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A Voluntary or Mandatory Corporate Social Responsibility Engagement? A post-2000 Analysis of China-Zimbabwe Economic Relations

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Abstract

The quest for economic development in Africa's emerging economies like Zimbabwe is an uphill undertaking that necessitates multi-stakeholder contribution. Since 2000, China and Chinese firms have played a considerable role in contributing to the Zimbabwean economy and community well-being through CSR programmes. However, in the absence of a CSR regulatory framework, it is not clear whether Zimbabwe harnesses the full social-economic potential of CSR arrangements. Existing research on CSR in the country provides sketchy evidence and mainly from a foreign perspective. This paper analyses Chinese corporations' engagement in promoting the socio-economic progress of communities in a non-mandatory CSR environment and presents a case for a regulatory framework in Zimbabwe. It applies interpretivism to desk review evidence from sources published between 2017 and 2022 and reveals that, despite voluntary CSR arrangements, Chinese firms have contributed to the socio-economic well-being of communities by investing in some development projects. This notwithstanding, a voluntary CSR engagement has provided a leeway for Chinese firms to neglect environmental concerns, violate employee labour rights, and threaten community displacement, especially in mineral-rich areas. The paper concludes that Zimbabwe's economic hardships push the country to prioritise economic over social and environmental concerns of communities in fear of losing the scarcely available Foreign Direct Investment. However, mandatory CSR arrangements provide mutual benefits to both Zimbabwe and China, thus an opportunity to legislate CSR without jeopardising Sino-Zimbabwe's economic and political relations.

Keywords

China-Africa relations, Chinese Firms, Corporate Social Responsibility, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

The quest for economic development in Africa's emerging economies like Zimbabwe is an uphill undertaking that necessitates multi-stakeholder contribution. Zimbabwe grapples with several challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, low levels of education and human capital, high rates of poverty and inequality, political instability, and environmental degradation (Sharma, 2022). To address these challenges, considerable investments in infrastructure, education, healthcare, and social and environmental programmes are required. The contributory role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in economic development is well established (Sharma & Sathish, 2022). CSR can contribute to economic growth by supporting responsible business practices, producing shared value for enterprises and communities, and tackling social and environmental issues that threaten long-term development (Akinde, 2020). Appropriately channelled CSR investments can supplement government efforts in addressing shortfalls in areas like inadequate infrastructure, unemployment, community development, education, women and child development, livelihood projects, and healthcare. However, the extent of the impact will depend on whether the CSR environment is mandatory or non-mandatory.

In a non-mandatory CSR environment like Zimbabwe, corporations may prioritise revenue over local social and environmental concerns (Mathende & Nhapi, 2017; Matsutani et al., 2022). As a result, firms may undertake surface CSR initiatives with negligible impact on economic development. In a mandatory CSR environment, such as China, corporations must address social and environmental impacts alongside corporate revenue goals (Li et al., 2019). A mandatory approach can help address some issues confronting African countries. The researcher's encounters with Lupinyu residents on a fieldwork outing (for her PhD thesis) and the prevailing socio-economic challenges facing Zimbabwe prompted this work. During the PhD thesis fieldwork, Lupinyu locals living adjacent to Victoria Falls International Airport spoke on the importance of CSR programmes in tackling some of the social and economic difficulties that the socio-economically disadvantaged community faced. Borehole requests to address water shortages, humanitarian aid to address hunger, and socio-economic prospects for unemployed youth highlighted the community's acute needs and their expectations that the Chinese Company, China Jiangsu, might help address these needs.

The dearth of scholarly studies, concrete evidence, and impartial analysis of CSR practices in Zimbabwe raises interest in assessing the extent to which foreign firms carry out their social responsibility duties. A few publications (including (Kawazi, 2022; Yang et al., 2022; Mugwara & Yuliang, 2022; Xinhua, 2022) focused on CSR initiatives by Chinese contractors investing in Zimbabwe's infrastructure sector and how the Chinese will continue to improve the communities' livelihoods through CSR projects. However, these works do not provide sufficient evidence to determine the extent to which these Chinese investments are benefiting the local communities in which they operate. Others, such as (Chidyausiku & Muzingili, 2017; Mathende & Nhapi, 2017), investigated CSR initiatives by local companies. This study goes beyond a narrow conception of CSR that focuses on the company's provision of financial support to community development projects to how communities' needs, e.g., employment, water supply, and other essential services, are taken care of.

Zimbabwe's quest for socio-economic development in a post-Land reform economy during Robert Mugabe's regime (2000-2018) and China's increased engagement with Africa opened new China-Zimbabwe relations with economic development implications (Chipaike & Bischoff, 2019). The holding of the first ministerial conference on the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 and Zimbabwe's adoption of the Look East policy in 2003 acted as a two-way momentum that transitioned China-Zimbabwe relations from pre-2000 "strange comrades" to a post-2000 all-weather friendship status (Chipaike & Bischoff, 2019; Jaji, 2021; Yang et al., 2022). At the 2006 FOCAC Beijing Declaration, it was declared that a $5 billion China-Africa Development Fund would be established to encourage Chinese firms to invest in Africa (Aiping & Zhan, 2018). Zimbabwe was set to benefit from China's commitment to furnishing Africa, through FOCAC, with cheaper infrastructure development loans, targeted debt relief, support in the global forum, political non-interference, and the involvement of Chinese funding agencies like the China Exim Bank, which would parallel the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Solomon, 2018). With global policy consensus advancing improved connectivity and infrastructure upgrades as prerequisites for fostering economic growth in developing economies, Zimbabwe sought and received Chinese financial and human resource support conveyed through Chinese corporate entities (UNDP, 2021 & Shajalal et al., 2017).

