Zaheer, S. 2025. Choosing to Make International Business Scholarship Matter. ***AIB Insights***, 25(5). https://doi.org/10.46697/001c.153839.

Editorial

Choosing to Make International Business Scholarship Matter

Srilata Zaheer[1]

[1] University of Minnesota, USA

Keywords: research relevance, contextualized research, public policy impact, societal impact, knowledge dissemination

https://doi.org/10.46697/001c.153839

AIB Insights

Vol. 25, Issue 5, 2025

Making international business (IB) scholarship matter is a deliberate choice, and one that requires us as scholars to be problem-driven, multidisciplinary, societally responsive, and grounded in context. Drawing on insights from four impact panels at AIB 2025 in Louisville, this essay provides guidance on how IB research can meaningfully influence business schools, managerial practice, public policy, and society. It also emphasizes that IB scholars must learn to disseminate their work in ways that create resonance beyond academia, ensuring that our insights reach the stakeholders who can use them.

International business as a field emerged from a simple but powerful ambition, to help scholars and practitioners understand why and how firms operate across borders. Today's rapidly shifting global environment compels us to revisit that aspiration and ask, honestly, whether our scholarship still matters, and to whom. As globalization becomes increasingly contested and its consequences less certain, IB scholars face renewed pressure to demonstrate relevance not only within academia but also to practitioners, policymakers, and to society at large. This paper, drawing on insights from four "impact panels" at AIB 2025 in Louisville, considers how our field can reclaim its legacy of engaged, context-rich, and problem-driven research, and how we as scholars can make the intentional choices required to ensure that IB scholarship truly matters.

A FIELD AT AN INFLECTION POINT

At a time marked by geopolitical fragmentation, trade wars, technological disruption, climate anxiety, and growing skepticism about globalization, the work of international business (IB) scholars has never been more consequential. Yet paradoxically, as the global environment becomes more complex and international challenges become ubiquitous, IB scholarship risks becoming less visible, less integrated into policy and practice, and less central within business schools. The question of how to ensure that IB scholarship matters framed the 2025 AIB Conference in Louisville. For me, as someone who has been part of AIB for more than three decades, the energy and urgency of our discussions there reflected a collective yearning to reconnect the field with its original purpose of producing work that illuminates real-world phenomena in ways that practitioners, policymakers, and society can use.

The four Louisville "impact" panels each addressed a different dimension of this challenge: the role of IB research in business schools, in managerial practice, in public policy, and in society. Their discussions revealed that fulfilling our field's potential is not a structural inevitability but a *matter of deliberate scholarly intention*. We must consciously decide how to rethink our mission, reshape our methods, and re-engage with the world we study. We also have to learn to disseminate our work in ways that create resonance beyond academia, ensuring that our insights reach the stakeholders who can actually use them.

IB RESEARCH THAT MATTERS FOR BUSINESS SCHOOLS: A SENSE OF PLACE

The panel featuring deans from the University of St. Gallen, Brigham Young University, and Hang Seng University underscored that the relevance of IB research is fundamentally shaped by *place*. Each dean emphasized that impactful scholarship emerges when researchers engage deeply with the distinctive economic, cultural, and institutional contexts surrounding their business schools. At St. Gallen, IB research attains relevance through close ties to Swiss industries and the broader European ecosystem. At BYU Marriott, research gains meaning when aligned with the institution's global-service mission, encouraging faculty and students to work with under-resourced communities in ways that influence both practice and scholarship. At Hang Seng University, applied IB research that strengthens Hong Kong's links to the world is viewed as particularly valuable.

The panel also highlighted examples where local embeddedness produces global insight. At the University of Minnesota's Carlson School, for instance, the Twin Cities' unique ecosystem of multinational headquarters has created fertile ground for influential work such as Myles Shaver's (2018) research on the local talent pools that sustain global firms.

Across these perspectives, a consistent thread emerged. IB scholarship that matters is not an abstract intellectual exercise detached from place. Rather, it flourishes when scholars intentionally engage with the problems and opportunities that matter to their immediate communities, while situating those insights within the broader international context. Business schools benefit when IB scholars take an "outward-in" approach, beginning with local challenges shaped by global forces, rather than the traditional "inward-out" approach of much international business research, focused on distant host-country issues that may matter little to the communities around them.

Relevance to business schools, the panel made clear, is a choice. It requires scholars to embed themselves in their institutional environments, cultivate relationships with local stakeholders, and pose research questions that both contribute to global theories and are meaningful to those constituents. Most IB scholars, however, are drawn to the field because we want to study the world rather than our own backyard. Yet for the business schools in which most of us work, apart from the rare few that truly see the world as their primary constituency, it is the local context that matters most.

