



The social responsibility of international business: From ethics and the environment to CSR and sustainable development



Ans Kolk*

University of Amsterdam Business School, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the international business (IB) literature has addressed social responsibility issues in the past 50 years, highlighting key developments and implications from a historical perspective. Specific attention is paid to the Journal of World Business (JWB), which has covered the whole period and published relevant articles related to these issues, in comparison to the Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS), the other long-standing IB journal. The article outlines that they illustrate different conceptualizations of IB and social responsibility. The 50-year review shows three subthemes: the (green) environment; ethics, rights and responsibilities; poverty and (sustainable) development. These are discussed consecutively, including main contributions and promising areas to further the field.

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1. Introduction

Over the years, growing attention has been paid to the ethical, environmental and social dimensions of business, most often under the corporate social responsibility (CSR) heading. Much of the early literature aimed to specify the concept and the various components of CSR, as it emerged in the second half of the 20th century (see Carroll, 1999; Dahlsrud, 2008; Kolk, 2010a; Mintzberg, 1983; Whetten, Rands, & Godfrey, 2002; Zenisek, 1979). Interestingly, the field of international business (IB), which took off in the same period (Wright, 1970), as demonstrated especially in the launch of the Journal of World Business (JWB)¹ in 1965 and the Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS) in 1970, gave it a somewhat different turn than the generic management literature. Most notable has been the attempt to move beyond the traditional US focus, as the editorial introduction to a 1978 JWB double special issue on 'Business and the social order' put it, for example. While emphasizing that "the topic itself is hardly new", McNulty and Cheeks (1978, pp. 4–5) noted that "Much of the discussion concerning corporate social responsibility has focused on business in the United States, but it is increasingly clear that managers around the world are being faced with new

problems resulting from societal changes". Accordingly, Gladwin and Walter (1976), in the first article published on the topic in JIBS, came up with an analytical framework for multinational social responsiveness that they used to illustrate pollution control issues of US and European multinational enterprises (MNEs).

At the same time, and despite the fact that CSR was characterized as not really novel, the international business (IB) literature has overall not widely reflected this interest. As shown by Kolk and Van Tulder (2010), only a small share of the articles published in the main IB journals in the 1990–2008 period addressed CSR or sustainable development. Publications referring to CSR increased in the 2000s (especially in JIBS), but this did not apply to sustainable development – despite JWB's consistent interest, most prominently already in the early 1990s, when it was the only main IB journal with articles on both topics. Egri and Ralston (2008), who included many more journals and keywords in their overview (ethics, environment, governance), but with a shorter time frame (1998–2008), also found limited mainstreaming outside of special issues; ethics received twice as many hits as CSR and environment. The lack of interest in environmental issues in leading management journals, especially outside the US setting, was confirmed by Holtbrügge and Dögl (2012): the main IB outlets had only a few in the 1997–2010 period (JIBS two, JWB four, of which three in 2010). Doh and Luca (2013), finally, who evaluated the occurrence of non-market research in business and management journals in 2001–2011, included main IB outlets. From their overview per outlet, one can conclude that authors included the CSR keyword in 10 articles published in JIBS in these 11 years, and in 8 JWB articles (sustainability appeared 1 and 9 times respectively).

* Correspondence to: University of Amsterdam Business School, Plantage Muidergracht 12, 1018 TV Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

E-mail address: akolk@uva.nl

¹ In the period 1965–1996, the journal was called Columbia Journal of World Business, but JWB (not CJWB) will be used in this article throughout.

Although revealing as such, and illustrating the “embryonic” nature of the literature on CSR and MNEs, as observed by [Rodriguez, Siegel, Hillman, and Eden \(2006\)](#) in the introduction to a JIBS special issue on politics, corruption and CSR, keyword searches for specific periods have limitations in providing insight into the evolution of interest in the broader realm of social responsibility considerations. The overviews only covered parts of the 1990s/2000s, not earlier years. Perhaps more importantly, authors may have examined the role of international business in society without using the CSR label or another particular search term defined post hoc. To help address this gap, this article discusses the evolution from the 1960s onwards, not focused on counting number of occurrences of particular keywords and related articles, but instead on highlighting the overall trajectory of environmental, social and ethical concerns in international business and of MNEs’ consideration of their sustainable development impacts broadly defined. Given that JWB was found to publish on these topics regularly from 1990 onwards and has been in existence since 1965, I will particularly examine some of its contents using illustrative articles, also from the first 25 years in comparison to JIBS. This may help to put claims that topics are new, of growing concern, or increasingly complex (cf. [Doh & Lucea, 2013](#); [Holtbrügge & Dögl, 2012](#)) into the right historical context, by taking a somewhat longer-term perspective. Three subthemes are discussed in more detail – the environment; ethics, rights and responsibilities; poverty and sustainable development – considering main contributions and promising areas to further the field. First, however, conceptualizations of IB and of social responsibility will be briefly examined, to explain the understanding that will guide the article.

2. IB and social responsibility: conceptualizations

2.1. *The (corporate) social responsibility notion*

There are many different views on what social responsibility entails, as I indicated in an earlier piece resulting from a keynote speech ([Kolk, 2010a](#)): definitions abound, no clear consensus regarding the exact meaning, while various new/related (sub)-concepts have been emerging as well. Although the number of CSR conceptualizations has decreased somewhat over the years, also with an eye to operationalization for quantitative studies, Votaw’s 1973 characterization still seems valid: “The term [social responsibility] is a brilliant one: it means something, but not always the same thing, to everybody. To some it conveys the idea of legal responsibility or liability; to others, it means socially responsible behavior in an ethical sense; to still others, the meaning transmitted is that of ‘responsible for’ in a causal mode; many simply equate it with a charitable contribution; some take it to mean socially conscious; many of those who embrace it most fervently see it as a mere synonym for ‘legitimacy’, in the context of ‘belonging’ or being proper or valid; a few see it as a sort of fiduciary duty imposing higher standards of behavior on the businessmen than on citizens at large.” (quoted in [Carroll, 1999](#), p. 280).

As mentioned in [Kolk \(2010a\)](#), a possible distinction can be made between those definitions that perceive CSR to consist of activities to advance a social cause beyond compliance (e.g. [Portney, 2008](#); [Rodriguez et al., 2006](#)), and those that do not focus so much on the voluntary nature beyond the law but rather, more broadly, as managing a firm in such a way that it can be “economically profitable, law abiding, ethical and socially supportive” ([Carroll, 1999](#), p. 286). Especially the first approach hinges upon delineating legal obligations, with CSR beginning where the law ends. While this may seem a clear-cut definition, problems emerge when one considers that most firms operate in a large

number of different contexts with widely varying legal rules and norms (cf. [Brammer, Jackson, & Matten, 2012](#)), something that also applies to levels of implementation and enforcement. It is also the case that firms are often fined, or that they do not fully conform with legal requirements without being punished for that, so even meeting the law is not standard for all. Moreover, recent years have seen the adoption of laws for CSR in some jurisdictions (cf. [Osuji & Obibuaku, 2014](#)). Therefore, the ‘beyond compliance’ criterion does not reflect the realities of international business very well; and even ‘law abiding’ poses difficulties across borders. What multinationals do face, however, especially if they are large, visible and active in countries with different norms and standards than their home country, is the growing pressure to account for social, environmental and ethical problems occurring in various locations of operations.