The bilateral cooperation would see Chinese financial capital and other resources conveyed through Chinese firms and banks flocking to Zimbabwe. For instance, between 2000 and 2004, the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA) ratified financing deals with Chinese energy firms that supplied ZESA with affordable solar energy facilities (Abegunrin & Manyeruke, 2020). It was envisaged that in a post-2000 Zimbabwe, characterised by political instability, economic decline, infrastructure deterioration, rising unemployment and poverty, and hyperinflation; the Chinese companies would actualise infrastructure projects financed by China's loans and credit facilities and invest in critical sectors of Zimbabwe's economy (Abegunrin & Manyeruke, 2020). With Zimbabwe experiencing sanctions-inflicted hostility from its traditional Western European trading and financing partners (e.g. the United Kingdom, the European Union, and the United States) due to the 2000 Land Reform Programme, renewed China–Zimbabwe relations became the only viable alternative that would help rescue the ailing economy (Dendere, 2022; Musanga, 2022). The famous Robert Mugabe's phrase "turning east where the sun rises and giving our backs to the west where the sun sets" precipitated an increase in Chinese corporate investments in Zimbabwe. In the context of a dire need for foreign (Chinese) investment, involvement in CSR remained non-mandatory. Given the scarcity of literature on Chinese corporate involvement in CSR in Zimbabwe, little is known about how those companies engage in CSR. Should the government of Zimbabwe have a standing policy on CSR, or should corporate entities like Chinese firms investing in Zimbabwe be left to their whims? In this regard, this paper advances two research questions. (a) Whether Chinese corporations' voluntary engagement in CSR has contributed to the socio-economic progress of communities (b) Whether mandating corporate social programmes would affect the contribution of Chinese CSR to Zimbabwe's economic development.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: The second section reviews the literature on why Zimbabwe's socio-economic situation warrants CSR. Furthermore, it examines the Chinese corporations' CSR footprint in Zimbabwe. The third section (the conceptual framework) explores the importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) based on Carroll's CSR pyramid. The fourth section outlines the research design, data collection methods, and discussion of findings. The fifth section (findings and discussion) presents the positive and negative implications of Chinese corporations' voluntary CSR engagement and analyses the implications of mandatory CSR arrangements on Chinese firms' contributions. The final section summarises the key findings, provides recommendations for enhancing CSR practices, and emphasises the importance of sustainable economic development and environmental protection in Zimbabwe.

2. Zimbabwe's economic situation

There are several reasons why Zimbabwe's economic situation warrants CSR. First, the combined weight of the domestic and external debt ($13.5 billion) accounted for 93.2%, 102.7%, and 67.6% of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2019, 2020 and 2021, respectively (Adesina, 2022; Dendere, 2022; Mhlanga, 2020; Statista, 2022). This could be attributed to the prevailing two-decade-long economic sanctions. According to Statista (2022), Zimbabwe's national debt is projected to rise steadily by 169.2 billion US dollars between 2022 and 2027. **Figure 1** below depicts Zimbabwe's national debt relative to its GDP from 2017, projected through to 2027 (Statista, 2022). In this situation, Zimbabwe may not marshal adequate foreign and domestic revenues to fund sustainable economic development objectives (UNDP, 2021). Also, Zimbabwe's low tax-to-GDP ratio due to a predominantly informal economy means taxes (the most crucial component of domestic funding) must be supplemented. Private-sector investments supplement public-sector spending and boost economic growth, employment generation, and sustainable development (UNDP, 2020). Besides enhancing the tax capacity, financing sustainable development requires the right mix of incentives to encourage the greater participation of the private sector, including CSR initiatives.

