

Article

How Can International Business-to-Business Partnerships in Africa Contribute to Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals?

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Following calls by international business scholars to pay attention to how multinational enterprises contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals, we make implementable recommendations for international B2B partnerships in Africa. We postulate that international businesses can alleviate extreme poverty and eradicate child labor by selecting ethical African suppliers. Furthermore, partners must exercise transparency in how they adopt clean and environmentally sound technologies. We also highlight that partners should demonstrate flexibility and open-mindedness to African indigenous know-how and sustainable practices to facilitate knowledge-sharing. International B2B partners may consider our recommendations to guide the building of ethical and responsible businesses in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations articulate environmental, economic, and societal transformation by 2030. After being introduced in 2015, firms have been revising their business strategies to align with them. Consequently, international business scholars have advocated for more studies to illuminate our understanding of how companies are contributing to the SDGs (Cuervo-Cazurra, Doh, Giuliani, Montiel, & Park, 2022; Ghauri, 2022; Ku, 2022; Van Tulder & van Mil, 2022; Zhao, Dilyard, & Rose, 2022). We contribute by focusing on the less explored role of international business-to-business (B2B) partnerships toward sustainable development (Voola, Bandyopadhyay, Voola, Ray, & Carlson, 2022). We provide insights into where and how businesses might contribute to the SDGs and associated targets. We focus our attention on international B2B partnerships in Africa, where our choice falls on three premises. First, African markets are considered the next frontier for international business expansion (Mol, Stadler, & Ariño, 2017). With a young and entrepreneurship-driven population, a growing middle class, increasing consumption, rapid urbanization, and abundant natural resources, Africa offers enormous business potential (Amankwah-Amoah, Boso, & Debrah, 2018). Africa's new trade bloc, the African Continental Free Trade Area, is even more attractive and ambitious, which is projected to cover a business market of more than 1.2 bn people and a combined GDP of \$2.5 tn across 54 countries (UNECA, 2019). This makes Africa a good investment and solid base

from which international B2B partnerships can be forged. Second, most African countries are lagging meeting most of the SDG targets. According to the UNDP (2024), less than 6% of the 32 measurable targets are on track to be reached by 2030. We believe that B2B partnerships can be a way in which African countries can catch up. Third, B2B partnerships are critical for sustainable development in Africa as they can be used for sharing knowledge and technology. A recent study shows that African companies partner with international companies for knowledge and technology transfer (Züfle & Schneider, 2023). Learning from these observations, we raise the question: *How can international B2B partnerships contribute to achieving SDGs in Africa?* We answer by focusing on partnerships during the pre- and post-formation stages at the supply and distribution ends of a firm's value chain. Our recommendations in this article may give international business partners in Africa a fresh perspective to (re) consider their critical role in achieving SDGs.

FORMING AND MANAGING INTERNATIONAL B2B PARTNERSHIPS IN AFRICA

Studies have shown that B2B partnerships are formed to lower costs, increase service and product quality, as well as improve the competitive advantage of firms (He, Meadows, Angwin, Gomes, & Child, 2024; Tuten & Urban, 2001). In addition, partnering with local companies for supply and distribution is particularly relevant for market entry and

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business success in emerging markets like Africa. Firms search for and select partners based on their strategic business ambitions. For instance, businesses originating outside of Africa choose local African companies to form joint ventures or sales partnerships before increasing the level of localization (Oguji & Owusu, 2021). For international companies, the benefits of such partnerships are access to marketing expertise, market entry, and reduction of risks and costs associated with conducting business in foreign institutional environments (Del Bosque Rodríguez, Agudo, & Gutiérrez, 2006). In the post-formation stage, relational aspects such as trust, communication, and commitment are crucial elements for enduring successful B2B partnerships (Shanka & Buvik, 2019).

Africa's role in international business is increasingly becoming relevant as it presents opportunities for multinational enterprises (Boso, Debrah, & Amankwah-Amoah, 2018). Africa's vast natural resources, including cobalt, graphite, lithium, manganese, and nickel, have a great potential to draw foreign and African businesses into partnerships to supply raw materials for manufacturing eco-friendly products such as batteries for electric vehicles. Due to the growing purchasing power and product/service demand of Africa's middle class, there is also an opportunity for businesses to forge sales partnerships for products and services. At both supply and distribution ends, international B2B partners stand to benefit as studies have shown that firms may gain access to the partner's knowledge (Muthusamy & White, 2005).

IMPLEMENTABLE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACHIEVING SDGS

We link international B2B partnerships and SDGs to highlight businesses' role in addressing societal concerns beyond profit. We discuss opportunities to achieve SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 4 (Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). We chose these SDGs because they apply to all businesses regardless of industry or firm size and can be broadly implemented. We indicate in [Figure 1](#) that specific SDGs can be considered at the pre- and post-partnership formation stage of supply and distribution ends of international B2B partnerships.

