu* in any operations and activities aimed at socio-economic development of host countries and communities cannot be overemphasised, as this directly talks to the need for intense moral behaviour in the operations of MNCs. This assertion is supported by Engle (2007) who argues that an intense need for moral behaviour on the part of corporations and government concerning the achievement of broad economic and social development goals is fundamental. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is globally guided by business ethics and development policies and strategies, but this has proven to be an ultimate dilemma for many corporations (Engle 2007).

Masoud (2017) applauds the recognition of corporate social responsibility by most corporations, but this seems to be characterised by 'more talk than action' on the part of the companies, arguing that companies do create organisational mechanisms for compliance with laws on environment, employment discrimination, product safety and worker safety, with minimal attention given to philanthropic responsibilities. The latter is attributed to the fact that giving back is voluntary and purely discretionary, performed out of kind-heartedness, humane feeling and benevolence. *Ubuntu* is, in this case, a viable philosophical guide for MNCs, as it is informed by the values of caring and sharing. The philosophy has the potential to guide philanthropic efforts for a positive impact on host communities.

The central part of *Ubuntu* is the interdependence of humans with the driving norms emphasising reciprocity and the importance of the individual and the needs of the group (Mangaliso and

Mangaliso 2007). Translated to MNC operations, *Ubuntu* philosophy operations have to be ethical, guided by the spirit of giving back with respect, generosity and respect. Industries cannot be fully functional and fruitful without host communities and the communities need the industries. The isiZulu phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other people) relates to this inter-connectiveness.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study was conducted at the city of uMhlathuze, in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, a fast-growing industrial development zone where the MNCs are conglomerating and hence there is expectation of ploughing back in terms of community development projects in the host communities.

The Integrated Development Plan (IDP) of uMhlathuze Municipality (2019/2020) identifies, among others, a number of economic and social challenges ranging from unplanned settlements and shortage of housing for people at the lower end of the market, urban degeneration, a historical legacy of giving preference to the provision of hard infrastructure over social development, and high rates of unemployment which undermines the equitable distribution of income.

The area is endowed with MNCs, with the majority involved in the mining sector. The study used the interpretivism paradigm to interpret the experiences and views of four MNCs, three community leaders and two municipal officials from the local economic development unit. The participants were purposefully selected. The rationale for the sampling method adopted was informed by their expertise and engagement in community development initiatives.

The study acknowledged that the concepts of MNCs and community development are socially constructed and therefore have different meanings to different people. A qualitative approach was used to provide an in-depth understanding of the perspectives, and operations of MNCs in the context of socio-economic development. A detailed understanding of issues such as the existence and nature of partnerships among the MNCs, local municipality and host communities was achieved by interacting directly with the participants and allowing them to tell their stories. In this study, participants were interviewed to gather in-depth

information by probing. A thematic analysis in this study was adopted and it provided an easily interpretable and concise description of the themes and patterns that emerged from the data collected. The interviews were reviewed and analysed prior to ascertain trustworthiness, credibility, conformability, dependability and transferability of data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The central theme arising from the study was the value of partnerships among multinational corporations, local municipality and community members in socio-economic development. Out of four selected MNCs, only one had a clearly defined and documented partnership with a local municipality. Generally, this implies that most multinational corporations operate as separate entities according to their own terms and conditions. Only one MNC was found to be working closely with the local municipality toward socio-economic development in the city of uMhlathuze. However, this does not in any way suggest that the MNCs, particularly those without well-demarcated and clearly defined collaborative and partnership agreements, do not engage in community development activities on their own in what can be best described as corporate social responsibility.

Nature of Partnerships Amongst MNCs and Municipality

The development initiatives or CSR that MNCs engage in, including the level and nature of collaboration with the local municipality towards executing socio-economic activities are illustrated in Table 1.

The study revealed that the some MNCs voluntarily initiated to work with the city of uMhlathuze in supporting socio-economic development initiatives. There is no formality that guides any collaboration and there are minimal or nonexistence formal partnerships between MNCs and the local municipality.