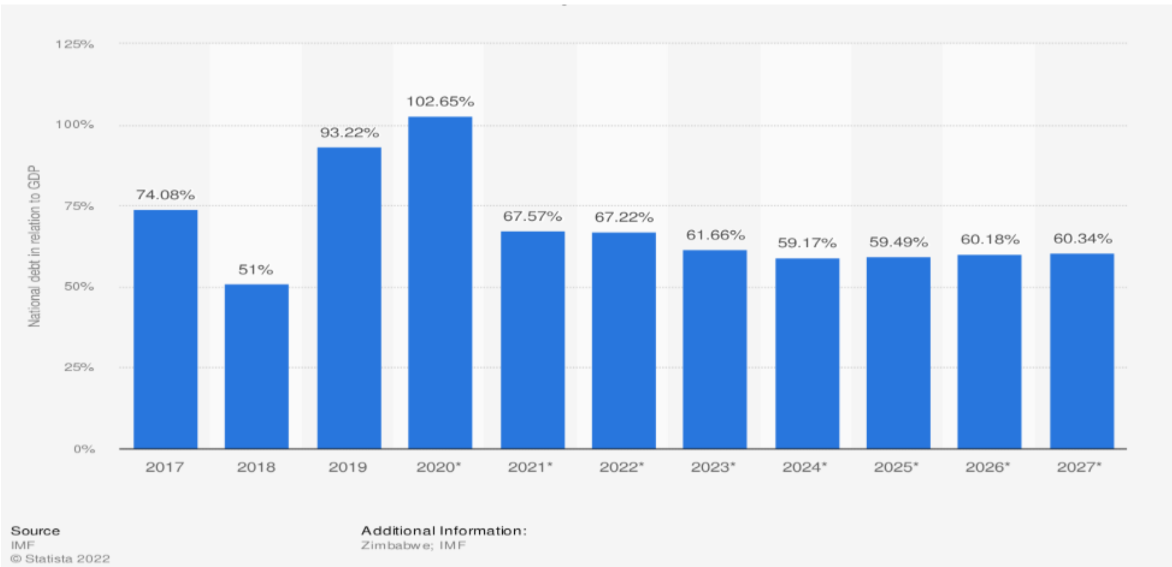

Figure 1: Zimbabwe's national debt to GDP ratio from 2017 and post-2022 projections.
Source: *Statista (2022).*

Second, the Zimbabwean government's top 10 priority goals between 2015 and 2030 include zero hunger, clean water and sanitation, quality education, clean and affordable energy, good health and well-being, decent work, and economic growth (Ngorima, 2021). These warrant collective multi-stakeholder efforts, including the private sector. For instance, despite a 14% increase from 2015, only 48% of Zimbabwean households had electricity in 2019. Through increased priority spending on agriculture, education, health, social protection, and infrastructure, the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1) has internalised the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNDP, 2020). Due to deliberate prioritisation, 77.1% and 68.8% of households had improved drinking water and non-shared sanitation in 2019, up from 76.1% in 2014 and 67.8% in 2017, respectively (UNDP, 2020). Although not every priority spending can translate into gains, prioritisation and collective efforts can harness the limited economic resources towards common development goals.

Areas like agriculture, employment creation, and poverty reduction can register better gains with joint action, however negligible. Despite increased government expenditure on agriculture, persistent droughts have worsened food insecurity. The anticipated employment creation and poverty reduction impacts from government investment in infrastructure projects have been slow and non-inclusive. Zimbabwe's slightly younger demographic profile (15-64-year-olds) provides a highly productive potential, accounting for 94% of the total population (Ngorima, 2021). The young population is a potentially resourceful labour force that can power and hasten economic growth and sustainable development. In 2019, regular wage employment in Zimbabwe was low, with 76% of the employed population working in informal sectors (UNDP, 2021). Between 2014 and 2019, the percentage of youth between 15 and 24 years old who were not in education, employment, or training increased by 9.5% from 35.2% in 2014. Despite a slight decline in the prevalence of poverty to 70.5% in 2017 from 72.3% in 2011/12, the persistently high poverty rates saw individual rural poverty rise to 86.0% in 2017 from 84.3% in 2011/12 (Zimstats, 2019 and UNDP, 2020). Also, between 2012 and 2017, the population's extreme poverty rose from 6.8% to 29.3%. The NDS1 provides a framework for guiding Zimbabwe's development efforts toward achieving these priority goals through a multi-stakeholder approach.

Third, due to a shrinking economy that was yet to rebound as of 2022, the Zimbabwean government continues to grapple with fighting chronic poverty (due to the country's limited social protection and the COVID-19 pandemic-associated socio-economic shocks) (IMF, 2022). In 2019, the Zimbabwean economy shrank by 6.5% due to significant contractions in such vital sectors as mining, energy, agriculture, and water. The economic decline was partly attributed to adverse climate-induced disasters like the El Nino-induced drought (negatively impacting Kariba South hydropower generation and agricultural production) and Cyclone Idai (that ravaged segments of the country) (UNDP, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated shocks would exacerbate an already precarious economic situation in 2020 (Ngorima, 2021). The COVID-19 outbreak disrupted trade and supply chains, limiting raw materials imports, slashing commodity prices, lowering tourist arrivals, reducing foreign direct investment inflows, and diverting limited government resources from key development priorities to fighting the outbreak (UNDP, 2020).

Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Zimbabwe has implemented SDGs through the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZIM-ASSET) (2013-2018), the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (IPRSP) (2016–2018), and the Transitional Stabilisation Programme (TSP) (2018–2020) (UNDP, 2021). In 2016, the Zimbabwean government issued the 7-pillar Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (IPRSP: 2016–2018), which includes infrastructure; agricultural productivity, and rural food security; the private sector; women and youth empowerment; and environment and climate change (UNDP, 2020). The succeeding Transitional Stabilisation Programme (TSP 2018–2020) eliminated both the fiscal and current account deficits and realised a degree of macroeconomic stability, thereby providing a solid foundation for sustainable economic growth (UNDP, 2020). The realisation of economic development and attainment of middle-income status requires the proactive partnership and participation of all the key stakeholders (government, local and diaspora citizens, the private sector, and international partners) and the integration of several financing sources (UNDP, 2021; World Bank, 2022). Although CSR may not adequately address all the problems and gaps highlighted, CSR initiatives can contribute to Zimbabwe's economic recovery efforts, especially if it is integrated into a broader development strategy.

