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Citation: Nyuur, Richard, Wanjiru, Roseline, Amankwah-Amoah, Joseph and Ifere, Simeon (2018) Critical perspectives on international business in Africa: An overview and proposed new research agenda [Editorial]. *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, 14 (2/3). pp. 102-110. ISSN 1742-2043

Published by: Emerald

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1108/cpoib-05-2018-073> <<https://doi.org/10.1108/cpoib-05-2018-073>>

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Critical perspectives on international business in Africa: An overview and proposed new research agenda.

Dr. Richard B. Nyuur

Newcastle Business School
City Campus East 1, Newcastle Upon Tyne
NE1 8ST, United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0) 191 227 3336
Email: richard.nyuur@northumbria.ac.uk

Dr. Roseline Wanjiru

Newcastle Business School
City Campus East 1, Newcastle Upon Tyne
NE1 8ST, United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0) 191 227 4319
Email: roseline.wanjiru@northumbria.ac.uk

Dr. Joseph Amankwah-Amoah

Kent Business School, University of Kent,
Chatham, Kent ME4 4TE
TEL: +44 (0) 1634 (88)8870
E-mail: J.Amankwah-Amoah@kent.ac.uk

Dr. Simeon E. Ifere

Department of Business Administration
University of Lagos
Akoka - Lagos
Tel: 00234 (0) 8033144937
E-mail: sifere@unilag.edu.ng

Critical perspectives on international business (cpoib) – paper accepted for publication on 28-Feb-2018



Critical perspectives on international business in Africa: An overview and proposed new research agenda.

Journal:	<i>critical perspectives on international business</i>
Manuscript ID	cpoib-01-2018-0005
Manuscript Type:	Editorial

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Critical perspectives on international business in Africa: An overview and proposed new research agenda.

Abstract

Purpose – *In this introduction paper, we aim to first highlight the different intellectual discourses and contributions to the ‘special issue’ on critical perspectives on international business in Africa. We also introduce the details of the contributions included within this special issue.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The paper briefly presents Africa as a fertile but under researched context for international business scholarship notwithstanding the growing number of contributions in recent times. This is followed by a brief review and discussion of each paper in this special issue.*

Findings – *The paper captures the findings and contributions of the papers featured in this issue.*

Originality/value – *The paper sets the context in which the other papers that comprise this special issue can be situated. Moreover, the paper engages with key issues and challenges relevant to African business and offers critical perspectives on the theory and practice of international business within Africa.*

Keywords: Africa, Critical perspectives, International Business.

Introduction

By the end of this decade, the majority of African countries would have celebrated their 50th independence anniversaries. Perceptions of events unfolding on the African continent during this half-century journey broadly oscillate between optimism and pessimism. Rapid socioeconomic gains achieved during the early decades of independence signaled hopeful predictions of prosperity, which invariably slowed down as African countries encountered discord and socioeconomic crises.