Societal expectations vis-à-vis business have increased more generally, as part of ‘blurring boundaries’ between the roles of public and private actors. This trend has sometimes been directly linked to the debate on CSR or to other notions such as sustainability, the triple bottom line, sustainable development, corporate citizenship or human rights. It should be noted that the various concepts involve partly distinct debates, with concomitant traditions, foci and framings; sometimes attention for certain topics can be traced back to particular streams of literature. For example, a body of knowledge on environmental management (and organizations and the environment) has laid the foundations for understanding ‘the greening of business’, and so have business ethics and business and society (or ‘social issues in management’ in terms of the Academy of Management) with regard to CSR and corporate citizenship; and development studies in relation to sustainable development. These literatures have also drawn attention to the importance of stakeholders, in addition to the more traditional concern for shareholder value expressed in corporate governance approaches.² Although the different concepts continue to coexist, a certain convergence can be seen, looking at contents of the discussion, the terminology used and the tendency to cover the whole range of issues (e.g. [Devinney, Schwabach, & Williams, 2013](#); [Kang & Moon, 2012](#)). An illustrative example is corporate accountability and non-financial disclosure, adopted by many multinationals under a variety of headings, such as sustainability, CSR and corporate citizenship reports, in a stand-alone format, or included in the annual financial report ([Kolk, 2010b](#)).

Thus, building on the practices as they have emerged, it seems best to approach social responsibility from the perspective of the issues, whether regulated or not, and pressures, from whatever origin and regardless of the specific label or concept, with which MNEs are confronted (cf. [Kolk, 2010c](#)). The generic term is thus used here to cover environmental issues such as climate change, pollution and resource depletion, and the social and ethical dimensions of MNEs’ activities – inside and outside the firm, often in connection with communities and workers. It resonates in broader societal repercussions and expectations from regulators and other stakeholders, also regarding the need to (help) promote economic development of underprivileged groups and individuals, which MNEs face in their activities across borders in particular. They can choose to deal with the range of issues in a reactive, or pro-active/pre-emptive manner, and address them in their strategies, governance structures and/or organizational processes one way or the other, which in the end may affect firm survival and performance on the various dimensions. Such an approach fits the more current, normative drive of IB, as expressed by [Collinson, Doz, Kostova, Liesch, and Roth \(2013, p. 8\)](#) in their proposed domain statement for the Academy of International Business (AIB), “to

² Corporate governance will not be examined in more detail here as it is the subject of another article in this issue (by Ruth Aguilera).

improve the performance of internationally active firms and other institutions, and the well-being of people affected by their activities” (see further Section 2.2).

The broad notion of social responsibility as adopted here does not distinguish between ‘market’ and ‘non-market’, since there seems no theoretical justification as to why strategizing in these two realms would be different. As [Devinney \(2013, p. 199\)](#) put it, “markets exist everywhere and in many different forms” if there are “trade-offs among wants and needs”, and “currencies” can be monetary and/or nonmonetary. Interestingly, while the non-market term is often referred back to [Baron \(1995\)](#) (e.g. [Devinney, 2013](#); [Doh & Lucea, 2013](#)), the early JIBS article mentioned in the introduction, by [Gladwin and Walter \(1976, p. 57\)](#), already used the term to explain the complexity faced by MNEs: “Bribery, product safety, occupational health, environmental protection, worker participation, minority employment, inappropriate technology, urban blight, political influence, false advertising, expatriate management, and social dislocation are a few of the many social and political issues today facing business enterprise. Perhaps never before has the scope of corporate accountability been extending so rapidly, and the struggle to maintain social legitimacy in the private sector so difficult. Dealing with such non-market issues in a reasonably coherent national setting is one thing – dealing with them in a multinational setting is another matter altogether. Expectations with regard to any given social issue differ widely in intensity, substance, and durability, both between countries and over time.” In addition to introducing the non-market notion early, this quote neatly sketches a range of issues and their relevance to IB at that point in time.

2.2. The realm of international/world business

Interestingly, JWB had positioned itself even broader when it was launched a decade earlier, with an ambitious goal placed in the overall societal context at the time. Its first official issue of the first volume contained “notes from the editor” that reflected on the role of business in promoting world peace, two decades after the creation of the United Nations. [Brown \(1966, p. 6\)](#) explicitly linked this to expanding world markets, trade and for-profit activities by firms operating outside their home countries: “There has developed a vast interwoven network of reciprocal interests, of open communications for exchange of technology and commercial intelligence, of personnel and cultural patterns – yes, even of new friendships and loyalties that cut across national boundaries (...). The multinational company thereby becomes a major vehicle to carry the have-nots toward ‘take-off’ and the haves into frontier fields. As such it is an unmatched force for peace.” He continued by outlining the complexities for the “multinational executive” in learning how to manage a worldwide firm in view of social and political conditions, histories and traditions, obviously areas for concern for JWB. The different approach embodied in ‘world business’, compared to ‘IB’, came to the fore in the type of articles and their topics published in the two journals respectively, and was most visible in the first 25 years.

Despite containing the quoted JIBS article by Gladwin and Walter in 1976, JIBS delineated its domain rather differently than JWB in this early period. An initial definition of IB as reproduced in the inaugural issue of JIBS ([Wright, 1970](#), pp. 110–111) clearly mentioned key topics that it included and excluded, respectively: “First, it is concerned with firm-level business activity that crosses national boundaries or is conducted in a location other than the firm’s home country (...). Second, it is concerned in some way with the interrelationships between the operations of the business firm and international or foreign environments in which the firm operates. Our definition excludes studies devoted to economic development, foreign trade, and the international monetary

system, which belong to development and international economics. Excluded also are studies of foreign legal, political, economic, and social environments. These, it was felt, belong to the fields of law, political science, economics, and behavioral science unless the study itself relates the environment directly to the organizational, operational, or decision-making problems of international business firms.” It reported a Delphi process involving 30 experts that had eventually resulted in 32 promising research areas. Only one related to social responsibility broadly conceived, i.e., “the impact of MNF [multinational firm] activities on world economic and social development”; on the initial longlist of 92 topics, three others could be found (adaptation to ethical standards abroad; conflict resolution in union-management relations; and changing needs of developing economies).

In a reflection on the first 25 years of JIBS, [Wright and Ricks](#) looked back at a quarter century of IB research, reproducing the contents of the inaugural article in terms of the definition and the Delphi results. They also mentioned emerging areas for research, one of which included the greening of business: “This concern for the environment serves as a new, unifying theme for the study of international business, which will no doubt continue to deepen and grow in importance” ([Wright & Ricks, 1994](#), p. 699). By then (and except for [Gladwin & Walter, 1976](#)) no JIBS papers had been published that focused on green issues, rather different from JWB, as will be discussed in the next section. The initial JIBS positioning appears to have contributed to the relatively limited role of the issue in the field of international business, despite JWB’s interest, which early on launched themes that still have relevance today. However, there have been changes since, as indicated in Section 1, concurrent with a broadening more generally and the explicit opening up to other disciplines, especially in the past decade, thus dissolving a possible distinction between ‘world’ and ‘international’ business. JIBS editors have recently noted the need for interdisciplinary research in relation to a focus on “issues” (cf. [Cantwell & Brannen, 2011](#)), and a proposed AIB domain statement referred to “real-world phenomena, problems, and puzzles that arise from, or relate to, the activities of firms and other organizations that cross national borders or are undertaken in more than one country, and the economic, social, and political consequences of these activities” ([Collinson et al., 2013](#), p. 7; cf. [Meyer, 2013](#)).