SUPPLY PARTNERSHIP AT THE PRE-FORMATION STAGE

Data shows that except in Algeria, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Tunisia, Africa's response to eradicating extreme poverty (SDG 1.1) is far below expectations (Sachs, Lafortune, & Fuller, 2024). International B2B partnerships can play a critical role in eradicating extreme poverty at the pre-formation stage of the partnership. Specifically, international business partners should source directly from African suppliers to ensure they receive fair prices above the poverty line of \$2.15 a day. This may trickle down to other suppliers (i.e., households) and alleviate extreme poverty. When national laws obstruct direct supplier access,

international business partners should ensure their operations address social or community concerns. For instance, in Ghana, only licensed buying companies are authorized to purchase cocoa directly from cocoa producers and sell to the Ghana Cocoa Board, the state regulator for cocoa trade (Busquet, Bosma, & Hummels, 2021). Due to this regulatory model, most cocoa buyers support producers in improving their farming practices or providing basic amenities in cocoa-producing areas to improve livelihoods. A case in point is Barry Callebaut's Cocoa Horizons project activities, such as coaching, and providing tools, inputs, and financing to improve the quality of farmers' operations (Barry Callebaut, 2024). Suppliers can then concentrate on producing good-quality cocoa, which, when sold, generates stable income and eliminates extreme poverty. This is only one example of how international B2B supply partnerships can contribute to alleviating extreme poverty.

Regarding SDG 8.7, global estimates show that 86.6 million (57%) of the 160 million child labor practices are in Africa (ILO & UNCF, 2021). Child labor occurs when children between 5 and 17 years engage in work that harms their mental, physical, social, and moral well-being and negatively interferes with schooling (ILO, 2024). A recent study in Africa reveals that the root cause of child labor not only lies in poverty and a failed educational system, but is also perpetuated by weak and inefficient laws and poor coordination between responsible institutions to protect children (Njieassam, 2023). We contend that international B2B partnerships can play a role in eradicating child labor. At the pre-formation stage of a B2B partnership, international partners must inquire about African suppliers' history regarding child labor practices. This should be verified by visiting the workplace of the African partners to receive first-hand information. International business partners should refuse to engage with suppliers with unverified child-labor-free business practices. Ensuring suppliers do not violate this requirement entails drawing up terms of contractual obligations and developing control mechanisms (e.g., dedicated staff) to monitor the supplier's business practices. This commitment may require more resources and effort from the international partner, but it can potentially reduce child labor in real terms. We caution that addressing child labor is a complex issue and might require some trade-offs *vis a vis* the SDGs and family livelihood. Recent research shows that children are actively involved in various rural and agricultural activities as it is part of their upbringing to help and contribute to their parents' activities (Busquet et al., 2021). This may cause children to focus only on earning a livelihood and, for instance, neglect their formal educational upbringing. We posit that where a family's livelihood is endangered without the child's contribution, this should be compensated in other ways. As a case in point, cooperation between Muramati, a Kenyan tea exporter, the Child Welfare Society of Kenya, the ILO, and the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour launched the Child Labor Program to assist in the formal and technical education of children rescued from forced labor (IFC, 2002). After receiving education, Muramati provides student loans and creates employment opportunities

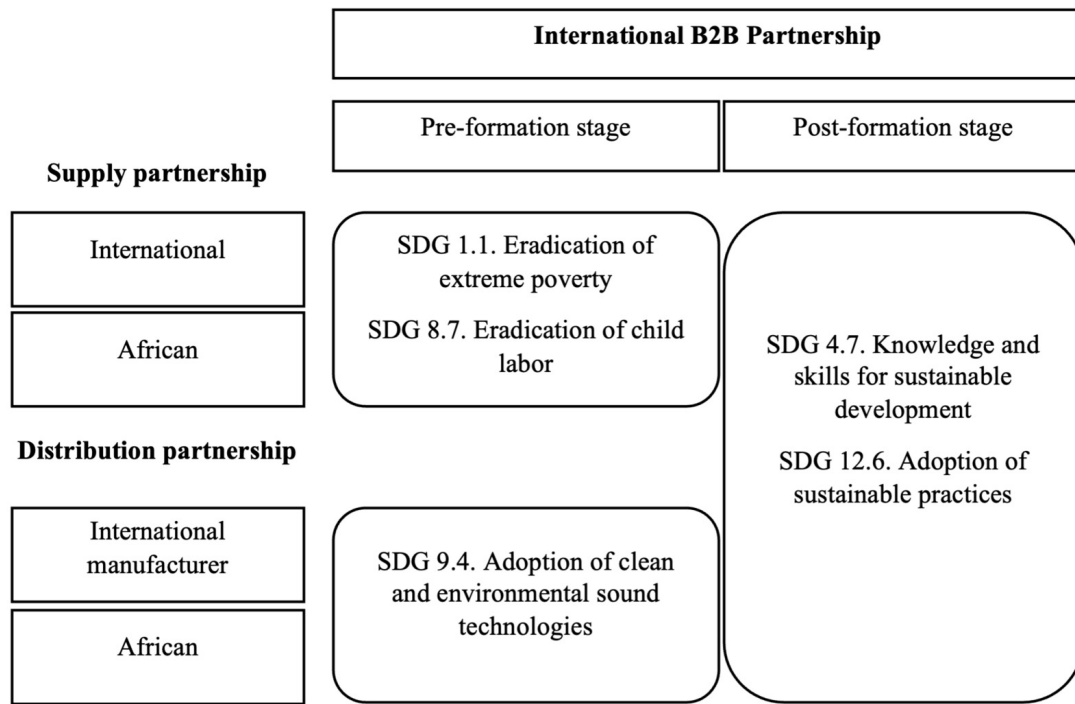


Figure 1. Recommendations for international B2B partnerships in Africa to achieve SDGs

Source: Authors' construct.

for those who later attain the legal age to work. This example demonstrates the effect of potential B2B partnerships in alleviating child labor.