2.1 Chinese corporate footprint in Zimbabwe

CSR issues cannot ignore the rate of FDI inflows into Zimbabwe, and in this case, Chinese investments in Zimbabwe. Due to targeted sanctions, which caused many American and European businesses to leave the country, FDI inflows declined after 2000 inducing significant job losses and a steep decline in economic productivity (Jaji, 2021). Following the adoption of the Look East Policy in 2003, China accounted for the increases in FDI inflows after 2004. China is Zimbabwe's second-largest trading partner and has been the country's leading source of FDIs for many years (Shaochun, 2022). China's direct investment in Zimbabwe had surpassed $2 billion by the end of 2020 and was still growing (Shaochun, 2022). Post-2004 FDI inflows began declining in 2014 from 2.4% of GDP to 0.6% in 2021 (World Bank, 2022). Zimbabwe's capital infrastructure projects are often funded by Chinese state-owned institutions such as China Exim Bank or China Development Bank, which advance loans to Chinese enterprises.

The Zimbabwean government has prioritised infrastructure development across multiple sectors as a primary means of sustainable economic development and attaining an upper-middle income economy (United Nations, 2021; World Bank, 2022). According to Manyeruke (2021), the activities of Chinese companies, including the combined activities of Sinotex, Anhui agricultural reclamation company, Anjin diamond mining company, and China Railway International, created as many as 20,000 gainful jobs for Zimbabweans. Before adopting the Look East Policy, less than 5 Chinese companies operated in Zimbabwe. Between 2003 and 2005, 29 Chinese companies were investing in Zimbabwe, gradually rising to 45 in 2013. As of 2022, about 250 Chinese enterprises were operating in Zimbabwe, ranging from state-linked and enormous multinational enterprises to small private investments (Xinhua, 2022). Most Chinese loans have financed infrastructure projects previously overlooked by Western donors (Mlambo, 2022). Some of the Chinese-funded infrastructure projects include the China Jiangsu upgrade of the Zimbabwe National Sports Stadium (2007–2010), the China Jiangsu expansion of Victoria Falls International Airport (2013–2016), the Sino-Hydro extension of Kariba South Hydro Power Station (2014–2018), China Jiangsu expansion of Robert G. Mugabe International Airport (2018-2023) and the Sinohydro extension of Hwange Thermal Power Station (2018-2023) (Shaochun, 2022). The Chinese government is constructing and developing hospitals, schools, and boreholes in drought-prone regions (Chifamba & Yuliang, 2019). China Jiangxi Corporation International Economic and Technical Cooperation (CJIC) has supported local communities in several rural districts around Zimbabwe by drilling boreholes. As a result, approximately 1,000 boreholes have been sunk in Zimbabwe's six provinces, including Matebeleland, Masvingo, and Midlands province, since 2012 (Mugwara & Yuliang, 2022).

Even voluntarily, Chinese firms should seriously prioritise CSR because of its economic competitiveness, which includes hard and soft power and corporate attractiveness in a globalised world (Lassalle et al., 2020). Jayaram et al. (2017) note that some Chinese companies have helped African economies grow while some have also hurt the local economies and the environment. In general, the local people who have had more positive interactions with Chinese companies better understand the market and employment opportunities created by Chinese firms' entry (Gukurume, 2018). Investment activities by foreign firms may occasion meaningful employment or a more competitive business environment that may spur the development of a market with healthier purchasing habits (Nahornyi et al., 2022). From a CSR perspective, the frequency of positive social interactions with Chinese people could be a beneficial channel for locals to obtain gainful employment and comprehend market trends and the advantages associated with the Chinese companies' primary activities (Yang et al., 2022). Positive contacts with Chinese firms on a CSR platform should increase the inclination of the locals to support the retention and increased entry of Chinese firms into Zimbabwe, given the country's very high unemployment rate and beleaguered economy.

Moreover, Yang et al. (2022) established that for Chinese firms to sustainably invest in Zimbabwe, they must assume certain shared CSRs and strive to lessen their negative impacts on local communities. For instance, Manyeruke (2021) expressed concern over Chinese employers constantly mistreating local employees and overlooking fair labour practices with arbitrary dismissals, precarious working conditions, compensation below the minimum wage, and long working hours that characterise some Chinese workplaces. Locals dissatisfied with their working conditions in Chinese employment are less likely to support increased Chinese business establishment in Zimbabwe. At their core, CSR duties are the corporation's commitment to raising its host population's living standards and conditions and promoting local economic growth and environmental improvement (Matsutani et al., 2022).

3. Conceptual framework

CSR is a management concept in which businesses integrate environmental and social concerns into their company activities and stakeholder relations. CSR is the business case that demonstrates that firms stand for something broader than their bottom line (Lin, 2020). Carroll's pyramid imposes a four-part definition of CSR: To be socially responsible; a firm must meet societal, legal, ethical, economic, and philanthropic expectations at any given time. **Figure 2** below denotes Carroll's corporate social responsibility pyramid (Hubbart, 2022; Business Faculty from Ontario Colleges & eCampusOntario Program Managers, 2018). Howard Bowen, the father of CSR, defined CSR as the duty the businessman or corporate body owed the society to advance the policies, make the decisions, and adhere to the lines of action consistent with the values and objectives of the society in which the business or corporate entity operated (Kim, 2022; Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019).

