

Rethinking the Conceptualization of Corporate Social Responsibility in an African Context: A Research Note

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Abstract
The overall objective of this paper is to provide clarity in the understanding of the CSR concept in an African context. This conceptual paper seeks to provide some ideas about the reasons why business firms have taken up the challenge of CSR in the African context. This article adopts a conceptual approach in analysing the current debates about CSR and its linkage with the distinctive interpretations and definitions of CSR in African countries as well as a 'political' role of business firms in the communities in which they operate. The findings suggest that firm-society relationships would be beneficial for the continent in terms of provision of public goods that have previously been the sole prerogative of government. The distinctive interpretations and definitions of CSR in different African countries (or African communities) hint at the need to provide an important insight into 'context-issues' in the body of CSR research focused on the African context. The findings suggest that, within the context of an African country and/or an African community, unless we explore, in some depth, we will be unable to understand the distinctive interpretations and definitions that underpin the conceptualization of CSR. This paper provides a contribution to the CSR literature as it improves our understanding of the conceptualization of CSR in the African context. A major contribution of this paper is that we propose a framework, identifying a constellation of factors shaping a business firm's CSR decisions in the African context. Our framework can guide empirical research into various CSR issues areas, and thereby, stimulate corporate engagement with the public good in an African context.
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1. Introduction

There is less clarity about what corporate social responsibility (CSR) actually means. This is because apart from some notable definitions, the field of CSR research has been hampered by the lack of a consistent definition and the operationalization and measurement of the concept (see Dahlsrud, 2008; McWilliams *et al*., 2006; Rodriguez *et al*., 2006). This is perhaps to be expected in a field that is still "embryonic" (McWilliams *et al*., 2006). This lack of consistency in *the* definitional construct of CSR is worrying, given that its operationalization and measurement necessitates that clarity is brought to bear on *the* definitional construct of CSR. Most importantly, several allied and/or competing concepts, such as 'corporate citizenship', 'corporate social responsiveness', 'corporate sustainability', 'social and environmental accounting', 'corporate social performance', 'stakeholder management', 'philanthropy' and the 'triple bottom line', are also linked to the role of business in society (or firm-society relationships). In essence, these allied and/or competing concepts leave the construct of CSR in a more confused state, and thus, even more elusive to operationalize and measure in a specific context.

Notwithstanding an apparent confusion in *the* definitional construct of CSR, CSR is deemed to be a rapidly developing business strategy in response to globalization and the extension of multinational companies' (MNCs') activities across countries, as pointed out by Williams and Aguilera (2008). In this regard, Rodriguez *et al*. (2006) argue that it is the large MNCs that are highly socially visible that are increasingly expected to contribute to CSR in the countries in which they operate. To this end, CSR has become the most widespread lens to theorize the role of business in society in the prior literature. In general terms, business firms' socially responsible behaviours that the prior literature has explored include most social issues (e.g., embodying products with social attributes that support social responsibility, etc), environmental issues (e.g., re-cycling, abating pollution, etc.), stakeholder issues (e.g., supporting local businesses, etc.), ethical and human rights issues (e.g., adopting progressive human resource management programmes, etc.) (see McWilliams & Siegel, 2001, p. 117). One would argue that, such a diverse thematic perspective leaves *the* concept of CSR in a more confused state, and thus, even more elusive to operationalize and measure in a specific context. This problem is an old one. Over 40 years ago, Votaw (1973, p. 11) underscored this point when he wrote:

"the term [CSR] is a brilliant one; it means something, but not always the same thing, to everybody".

In spite of the vast range of allied and/or competing concepts and definitions that have emerged, a general consensus in the prior literature points to some distinctive features that have evolved, namely, the beyond-compliance, triple bottom-line, voluntary and stakeholder orientation of the concept (Dahlsrud, 2008). The challenge, however, is that consensus becomes far less clear once CSR is operationalized in a specific context, such as the African context. Additionally, the role of business firms in society is a frequently debated topic among academics and practitioners. Still, knowledge is lacking in terms of how societal expectations and firm-society relationships combine to shape business firms' (or private firms') engagement in CSR activities in the African context. Moreover, while business firm-society relationships have gone global, research has rarely expanded beyond North America and Europe. To address these shortcomings and improve our understanding of the conceptualization of CSR in the African context, this conceptual paper seeks to provide some ideas about the reasons why business firms have taken up the challenge of CSR in the African context. The overall objective of this paper is to provide clarity in the understanding of the CSR concept in an African context.

Through CSR activities, business firms are considered agent of change and strategic partners for the development of Africa. Specifically, CSR and other concepts, such as 'political' CSR (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011) and 'implicit and explicit' CSR (Matten & Moon, 2008) appear relevant in an African context particularly as vehicles for government development objectives, private sectors and market development objectives and inclusive development. Additionally, we note that the involvement of multiple stakeholders in the development of CSR initiatives show respect for local (social) norms and cultural differences, which is crucial for successful implementation of CSR initiatives by business firms (Amaeshi *et al*., 2006).