3. IB and social responsibility: developments and themes

There are many ways in which the key themes and developments in the IB literature might be discussed, as both researchers and practitioners have come up with a large variety of classifications and terms (see Section 2.1). Academic and managerial agendas are to some extent influenced by policy debates, which have become very vibrant recently: the UN is moving from the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals; the OECD started with well-being indices; and the 21st Century Grand Challenges were launched by the US President Obama (cf. [Colquit & George, 2011](#)). These initiatives add to existing, ongoing measurements, usually at the country level, which have also identified key issues and subcategories, resulting in concomitant ‘scores’. Examples include the Sustainable Society Index and, focused on one continent, the Ibrahim Index of African Governance. Business associations seem to be most involved in the discussions at the UN level, as reflected in the ‘post-2015 business engagement architecture’, leading to an issue area priorities framework published by the Global Compact, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI). Like earlier major UN activities, such as the Development Decade (1960s), the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE), the 1992 Conference on Environment and

Development (UNCED in Rio de Janeiro), the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD, Johannesburg) and the series of climate conferences, they have affected MNEs, and shaped their discourses, although not necessarily their activities and impacts. Policy debates from the 1960s onwards have very often reflected societal concerns. Awareness was especially raised by negative environmental and social ‘by-effects’ of industrialization and international production, as felt by populations and highlighted by major accidents and protest campaigns (see Table 1 for some key historical examples).

What is most important here is how this broader context has influenced research on IB thus far and what future directions may be. I will discuss topics as they have emerged from my reading of articles published, and that may link to promising areas for further study. Some examples are given in each category as illustrations of either very time-bound, historical work or aspects that continue to be relevant but have been underexposed in IB research, and where broader references will be included. Interestingly, environmental issues have received most attention over the 50-year period, most likely induced by policy interest and the fact that they cover both the internal management dimensions and external, societal pressures with which MNEs are confronted in the various contexts where they operate. From a current IB research perspective, JWB has sometimes been agenda-setting topic-wise, aptly reflecting the history of IB and containing valuable elements deserving revival in a contemporary shape. Concurrently, however, the more essay-type, reflective pieces, sometimes written by practitioners, in the first period of the journal, do not seem to fit anymore in the current setting. In addition, some of the published articles, particularly in special issues in the last two decades, were rather generic on a topic (such as sustainability or social entrepreneurship), shedding light on phenomena relevant for business but not so much for IB as conceptualized in Section 2.2. This clearly shows from the environment, discussed next, as it has been covered most extensively, in the last decade often under the sustainability heading.

3.1. The (green) environment

In line with the overall policy and societal interest, a relatively large portion of the (overall limited) research has focused on

Table 1
Key historical incidents and developments.

Year(s)	Incidents and events
1950s	Effects of decades of mercury dumping in Minamata Bay (Japan) by Chisso Corporation start to transpire
1961	UN general assembly announces first development decade
1962	US publication of ‘Silent Spring’ book, targeting pesticides, especially DDT, and the chemical industry
1969	Union Oil Company oil spill in Santa Barbara (US)
1972	Publication of ‘Limits to growth’ report by Club of Rome (group of managers, scientists and policy-makers)
1976	ICMESA factory dioxin leak in Seveso (Italy)
1978	Amoco Cadiz oil spill (France)
1979	Nuclear plant accident, Three Mile Island, in Harrisburg (US)
1980s	Soil and river pollution scandals in many countries
1984	Union Carbide factory incident in Bhopal (India)
1986	Nuclear reactor explosion, Chernobyl (Ukraine, then part of Soviet Union)
1986	Sandoz factory Rhine pollution (Switzerland)
1987	Publication of ‘Our Common Future’ (Brundtland report) (UN-convened group of politicians and scientists)
Late 1980s	Growing number of child labor and sweatshop scandals involving apparel and footwear companies
Late 1980s	Mounting public awareness of global environmental issues (global warming, deforestation, ozone layer)
1989	Exxon Valdez oil spill, Alaska (US)

pollution from production, resource extraction and product use; and firms’ responses in terms of the broad range of environmental management practices and their interactions with regulators and other stakeholders. Early JWB papers under this heading, in the 1970s, were generic reflections or essays, sometimes written by managers and/or policy-makers, which characterized the journal more generally in the first part of its existence. A 1972 special issue paid attention to the UNCHE and the implications for policies, societies, economies and sometimes business, with authors including the conference chair, Maurice Strong. Most specific to MNEs was an article on the need for new environmental strategies, asking “three key questions” (Welles, 1973, p. 11): (1) “How can the ‘environmental dimension’ be injected effectively into the management of multinational corporations?”; (2) “Should multinationals take advantage of ‘pollution havens’ in developing countries?”; (3) “What can multinationals do to stimulate more uniformity in the ways by which nations control pollution?”. Besides helping start the debate on pollution havens (cf. Leonard & Duerksen, 1980), the questions touch upon topics that continue to be relevant today, not just in terms of the more applied nature but also from an empirical, research perspective. Standard divergence, policy harmonization, level-playing fields and arbitrage are important to MNEs (e.g. Ghemawat, 2007; Kolk & Pinkse, 2008; Regnér & Edman, 2014; Verbeke, 2009). They deserve further investigation in relation to environmental and social issues more generally, for which some recent CSR studies concerning MNE home-host settings may be helpful (Campbell, Eden, & Miller, 2012; Surroca, Tribó, & Zahra, 2013) if properly extended to developing countries (see also Section 3.3).

More relatively early agenda-setting came to the fore in JWB’s attention to the environment in the period surrounding UNCED, which took place two decades after UNCHE. Noteworthy was first an article entitled “Global climate change. The challenge to American industry”, as it helped launch the issue in a broader setting with the following key message: “The world as a whole accepts the existence of global warming. The United States does not. By sitting idly by, the US stands to lose out in the race to develop new pollution control technology that will be badly needed, especially in the Third World” (Westin, 1992, p. 76). Climate change has been explored further in IB from business risk and strategic management perspectives (e.g. Kolk & Pinkse, 2008, 2012; Romilly, 2007), but there are still many questions concerning the actual influence on competitiveness and MNE interactions in their home, host and international contexts (Pinkse & Kolk, 2012). Especially such an issue subject to political contestation and with a high impact on firms and economies – a peculiarity extending to renewable energy and fossil fuel use more generally nowadays – could help shed light on broader IB concepts. Examples include institutional failures, liabilities (of origin, foreignness and multinationality, cf. Denk, Kaufmann, & Roesch, 2012; Ramachandran & Pant, 2010), global/regional/local firm-specific advantages and strategies (Kolk, 2010c; Kolk, Lindeque, & Van den Buuse, 2014a; Poisson-de Haro & Bitektine, 2015; Narula & Verbeke, 2015) and their potential transferability across borders (cf. Holtbrügge & Dögl, 2012; Verbeke, 2009). Given that the technological ‘frontier’ currently extends to emerging economies (e.g. Chinese investments in solar and wind), beyond the US and Japan as in Westin’s piece, and energy is characterized by (partial/former) state ownership in many countries, the whole range of MNE types might be included (cf. Bruton, Ahlstrom, Stan, Peng, & Xu, 2015; Cuervo-Cazurra, Inkpen, Musacchio, & Ramaswamy, 2014). The ‘energy transition’ as phenomenon also lends itself to interesting though complex interdisciplinary studies. These seem current research avenues building on this early JWB article.