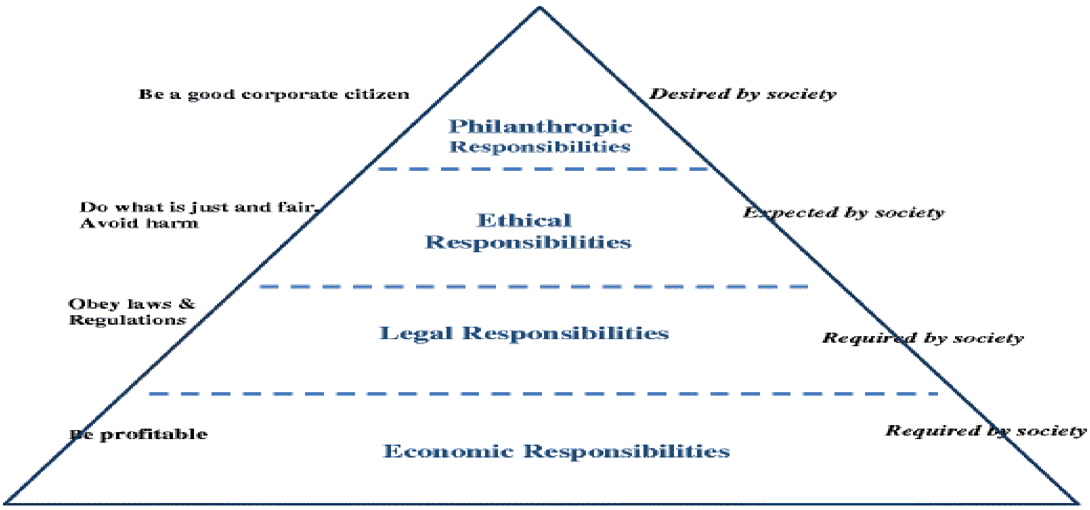

Figure 2: Carroll's corporate social responsibility pyramid
Source: *Business Faculty from Ontario Colleges & eCampusOntario Program Managers (2018).*

The pyramid suggests that while CSR is a valuable source of financing development needs, it should not be projected as a "magic/silver bullet" to local socio-economic issues given that a corporation's primary responsibilities to self are economic. This means that while CSR initiatives can certainly help address social and economic issues, they should not be expected to solve all of these issues on their own. Instead, CSR should be viewed as one of the tools that corporations can use to contribute to the greater good while also pursuing their economic objectives. Bowen's conception of CSR sought to question what obligations to society many business and corporate entities could reasonably be expected to assume. Chen et al. (2018) and Sharma & Sathish (2022) observed that when corporate entities engage in CSR activities, their value appreciates before the host community and the business community, particularly when such investments indirectly or directly contribute to economic growth. CSR embodies an age-old tradition of the business community's concern for society, dating way back before the onset of the industrial revolution (Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019). Through CSR, a company would treat society from a moral point of view by adhering to ethical conduct toward stakeholders and respecting the spirit of the legal and regulatory environment (Wenqi, 2022). With the expansion of giant multinational firms in the late 1950s and 1960s, the concept of CSR gained popularity in the 1980s by urging businesses to commit to contributing to long-term economic development through collaborations with employees and their families, the local community, and society (Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019). CSR would improve the quality of life in ways that are good for both business and development.

In line with Carroll's Pyramid, Environmental responsibilities seek to lower pollution, boost the use of renewable energy, and mitigate negative consequences; Ethical responsibilities guarantee fair treatment of all stakeholders, from employees to customers, through efforts like responsible material sourcing and fostering equal work environment; Charitable responsibilities include donating portions of one's revenues to charitable causes that are unrelated to one's business; Economic responsibilities tie a company's financial decisions to its commitment to do good in the host community (Mohammed, 2020; Juniarti, 2020). Although CSR critics like Milton Friedman and Theodore Levitt advanced that businesses shun involvement in social issues and rather seek material gain and engage in civilities like good faith and honesty in business, concerns like environmental protection and poverty alleviation have prompted the government to encourage corporate indulgence (Sharma & Sathish, 2022). The "CSR" concept opens discussions on whether the expected obligations should be voluntarily pursued or legally enforced. As a result, depending on the jurisdiction, companies have either assumed or tracked CSR voluntarily or under legal constraints.

4. Research Methodology

This study is anchored on an interpretive research paradigm. In this regard, qualitative data collection and analysis techniques were applied). The researcher assumed a subjectivist epistemology in making sense of data obtained mainly from secondary sources. In subjectivist epistemology, the researcher makes sense of data through cognitive processing (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). A descriptive research design helped to provide a snapshot of the phenomenon by summarising and analysing themes from available information. This study heavily depends on a desk study of secondary sources, primarily journal articles, governmental policy papers, newspaper articles, and websites. The selection of documents was based on relevance and accessibility. In this regard, materials on China, Zimbabwe, and China-Zimbabwe economic relations, particularly Chinese investments, CSR and socio-economic development, were collected and analysed accordingly.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria primarily involved up-to-date articles published between 2017 and 2022 on China-Zimbabwe relations, mandatory and not mandatory CSR in a China-Zimbabwe relations context, and correlations between CSR and economic development.

Only reputable literature sources, news outlets, government publications, or industry reports- were considered to guarantee the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. Relevant information from reviewed documents was collected and summarised in themes to identify patterns and relationships. Conclusions were drawn from collated themes about the contributions of mandatory versus non-mandatory CSR policies to economic development in China and Zimbabwe.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Implications of Chinese Corporations' Voluntary CSR Engagement

This section discusses the extent of Chinese corporate contributions to Zimbabwe's economic development in a non-mandatory CSR environment. It reveals that although Chinese firms' voluntary engagement has had positive contributions, many neglected opportunities exist.