DISTRIBUTION PARTNERSHIP AT THE PRE-FORMATION STAGE

Forging partnerships with African distributors can be instrumental to international companies seeking to sell products in Africa with limited market knowledge. In the context of SDG 9.4, African distributors may prioritize partnerships with international manufacturers who adopt clean and environmentally sound technologies. The nature of the product may determine how partnerships for sustainable development are forged. For instance, the criteria for selecting distribution partnerships for a technological product such as smartphones may differ from how pharmaceutical products or textiles are distributed. Partners must be mindful of growing continental or regional policies detailing requirements for companies to report on their sustainability and responsibility standards. In this vein, international business partners seeking to sell products in Africa may check with authorized bodies such as the African Organization for Standardization (ARSO) to furnish themselves with sustainability standards applicable to Africa. Furthermore, the actions of African distributors can significantly influence how international manufacturers deal with sustainability and responsibility. African distributors may request information about the products and integral parts

to discover whether they are responsibly produced. This may inform whether African distributors decide to partner with given international manufacturers. As a case in point, when agro-dealers and farmers in Africa were able to verify the authenticity of a new fertilizer product by Toyota Fertilizer Africa through mPedigree's product counterfeit verification platform, brand awareness, and customer loyalty increased (mPedigree, 2023). Informed by this example, chances are that when African distributors recommend purchasing genuine products from transparent international manufacturers, this may serve as a demonstration effect for other international manufacturers to reconsider their approach toward the SDGs.

MANAGING PARTNERSHIPS AT THE POST-FORMATION STAGE

In an international B2B partnership, African indigenous knowledge¹ can play a pertinent role in achieving SDG targets 4.7 and 12.6. This recommendation cuts across both supply and distribution value chain ends. African indigenous knowledge shows a harmonious and sustainable relationship between humans and nature (Eyong, 2007). For instance, houses in pre-colonial Africa were built with eco-friendly and climate-adaptable materials such as mud, thatch, and wood. However, this was considered primitive for many decades. We argue that these practices can help achieve sustainable development targets. It may require international B2B partners to demonstrate flexibility and

¹ African indigenous knowledge refers to intergenerational knowledge, skills and practices within a community or area.

open-mindedness to local know-how and sustainable practices to facilitate knowledge-sharing. Indeed, eco-friendly materials such as mud, thatch, and wood are not unique to the context of Africa. However, the science behind their use in Africa is a critical resource for facilitating sustainable development. Anecdotal evidence illustrates that the beehive huts in Eswatini and South Africa, traditionally part of the indigenous construction sector, have been applied to boost eco-tourism in the hospitality sector. For B2B partnerships, this has the potential to activate knowledge-sharing by establishing firm exchange and training practices open to experiential learning. By doing so, foreign partners may generate new ideas for developing and manufacturing eco-friendly and sustainable products for African markets. African partners may then serve as their distributors in (other) African markets. As a domino effect, commercial products manufactured with a sustainability mindset may lead to using eco-friendly and climate-adaptable materials for production and consumption, promoting the adoption of sustainable practices further in related industries.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents key SDG targets that could be achieved through international B2B partnerships in Africa. This is far from an inexhaustive endeavor, but we hope our recommendations will stimulate relevant and purposeful discussions. We also acknowledge that other SDGs and specific targets could be achieved through international B2B partnerships. For instance, under SDG 8.3, international B2B partnerships may spur job creation and growth through entrepreneurship, creativity, innovation, and the formalization of (informal) micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, which may expand access to banking, insurance, and financial services. This may, in turn, alleviate extreme poverty and reduce child labor by adopting sustainable practices. Furthermore, using African indigenous knowledge in international B2B partnerships will promote cultural diversity, which may empower and promote social, economic, and cultural inclusion (SDG 10.2).

Our recommendations highlight that international B2B partnerships can contribute to SDGs in Africa. However, different SDGs can be achieved at different value chain steps (e.g., supply and distribution) and that SDG targets will be different at the pre-formation and post-formation stages. While international B2B partners should also accept responsibility for achieving the SDGs, their ability to effectively

enforce achievements of SDG targets differs in different value chain steps and at the pre-formation stage, but not so much in the post-formation stage, where both partners could effectively push similar SDG goals. International B2B partners must carefully consider which SDGs they may want to focus on while conducting responsible business. We do not expect international B2B partnerships' contributions to the SDGs to be devoid of challenges. Nevertheless, we think the benefits outweigh the costs when engaging in partnerships for societal good.

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