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3 Rapid economic growth in recent decades and the resilience of African economies in the
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5 wake of global recessions have led to a rise in optimism over the continent's prospects.
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7 Investors and observers increasingly speculate on the promise Africa holds for global
8
9 economic development. Positive perceptions of new and emerging opportunities on the
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11 continent underscore this logic. These opportunities are occurring against a backdrop of new
12
13 developments within Africa, which include, *inter alia*, the improving living standards and
14
15 stability in many countries, the emergence of a sizeable middle-class with enhanced
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17 purchasing power, the emergence of multinational enterprises (MNEs) from within the
18
19 region, the evolution of multi-lateral and international trade and investment agreements, and
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21 the rising levels of both inward and outward foreign direct investment flows. Alongside these
22
23 shifts is a widespread transformation of structural, economic, political and social institutions
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25 currently underway across numerous African countries. New and rapidly growing trade and
26
27 investment links are evident between African economies and new emerging economies such
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29 as China and India. For instance trade between China and Africa has been increasing from \$1
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31 billion in 1980 to around \$114 billion as at 2010 (Amankwah-Amoah, 2017a; Bremmer,
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33 2012).
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40 Scholarly attention to current issues confronting Africa has also surged in the last two
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42 decades (Zoogah, Peng & Woldu, 2015). Most notable of these have been the increasing
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44 number of editorial comments in Academy of Management Journal (AMJ) (e.g., George,
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46 Corbishley, Khayesi, Haas & Tihanyi, 2016) and special issues in journals such as Global
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48 Strategy Journal (GSJ) and Technological Forecasting and Social Change (TFSC) dedicated
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50 to doing business in Africa. This SI on critical perspective on international business (cpoib) is
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52 part of the growing and needed research trend on Africa. In addition to this SI, there are
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54 similar calls for papers on other journals including Thunderbird International Business
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3 Review (TIBR). These are some of the signs of growing confidence of African management
4 research. A resurgent scholarship on international business (IB) in Africa has focused
5 variously on the motives and determinants of foreign direct investment (Naudé and Krugell,
6 2007; Asiedu, 2006); the role of government policies, institutions and corruption on foreign
7 direct investment (Musila and Sigure, 2006; Nyuur and Debrah, 2014; Nyuur, Ofori, and
8 Debrah, 2016), knowledge transfer, and human resource practices within multinational
9 corporations (Horwitz, 2015; Osabutey, William and Debrah, 2014). These and related
10 studies present mixed and sometimes conflicting findings, but share the broadly unequivocal
11 acceptance of the legitimacy of existing paradigms to explain current shifts across Africa.
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13 Critical perspectives of international business in Africa remain few and under the research
14 radar.
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29 The assumption of African homogeneity tends to obfuscate the realities of complexity and
30 diversity in the continent, as well as limit impactful research. Traditional models of inquiry
31 may not necessarily explain these unanswered questions and leave us less knowledgeable
32 about the motives, practices and implications of international business (IB) in Africa. The
33 widespread acceptance and application of established models while useful may, in particular
34 contexts, limit the ability to critically probe and analyse current shifts in order to generate
35 fresh insights. However, there is a growing research interest in critical perspectives on
36 international business in Africa (e.g. see Amankwah-Amoah, 2016, 2017; Ado and Su, 2016;
37 Ayres, 2012; de Jonge, 2016; Eweje, 2006; Konijn and Tulder, 2015). While there has been a
38 resurgence of interest and a growing body of research on Africa, it has been suggested that
39 this needs to be marshalled towards a better narrative and understanding of how firms
40 behave, the role of leaders and the management of indigenous enterprises (Amankwah-
41 Amoah, 2016, 2017; Amankwah-Amoah, Boso and Debrah, 2017).
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5 This special issue on critical perspectives on international business in Africa is therefore
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7 timely. Following the mission of *cpoib* (Roberts and Dörrenbächer, 2016, 2012) this issues
8
9 supports critically reflexive discussion of the nature and impact of international business
10
11 activity in Africa on individuals, specific communities, the environment, the economy and
12
13 society from inter-, trans-, and multi-disciplinary perspectives. The special issue seeks to
14
15 contribute to IB and related literature, and generate useful information and analysis on the
16
17 African context for business educators, management practitioners and policy makers.
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19 Moreover, this special issue aims to provide a platform for scholars to rethink and further
20
21 develop integrative as well as novel IB frameworks that are relevant in the African context.
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29 **General contributions**