IB RESEARCH THAT MATTERS FOR PRACTICE: RECLAIMING A LEGACY OF ENGAGEMENT

The second panel chaired by Paula Caligiuri, with contributions from David Collings, Guenter Stahl, and Eleanor Westney, emphasized that IB scholarship has always possessed the potential to influence managerial practice, yet realizing that potential requires intentional engagement. Caligiuri's own body of work exemplifies how rigorous research can remain deeply connected to managerial realities. Her remarks in Louisville highlighted the scrutiny academics now face and the necessity of demonstrating value "outside the academic bubble." For her, practical impact requires deliberate, strategic collaboration with practitioners from the outset of the research process, including co-designing studies, negotiating timelines, and aligning analytical priorities.

Collings' work reminds us that IB scholars confront agency problems and the structural complexities of talent systems within MNEs, issues that make management practice a natural domain for IB insight. Yet he cautions that relevance cannot come at the expense of rigor; rather, rigor and relevance must coexist in research that is both analytically strong and empirically grounded. On the panel, he made the case that the very different timescales and pace of academic research versus corporate decision-making pose a major barrier to engaged scholarship.

Stahl has often urged scholars to expand their empirical horizons by engaging underserved populations such as migrant entrepreneurs and small-scale international businesses. On the panel, he acknowledged one of the barriers that exists to engaged scholarship as the difficulties encountered in getting access to meaningful company data. That depends on long-term relationship-building and trust, which can usually be cultivated only through consulting, advisory work, and immersive student projects.

Westney situated these insights within the historical trajectory of the field. She reminded us that IB's most influential theories emerged from close interaction between practitioners and academics such as Hedlund, Prahalad, Ghoshal, and Bartlett, among others. Understanding how practitioners *actually use research*, she argued, is essential to designing scholarship with the potential for real uptake.

Collectively, the panel underscored that engaged scholarship is part of IB's DNA. However, making scholarship matter for practice is not a default outcome, but has to be a deliberate undertaking. It requires scholars to cultivate partnerships, invest in fieldwork, translate insights in accessible ways, and revive the tradition of co-created inquiry that once defined the field.

IB RESEARCH THAT MATTERS FOR POLICY: SUSTAINABILITY AND INFLUENCE

The panel chaired by Paul Vaaler, with contributions from Jane Nelson and Amelia Santos-Paulino, argued that IB scholarship is indispensable to shaping sustainable development and public policy, yet too often remains absent from policy debates dominated by economists and political analysts. This marginalization is puzzling as IB research focuses precisely on the actors, multinational enterprises, cross-border investors, global supply chains, and public-private partnerships that are central to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

A core theme was again that of scholars making a deliberate choice to do impactful work. Drawing on Van de Ven's (2007) framework for engaged scholarship, the panel emphasized that research can influence policy only when scholars actively place their work before policymakers, development organizations, and civil-society networks. This requires both rigorous empirical evidence and deliberate strategies for dissemination, communication, and relationship-building.

Nelson highlighted a notable gap in existing global guidance frameworks used by executives operating in developing countries. Many of these guides, produced by civil society organizations such as the World Economic Forum, are grounded in the accumulated experience of executives rather than large-sample empirical research. IB scholars, she argued, have an opportunity and a responsibility to provide comparative evidence that identifies which guidelines are generalizable and under what conditions.

Santos-Paulino focused on the declining number of infrastructure Public-Private partnerships (PPPs) in developing countries, especially in power, transport, and telecommunications. She linked this trend to increasing investor reluctance to undertake projects without robust government guarantees or political-risk insurance. Achieving SDG progress in renewable energy depends on mechanisms that enable MNEs to internalize long-term benefits while mitigating risks through insurance instruments provided by organizations such as the World Bank's Multilateral Guarantee Agency (MIGA) or regional development banks.

The panel reinforced that IB research holds a comparative advantage in analyzing the institutional conditions, such as minority state equity stakes, regulatory independence, and contractual safeguards, that shape cross-border investment decisions. For example, studies such as those by James and Vaaler (2018) show that PPPs with minority state equity stakes of roughly 20 to 40 percent can preserve investor autonomy while reducing expropriation risk, thereby strengthening project viability.

In short, the panel concluded that IB scholarship can matter profoundly for public policy, particularly in the domain of sustainability, but only if scholars choose to engage intentionally with policy communities, generate systematic empirical evidence, and articulate clear implications for governance.

IB RESEARCH THAT MATTERS FOR SOCIETY: BROADENING THE FIELD TO ADDRESS GRAND CHALLENGES

The final panel, chaired by Jane Lu with contributions from Gary Knight, Jonathan Doh, and Lorraine Eden, broadened the scope of IB relevance by asking what it means for scholarship to matter to society at large. The panel emphasized that societal impact does not emerge automatically from firm-centered analyses; it requires scholars to choose research questions, methods, and dissemination strategies that address the societal consequences of cross-border business activity explicitly.