Second, a double special issue on corporate environmentalism in Fall/Winter 1992 stood out. It contained 30 articles on a range of topics, many of which being studied up to now (see the list included in Table 2 for illustration). In an editor's note a year before publication, Erdmann (1991, p. 4) characterized the special issue as "shaping up to be not only an editorial success, but also a commercial one", and as "innovative and proactive". The introduction itself

mentioned that "we find ourselves in the midst of a paradigm shift", that a "transition from one world view to another is inherently difficult", with the articles helping "come to grips with the many facets of this pivotal business challenge" (Kaufman & Ferguson, 1992, p. 10). Looking at the special issue from today's perspective, most articles are relatively generic and introductory in nature, and quite some are written by practitioners, especially from business.

Table 2
Articles in 1992 JWB double special issue (nos. 3/4) on corporate environmentalism.

Article title	Brief indication of contents	Author(s)	Background
UNCED, environmentalism and beyond	Essay on role of actors, especially firms	F. Cairncross	Journalist
The business logic of sustainable development	Piece recounting the Business Council for Sustainable Development's history	S. Schmidheiny	CEO and chair of (W)BCSD
Business, science and environmental politics.	Reflections on four myths that guide policy-making, and the role of science and business	J.A. Baden, R. Ethier	Foundation for Economics & Environment
Toward a political economy of hope	Examples of financial instruments as powerful tools for environmental policy	G. Chichilnisky	Professor, consultant
Market innovation and the global environment			
Capital markets and sustainable development	Plea for a transformation of capital markets and valuation methods to enable incorporation of sustainability	J. Rada, A. Trisoglio	Vice-president DEC, business policy advisor
Behind the diplomatic curtain. Inner workings of the new global negotiations	Insider views on UNCED negotiations by a chair at the Rio conference	R.E. Benedick	WWF, career diplomat
New corporate roles in global environmental treaty-making	Plea for new coordinated treaty-making process with an active business role	L.E. Suskind	Professor
Environmental protection and the GATT. A business view	Suggestions by the trade policy director of US Council for International Business	J.G. Gavin III	Business trade policy officer
Draft-horse, not dragon. Observations on trade and the environment	Reflections on how to reconcile GATT with sound environmental policy	C.F. Sills	Environmental foundation
The corporation as non-government organization	Reflections on the changing role of business and its NGO-like behaviors	R.W. Fri	Resources for the Future
Japan's policy for sustainable development	Brief explanation of Japanese policies, placed in the broader context	S. Fukukawa	Vice-president Kobe Steel
The shape of the EC and sustainable development. An interview with Carlo Ripa di Meana	Interview with former EC Environmental Commissioner, proponent of tax on energy and carbon emissions	P.B. Erdmann, J.M. Ferguson, C. Kaufman	On behalf of the JWB
The European Environmental Agency in the context of the European Community environmental policy	Explanation by the head of the European Environmental Agency Taskforce of its role within EC policy	P. Bourdeau	European Community officer
The German packaging order. A model for state-induced waste avoidance?	Discussion of the (European) cross-border impact of this national policy	H.W. Micklitz	Professor
Environmental taxes and US competitiveness	Essay on the economic and political trade-offs of environmental taxes	R. Repetto	WRI research
Implementing the Montreal Protocol to restore the ozone layer	Discussion of cost and benefits of ozone layer protection, and of (best) responses	M. Munasinghe, K. King	World Bank
Environmental technology cooperation. A quid pro quo for transnational corporations and developing countries	Discussion of environmental and societal pressures and the role of MNEs in programs in developing countries	W.F. Wescott II	Arthur D. Little, environmental management
Sustainable development vs global environment. Resolving the conflict	Plea to allow temporary emission increase to enable technology catch-up	S.F. Singer	Geophysicist, policymaker
The energy dimensions of sustainable development	Discussion of complexities of reducing carbon emissions during growth	N.E. Duncan	CEO energy consultancy
Energy management in Eastern Europe and the former USSR	Discussion of scope of environmental problems and economic opportunities	W.K. Foell	CEO resources consultancy
The environment and the need for new technology, empowerment and ethical values	Short piece with reflections on the economic system and its challenges and the required new role for technology	R. Saemann	Board member of companies/associations
Environmentally friendly development. Can the private sector succeed where others have failed?	Short piece with examples of how the private sector can help while acting in their self-interest	A.G. Marcil	CEO, World Environment Center
Strategy and the environment	Short article on strategic considerations with illustrations from chemical firms	S. Barrett	Assistant professor
Managing in the environmental era. Lessons from environmental leaders	Results from survey on environmental management amongst senior executives	J.C. Newman, K.M. Breden	Booz Allen & Hamilton
Rethinking corporate environmental management	Discussion of various business reasons for mainstreaming the environment	J.L. Greeno, S.N. Robinson	Arthur D. Little, HSE
Corporate environmental communications. Lessons from investors	Results from focus group discussions amongst different types of investors	A. Mastrandonas, P.T. Strife	Consultant, manager
Achieving sustainable communication	Key features and five specific steps	E.B. Harrison	Consultant
Environmental option assessment	Explanation of methodological approach of new life-cycle management tool	P. Winsemius, W. Hahn	Consultants at McKinsey
Marketing green products in the Triad	Overview of government policies, green consumerism, marketing and advertising	F.L. Simon	Consultant & adjunct professor
The challenge of sustainable development. Kodak's response	Short article on Kodak's environmental strategies and their economic benefits	R. Poduska, R. Forbes, M. Bober	Eastman Kodak HSE managers

Examples include the founder and then chair of the Business Council for Sustainable Development (now WBCSD) Stephan Schmidheiny; two directors of Arthur D. Little; three Kodak managers; later, in 1993, the CEO of Nestlé, Helmut Maucher, wrote a piece on industry and the environment (“views from an industrialist”). An interesting contribution came from the president from Resources for the Future at the time, who speculated on the company as NGO, as business became increasingly vocal in international conferences and started to pro-actively undertake activities to further environmental change (Fri, 1992). While this framing of firms as NGOs has not been pursued, the importance of the reverse perspective has, i.e. to study NGOs within the field of IB, both as crucial actors influencing MNEs and as “multinational organizations in their own right” (Doh & Lucea, 2013, p. 187). A recent empirical JWB example of the former is Kourula (2010), Fee and Gray (2013) illustrate the latter for a development volunteering organization.

Almost 25 years after the conception of this special issue, the environment has received wide research interest (for a recent overview see Hoffman & Georg, 2013), as also reflected in JWB where it represents the most studied stream with the social responsibility realm as defined in this article. As a result, there is substantial insight into drivers, manifestations, tools, outcomes and influencing (f)actors for environmental management and sustainability approaches of firms; an observation that also holds for the CSR theme more generally (see Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007; Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). No doubt, many more studies can still be done to fine-tune for specific and less-covered countries, subsidiaries and firm types. However, a key question regarding management systems, standards, reporting and other voluntary or regulation/stakeholder-induced practices, is how all of this is truly different for MNEs. Hence, rather than adding more

comparative studies (where the ‘so what’ question really needs to be asked) or undertaking just incremental modifications to already established insights, a crucial criterion before starting new research is how it matters for IB theorization, or helps to shed light on new phenomena along the lines discussed in the preceding paragraphs or those below.