The balance of this paper is organized as follows: The Section 2 provides a detailed overview of the institutional determinants of CSR that the prior literature has adopted to improve our understanding of the CSR concept in the African context. Following this, Section 3 examines Carroll's work on the four-part model of CSR, which is considered the most longstanding and broadly accepted definition of CSR from an academic perspective. Section 4 then examines the contextual interpretations and definitions of CSR in the African context. Section 5 provides a brief overview of political CSR as a new paradigm regarding the role of business in society. Section 6 provides discussion and conclusion.

2. Institutional determinants of CSR in an African context

The question of why business firms (or private firms) act in socially responsible ways in different institutional environments has long attracted the attention of 'business and society' scholars (Campbell, 2006, Scott, 2001; Marquis *et al*., 2007). Institutional theory and the concept of *institutions* (or institutional isomorphism) has been a helpful theoretical lens for understanding the effects of the institutional environment on organisations' socially responsible behaviours (Campbell, 2007, Marquis *et al*., 2007; Matten & Moon, 2008; Scott, 2001). Institutional theory suggests an "interplay between corporations and their communities that focuses, forms, and directs social change efforts" (Marquis *et al*., 2007, p. 942-3). From an institutional theory perspective, Marquis *et al*. (2007) suggests that economists' arguments, such as the extent of competition and financial performance, are insufficient to fully account for organisations' CSR behaviours.

The institutional environments in which business firm operate comprise *institutions*, that is, regulation, culture, and social norms, which constraint and/or enable actors' interactions in a governance system. Campbell (2006, p. 926), defines institutions as "formal rules and taken-for-granted cultural frameworks, cognitive schema, and routinized processes of reproduction; and assumes that actors are motivated more by a logic of appropriateness whereby action is constrained and enabled by cultural frames, schema and routines". In this regard, different societal actors, such as business firms influence and are influenced by the regulations, institutional norms, and social values in the institutional environments in which they operate. This adoption (or isomorphism) to existing rules and structures is described as 'institutional' because it is derived from the concept of institutionalisation, that is, "the social process by which individuals come to accept a shared definition of social reality", and it largely reflects the "way things are" and the "way things are to be done" (Scott, 1987, p. 496).

Campbell (2007) and Matten and Moon (2008), explain that the institutional determinants for socially responsible corporate behaviour include: public-private, that is, industrial self-governance regulation; organized dialogues amongst business firms and their stakeholders; the presence of private, independent organizations that monitor organizations' CSR behaviours and associative behaviour amongst business firms themselves. These institutional determinants affect the adoption and practice of CSR and can promote (or temper) organizations' CSR behaviours. The following section will provide an overview of academic work on 'institutions', with particular emphasis on the prior literature focused on Scott's (2001) three 'elements' of institutions – regulatory, normative and cognitive – to illustrate how institutions can promote (or temper) the nature and level of socially responsible corporate behaviours in Africa.

2.1 Regulative (legal) systems. Scott (2001, p. 35) explains that "regulative processes involve the capacity to establish rules, inspect or review others' conformity to them, and, as necessary, manipulate sanctions – rewards or punishments – in an attempt to influence future behaviours". To this end, industries establish 'soft' regulations for their members to voluntarily comply, while the nation-state establishes 'hard' regulations which serve as a source of coercive mechanism (or isomorphism) for the adoption and practice of socially responsible corporate behaviours (Campbell, 2007; Marquis *et al*., 2007). In terms of the 'global south', Matten and Moon (2008, p. 418) posit that because these countries are "often characterized by weak institutions and poor governance", they tend to "delegate responsibility to private actors", such as business firms (or private firms). Muthuri and Gilbert (2011, p. 469) lament that governments of developing-countries are often accused of either not enacting or relaxing regulations which act as a source of coercive mechanism (or isomorphism) for the adoption and practice of CSR as an inducement for foreign investment. The authors cast doubt on the capacity of governments of developing-countries and industry associations to monitor behaviours and enforce regulations, arguing that these institutions do not always enforce regulations effectively. To these, Campbell (2007, p. 954) observes that, in some cases, business firms "may not only resist the imposition of regulations" but may also "seek to control or otherwise capture regulators in ways that bend them toward the will of the corporations they are supposed to oversee". Moreover, uncertain regulatory frameworks and inefficient legal systems may promote (or temper) interpretations and compliance with regulations (Marquis *et al*., 2007; Muthuri & Gilbert, 2011). We can thus expect the different regulatory systems in Africa to lead to varying degrees of compliance in terms of socially responsible behaviours by business firms.