As indicated in Table 1, partnerships remain unstructured, undefined, or not steered by any formal documentation. This suggest that it is not all the selected MNCs that contribute towards an achievement of socio-economic development as detailed in the Integrated Development Plans of the host communities. Despite the level and nature

Table 1: MNCs socio-economic activities and partnership

<i>Multinational</i>	<i>Supposed CSR activities involved in</i>	<i>Partnership</i>
<i>MNC1</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues bursaries. • Infrastructural development. • Build schools, houses and clinics. • Sponsor community projects. • Create jobs and empowerment. • Support students and learners learning programmes. 	Both the MNC and the municipality confirmed that there are good and recorded partnerships.
<i>MNC2</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports community development projects. • Build and renovates schools. • Provide houses to those in need. • Support students and learners learning programmes. 	The municipality revealed that there is no cooperation between them and the MNC, but the MNC has a vibrant CSR Office with evident community development projects.
<i>MNC3</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports schools' learning programmes. • Create jobs. • Established a number of community empowerment projects. 	No relationships recorded with the municipality and host communities.
<i>MNC4</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates jobs. • Little or no more involvement with the public are recorded. 	No relationships recorded with the municipality and host communities.

Source: Survey Data 2019

of unstructuredness concerning partnerships, the MNCs do provide various types of support and services as depicted in Table 1.

The involvement of the municipality in MNC activities related to socio-economic development was found to be less consultative. The MNCs used a top-down approach to decide on what to offer the development of communities. However, even if the municipalities were not fully engaged in decision making, it was established that communal gatherings, such as tribal meetings and political gatherings in the selected communities, were attended by MNCs to determine the development needs of host communities. Hence, the municipal official stated that amongst all MNCs in the study area, MNC1 was actively participating in mass meetings and IDP reviews organised by the municipality. It transpired that some MNCs have designated offices for CSR engagements. These MNCs are involved in varied ways concerning community empowering initiatives, as depicted in Table 1.

One of the MNC officials stated:

“Well performing learners in matric were given bursaries and learnerships; some have finished their studies and work for us while others have explored elsewhere. When the students we help finish tertiary education, they are obligated to serve the number of years they have received with us in the form of employment”.

The findings revealed that MNCs assist in various ways, such agricultural production initiatives through provision of agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilisers and ploughing. Other forms of assistance include the provision of basic services, such as housing, healthcare facilities, schools, water, and sanitary facilities. Some MNCs also contribute to local economic development projects, such as poultry. To be precise, the agricultural services mentioned by MNC2 as their focus was the provision of 500 egg-laying chickens, with egg layer cages as a start-up for host communities involved in local economic development initiatives. The official from the MNC2 expressed that there is a strong belief in empowering people by initiating projects that will improve daily livelihoods than a mere donation or handouts that people can abandon.

Nevertheless, Ollong (2019), Williams et al. (2017) and Guinot et al. (2020) confirm that MNCs, and their corporate social responsibility (CSR), serve as a means of creating an enabling environment to access basic necessities to secure human rights and job creation. However, other MNCs were found to be without any community development unit, which is contrary to the South African black economic empowerment initiatives which was set up to promote CSR activities and the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act 53 of 2003,

which emphasises black economic empowerment on the corporate agenda. This calls for compliance, particularly if companies want to engage in business ventures with government. Despite the presence of such acts, Kabir et al. (2015) confirms the continued existence of a substantial gap in socio-economic development. The South African government appraises the contribution of business firms in addressing inequality but emphasises having regulatory frameworks to encourage philanthropy or social corporate contribution.

Based on the study's findings, the MNCs that are pro-poor in their community development initiatives can be described as being informed by values of *Ubuntu*. This does not in any way absolve them from leaning more towards profit making than compassion (Mondom 2018; Guinot et al. 2020). The MNCs considered the expectations of the people and used their power and resources legitimately for the benefit of all. The focus here is not about making as much profit as possible, but that operations occur with intense moral behaviour and respect. This is in line with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which praises compassion, brotherhood, generosity justice and fairness. Some of the MNCs pointed out that they have not developed fully-fledged community engagement units but do provide ad hoc services such as marathon tournaments and supported students in higher education institutions with tuition fees in the universities of their choice.