3.2. Ethics, rights and responsibilities

Another early double special issue focused on business and the social order, following a similar approach in terms of author types and article set-up, with the aim to provide “a multidimensional analysis to the growing body of literature on the social role and responsibilities of business” (McNulty & Cheeks, 1978, p. 5). It covered a wide range of topics, from more philosophical and moral treatises to consumerism, unionism, employing the ‘disadvantaged’ and international business philanthropy as serving the national interest (see Table 3). Some of the contents reflected specific preoccupations of that time (cf. Table 1) while others signaled themes that have recurred one way or another in later years, or largely disappeared from the radar without fully obvious reasons. For example, codes of conduct/ethics have continued to play a role over the years, though in different forms: from those drawn up by international organizations, to business associations, individual firms, NGOs and finally multi-stakeholder groupings, which emerged last (Fransen & Kolk, 2007; Langlois & Schlegelmilch, 1990; Singh, Carasco, Svensson, Wood, & Callaghan, 2005; Van Tulder & Kolk, 2001). The interactions between and functions of such standards, framed as voluntary or self-regulation, or even as the privatization of regulation in relation to the political role of firms (e.g. Crane, Matten, & Moon, 2004; cf. Scherer & Palazzo, 2011), have

Table 3
Articles in 1978 JWB special issue (no. 4) on business and the social order.

Article title	Brief indication of contents	Author(s)	Background
Egalitarianism and market systems	Reprint of main address at dinner lecture on Business & Society and the role of institutions	H.M. Williams	SEC Chairman
Efficiency, equity and equality of result: What should business be doing?	Essay to explain and provide a framework on efficiency, equity and equality concepts as input for managers and actions for public affairs	M. Olasky	Public Affairs writer at Du Pont Company
Capitalism and democracy: Some unifying principles	Reprint of main address at dinner lecture on Business & Society re governments and markets	A.M. Okun	Senior fellow Brookings
Managerial responses to social change in Western Europe	Discussion on how managers have responded to pincers pressure of workers and governments	N.W. Chamberlain	Professor
Corporate allegiances to the local society	Reflections on ‘dual allegiance’ of (US) MNEs to corporate profit goals and local/national interests	G.W. Sawyer	CEO consultancy & associate professor
Can international philanthropy serve the national interest?	Discussion of business interest in philanthropy programs in the US and foreign countries	R. Eels	Corporate philanthropy expert
To whom and for what are business managers responsible?	Essay on possible answers, relevant issues and the interests of the various actors involved	J.W. Kuhn	Professor
Private sector efforts to employ the disadvantaged: The second round	Discussion of the potential for business to help improve employment opportunities for the disadvantaged unemployed	B.E. Anderson	Social Research at Rockefeller Foundation
A diversity theory of urban development: Policy implications for business and government	Essay on urban diversity (urban growth and urban decline theories) and implications for business, public policy and research	R.D. Horton	Associate professor & policy-maker
Business and consumerism: Emerging patterns of partnership	Essay on possibilities for business, consumers and government to collaborate to solve mutual problems (‘make consumerism work’)	C. Haney	President consumer issue advisory firm
The impact of unionism on American business: Evidence for an assessment	Analysis of unionization trends, unions’ wage and non-wage impacts, non-union bargaining spillovers and accountability implications	D. Lewin	Associate professor & consultant
Codetermination – The West German experiment at a new stage	Discussion of origins and implications of the 1976 German codetermination law	H. Neuberger	Assistant professor
The socio-economic environment and international union aspirations	Reflections on the complexities of managing human resources in the context of strong union demands for worker protection in Europe	R.L. Rowan	Professor
The public side of private enterprise: A historical perspective on American business and government	Essay on the historical roots of corporate social responsibility in American history and the increasingly public nature of business	P.J. McNulty	Professor

been addressed in different special issues (e.g. [Ahrne, Brunsson, & Hallström, 1997](#); [Brunsson, Rasche, & Seidl, 2012](#); [Gilbert, Rasche, & Waddock, 2011](#)), but not so often from an IB perspective (the one edited by [Sethi, 2005](#), is an exception).

It is notable that initial JWB interest in trade unions and managing 'industrial relations' ([McElrath, 1988](#); [Rowan & Campbell, 1983](#)) appears to have declined, despite ongoing contestation as to labor costs and working conditions, especially in the context of outsourcing and offshoring in international value chains (cf. [Schmeisser, 2013](#)) and employee-related CSR (e.g. [Young & Makhija, 2014](#)). NGOs and developed-country government agencies rather than trade unions seem to play an organized role in current regulation and norm-setting regarding (underage) worker rights and standard compliance, with a more dispersed influence of MNEs as corporate customers vis-à-vis their suppliers. Labor and other human rights continue to be highly relevant (e.g. [Cragg, Arnold, & Muchlinski, 2012](#); [Dawkins, 2012](#)) in relation to MNEs' trade and investment decisions ([Giuliani & Macchi, 2014](#)). This debate has most recently been fueled by negotiations on international agreements; in the recent TTIP campaigns even the implications for the UN sustainable development goals³ were raised (see Section 3.3). A potential social 'race to the bottom', comparable to the pollution haven phenomenon (see Section 3.1), needs systematic IB research, as [Meyer \(2004\)](#) already noted a decade ago. A possible 'counter' perspective, regarding payment of a 'living wage' to those at the bottom of the salary scale, deserves attention beyond the UK and US contexts where civil-society pressure has been strongest thus far ([Werner & Lim, 2015](#)).

This also applies to further empirical studies on the ethical dimensions of operating abroad, building on earlier, mostly conceptual work on international, home and host-country norms, the role of a 'market morality' and (remaining) managerial discretion in terms of a 'moral free space' (e.g. [Bowie & Vaaler, 1999](#); [Buller & McEvoy, 1999](#); [Donaldson, 1996](#); [Kolk & Van Tulder, 2004](#)). In this regard, an explicit consideration of the crossvergence stream as it has developed in cross-cultural research on managerial values seems worthwhile (cf. [Doh, Husted, Matten, & Santoro, 2010](#)), especially following [Ralston's \(2008\)](#) suggestion to study work values and behavior in the context of MNE value-chain globalization. His plea for multi-level approaches furthermore resonates with proposed research agendas in recent CSR overview papers ([Aguilera et al., 2007](#); [Aguinis & Glavas, 2012](#)). There is ample opportunity to build on emerging themes that relate to individual, organizational, and country levels. An interesting example is tax, recently approached from an IB perspective for both its 'positive' (responsible tax as CSR issue; [Muller & Kolk, 2015](#)) as 'negative' dimensions (tax evasion as deviant behavior; [Bame-Aldred, Cullen, Martin, & Parboteeah, 2013](#)).