2.2 Normative (social) elements. Normative 'elements' of institutions are the social norms and values that define the 'rules of the game', that is, "what is *right* to do around here" (Marquis *et al*., 2007, p. 934). Campbell (2006) explains that the normative frameworks set the standards for, and encourage conformity to, socially responsible corporate behaviours. Following this perspective, business firms assume social role-expectations, that is, acting as 'good corporate citizens', in order to "foster greater levels of corporate social action", and to remain socially relevant to the community in which they operate (Marquis *et al*. 2007, p. 937). Normative values are set by social actors, such as NGOs, educational and professional associations and the media. These actors ensure that CSR behaviours are consistent with existing normative frameworks by exerting pressure on business firms to conform to social norms and also influence the adoption of practices that are "deemed appropriate by other managers and significant actors in their environment" (Campbell, 2007, p. 958; Matten & Moon, 2008). Although legitimacy and professional power is often assigned by the nation-state, it can be expected that such institutionalized norms may affect the extent to which business firms (or private firms) operate in socially responsible ways. To this end, Campbell (2007, p. 962) posits that business firms are likely to act in socially responsible ways when they operate in "a normative institutional environment that encourages socially responsible behaviour". In an empirical study, Muthuri and Gilbert (2011, p. 479), show that some business firms that operate in Kenya "engage in more embedded forms of CSR as a strategic response to normative […] pressures". We can thus expect business firms that operate in African countries to respond to normative expectations as well as industry pressures that are embedded in the social context in which they operate.

2.3 Cognitive (cultural) elements. Cognitive 'elements' of institutions include cultural values that define the shared (or common) beliefs about what is deemed to be responsible (or appropriate) corporate behaviour. In essence, cultural cognitive institutional forces seek to give a shared frame of reference, in terms of "how things are done around here" (Marquis *et al*., 2007, p. 934). Here, expectations are that business firms that conform to the established cognitive frameworks exhibit behaviours that are culturally acceptable in the institutional environment in which they operate. In this regard, DiMaggio and Powell (1983, p. 151) explain that organizations that face uncertainty will most likely "import" institutionalized rules, processes and practices. To them, such organizations tend to model themselves on the "best in class" or industry leaders that are perceived to be more legitimate and successful. From an institutional theory perspective, Matten and Moon (2008, p. 412), argue that isomorphism of CSR may occur when organizations mimic 'best practice' in their organizational field […] in order to learn and develop best CSR practice". In this way, isomorphism of CSR may also occur as a result of pressures exerted on business firms to adopt codes of conducts and group-wide policies and principles. In an empirical study, Maignan and Ralston (2002, p. 512) show that firms originating from different countries, in an attempt to exhibit their distinctiveness, identify with "a variety of principles, processes, and stakeholder issues to demonstrate their commitment to CSR". We can thus expect that business firms (or private firms) that operate in Africa countries will most likely "copy" and/or import institutionalized CSR principles, processes and stakeholder issues from both the host-country environment and their parent-company in order to remain socially relevant in an African context.

3. Carroll's (1979, 1991) four-part model of CSR

It was in the United States in the early 1950s that the role of business in society became quite apparent. Howard Bowen's book, Social Responsibilities of the Businessman (1953), defined the social responsibilities of 'businessmen' as their obligation to "pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and value of our society" (Bowen, 1953, p. 6). Subsequently, Carroll (1999), argues that this definition of CSR proposed by Bowen in 1953 could be considered a major contribution to the ever-broadening debate on the CSR construct, and the expected CSR activities of business. In the following, Carroll characterized the apparently confused state in which *the* definitional construct of CSR is situated:

"an eclectic field with loose boundaries, multiple memberships, and differing training/perspectives; broadly rather than focused, multidisciplinary; wide breadth; brings in a wider range of literature; and interdisciplinary" (Carroll, 1994, p. 14).

Carroll proposed a definition of CSR that was embedded in the 'Four-Part Model of CSR', which could be considered the most longstanding and broadly accepted definition of CSR from an academic perspective as follows:

"the social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time" (Carroll, 1979, p. 500).

This definition was, however, expanded in his later publications (Carroll, 1991; Carroll & Buchholtz, 2002). Most importantly, Carroll (1991) regards CSR as a multi-layered concept, which consists of four interrelated aspects – economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities. These different responsibilities thus constitute consecutive layers within a pyramid model of CSR, such that 'overall' social responsibility requires that the firm fulfils all four levels of responsibilities consecutively. In essence, Carroll (1991, p. 42) suggests that all four dimensions of responsibility are morally integrated to the extent that moral managers are expected to behave differently in every dimension of responsibility. This four-part model of CSR is shown in Figure 1.