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31 This special issue engages with key issues and challenges relevant to African business and
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33 offers critical perspectives on the theory and practice of international business within Africa.
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35 The special issue comprises a range of original, thought provoking studies that can be broadly
36
37 categorised into three groups. The first group of papers examines the institutional
38
39 environments within which international business occurs in African countries. The second set
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41 of papers examines existing narratives on African contexts and their influence on the practice
42
43 of international business; alternative insights into the conceptualisations of key notions within
44
45 International Business are explored. The third set of papers examines the performance of
46
47 African actors within international business, with a focus on export performance motives and
48
49 exporting behaviour. These distinct sets of papers are briefly discussed in the next section.
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3 In the first set of papers, the contributing authors engage with the unique characteristics and
4 diversity of institutional environments in African countries, which are explored at a range of
5 levels and perspectives. These studies explicitly and implicitly apply the institutional
6 theoretical lens in grounding their arguments and guiding the studies.
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13 The study by Adegbile and Sarpong discusses the role of disruptive innovation within Base of
14 the Pyramid (BoP) markets in Sub-Saharan Africa, where such markets are argued to present
15 significant opportunities as well as challenges for multinationals operating in African
16 emerging markets. This study examines the potential managerial and institutional challenges
17 as well as opportunities faced by MNEs in their efforts to create and capture value from these
18 markets, drawing insights from disruptive innovation and BoP literatures. The paper adopts a
19 conceptual approach underpinned by institutional and innovation theoretical frameworks. In
20 this paper, the authors contrast the characteristics of business environments in Africa as well
21 as the institutional factors shaping disruptive innovation with the environments in existence
22 elsewhere within more developed markets. Importantly, the study underscores that the social
23 setting and institutional environments of emerging economies in Africa tend to contribute
24 more to disruptive innovation unlike in developed economies. The study further signals that
25 disruptive innovation confers market power and facilitates internationalisation. The study
26 therefore makes impactful contributions to the international business, innovation and BoP
27 literature in the context of emerging markets in Africa, which have large number of
28 consumers embedded in the BoP, and have become investment havens for many MNCs. It
29 also has important implications for MNEs in Africa.
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52 The empirical study by Shan, Lin, Li, and Zeng adopts a macro-level perspective in
53 examining the effect of natural resources, market size and institutional quality on the
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3 attraction of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) into African locations. This quantitative
4
5 study uses regression analysis on panel data from 2008-2014 covering 22 African countries to
6
7 test for the effects of market size, natural resources and five key institutional factors (political
8
9 stability and absence of violence; voice and accountability; regulatory quality; rule of law;
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11 control of corruption) on Chinese investment flows into Africa. The results from this study
12
13 indicate that market size influences Chinese investment flows into African countries more
14
15 than natural resources, which are not found to have a significant effect. In testing for the
16
17 effect of institutional variables on Chinese investment flows, the study's results indicate that
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19 rule of law and control of corruption do not have a significant effect in attracting Chinese
20
21 investment. The findings further reveal that Chinese investors, particularly the large state-
22
23 owned Chinese companies, are often driven by political reasons when deciding on investment
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25 locations in Africa. Arguably, this may be a strategy of strengthening their political relations
26
27 with such countries and also in influencing the political system in such countries. Moreover,
28
29 the study establishes that Chinese investors do not consider a country's weak legal systems to
30
31 be a concern when deciding about FDI destination, partly because of similar weak legal
32
33 systems at home in China which the investors are used to. Political stability and regulatory
34
35 quality are therefore found to have a significant and negative effect. Finally, the study reveals
36
37 that African countries that strive to increase their voice and accountability, are likely to
38
39 attract more investments from China. Thus, voice and accountability is the only institutional
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41 variable demonstrating a positive and significant effect. Altogether, these are important
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43 findings and contributions to the emerging and burgeoning literature on Chinese investments
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45 and relations in Africa.
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52 Distinctive institutional factors are further explored in the paper by Amankwah-Amoah and
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54 Osabutey which reviews the antecedents, processes and outcomes of a major post-
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3 independence African infrastructure project through which several lessons emerge on the
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5 interactions between African host-governments and their engagements with local and
6
7 international firms. The study further applied the Resource Based View (RBV) and
8
9 Transaction costs theories in exploring this less examined issue in the African context. Using
10
11 archival case study method, the study synthesised historical information on the planning,
12
13 implementation and post-implementation phases of the Akosombo dam on the Volta River in
14
15 Ghana to generate insights on the interactions and bargaining between multiple international
16
17 firms and African host- government. The findings from this study show how Nkrumah (who
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19 led Ghana into independence in 1957 from the British, and became the first president of the
20
21 country Ghana) marshalled support from relevant stakeholders and mobilised resources from
22
23 national governments and international organisations as well as companies in designing,
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25 operationalising, implementing and successfully completing a mega engineering project in a
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27 newly independent African country with the aim of facilitating industrialisation. The study
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29 further highlights the poor bargaining power and weak integration of projects into future
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31 development objectives by policymakers and business actors in African countries.
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33 Additionally, identified weaknesses are further intensified by the negligence of these
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35 infrastructure mega-projects by successive political actors. The study contributes to the
36
37 literature by developing and presenting a phase model to demonstrate how such multi-party
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39 engineering projects unfold over time. It recommends that while visionary leadership is
40
41 relevant in successfully implementing such projects, human capital development is also
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43 essential in supporting maintaining and managing such large infrastructure projects after
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45 completion in order to reap the full benefits. Moreover, the study deepens our understanding
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47 of the role of governments and policy-makers in designing and implementing mega-projects
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49 in Africa in collaboration with the private sector for economic growth.
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3 The second set of papers in this SI offer critical perspectives on existing narratives of African
4 contexts and their influence on the conceptualisation and practice of international business
5 within the African continent. For instance, the study by Abugre examines the role of cross-
6 cultural communication as a distinctive factor in increasing the capabilities and successes of
7 MNCs within emerging markets. This study draws from cross-cultural adaptation theory to
8 identify the processes through which western expatriates learn and draw lessons from
9 contextual adaptation and adjustment. The study notes that Africa is a complex and
10 multifaceted market environment with the most linguistic diversity of any region in the
11 world, and thus presents itself as an apt context for examining this issue. Using
12 phenomenological data collection methods in Ghana, involving interviews of 21 senior
13 expatriate executives from 19 MNCs across different industries, this study examines the
14 imperative nature of cross-cultural communication within international business to inform the
15 practice of international business and managerial strategies within western MNCs located in
16 Africa. The study confirms the critical role of cross-cultural communication competence in
17 ensuring effective communication by expatriates with their local teams in the subsidiaries.
18 The study also contributes to limited scholarship on the strategic portfolio of effective cross-
19 cultural communication by expatriates in Africa.