In looking back 50 years, it is interesting to observe that current calls for more attention to micro-foundations ([Aguinis & Glavas, 2012](#)), i.e. the role of individuals in CSR ([Devinney, 2013](#)), have early threads in JWB articles dealing with the question "to whom and for what are business managers responsible?" ([Kuhn, 1978](#)) and a first quantitative cross-cultural vignette study of ethical behaviors of French, German and US managers ([Becker & Fritzsche, 1987](#)). A few years later, senior executives also received more explicit attention. However, that was not in the form of a research article (as in [Schlegelmich & Robertson, 1995](#), in JIBS) but in an interview piece with five US and European CEOs, which put the social role of business and executives in a more global setting than in other articles until then. It introduced the notion of "corporate statesmanship", defined as "a corporate executive who, even as he

or she performs the traditional role of meeting the needs of customers, shareowners, employees, and home communities, takes on the added responsibility to meet the needs of the entire society. A corporate statesman works toward making nations prosper as businesses prosper" ([Bradley & Howells, 1994](#), p. 42). The latter part was placed in relation to efforts to influence regulation, but also explicitly discussed business-government "partnerships", as more often studied since. Remarkably, executives preferred the term 'joint ventures' as they saw partnerships as a legal arrangement involving a merger.

While seemingly a precursor to the corporate citizenship notion, statesmanship focused on the individual MNE executive, a perspective currently receiving less attention than the firm level in this regard. But different from the 'company as NGO' view, which was introduced in another JWB article (as mentioned in Section 3.1) two years earlier but did not gain traction, a potential corporate role as 'quasi-government' is still being discussed in corporate citizenship papers in management and ethics outlets. It indicates that there is research potential in further integrating insights from the business ethics literature into IB (and vice versa, see [Doh et al., 2010](#)) in an interdisciplinary manner, for example, by scholars from business and management with those from law, philosophy, psychology or political science. I will mention a few lines of thinking in recent studies (which unfortunately do not always build on one another) and that seem worthwhile pursuing, also empirically, for MNEs and across countries in particular. First, from a 'quasi-government' perspective, firm's activities can be seen to serve as substitute or compensation for (partly) missing public services, or as supplement ([Aßländer & Curbach, 2014](#)). This is perhaps most obvious in the case of developing countries ([Valente & Crane, 2010](#)), particularly those with substantial institutional voids, in which firms, sometimes in partnership with other non-state actors, take over public tasks to help address large social and human rights problems ([Kolk & Lenfant, 2015a](#)) (see Section 3.3).

Second, and related, firms have been conceptualized as administrators of (some) citizenship rights, in different ways for social, political and civil rights, and for the whole range of stakeholders ([Crane et al., 2004](#)). In this "extended" notion of corporate citizenship, firms thus serve as 'channel' in addition to having their own role, meaning that they are "active in citizenship and exhibit citizenship behaviors" ([Matten & Crane, 2005](#), p. 175). As noted by these authors, it raises many questions as to how that would work out for different rights and across contexts; and for each of the stakeholder categories in their interactions with many firms (and governments); which, in turn, also show large variation in terms of sectorial, organizational and locational characteristics. Noteworthy, a recent article criticized the (extended) corporate citizenship conceptualization for failing to include all relevant rights and responsibilities in an institutionalized manner. Therefore, [Aßländer and Curbach \(2014, p. 546\)](#) added 'corporate citizen' as an even more extensive notion (compared to the more limited 'corporate bourgeois'). Transitioning from 'bourgeois' to 'citizen' was presented as a learning process in which firms would eventually have "subsidiary co-responsibility in public rule-making and service provision" and "co-responsibility to serve the well-being of the community". While the specifics are to be further clarified, this corporate role is not perceived as a voluntary engagement, but as an essentially moral obligation, with rights for other actors.

Rights-based approaches, as also embedded in a 1986 UN development declaration, have received research and policy attention more broadly in recent years, sparked in particular by John Ruggie in his capacity as Special Representative to the UN Secretary General on business and human rights. His 'protect, respect and remedy' framework, endorsed by the UN, outlines states' duties to protect human rights, corporate responsibilities to respect them, and the access to effective remedies in case of

³ For example <<http://newseurope.me/2014/06/11/ttip-contradicts-post-2015-development-goals-experts-say/>> (accessed on 14.01.15).

abuses. While widely supported as a major contribution to reinvigorating the debate, it has also been criticized in ethics journals for, *inter alia*, lacking attention to the moral dimensions (e.g. Arnold, 2010; Osuji & Obibuaku, 2014, and the articles in a BEQ special issue, see Cragg et al., 2012). Wettstein (2012, p. 760), for example, explicated firms' moral obligations to respect, protect and realize human rights, "as requirements beyond voluntariness and moral discretion or the mere prospect of economic gain", in relation to corporate capabilities. This was accompanied by a plea to put human rights central within CSR, as globalization has turned them into key concerns for business in both practical and normative terms. Wettstein also emphasized the need to explicitly consider socio-economic rights; a challenge taken up by Osuji and Obibuaku (2014) in a conceptual exploration of the relationship with CSR and poverty reduction. Bringing all this into the framework of IB, both theoretically and empirically, is a real challenge, however, especially in relation to poverty issues which have been underexposed in research, despite JWB's early interest.

3.3. Poverty and sustainable development

Of the topics discussed thus far, the one that received attention already in the JWB volumes in the late 1960s was poverty and development, broadly defined, including the income gap between rich and poor nations, and the world food problem (with an article entitled "The world of hunger – A management challenge" as case in point). A 1967 "world business forum" piece contained reflections from academics, policy-makers and corporate executives on the "Development decade or disappointment decade?". And as precursor to partnerships for development, Turner (1972) described cases of collaboration between agro-industrial MNEs, UN agencies and local government, in – later often contested – attempts to spread the so-called 'Green Revolution' technologies to developing countries. Noteworthy, the same term, but then in plural, was used again in a 1991 article, as a sign of the times, for an extensive analysis of the environmental problems and surrounding mobilization in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (French, 1991).

Looking at JWB volumes in subsequent decades, the initial interest in poverty and development largely disappeared, with just few exceptions. A 2011 article explored the use of market heap maps for purposes of human development at the base/bottom of the pyramid (BOP), but without embeddedness in IB theories (Acosta, Kim, Melzer, Mendoza, & Thelen, 2009). Other than that, the journal seemed to have missed the research stream on BOP and subsistence markets in the last 15 years, perhaps due to the fact that they were perceived as marketing-related with submissions being referred to the Journal of International Marketing. The impact of MNEs on economic development was examined in a 2009 special issue, although not so much in relation to developing countries and poverty per se (except for Oetzel & Doh, 2009, who discussed the potential of development-oriented partnerships with NGOs), or to related social responsibility dimensions.

More generally, the debate on MNEs and development in IB has tended to mostly focus on economic issues, often spillovers, in relation to foreign direct investment (FDI). As a result, emerging economies rather than least-developed countries have received attention, as the former typically receive the largest amounts of FDI (cf. Ramamurti, 2004). Accordingly, in the meta-analysis by Meyer and Sinani (2009) the developing-country category mostly consisted of studies of current emerging countries and with only a limited spread. Nevertheless, in his JIBS research perspectives paper on emerging economies, Meyer (2004) included MNEs' environmental, social and institutional implications, with Ramamurti (2004) recommending, in a commentary, an extension to developing countries. Obviously some of the insights from

emerging economies may be relevant in other settings; here too, the 'so what' question from adding more and different countries needs to be asked (cf. Section 3.1), considering the distinction between context-specific, context-bound and context-free contributions to management knowledge (Tsui, 2004, 2007). At the same time, building on the discussion above and on recent work, several highly relevant research directions seem possible, and I will give some suggestions below, focused on poverty and sustainable development.