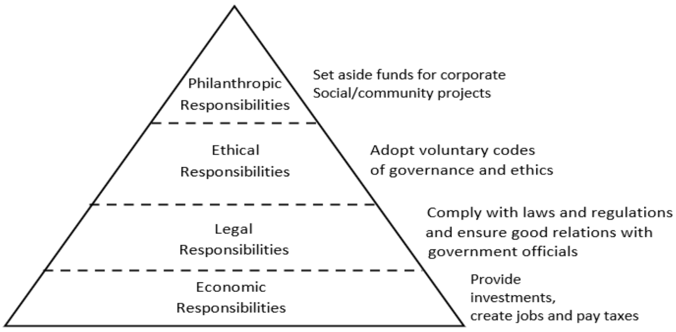

Figure 1: The Four-Part Model of Corporate Social Responsibility (Carroll, 1991, p. 42)

In a later publication, Carroll (1999) asserts that the CSR literature developed considerably in the 1960s, and that most of *the* definitional literature on CSR was developed during that period. However, in the 1970s, definitions of CSR began to proliferate in the literature. Most importantly, the emerging definitions of CSR in themselves became synonymous with allied and/or competing CSR concepts, such as 'corporate social responsiveness' and 'corporate social performance' that had attracted the attention of the research community at the time. Carroll (1999, p. 291) views the 1980s as a period that saw the development of fewer original definitions of CSR, to the extent that, "attempts to measure and conduct research on CSR, and alternative thematic frameworks" was the focus of the research community at the time. Moreover, Carroll (1999, p. 292), observes that the 1990s saw a continuation of a trend that began earlier to operationalize the construct of CSR and to articulate other allied and/or competing concepts, which seem consistent with CSR but, "that took alternative emphases". Carroll (1999, p. 292) concludes that as the 1990s come to a close, it is expected that, in the years ahead, the construct of CSR will remain an essential part of business culture, and hence, the need that CSR is "continually consistent with what the public expects of the business community". In essence, Carroll (1999, p. 292) anticipates that future researchers may consider it appropriate to "revise and adapt existing definitions of CSR or new definitions may come into the literature" that could address and capture the "most important concerns of the public regarding business and society relationships".

3.1 Carroll's (1979, 1991) four-part model of CSR: summary and reflections

Following Carroll's (1979, 1991) arguments in his four-part model of CSR, it is clear that he sought to structure the various social responsibilities expected of business firms in such a way that the 'foremost' responsibilities, which is to make profit and comply with laws and regulations, remain paramount if the business firm is to survive, that is, continue to do business. However, because society is built on different cultures and sub-cultures, it makes sense to expect that different societies may assign different relative importance to the various dimensions of responsibilities, as suggested by Visser (2006). In a review article that sought to bring clarity to his 1979, 1991 model, Carroll (2016, p. 6) argues that his four-part model of CSR is to be understood from the lens of stakeholder theory, and that "the focus is on the whole and not the different parts"; suggesting, therefore, that the model "holds that firms should engage in decisions, actions, policies and practices that simultaneously fulfil the four component parts". In this regard, and furthermore, Carroll (2016, p. 6) believes that the model "should not be interpreted to mean that businesses are expected to fulfil their social responsibilities in some sequential, hierarchical, fashion, starting at the base". Along these lines, Crane and Matten (2004, p. 44) observe that the model fails to "adequately address the problem of what should happen when two or more responsibilities are in conflict?". Thus, it is easy to see why, for example, the fulfillment of one category of responsibility, that is, economic responsibility (that business firms should be profitable) would lead to the problem that the public will have a sense of expectation that business firms will "give back", that is, philanthropic responsibility (that business firms should be good 'corporate citizens'), and this constitutes what is "expected or desired" of business firms by society.

4. Contextual interpretations and definitions of CSR in Africa

Given that the *social responsibilities of business firms* are determined by negotiated roles and expectations that organizations construct and adopt in relation to other actors, it is imperative that local actors experience contestations related to the social responsibilities of business firms in different geo-political contexts in Africa. This has meant that conceptions of what social responsibilities are, and who 'bears' that responsibility will vary based on broad societal demands in different regions and even within regions in Africa. Idemudia (2011, p. 1), for instance, argues that social responsibilities are 'highly contextualized', and laments that the mainstream CSR literature has been "largely driven by the concerns and priorities of western countries", and thereby, pay less attention to prioritized (social) issues in an African context. The existence of allied and/or competing conceptions of CSR and also conceptions that capture CSR from the multi-stakeholder perspective is well established in the prior literature (for an overview of CSR definitions, see Dahlsrud, 2008). This pattern has affected the content of CSR, as there has been some flexibility in terms of the range of activities that could be said to be CSR in nature. From this perspective and consistent with McWilliams and Siegel (2011), this article sees social responsibilities as being in flux, and essentially aiming at some wider societal good in an African context.

Moreover, some scholars are of the view that the specific context matters because CSR is rooted in local needs and expectations (Amaeshi & Idemudia, 2015; Visser, 2006; Hamann *et al*., 2005), and it is also a product of historical and cultural (societal) factors (Kolk & Rivera-Santos, 2018; Idemudia, 2011; Idemudia & Ite, 2006). It seems that the African context makes a difference because it is a continent noted for low levels of development, environmental degradation, high unemployment rates and poverty, which presents business firms with the dilemma of how to prioritize their 'overall' social responsibilities. In a review article that sought to improve our understanding of the extent to which Africa-focused research has helped to develop context-specific knowledge; Kolk and Rivera-Santos (2018) show that "scholars especially turn to Africa when they need to study phenomena that are specific, albeit most often not unique, to the continent" (p. 423). The authors corroborate Visser's (2006) findings and explain that this trend is "likely to reflect these scholars' particular interest in poverty alleviation, stakeholder relations, or environmental issues, all prevalent in the African context" (424).