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42 The challenge of generating relevant, culturally sensitive business research to inform the
43 practice of international business in African contexts is examined in the next study by Ado
44 and Wanjiru. Adopting a critical perspective, this study questions the dearth of relevant and
45 sufficiently nuanced viewpoints into everyday African business contexts, and investigates the
46 constraints faced by researchers in generating academic knowledge and business research that
47 is both detailed, culturally sensitive and relevant for African contexts. This paper draws
48 insights from the knowledge creation and institutional standpoints. Overall, information for
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3 this study was gathered from 23 African IB researchers via the adoption of a participant
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5 observation method. The study's results reveal that IB research in Africa is arduous due to
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7 major challenges which tend to require significant flexibility, sufficient resources and
8
9 personal determination on the part of researchers in order to overcome them. Moreover, weak
10
11 institutional settings and inadequate or non-existent research infrastructures are suggested as
12
13 inhibiting African IB researchers' productivity in knowledge creation. The authors
14
15 recommend a more systemic approach involving support from African governments, more
16
17 technology-driven fieldwork, and more sensitization of citizens regarding research and its
18
19 benefits for people, to help address the fundamental problems that undermine research in
20
21 Africa. The study therefore makes important contributions to the literature by linking existing
22
23 research gaps to a range of institutional (organisational-, country- and environmental- level)
24
25 barriers as well as individual (interviewer/respondent) barriers. Finally, this particular study
26
27 nurtures the debate regarding why African topics remain underrepresented in the IB literature.
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33 The paper by Adams, Nayak, and Koukpaki engages with Eurocentric conceptualisations of
34
35 risk, which are argued to reinforce the language, culture and practices of doing business in
36
37 Africa. This study presents a philosophical basis of risk and its historical foundations in the
38
39 African context. A key argument posits that the resource-seeking and rent-seeking strategies
40
41 employed by MNCs in African contexts are central to the creation of contrived risks that
42
43 create crisis and perpetuate Eurocentric stereotypes, even as these MNCs carry on with their
44
45 business activities and resources are extracted for private gain. Using non-linear historical
46
47 narratives around the concepts and constructions of the idea and language of risk, the study
48
49 employs discourse analysis to locate how ideas of risk become exported and are eventually
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51 incorporated into the language of international business. Such manufactured
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53 conceptualisations of risk perpetuate the image of the African continent as risk-ridden.
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3 Moreover, risk is predominantly explored from the perspective of host economies, without
4 equal examination of the activities of MNCs that contribute some level of risk in such
5 environments. According to the authors, the RBV, internalisation, internationalisation and
6 convergence theories have not been able to adequately unpack the nature of real risks in
7 emerging economies such as those in Africa. The paper argues for the explicit integration of
8 African perspectives into MNE modes of entry and operational strategies to counter neo-
9 colonial business methods, languages, cultures and strategies.
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20 A third set of papers in this SI investigates the nature of participation of African actors within
21 international business activities, exploring the details of exporting behaviour and the
22 integration of African firms within global value chains. The paper by Ayakwah, Sepulveda,
23 and Lyon examines the nature of business relationships and the links to international supply
24 chains in which African firms participate. Comparing the performances of two exporting
25 agro-processing clusters in Ghana, the study investigates the influence of both competition
26 and cooperation on the relationships among firms, as well as the potential for clusters to
27 support African firms towards internationalisation. The paper is implicitly underpinned by
28 transaction costs and institutional theoretical perspectives. Moreover, it adopts a mixed-
29 method approach to generate results that underline the significant constraints posed by
30 institutional weaknesses and inefficient market structures that act as key limitations for the