Chinese firms' positive contributions have spanned building additional blocks in schools, additional furniture, and renovating local stadiums to drilling boreholes and building clinics. The Chinese corporations in Zimbabwe CSR led by China Jiangxi, China Jiangsu, Dinson Steel, and Bikita Mining have reported some CSR engagements (China Jiangsu, 2022; Chinese Embassy in Zimbabwe, 2022b). The extension of the Kariba South hydropower station by China Sinohydro between 2014 and 2018 and the accompanying voluntary CSR-motivated upgrades to the Ruia bridge connecting Charara and Kariba towns, as well as the construction of two blocks at Mahombekombe secondary school and renovation of Nyamhunga Stadium, are examples of how companies can contribute to the socio-economic progress of local communities. In 2021, Sino-Hydro Limited, a Chinese Government-owned Power Company subsidiary, donated 500 desks and chairs to Neshaya Secondary School in Hwange as part of its CSR (Mukucha, 2023).

According to Shaochun (2022), Chinese corporate entities actively uphold their social obligations in Zimbabwe by constructing wells, schools, roads, bridges, and clinics for neighbourhood communities, aiding disadvantaged pupils, and supporting vulnerable populations. Zimbabweans have welcomed Chinese investment by attending job fairs for Chinese businesses, while communities, local council members, and traditional leaders have defended the growth of Chinese enterprises. According to Xinhua News (2020), China Jiangxi and China Development (the Chinese government's international aid organisations) have drilled 1,000 boreholes in six Zimbabwean provinces to benefit rural districts. Chinese granite mining projects are creating jobs and transferring skills. Huawei's "Seeds for the Future" programme and Chinese companies in granite mining train Zimbabweans in telecoms technical skills and help fill Zimbabwe's technical skills deficit, respectively. Renovations of Zimbabwe's Wilkins Hospital in Harare have been attributed to Chinese enterprises in Zimbabwe as a contribution to the fight against the coronavirus.

Neglected Opportunities for CSR

Besides the aforementioned positive voluntary contributions, some Chinese companies in Zimbabwe have been accused of causing harm to the local economy and environment (Yang et al., 2022). The negative impacts could be attributed to several factors, including inadequate regulatory frameworks, lack of enforcement, or insufficient attention paid to CSR obligations by these companies (Chamba & Mugova, 2019). Chinese companies in Zimbabwe have been associated with environmental degradation (miners leaving open pits unfilled and dumping toxic waste into rivers), threatening to displace locals, and labour rights violations, as discussed subsequently.

First, Chinese mining corporations (particularly those in extractive industries like gold, diamond, and chrome mining) leave a massive countrywide trail of environmental damage.

Chinese mining corporations in Marange, Mutoko, Gweru, and Mutorashanga failed to uphold their CSR commitments in Zimbabwe, being charged with environmentally hazardous practices such as unlawful mining and hazardous waste dumping (Chamba & Mugova, 2019; Mining Zimbabwe, 2022; Zhoya, 2022). In open trenches left by Chinese firms mining granite stone in Mutoko District, villagers and livestock faced an increased risk of harm and even death in the pits (Chingono, 2022). In 2015, a 12-year-old child died after falling into an open pit that a mining firm had left unattended (Chenjerai, 2017). Mining companies must carry out CSR activities in their communities and clean up and recover open-pit sites. Villagers in areas hosting the miners like Mutoko have complained that certain Chinese mining firms dump toxic waste into their waterways. In a 2012 report, the Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association discovered substantial chemical and heavy metal pollution, including indications of the potentially cancer-causing metals nickel and chromium (Chenjerai, 2017; Mambondiyani, 2019). The once-drinkable water from nearby rivers caused skin itchiness upon contact and was associated with women's miscarriages. Some villagers claimed that mine waste was blocking rivers (like Save River and Odzi's channel blocked using sandbags) and dams and reducing the amount of water available for cultivation and livestock (Mambondiyani, 2019; Majavu, 2022). A portion of Save River that flows from the centre of Zimbabwe through Mozambique and into the Indian Ocean had dried up. Contamination and blockage of water sources have resulted in human illnesses, decreased crop yields, livestock deaths, and a decline in the quantity of fish in the rivers. Furthermore, the locals of Mutoko accused Chinese firms of ruining their local roads when ferrying rocks in Lorries.

Second, locals and Chinese mining firms have been embroiled in a conflict over the possibility of displacing the locals from their ancestral lands (Mambondiyani, 2019). Besides house cracks and bomb debris littering some compounds, Zimbabwean civil society groups have accused Chinese firms of investing in projects while impoverishing and disempowering the locals (Mlevu, 2022; Majavu, 2022). Mineral-rich areas frequently report threats of corporate displacements and mining undertakings in ecologically vulnerable areas without regard for local concerns. Chinese Jinding mining corporation had informed 50 families in the village of Mutoko that they would have to vacate their houses and land (Chingono, 2022). Moreover, nearby village residents like Nyamaropa were also concerned about losing their ancestral land to Shanghai Haoyung Mining Investments. Other notable areas include Gweru and Mutorashanga, where Chinese Almond Minerals, Jinan, and Xi Yu's chrome mining activities have caused severe infrastructure and environmental damage (Mining Zimbabwe, 2022; Zhoya, 2022).