This paper argues that CSR in the African context is specifically definable once we take into consideration the distinctive features of the African country and/or African community in focus in a given research project. This idea also suggests that it is crucial to highlight contextual interpretations (or definitions) of CSR at a more local level within African country and/or African communities. However, regrettably, this is one research stream for which there is relatively limited research; notable exceptions being Kayuni and Tambulasi, 2012; Hinson and Ndhlovu, 2011. These studies relate to the distinctive historical and/or cultural developments of the Malawian context and the South African context in terms of the distinctive interpretations and definitions of CSR; in this case 'Ubuntu' and 'Corporate Social Investment' respectively. The 'Ubuntu' concept, for instance, highlights 'humaneness', 'interconnectedness' and 'concern for others', which are attributes that are extremely relevant once we conceptualize CSR in the Malawian context; rather than Western-oriented business approach to CSR, which is well established in the prior literature. This distinctive interpretation and definition of CSR in the Malawian context prompts Visser *et al's* (2006, p. 12) concerns, namely:

> when do local cultural traditions take precedence over global standards and policies? How far do companies' responsibilities extend in providing public services? […] Do global companies have a right to impose Western ideas of ethics on African societies that have their own, often different, set of values?

Most importantly, Kolk and Rivera-Santos's (2018) work on social entrepreneurship in Africa points, in particular, to four dimensions that are particularly prevalent on the continent: two are social contextual dimensions, namely, poverty and informality, and two are historical and/or political contextual dimensions, namely, tribal identity and colonization (p. 427). The authors posit that the four dimensions can be expected to influence business and society in Africa; stressing that the African context seem particularly appropriate for business and society-related research, and that this pattern may influence business and society in Africa beyond traditional CSR research (p. 427). Moreover, the authors show that the link between the distinctive features of Africa as a context and the topic researched seems to be a major determinant of the choice of Africa as empirical setting, which contrast with other settings, such as North America and Europe.

In the next section, we explore the relative priorities of the dimensions of the four-part model of CSR in the African context.

4.1 Applying the four-part model of CSR in an African context.

4.1.1 Economic responsibilities. In his often-quoted essay, *"The Social Responsibility of Business is to increase its profit"*, Nobel Prize-winning economist, Milton Friedman (1970) sought to emphasize the responsibility of business managers to shareholders who have invested their financial resources in the business. The profit motive has long been established as the primary incentive for entrepreneurship in our society. As the basic economic unit in our society, the principal role of the business firm is to produce goods and services that consumers need and to make an acceptable profit thereon. In fact, this first layer of the 'four-part model' of CSR is the basis for the subsequent three responsibilities (or layers). Accordingly, Carroll (1991, p. 42) regards economic responsibility as "the foundation upon which all others rest". This notion suggests that the pursuit of maximum profits, would be valuable in order to fulfil the subsequent dimensions of responsibility.

Visser (2006) explains that governments and communities in Africa tend to place a high prize on the economic contributions of business firms (or private firms). Visser (2006, p. 31) also observes that the private sector "remains one of the best placed institutions to make a significant contribution towards improving social, economic and environmental conditions in Africa". A prominent actor in the private sector is the large (multinational) companies, which furthermore are envisaged to make contributions that "are most often discussed in terms of CSR". Visser (2006, p. 40) suggests that as poverty, high unemployment and shortage of foreign direct investment are widespread in African countries, it is logical that business firms (or private firms) prioritize their economic responsibilities over the other dimensions of responsibilities. This is crucial in situations when the government is so dependent on a single or fewer business firms for employment, foreign direct investment and tax revenue purposes.

4.1.2 Philanthropic responsibilities. The philanthropic responsibility of business firms comprises those corporate actions that are in response to society's expectations of business firms and also the need for business firms to act as good 'corporate citizens'. Philanthropy thus represents voluntary (or discretionary) contributions of business firms to society and stakeholders, which is generally intended to promote human welfare or goodwill. The word 'Philanthropy', has its roots in the Greek word *'Philanthropia',* which means literally 'kindliness', 'humanity', 'benevolence', 'love to mankind'. The adjective *'Philanthopos'*, in turn, consists of two parts; *'phil'*, which means literally 'loving' and *'anthropos'*, which means literally 'mankind'. *'Philanthropos'* thus means literally 'loving mankind' or 'useful to mankind'. Consistent with this perspective, philanthropic activities, include a business firm that voluntarily contributes financial and non-financial resources to the community in which it operates.