31 global competitiveness of African firms. The findings illuminate the strategies export focused
32 businesses adopt in coping with weak institutional environments and draw attention to the
33 diversity and uniqueness of location-specific attributes of competition and cooperation
34 business relationship in clusters. The paper finally emphasises that understanding
35 international business practices in Africa requires recognition of the unique business
36 structures and the role of both formal and informal institutional forms in this context.
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5 The study by You, Salmi, and Kauppi examines another under-researched issue in the IB
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7 literature; the nature of integration of African firms into global value chains and the roles
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9 these firms play within these international supply chains. In comparative case-studies of
10
11 Finnish and Chinese companies sourcing from diverse African markets, this paper examines
12
13 the characteristics of African markets as a supply base from the perspective of foreign buyers
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15 and studies the nature of sourcing decisions made by foreign buyers who source from African
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17 suppliers. A sample of ten foreign case-companies are used to examine their motives for
18
19 integrating African suppliers into their supply chains. The study's results underscore the
20
21 varied motives influencing business activity and highlight that the small size of African firms
22
23 and the minor positions they occupy within the global value chains are key obstacles to their
24
25 ability to meaningfully influence the supply relationships. The paper further reveals different
26
27 practices through which foreign firms integrate African firms into their global supply/value
28
29 chains. While the Chinese firms tend to develop a relatively strong relational approach with
30
31 their African suppliers, the Finnish companies, on the other hand, adopt a modular approach
32
33 to integrating their African suppliers into the global value chains system. The authors
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35 underscore the need to adapt theories and frameworks in supply chains and purchasing when
36
37 applying these to the African context due to the uniqueness of the continent.
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44 In the study by Haddoud, Onjewu, Jones, and Newbery, the relationship between export
45
46 barriers and export propensity is investigated, with a focus on the role of export promotion
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48 programmes from North Africa. The authors analyse the moderating role of export promotion
49
50 programmes in reducing perceptions of export barriers among Algerian manufacturing SMEs
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52 by applying RBV and institutional theoretical perspectives. The role of trade missions, trade
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54 shows and export seminars in addressing a range of external and internal export obstacles is
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3 analysed. The results show that such export promotion events lowered SME perceptions of
4 export barriers to varying degrees. The authors also highlight that language and cultural
5 problems are some of the most important SME export barriers. They also emphasise the role
6 of export promotion programmes in reducing the negative influence of export barriers on
7 SMEs' international market entry.
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15 The propensity of African SMEs to undertake exporting activity is further explored in the
16 study by Damoah which investigates the exporting behaviours of African SMEs. In contrast
17 to existing approaches that employ quantitative methods to investigate firms' export
18 propensities or likelihood to undertake exporting, this paper employs a critical incident
19 method to analyse the subjective factors shaping firms' decisions to internationalise. Critical
20 incidents, episodes and events may trigger export initiation as outlined in existing literature;
21 this study tests for the main events within SMEs operating in the garment and textile sector in
22 Ghana. The author opts for an integrated theoretical framework that combines RBV,
23 international entrepreneurship theory, network theory and contingency theory. The results
24 from interview data of 36 firms demonstrate that trade fairs, contacts through international
25 links and contacts made through networks with friends and family abroad comprised some of
26 the main triggers for exporting behaviour. Related themes are developed to inform theory and
27 policy implications.
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46 **A closing note**