The Nature of Partnership amongst MNCs and Host Communities

The nature of collaboration extends an explanation about the forms of relations between the MNCs and host communities as this could assist in determining development projects that can benefit both parties and strengthen their togetherness. The municipality and the local leadership confirmed having a good relationship because of proper consultation and decision-making processes to share and validate information on a local development agenda. The communal leaders expressed that they participate fully in the setting of new targets and reviews and report on community development or structure new community development activities.

Additionally, the traditional leaders (*amaKhosi*) corroborated the ties held with the MNCs operating in their jurisdictions and that they

connected more with MNCs than the local municipality. However, some describe the ties as unsystematic, and ambiguity was noted where others declared that no formal ties exist. The traditional leaders pointed out that MNCs attended some of community gatherings and meetings unannounced and unexpectedly. Confirming this assertion, MNCs indicated that they do attend community meeting and referred to the meeting as *umkhandlu* (council) and declared that attendance helped in aligning philanthropic activities. The community leaders reiterated that the MNCs often embarked on activities that brought significant change on certain areas and the interventions were enumerated and confirmed the supply of agricultural inputs towards income generation. The MNCs also prioritised infrastructural development as a catalyst for improving the wellbeing of host communities.

What also transpired is that the majority of MNCs actively engaged with communities in the context of socio-economic development were from the mining sector. This is attributed to their better understanding of the significance of CSR, and hence good practice was witnessed particularly amongst the few that compassionately worked with host communities. The understanding could be due to a compliance with the Social Labour Plan of South Africa that enforces the implementation of CSR activities. The close ties are demonstrated through attendance of communal meetings and other gatherings, although some of the traditional leaders expressed that MNCs randomly consulted host communities.

The leadership in the community confirmed that there are structures, such as public interest groups, who liaise with MNCs to ensure that the development agenda of local communities is prioritised. This encompasses economic development opportunities, employment creation which emphasise youth and women employment because they are most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in terms of access to job opportunities.

However, some of the community leaders felt that MNCs were not ploughing back into the host communities. The dissatisfaction expressed is evidenced by closure of one of the MNCs due to community protest of a lack of infrastructural development. Concerns were raised about the fact that no development takes place where

MNCs operate, which fails to benefit the surrounding communities and job opportunities were not made available for local communities. The type of development can be described as “selective development” which advances profit at the expense of community development.

Amusan (2018) confirms the findings that indicate that some MNCs have a firm reputation of not complying with the Social Labour Plan of South Africa to advance the development agenda of local host communities. The findings revealed that what contributes to the unemployability of host communities relates to a lack of required and relevant skills and knowledge. This leads to the employment of outsiders with the required technical skills to operate the sophisticated machinery. This becomes worse if the outsiders are from developed countries because they are remunerated in the currency of their countries of origin, which has significant implications for the economic development of host countries. The solution is the provision of education, training and skills to adequately equip host communities for employment, as this will ensure access to job opportunities and inclusive economic development of host countries.

Advancement and development require a sharing of skills and knowledge which embrace the values of *Ubuntu*. This could encourage positive thinking about development in the African context and develop a sense of belonging and identity, whilst allaying feelings of helplessness, uncertainty, insecurity and inferiority.

Effectiveness of Partnership among MNCs, Municipality and Communities

It proved difficult to establish the strategies used by the municipality to encourage participation of MNCs. The municipality indicated that various methods were used to solicit engagements and collaborations with the MNCs. For example, roadshows and discussion forums were organised to engage on community development issues and for the review of IDP and local government operations aimed at aimed enhancing inclusive development. Despite all attempts to engage MNCs, only one confirmed and attended meetings regularly to ensure sustainable delivery of services that are responsive to the needs of host communities. The municipal official attributed that poor attendance

to the unavailability of formal partnership. Furthermore, an absence of formal partnerships limit stakeholders interdependentness, interconnectedness and mutual help to attain sustainable livelihood outcomes, such as food security, income security, health, wellbeing, asset accumulation and high status in the community. Community development projects cannot be confirmed nor measured in the absence of collaborative work and formal partnerships and commitment from the MNCs cannot be guaranteed.