The very topic of this article almost automatically implies a recommendation to broaden the scope beyond merely economic issues. In this respect, and induced by the ongoing international policy debate that involved business and other actors, the redefined notion of sustainable development deserves consideration. The synthesis report of the UN Secretary General on the post-2015 development agenda specifies 17 goals as sequel to the eight Millennium Development Goals and six essential elements to deliver them. Filtered out for the purpose of this paper, key components are a reconceptualized triple P – People, Planet, Prosperity – and, as reflection of the discussions about rights (see Section 3.2) – Dignity and Justice (Partnership is also mentioned in relation to global solidarity but that seems more a mechanism than a goal in itself). These five encompass the environmental, social and economic dimensions at the macro (economy/society) level, while specifically noting objectives to "end poverty", "fight inequalities", and "promote safe and peaceful societies and strong institutions" (UN, 2014, p. 16).

A 'translation' and link to individuals and households may be possible if coupled, for example, with the OECD framework for measuring indicators of well-being and progress, but data is available for a limited number of their member countries thus far.⁴ Sustainable development is highly relevant to IB as conceptualized in Section 2.2 (see also further below), and seems more internationally embedded (cf. UNCTAD, 2014; UNGC, 2013) than, for example, grand challenges originating from US policy concerns, although there is some overlap. The broad sustainable development theme has underlying dimensions, as exemplified by the global multidimensional poverty index. Developed by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Institute (with support from UNDP and used in the Human Development Report),⁵ it addresses *inter alia* education, health, food, water and energy. These specifications do not only point at the value that can be derived from incorporating insights from development economics/studies and policy think tanks, but also at the possibilities for issue-specific fine-tuning for IB research purposes.

Issues have specific characteristics, dynamics and lifecycles, and can vary in relevance across locations, sectors and firms. Likewise standards, policies and stakeholder constellations frequently differ between issues, and so do accompanying regulatory arrangements and firm practices (Fransen, 2013). Some issues may have a negligible or no effect on MNEs' (perceived) liabilities and opportunities; others a more substantial one, although sometimes only in specific situations or geographies (Kolk, 2010c). As illustration, UNGC (2013) prioritized issues, assigning them different degrees of urgency in relation to the potential positive impact of business, while UNCTAD (2014) also considered sector-specific dimensions. Importantly, even between largely comparable firms, there are differences in perceptions and strategies concerning one and the same issue (e.g. Levy & Kolk, 2002, for climate change), or – within one MNE – between locations, business units or issues. An example is Walmart's divergent approach for labor and sustainability, and its awards as best employer in China, deviating from its US reputation (Kolk, 2010c).

⁴ <<http://www.oecd.org/statistics/better-life-initiative.htm>>.

⁵ <<http://www.ophi.org.uk/multidimensional-poverty-index/>>.

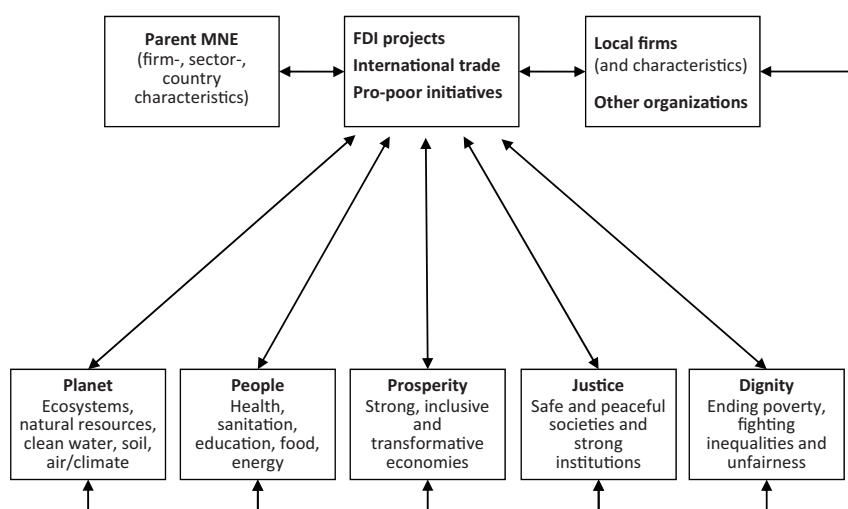


Fig. 1. Preliminary framework for analyzing MNEs 'impact' on sustainable development.

Sources: Inspired by Meyer (2004, p. 261) for the MNE-FDI part; and by UN (2014, pp. 14–16) for the sustainable development boxes.

It illustrates 'being good while being bad', but in the opposite direction as assumed by Strike, Gao, and Bansal (2006) who focused on US MNEs operating 'good' at home and 'bad' abroad. Such analyses can help shed light on the extent to which MNEs learn and transfer experiences across contexts and issues.

The revamped sustainable development notion directs attention to topics that have been underexposed in the IB literature, especially poverty, inequality, peace and conflict, within and across countries, and the accompanying institutions (and their 'voids').⁶ Some IB publications have shed light on components, or parts of relationships. For example, recent IB articles focused on survival of MNE subsidiaries in host-country conflict zones (Dai, Eden, & Beamish, 2013) and factors influencing MNE responses to violent conflict (Oetzel & Getz, 2012). However, there is no systematic insight into their possible roles in furthering peace and/or conflict, or specific interactions in such fragile settings. In that sense, the peace agenda set by the JWB editor at its launch 50 years ago is still unfinished. Moreover, and very current, MNEs do business in an international context characterized by more dispersed forms of (extremist, sectarian, separatist) violence by groups and individuals, sometimes related to 'failed' states and lawlessness, and mirroring geopolitical tensions as they have grown since 9/11. As to poverty, 'fortune at the BOP', with the poor mostly seen as potential consumers, has predominated in the few, mostly conceptual, IB pieces (although actual MNE BOP evidence has been rather limited, Kolk, Rivera-Santos, & Rufin, 2014) to the detriment of other types of relationships and influences that appear more relevant from a sustainable development perspective.

In this respect, it is important to underline the need to not only consider MNE involvement via FDI, but also via trade and 'pro-poor', merely social responsibility induced initiatives, which are frequently but not always interrelated. As noted above, IB literature has mostly focused on FDI, but that is less relevant for poor regions, where MNEs may be involved rather via international trade, sometimes as precursor to further business development at a later stage, or pro-poor activities. To the extent that there have

been studies, they have often examined the environmental, ethical and social implications of MNE investment, and only to some extent trade. However, it is also important to pay specific attention to other activities, labeled here as pro-poor, increasingly undertaken by MNEs, individually or via partnerships, usually on a much smaller scale. In some cases they take place in so-called 'subsistence marketplaces', where poor people face serious resource constraints for day-to-day living, although there is also ample local (micro-)entrepreneurship. These phenomena have been documented in a substantial stream of marketing publications (e.g. Kolk & Lenfant, 2015b; Viswanathan & Sridharan, 2009), and have included IB-related topics, such as institutional settings and voids, and MNE activities to help address them (e.g. Kolk, 2014; Rivera-Santos, Rufin, & Kolk, 2012). As the IB literature has tended to prefer topics more directly related to firms' performance, profit or their own immediate economic survival, and grounded in substantive datasets, research on these rather incremental, piecemeal 'pro-poor' MNE activities has found its way to outlets in other fields.