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48 Taken together, the articles included in this SI reveal that the African continent is
49 increasingly becoming an interesting and an appealing investment destination for
50 international businesses, particularly for corporations seeking to internationalise into vibrant
51 developing markets. While this has sparked tremendous investment interests in the region,
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3 academic scholarship lags behind this trend. The articles in this SI utilise a wide range of
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5 theoretical approaches, including institutional theory, innovation theory, RBV; Transaction
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7 costs theory, cross-cultural adaptation theory, stage theory, international entrepreneurship
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9 theory, network theory and contingency theory, with the institutional and RBV appearing to
10
11 be the dominant lenses. The authors whose work is featured in the SI also apply a variety of
12
13 research methods and analyses (e.g., quantitative, qualitative and conceptual approaches).
14
15 Moreover, the papers exemplify a wide set of organisational sizes, types, and sectors. For
16
17 example different perspectives of MNCs, SMEs and SOEs are explored in detail covering
18
19 different countries within the African continent.
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25 The SI thus provides a critical insight into various dimensions in the business environment
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27 and provokes a number of interesting research agendas. First, there is an important research
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29 contribution to be made by a more systematic and theory-driven research on disruptive
30
31 innovation at the Base of the Pyramid (BoP) particularly in Africa to help broaden the
32
33 theoretical base. Secondly, given the increasing level of China involvement in Africa, and the
34
35 high investment growth of China on the continent, further research attention is required on
36
37 Africa - China relations, trade and investment to move the body of knowledge in this area
38
39 forward. Moreover, there is currently limited empirical work on how African firms/suppliers
40
41 are integrated into the global value chains system. This background provides further scope for
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43 studies to examine it in order to enrich our understanding of the issue on the African context.
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45 Additionally, the growing number of African SMEs that are expanding their operations
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47 beyond their national borders serve as another fertile research avenue for future studies to
48
49 explore and enrich the SMEs' internationalisation scholarship in Africa. This stream promises
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51 to yield fruitful implications for research, policy and businesses. Finally, this SI opens
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53 another fertile avenue for scholars of strategy, project management and business history to
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3 inject historical perspectives into the current international business, host country political and
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5 economic development discourse on Africa. This introduction paper and the contributions to
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7 this special issue on Africa capture promising avenues in advancing African management
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9 research. This represents a shift of African management related issues from largely in the
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11 periphery of management research literature into the mainstream discourse (Amankwah-
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13 Amoah, 2016, 2017; see also George, 2015). Africa is thus an exciting and a fertile research
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15 context for scholarship in the social and management sciences (Horwitz, 2015).
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22 **Acknowledgements**