Thirdly, concerns have also been raised regarding how workers are treated, with some Chinese firms accused of breaking labour laws and exploiting workers. Working conditions are considered part and parcel of CSR. This entails a company's obligation to conduct its business ethically and socially responsibly, which includes considering the impacts of its operations on workers, communities, and the environment. Workers at a mine in Mutoko complained about beatings and low pay while also having to go to work every day for more than 12 hours and receiving only $50 a month (Chingono, 2022). One worker was allegedly hit with a steel rod, while another 17-year-old boy had his arm fractured after arriving late for work (Chingono, 2022). He was paid $250 in compensation after villagers complained. In 2020, two workers were shot and injured in Gweru, central Zimbabwe, allegedly by a Chinese miner during a wage dispute (Chingono, 2022).

Moreover, Chinese mining corporations have been criticised for leaving behind a trail of destroyed bridges, roads, and polluted air as they extract minerals from the villages. Calls have been made for the Zimbabwean government to tighten its legislative frameworks to guarantee that foreign corporations, including Chinese firms, comply with CSR requirements (Mathende & Nhapi, 2017; Majavu, 2022). For the Chinese firms to flourish sustainably (unless they are in Zimbabwe for the short term), they must take on certain shared legal, philanthropic and ethical responsibilities and work to lessen their negative impacts on local communities.

5.2. Implications of Mandatory CSR Arrangements on Chinese Firms' Contribution

The preceding discussion has revealed unpleasant experiences with voluntary CSR arrangements with Chinese firms. Such an experience was not unexpected given the profit-oriented nature of business firms. One of the possible explanations for why the Government of Zimbabwe might have to make voluntary CSR arrangements despite the glaring concerns is the fear of reducing or even losing the already meagre FDI. In the context where the East remains the country's only viable source of FDI hopes, strict CSR measures might be fearsome. Is this fear real or imagined? Could mandatory CSR affect the flow of Chinese FDI and hence Chinese firms' contribution to Zimbabwe's economic endeavours? In this section, the implications of mandatory CSR arrangements for Chinese firm involvement are discussed in turn.

A review of corporate experience in China reveals that mandatory CSR arrangements are not new to Chinese companies. China made CSR mandatory in the 2006 Company Law for several reasons. CSR was introduced through global supply chains as multinational companies began adopting social and environmental criteria for selecting their suppliers (Lin, 2020; Adamczyk, 2022). This created a demand for CSR among Chinese companies. Additionally, codes of vendor conduct used in global supply chains and often incorporate international law imposed fundamental legal obligations in supply contracts, creating pressure on Chinese suppliers to comply with CSR standards (Lin, 2020). Initially, Chinese suppliers were suspicious and hostile towards CSR, perceiving it as a protectionist measure by developed countries to undermine developing countries' competitiveness (Lin, 2020). However, as China climbed "up the value chain," CSR became an internally accepted value, and homegrown CSR initiatives emerged. China takes a state-centric approach to CSR, and the government has been using laws and regulations to promote CSR. Finally, the comprehensive revision of China's corporate law in 2004 culminated in the 2006 Company Law, which engraves CSR in China's corporate statute. This implies that mandatory CSR is less likely to affect Chinese corporate engagement in Zimbabwe as it is self-homegrown in the Chinese corporate governance system.

Moreover, mandatory CSR is not a new phenomenon in other African countries where Chinese companies are also operating. For example, in Mauritius, the Finance Bill of 2009 applies uniformly to all businesses and requires all profitable businesses to invest at least 2% of their previous year's profits in CSR operations (Mauritius Revenue Authority, 2023; Ramdhony, 2018). Similarly, under the South African Companies Act No. 71 of 2008, large companies are expected to utilise CSR to alleviate economic inequality and promote social development (Ndong Ntoutoume, 2023). Mandating CSR is justified when voluntary corporate CSR participation is insufficient to address social and environmental challenges (Johnston et al., 2019; Cheruiyot et al., 2017). CSR measures such as upholding human rights, conserving the environment, and promoting social welfare could be largely overlooked by corporations (Zukauskas et al., 2018). Hence, mandating CSR could see firms fulfil their social obligations and promote the public good (Ibid.). Should the market forces fail to encourage CSR activities because externalities, such as pollution or labour exploitation, are not priced into the market, mandating CSR could address the failure and see corporations internalise the consequences of their detrimental social and environmental actions (Johnston et al., 2019).

Mandatory CSR is likely to have several positive implications for Zimbabwe and China's corporate relations. First, mandating CSR would give Chinese companies in Zimbabwe a local blueprint rather than a self-transplanted foreign CSR blueprint when the need arises. Such a blueprint would align corporate contributions with government priority projects and development goals.

Second, making CSR programmes mandatory increases corporate reporting and corporate disclosure (Zhang et al., 2019). This is because companies would be required by law to disclose information about their social and environmental impact, which increases transparency and accountability. Making CSR programmes mandatory in China has resulted in a rise in the number of Chinese companies reporting on CSR. This increase in CSR reporting is directly related to transparency regulations adopted by China's two stock exchanges. The Shenzhen Stock Exchange issued the "Guide on Listed Companies' Social Responsibility" in 2006, urging listed companies to produce annual CSR reports (Zhang et al., 2019; Lin, 2020). The Shanghai Stock Exchange mandated that specific categories of listed corporations submit yearly CSR reports in 2008. Furthermore, the State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission has mandated the publication of yearly CSR reports by state-owned firms. Also, Lin (2020) further noted that because of China's mandatory CSR framework (China's 2006 Company Law), increasingly, more companies engaging in CSR began publishing standalone CSR reports between 2006 (<200 companies) and 2015 (>1500 companies). Companies complying with mandatory CSR regulations will also do so under state regulation rather than internal or external influences. This suggests that making CSR reporting mandatory would increase the number of companies participating in this practice in Zimbabwe. Moreover, double disclosure (both in Zimbabwe and China) may promote accountability and transparency in CSR reporting.