The social issues in management literature (e.g., Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011; Scherer *et al*., 2014) suggests that a business firm will become involved in CSR when the socio-economic needs of the given "societies in which companies operate are so great that philanthropy is an expected norm – it is considered the right thing to do by business" (Visser, 2006, p. 40). Looking to Africa, Visser (2006, p. 40) observes that philanthropic responsibilities seem to attract "an even higher priority" compared with legal responsibilities and ethical responsibilities, "as a manifestation of CSR in Africa". The prior literature suggests that governments and/or communities in Africa tend to prioritize the philanthropic (social) contributions of business firms, which are in line with their developmental aspirations (Amos, 2018a, 2018b; Blowfield & Frynas, 2005; Frynas, 2005). Amos (2018a) explores host-communities' expectations in terms of CSR initiatives of mining firms in Ghana. The author shows that, "while CSR is broadly understood and encompasses six thematic categories in the mining host-communities, there are emphases on philanthropic and environmental responsibilities" (p. 1177).

4.1.3 Legal responsibilities. Business firms have legal responsibilities that enjoin them to abide by the laws and regulations enacted by governments, and thus play by the 'rules of the game' in society. Legal responsibilities are thus viewed as "codified ethics" that dictate society's moral view, which business firms are expected to uphold to ensure "fair operations" in society. The insights provided by legitimacy theory suggest that organizations such as business firms social constructs, and are thus subject to a 'social contract'. A central idea of the 'social contract' between business and society is that business firms can continue to operate (or survive) if they are deemed to be 'legitimate', that is, socially responsible, since they need to obtain 'approval' from their respective societies (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). In this way, every business firm can be expected to possess two licenses in order to operate: i) the legal "license to operate", and ii) the social "license to operate". While the social license to operate requires the business firm to align its practices with the prevailing bounds and norms of the society in which it operates; the legal license to operate, in turn, places an obligation on the business firm to comply with the laws and regulations that are enacted through institutions, such as government departments, and are applicable to the society in which it operates.

The work of Muthuri and Gilbert (2011, p. 469) suggests that the Kenyan government seems reluctant to enforce regulations on businesses for fear that it might discourage domestic investment. Amos (2018b), in turn, shows the government of Ghana has looked up to the private sector for initiatives that could facilitate the adoption and practice CSR, such as the development of 'soft-regulations' by industry associations for voluntary compliance by members. From the South African perspective, Hinson and Ndhlovu (2011, p. 343) make us to understand that "corporate social investment (CSI) has emerged from the specificities of South African historical development", and which has been "driven primarily by legislation and industry charters". Despite the evidence that "government capacity for enforcement remains a serious limitation and reduces the effectiveness of legislation as a driver for CSR", some notable strides have been made to address these deficiencies, and to render legal responsibilities more important "as a driver in the pursuit of CSR" in the African context (Visser, 2006, p. 43).

4.1.4 Ethical responsibilities. Business ethics involves an inquiry into the basis of morality and law in society. Ethics is closely linked to the moral frameworks that provide the basis for choices between 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad', and 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' actions by business firms. The word ethics has its roots in the Greek word *'ethikos'*, which refers to literally the philosophical dimension concerned with character or mores. In Latin, however, *'moralis'* means literally 'moral philosophy'. Harper (2009), states that *'moralis'* is a Latin translation of the Greek word *'ethikos'*. Along these lines, ethics and morality tend to be regarded as synonymous when applied in the context of business firms (Carroll, 1991, p. 44). More specifically, the Latin word '*mos'* (from which *'morality'* is derived) emphasizes a sense of society's expectations of business firms, while the Greek word *'ethos'* (from which *'ethikos'* is derived) emphasizes on individual character. In this regard, ethical responsibilities demand that business firms act in accordance with their norms, standards, expectations or societal values even when they are not required to do so by law. Hence, to fulfil their ethical responsibilities, business firms are expected to show concern for societal members, such as consumers, employees, and the community in which they operate, and to do what is 'right', 'just' and 'fair', or to protect their moral rights; even though such values and norms are not laws that are enacted through institutions.

In South Africa, for instance, concerns for improved corporate governance prompted the development and voluntary adoption of notable corporate governance codes, including the "1992 King Report" and the "2002 King Report" (King II) by business firms in South Africa. These codes of conduct have had a substantial impact on business firms and the role and importance of CSR in South Africa. Most importantly, these codes of conduct have created a general anxiety about the need for business firms to 'guard' their social "license to operate", and thus deemed to be 'fit' for their social contracts. Additionally, as most African countries can be described as "resource-dependent economies" (e.g., Angola, South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Guinea, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Zambia, Democratic Republic of Congo), it is crucial that transparency is brought to bear on revenues that accrue to governments from the extractive industries. To this end, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiatives https://eiti.org, which aims to increase transparency and thus address corruption by enjoining extractive companies to publish their payments to host governments, is a bold attempt at improving governance in African countries.