23
24 We would like to acknowledge the immense contribution of colleagues who reviewed the
25
26 papers submitted to the special issue. The reviewers provided valuable and insightful
27
28 comments and recommendations during the review process which helped to make this a
29
30 success. We also profoundly acknowledge the assistance provided by the Editors of *critical*
31
32 *perspectives on international business*, Christoph Dörrenbächer, Joanne Roberts, and Snejina
33
34 Michailova who have been very helpful throughout this process. Thank you.
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Table 1 Summary of the papers - the authors, themes, theoretical foundations and the methodology utilised.

Author(s)	Topic	Field/theoretical foundation	Methodology
Adebile and Sarpong	Disruptive Innovation at the Base-of-the-Pyramid: Opportunities, and Challenges for Multinationals in African emerging markets.	Disruptive Innovation, international business and Institutional theories	A conceptual paper on BoP. A total of 7 propositions developed for future studies to empirically test in the African context.
Shan, Lin, Li and Zeng.	Attracting Chinese FDI in Africa: the role of natural resources, market size and institutional quality.	Institutional theory	Quantitative – Panel data The study uses regression analysis on panel data across 22 countries for the period from 2008 to 2014.
Amankwah-Amoah and Osabutey.	Newly independent nations and large engineering projects: The case of the Volta River Project.	The Resource-based View (RBV) and Transaction costs theory.	A case study method of the Volta River Project – based on Archival information from the Volta River Authority (VRA), other archival government data, and interview transcripts before, during and after the completion of the Volta River Project (VRP).
Abugre.	Cross-Cultural Communication Imperatives: Critical Lessons for Western Expatriates in Multinational Companies (MNCs) in Sub-Saharan Africa.	Cross-cultural adaptation theory	Phenomenology as a qualitative method of data gathering and analysis for this study. This involves interviewing 21 senior expatriate executives from 19 MNCs in in Ghana.
Ado and Wanjiru .	Business Research Challenges in Africa: Knowledge Creation and Institutional Perspectives.	Knowledge creation and institutional theories	A qualitative method through 23 participants' observation approach and a content analysis.
Adams, Nayak, and Koukpaki.	Critical perspectives on 'manufactured' risks arising from Eurocentric business	International business and institutional theories	A conceptual paper - a nonlinear historical narrative.

	practices in Africa.		
Ayakwah, Sepulveda and Lyon.	Competitive or cooperative relationships in clusters: A comparative study of two internationalising agro-processing clusters in Ghana.	Transaction costs and institutional theoretical perspectives.	A mixed method approach comprising of a survey of 99 firms and 17 semi-structured interviews in the two selected food-processing clusters in Ghana.
You, Salmi and Kauppi.	Integration of African firms into global value chains: A comparison of Finnish and Chinese firms' sourcing from Africa.	Integration and global value chains perspectives	A multiple case study - interview data of foreign buyers. These include 5 Finnish companies and 5 Chinese companies.
Haddoud, Onjewu, Jones, and Newbery.	Investigating the moderating role of Export Promotion Programmes using evidence from North-Africa.	Resource based view (RBV), and institutional perspectives	Survey - online questionnaire set to 500 SMEs in North-Africa.
Damoah.	A Critical Incident Analysis of the Export Behaviour of SMEs: Evidence from an Emerging Market.	An integration of: Resource-based view (RBV), stage theory, international entrepreneurship, network theory and contingency theory.	Qualitative - Interviewed 36 firms from the garment and textile industry in Ghana