Third, the obligatory CSR experience in China suggests that making CSR mandatory could increase corporate involvement in environmental conservation (Zhang et al., 2019; Lin, 2020). In particular, the China context highlights the growth of green finance in China, including the introduction of green credit policies and the issuance of corporate green bonds (Lin, 2020). Green credit regulations were introduced in China in 2007 to promote environmental sustainability in credit management and encourage funding for environmentally friendly initiatives. As of June 2017, the total amount of green credit loans in China had increased to USD 1.192 trillion, indicating a significant growth in funding for green projects (Lin, 2020). Lin further notes that, as of 2020, China was the world's second-largest issuer of environment-aligned bonds since issuing its first corporate green bond in 2015 (ibid.). These policies and practices encourage companies to adopt environmentally friendly practices and invest in projects that promote environmental sustainability. This suggests that mandating CSR can effectively encourage foreign companies to engage in environmental conservation efforts in Zimbabwe. However, it is important to note that the effectiveness of such policies may also depend on the implementation and enforcement mechanisms in place.

Fourth, mandatory CSR disclosure influences how much tax evasion businesses engage in. Ding et al. (2022) found that businesses became less tax-aggressive in China since the end of 2008, when mandatory CSR disclosure became law. In 2015, an income tax treaty was signed between China and Zimbabwe. It came into force in 2016, covering various taxes such as individual and enterprise income tax, non-resident shareholders' tax, non-residents' tax on fees, non-residents' tax on royalties, capital gains tax, and residents' tax on interest (Orbitax, 2017). The treaty also includes provisions for withholding tax rates and double taxation relief. However, data on the transparency of tax remittances by Chinese companies in Zimbabwe is scarce. The drawback of the absence of widely accepted CSR reporting standards is that firms are free to choose what information they provide and emphasise in their reports (International Business Machines Corporation, 2021). Chinese firms in Zimbabwe can strive to be as transparent as feasible in their reporting to prevent public hostility. This entails outlining both their CSR accomplishments and areas for improvement, as well as their shortcomings. The Zimbabwean populace may be more inclined to believe that socio-economic concerns that matter to the community are prioritised by transparent CSR undertaking.

6. Conclusion

Zimbabwe has an economic growth platform that promotes the "business case" for CSR, thereby making it easy for voluntary CSR engagements. However, the country's lack of a regulatory framework has limited the socio-economic gains Zimbabwe could reap from multinational corporations' CSR programmes. From the perspective of Carroll's pyramid, to be socially responsible, a firm must meet societal, legal, ethical, economic, and philanthropic expectations. The experience of voluntary Chinese firms' engagement in CSR suggests Zimbabwe is far from realising the full potential of CSR. Albeit some recorded benefits, the Chinese firms remain largely socially, economically, and environmentally less responsible. Locals could more likely associate with and support Chinese firms' long-term growth if contented with the working conditions and the impact of Chinese corporations on the local economy and environment. Due to Zimbabwe's prevailing economic situation, it is more likely that the government may overlook CSR engagement in environmental matters and seek Chinese CSR input into socio-economic priorities like education and unemployment. This study advances the "policy framework" case for CSR by highlighting some of the gains of government-mandated CSR for local and foreign corporate entities from China's experience. The increasing entry of Chinese private companies into Zimbabwe is a potential platform for absolute gains for either party. The Chinese government gains from the proceeds of Chinese corporate profitability in Zimbabwe, while the Zimbabwean government gains from the actualisation of development goals. The presence or absence of a legal and regulatory framework considerably impacts how multinational corporations engage in CSR programmes. A voluntary CSR engagement does not seem to be an appropriate model for Zimbwabwe's sustainable development aspirations.

The motive of a regulatory framework in the form of a CSR Act of Parliament is to lay a legal obligation on all the profit-making business entities with a certain market cap to give back to society a percentage of their profits through CSR or help the government develop the economy. Due to limited access to fiscal resources, Zimbabwe's rapid growth would be derailed without the input of the private sector and for-profit organisations. Through a legislated CSR, companies engaging in CSR can adopt more community-uplifting and responsible internal policies that guarantee the systematic rewarding and penalising of responsible and irresponsible business practices, respectively. Beyond the extremes of carrot (reward) and stick (penalties) measures, regulation will guarantee the mandated channelling of CSR funds into sectors of the economy prioritised by Zimbabwean law and international protocols like the UN SDGs while upholding social and environmental concerns. Mandatory CSR arrangments in Zimbabwe should guarantee enhanced market and public-sector rewards due to prioritised CSR commitment and penalise non-complying companies. An institutionalised and highly regulated CSR framework in China's corporate governance system provides an opportunity for Zimbabwe to introduce a mandatory CSR without jeopardising Sino-Zimbabwe's economic and political relations.

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