However, given the importance of these 'real-world phenomena', the calls to IB to help address them, and the potential for interdisciplinary work, it seems time to explicitly widen the scope to the whole range of poverty-related interactions. Opening IB to not only include FDI, but also trade and 'pro-poor' initiatives avoids attempts to somewhat artificially link poverty to a business case (selling to the poor as in the BOP) or present non-core activities as (potentially) commercially attractive, even though aims are different. It would take the various types of activities, including partnerships, as separate objects of study, turning the extent to which they are or may become connected to FDI and/or trade into a question for investigation in its own right. These extensions may represent further ways in which IB scholars can contribute to a better understanding of sustainable development, and specifically poverty (see Fig. 1 for a preliminary partial framework, building on Meyer, 2004; UN, 2014). Conversely, insights from poverty-related articles published in non-IB outlets may provide building blocks for IB. A recent example is Parmigiani and Rivera-Santos (2015), who analyzed MNEs' BOP initiatives from a supply-chain view (resources/raw materials, production, distribution, marketing/sales), in relation to five types of institutional voids (product, labor and capital market, contracting and regulatory ones) in the respective locations. Their conceptual specification of MNE strategies on both dimensions may help fine-tune insights from

⁶ Attention for inequality has increased in recent years, with several special issues (calls include those for Organization Studies, Journal of Management Studies and Business & Society; an earlier one for Human Relations has recently become available, see Bapuji, 2015). Although not specifically targeting IB, let alone in relation to least-developed countries or poverty, some of their contributions may provide inspiration for further research relevant to this field.

an IB perspective, including more precise assessments of interactions with institutions, degrees of collaboration with other firms and stakeholders, interlinkages between pro-poor initiatives and trade/FDI activities, and firm-specific drivers and outcomes.

4. Conclusions

This article examined how IB literature has addressed social responsibility issues in the past 50 years, highlighting key developments and implications from a historical perspective. Counts from earlier reviews that covered the most two recent decades (1990s and/or 2000s) (Doh & Lucea, 2013; Egri & Ralston, 2008; Holtbrügge & Dögl, 2012; Kolk & Van Tulder, 2010), indicated limited mainstreaming, with only a small share of articles published on CSR and related key words within IB. As these papers had limitations in using particular search terms only and in time periods, this article discussed the longer-term evolution of environmental, social and ethical concerns in IB and of MNEs' sustainable development impacts broadly defined, as reflected in the key journals. It paid specific attention to the *Journal of World Business*, which has existed this whole 50-year period, and published articles on these dimensions of doing business in different policy settings from the very beginning. The *Journal of International Business Studies*, the other long-standing journal, demonstrated a different perspective of the field when it started in 1970. The divergent approach embodied in 'world business' compared to 'IB' came to the fore in types of articles and topics in the two journals, particularly in the first 25 years.

In a sense, and as discussed in Section 2 of this article, these two aptly illustrate different conceptualizations of IB and social responsibility, resulting in divergent levels of attention early on. *JWB* rather reflected the societal and policy debates, for example, through special issues related to the 1972 and 1992 UN environmental conferences (Tables 1 and 2). It also published reflections by practitioners, both managers and policy-makers, with article types that do not fit the current style of academic (research) journals any longer (exemplified in Table 3, but also still visible in most of the articles in the 1992 special issue in Table 2). More recent volumes in the last decade, particularly special issues, have addressed themes such as sustainability and social entrepreneurship but often in a generic way, without direct relevance for IB. Interestingly, the peace concern that appeared to have inspired the creation of *JWB*, looking at the first editor notes, has not been followed up in the journal in a prominent way, and is not noticeable in this day and age. Although there is thus ample room for further research on MNEs and social responsibility that builds on and contributes to the IB field, surveying the overall trajectory did not lead to a confirmation of the "embryonic" label (as used by Rodriguez et al., 2006) per se, as much more was found than via key word searches.

The quasi-historical review focused on three themes, in decreasing order of attention in *JWB*: the environment; ethics, rights and responsibilities; poverty and sustainable development. A closer look at topics and contents illustrated that some pieces were rather time-bound (and often policy-/practice-oriented), while others contained ideas that continue to be interesting. Examples include the income gap between rich and poor countries, the 'company as NGO' and corporate statesmanship, aspects pursued to different degrees in subsequent years. Moreover, the 'pollution haven' debate, which started very early, still deserves proper investigation in the current context with empirical data from least-developed countries and regions facing different degrees of institutional voids. This also applies to the comparable 'race to the bottom' in relation to social standards, including labor, socio-economic and other human rights. Despite some early interest, poverty and development have been underexplored,

except for the economic dimensions of foreign direct investment, usually studied for emerging economies. Here, a broadening to the social and environmental implications as well as the role of trade and so-called pro-poor initiatives by MNEs in least-developed countries seems worthwhile and timely (see Fig. 1).

Section 3 proposes promising areas for future research, but also mentions topics that seem to have received quite some attention already, and where the 'so what' question really needs to be asked before adding incremental modifications or largely comparable studies (though in sometimes different contexts). The article suggests to focus on specific issues, reaching out to other (sub)disciplines where appropriate, for which concrete examples are given, especially building on the sustainable development notion as it has evolved in the context of the post-2015 international policy agenda. Key components, under the broad headings of People, Planet, Prosperity, Dignity and Justice, lend themselves well for delivering on the, thus far largely unfulfilled, promise of interdisciplinary research on phenomena highly relevant for international firms (and other organizations) in ways that directly relate to insights from IB and can lead to new theoretical work (cf. Cantwell & Brannen, 2011; Meyer, 2013). Fig. 1 provides a preliminary framework to help guide further innovative studies in this regard, in which especially themes under the justice, dignity and people stand out, as indicated in the article.

While perceptions of IB and its domain differ, this article's interpretation of 'what matters most', and that explicitly brings dimensions of human 'well-being' into the study of MNEs, might help address part of the 'quo vadis' for the field as a whole. One caveat worth mentioning regarding such research thrusts, however, concerns the availability and the possibilities for collection of evidence for empirical studies. On the positive side, the amount of country-level data has increased substantially in the past few years. This is likely to expand further following renewed attention from international organizations in the framework of the sustainable development goals (e.g. UN, 2014, pp. 29–30) and considering activities already underway at, for example, the OECD (see Section 3). At the same time, obtaining issue-specific data for firms, especially in least-developed, fragile settings will remain a challenge. Steps forward might be made if the field and its journals would allow more incremental, piecemeal and unconventional work (e.g. Franssen, 2013; Kriauciunas, Parmigiani, & Rivera-Santos, 2011; Rivera-Santos, Holt, Littlewood, & Kolk, 2015). This would be part of a somewhat braver approach allowing for experimentation and innovation, to some extent resonating calls from other disciplines (e.g. Hopwood, 2007; Wilkie & Moore, 2012; cf. Doh & Lucea, 2013).

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