The municipal officials and community leaders confirmed the valuable contribution of some the MNCs concerning infrastructural development and the provision of basic services. However, the participants commented on a lack of structured partnerships, which has a contribution in duplication and implementation of less prioritised community development needs. The findings point to partnerships that are informal and ill-defined and more ad hoc. Some of the MNCs preferred to establish informal partnerships with host communities directly without involving the host local municipality. This is attributed to cumbersome bureaucratic processes, corruption and the creation of perpetual dependency which renders host communities powerless, which in turn perpetuates inequality in decision making. The needs of local communities under non-existent partnerships are determined by MNCs because they are in possession of power and financial means to address the perceived needs of host communities. The formation of effective partnerships builds on a recognition of local structures, such as local municipality and the hierarchy of local leadership, community members and educational institutions and the significance of partnerships that make a solid foundation for understanding local conditions, knowledge, and skills levels for efficient delivery of required services.

The MNCs and local municipalities are considered as forming effective partnerships conducting joint community development projects for sustainable development and improvement of the well-being of local people. Mutual development, where community members provide their labour and the MNCs reciprocate through remuneration and acts of CSR, suggests an integration of the values of *Ubuntu*, such communalism, interdependence and sharing. This translates to a Zulu proverb *Izandla Ziyagezana* (do unto others

as you would have them do unto you). In this context, however, this does not mean equality in terms of decision making and equal sharing of resources, but it refers to the assistance given to host communities. Nevertheless, the findings show that the host has advanced very little from MNCs development initiatives.

The legitimacy theory points to the importance of partnerships between stakeholders, such that society grants legitimacy and power to business (MNCs), and as such, should a business fail to use its power responsibly, society may revoke it or it may cause unfriendly working relations. An effective partnership towards socio-economic development has to be guided by a compassionate approach to development. Hamann (2004) argues that the creation of binding legal obligations should guide CSR community development activities.

CONCLUSION

The paper concludes that the question of what informs CSR activities remains unanswered, given the non-existence of partnerships amongst the providers and beneficiaries of community development activities. Community development endeavours, aimed at MNCs giving, have to be informed by the local development agenda guided by a compassionate approach, guided by the values of *Ubuntu*. The paper affirms that the SCR approach used by MNCs is supposed to be rooted in the core values of *Ubuntu*.

The paper confirmed that municipalities are custodians of service provision and catalyst of community development. The type and nature of interactions amongst the host communities and MNCs were erratic with lack of regulatory measures. Some of the host communities confirmed the positive contribution of CSR activities offered but raised concern that the partnerships that exist are purely occasional and unpredictable. This is attributed to the absence of any memorandum of understanding and formal agreements. Ill-defined, unstructured and informal partnerships create a void and conceal the essential information required for the effective implementation of CSR activities.

Participation by host communities in CSR activities is one of the key pillars for development as it provides communities an opportunity to take part directly in development. However, it is clear from

this paper that the host communities, including local municipality, are not satisfied with how CSR activities are conducted by MNCs. This may suggest that the MNCs' approach towards development emanates from an elitist or superior perspective.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommends the formation of a pragmatic policy framework to guide philanthropic operations within host communities. Partnerships do have the potential to contribute to community development initiatives however, the effectiveness is dependent on representation and consultative processes in all structures. It is imperative to note that partnerships are fragile, and this calls for exploring amicable strategies to sustain connectivity and effectiveness of partnerships. The paper recommends the appointment of full-time designated personnel within the MNCs to provide guidance on CSR related issues. There has to be prioritisation and advocacy programs to promote active participation of all stakeholders in actions aimed at developing host communities.

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