Doh argues that IB's traditional performance-oriented focus is too narrow to address societal challenges such as inequality, labor conditions, and community well-being. He called for phenomenon-driven research that situates MNE activity within broader social systems, and for methodological pluralism capable of capturing complex, often unintended effects.

Eden provided a conceptual framework for understanding societal impact, emphasizing that IB scholarship can shape outcomes through multiple channels such as public policy, organizational practices, public awareness, and measurable community improvements. She argues that societal relevance requires interdisciplinary collaboration, multi-level theorizing, and a willingness to embrace equivocal findings when dealing with grand challenges such as climate change, democratic fragility, and sustainable development.

Knight and Lu reinforced the idea that IB scholars must be intentional in addressing the developmental, democratic, and environmental consequences of globalization. The panelists demonstrated that phenomena such as property-rights regimes, crime, environmental degradation, or inequality can be empirically mapped and theorized using tools already familiar to IB researchers, provided that scholars set out to deliberately broaden their research questions.

This panel's message was clear as well: making IB scholarship matter for society is a choice. It requires scholars to expand the boundaries of the field, develop new competencies in documenting and measuring societal effects, and communicate findings in ways that resonate beyond academic audiences.

HOW DO WE MAKE IB SCHOLARSHIP MATTER?

Making international business scholarship matter is, at its core, a matter of deliberate intention. As the Louisville panels collectively demonstrate, relevance does not arise automatically just from the accumulation of research; it emerges when scholars choose to orient their work toward the world's most pressing problems and toward the constituencies, whether it is business schools, practitioners, policymakers, or society at large, that depend on their informed insight. To do so requires rethinking our mission, reshaping our methods, and re-engaging with the institutional and cultural contexts in which international business unfolds.

The business-school panel reminded us that relevance begins with context. Scholars who embed themselves in local ecosystems can generate insights that resonate globally if they choose to look outside-in. The managerial-practice panel showed that rigorous research influences organizations only when scholars actively cultivate relationships with firms, co-develop questions, and translate findings in ways managers can use. The public-policy panel revealed a parallel imperative, that IB research can materially shape sustainable development and investment governance, but only when scholars bring comparative evidence into the policy arena, where decisions are often made without systematic IB input. Finally, the societal-impact panel pushed the field outward, urging scholars to address the human consequences of globalization and address global challenges such as inequality, climate change, and the fragility of democracy, through phenomenon-driven inquiry, methodological pluralism, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

While some of these lessons may appear to pull in different directions, especially on whether we should begin with local or global challenges, they ultimately converge on a couple of central ideas. Most importantly, making IB scholarship matter is a choice, and it is *our* choice. That choice requires us to be problem-driven and to place the world's grand challenges at the heart of our research. It calls on us to embrace the multidisciplinary roots of our field, to engage more deeply with practitioners and policymakers, to respond to societal needs by integrating ethical and developmental concerns into our work, and to ground our insights in the lived realities of the communities around us. It also requires that we learn to disseminate our research beyond academia, ensuring that our insights reach the stakeholders who can genuinely use them.

The responsibility to make IB scholarship matter does not rest on our shoulders solely in our role as scholars. All of us who have the privilege of serving as editors, deans, and members of promotion committees must also choose to value such work and create the space, incentives, and time needed for it to flourish. In the end, relevance will not simply happen. It will happen only if we collectively decide to make it happen.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper was written with inputs from the chairs of the impact panels presented at AIB 2025 in Louisville, and I am deeply grateful to Paula Caligiuri, Paul Vaaler and Jane Lu for their help. Any errors in interpretation or recollection of the discussions on the panels are entirely mine.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Srilata (Sri) Zaheer is Professor and Elmer L. Andersen Chair in Global Corporate Social Responsibility at the Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota. Her research focuses on international strategy, technology, and sustainability. She is Past Chair of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis and serves on the AIB Executive Committee. An AOM Eminent Scholar, she is also an Area Editor at *JIBS* and was Program Chair for the 2025 AIB conference in Louisville.

Published: December 18, 2025 EST.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0 and legal code at http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode for more information.

REFERENCES

James, B. E., & Vaaler, P. M. 2018. Minority rules: Credible state ownership and investment risk around the world. ***Organization Science***, 29(4): 653–677.

Shaver, J. M. 2018. ***Headquarters economy: Managers, mobility, and migration***. Oxford University Press.

Van de Ven, A. H. 2007. ***Engaged scholarship: A guide for organizational and social research***. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199226290.001.0001.