A well-known indicator of corruption is Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi. Since its inception in 1995, the CPI has become a leading global indicator of public sector corruption. Somalia and Equatorial Guinea have consistently been placed amongst the most corrupt nations in the CPI: for example, in 2019 they scored 9 and 16 (out of 100) respectively, indicating a high perception of corruption, and this earned them the 180th position and 173th position (out of 180 countries globally) respectively. Conversely, Seychelles, Botswana and Cape Verde are in the top 50 and scored 66, 61 and 58 (out of 100) respectively, indicating a low perception of corruption, and this earned them the 27th position, 34th position and 41st position (out of 180 countries globally) respectively in 2019. In a review article, Amos (2018c) used keywords, including 'ethics', 'morals', 'values', 'corruption', 'ethical/unethical', 'integrity' and 'crime/criminal', in searching for evidence from scholarly articles on how the topic "ethics" has been the focus of CSR research in developing-countries. This author shows that while "social" and "environmental" issues attract a higher priority, ethics-related issues got an abysmally low priority. This, the author finds "particularly puzzling given that in developing-countries firms have to tackle issues, such as rampant corruption, ethical standards and responsible sourcing", as part of their CSR (p. 290).

5. Political CSR: an opportunity for political firms to fill governance gaps in Africa

The question of why business firms (or private firms) would accept public responsibilities beyond the business case for CSR is well established in the CSR literature (see Scherer *et al*., 2014; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011, 2007). From an instrumental CSR approach, business firms are expected to address the needs of their stakeholders to further business firm success. Conversely, from a normative CSR approach, business firms would be expected to address the needs of their stakeholders to further societal good. This divergence of CSR approaches creates a unique challenge for business firms (or private firms): 'what should a private (firm) do if public responsibilities go against the profit motive and/or the expected consequences' of the private (firm). Rather than specify the scope (or conditions) under which private (firms) accept certain societal expectations at the cost of instrumental concerns, political CSR can, therefore, be better understood as any public interest role that business firms play in society, and which may be linked to how business firms (or private firms) and public authority interact, namely where business firms (or private firms) "step in and fill the governance void and take responsibility for issues of public concern" (Scherer *et al*., 2014, p. 148; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). To this end, private (firms) do not "replace governments completely" rather "they take on some of the roles and responsibilities previously assigned to government" (Crane *et al*., 2008, p. 86). Specifically, 'political' as used in political CSR is defined as "firms assuming public roles and responsibilities, notably (self-) regulation and provision of public goods, that have previously been the sole prerogative of governments" (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011, p. 901, 903).

The image of state failure and 'institutional voids' (Khanna & Palepu, 1997) filled by business firms (or private firms) acquiring a 'new political role' (Scherer and Palazzo, 2011) is not a new phenomenon in the scholarly business literature (Matten & Moon, 2008; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011; Scherer *et al*., 2014; Scherer, 2017), and it usually represents a case where "institutional arrangements that support markets are absent, weak, or fail to accomplish the role expected of them" (Mair & Marti, 2009, p. 422). A central assumption in political CSR is that regulatory authority is shifting from governments to private firms. In this way, the political CSR approach operates with a normative conception of the political firm that is grounded on the notion of private firms as stewards of the public interest when governments are absent or fail. Additionally, Scherer and Palazzo (2011, p. 903) state two areas in which business firms (or private firms) could play political role: "voluntarily contributing to self-regulation" and "producing public goods that are not delivered by governments". In accepting public responsibilities, business firms are likely to be selective and might focus on areas of public responsibility where societal expectations is strongest.

Most importantly, the common good orientation is key to business firms (or private firms) accepting public responsibilities and the normative orientation of political CSR (Scherer, 2017). In essence, business firms are increasingly expected to respond to normative expectations as well as to isomorphic industry pressures that are embedded in the social context in which they operate (Matten & Moon, 2008). This is as a result of the underlying dynamics between business firms and society to the extent that the power and position that business hold should be used responsibly to maintain legitimacy with a private firm's stakeholders. Indeed, the social issues in management literature (e.g., Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011; Scherer *et al*., 2014) hints that a business firm will become involved in CSR when the socio-economic needs of the given "societies in which companies operate are so great that philanthropy is an expected norm – it is considered the right thing to do by business" (Visser, 2006, p. 40). Along these lines, it can be expected that governments and/or communities in Africa will tend to prioritize the philanthropic (social) contributions of business firms, which are in line with their developmental aspirations (Amos, 2018a, 2018b). We can thus expect that normative expectations and institutional differences (or institutional voids) in African countries (or different country contexts) will require different approaches in terms of the role of business in society.

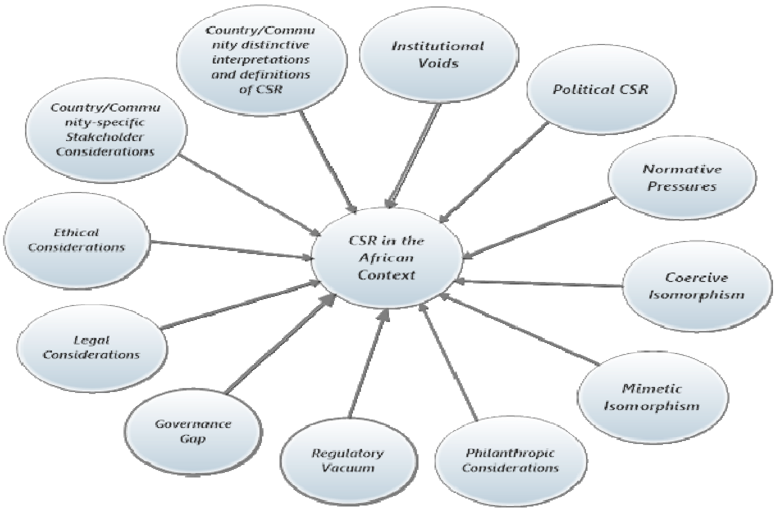

Figure 2: A constellation of factors shaping a business firms' CSR decisions in the African context.
Source: Authors' own elaboration

A common denominator across the arguments underpinning the conceptualization of CSR articulated in this paper is that a business firm's CSR decision in the African context is informed by a multiplicity of factors. Therefore, our proposed framework (Figure 2) depicts a constellation of factors shaping a business firm's CSR decisions in the African context, which can guide empirical research into various CSR issues areas in the African context, and thereby, stimulate corporate engagement with the public good in an African context.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has shown that a firm will become involved in CSR when the socio-economic needs of the community in which it operates are so great that philanthropy (e.g., community development project) is an expected norm – it is considered the 'right' thing to do by business firms. The argument in this paper suggests that business firms are expected to help address the continent's various developmental issues (or challenges). Most importantly, in Africa, a prominent actor in the private sector is the large business firms, which furthermore are envisaged to make contributions that are often discussed in terms of CSR. In this way, business firms' CSR activities targeted at the communities in which they operate, would be beneficial for the continent in terms of provision of public goods that have previously been the sole prerogative of government. Africa, therefore, provides an ideal context for exploring environmental, social and governance (ESG) issues in the context of communities in which business firms operate.

Drawing on stakeholder theory, Carroll's (1979, 1991) four-part model of CSR would suggest that different communities in Africa may assign different relative importance to the various dimensions of responsibility. To this end, business firms are expected to engage in decisions, action, policies and practices that simultaneously fulfil the four component parts. This would also suggest that both public policy on CSR and a business firm's policy on CSR have a role to play in the contextual interpretations and definitions of CSR in an African country and/or African community. In this way, it is expected that the laws and policies that governments in African countries enact can have much to offer in terms of the contextual interpretations and definitions CSR.

From an institutional theory perspective, we would expect to find laws and policies that are primarily intended to encourage the adoption and practice of CSR by business firms. Most importantly, it is expected that such laws, once institutionalized by governments in African countries and business firms, can "send a strong signal about the importance of a subject – a signal that, as regards CSR, is amplified by the business culture in the country", which may shed light on "the country's underlying political and social philosophy" (Williams & Aguilera, 2008, p. 454). From an institutional void perspective, the presence of 'institutional voids' (Khanna & Palepu, 1997) in African countries would suggest that business firms are expected to act as stewards of the public interest, and thereby, acquire a 'new political role' by providing public goods that had previously been the sole prerogative of governments in African countries.

This paper has shown that CSR within the African context is specifically definable once we take into consideration the distinctive features of the African country and/or African community in focus in a given research project. However, regrettably, this is one research stream for which there is relatively limited research. This paper has argued that the need to highlight the distinctive feature of CSR in the African context is motivated by a societal expectation that business firms should take on some of the roles and responsibilities previously assigned to government, that is, political CSR. Additionally, the political CSR perspective has contributed to improve our understanding of the difficulty African societies face is having their socio-economic expectations addressed. Drawing on the political CSR literature, this paper has argued that the existence of a "governance gap" (Crane *et al*., 2008) or a "regulatory vacuum" (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011) necessitates that the private sector (or a business firm) steps in and fill the governance void and take responsibility for issues of public concern.

This paper provides a contribution to the CSR literature as it improves our understanding of the conceptualization of CSR in the African context. A major contribution of this paper is that we propose a framework, identifying a constellation of factors shaping a business firm's CSR decisions in the African context. Our framework can guide empirical research into various CSR issues areas, and thereby, stimulate corporate engagement with the public good in an African context.

The contributions of this paper suggest the following research directions and opportunities for the political role of business firms in the African context. Future research is needed to uncover a clearer scope of a 'political' role that allows for empirical examination of business firms (or private firms) political engagement in African countries. In this regard, Lyon *et al*.'s (2018, p. 8) call for the inclusion of "corporate political responsibility", defined as "a firm's disclosure of its political activities and advocacy of socially and environmentally beneficial public policy" can be seen as a sound beginning for addressing business firm engagement with the public good, and, ultimately, in advancing the public interest in a given CSR issue area in an African context. Future empirical research questions to be explored include: 'what informs the interpretations and definitions of CSR in the different African countries and/or African communities'. Studying the interpretations and definitions of CSR in the different African countries and/or African communities will provide an important insight into 'context-issues' in the body of CSR research focused on the African context.

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