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The Hybrid Imperative and Its Discontents: Multinational Corporations, Localisation Strategies, and Development in Africa

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ABSTRACT

The strategic imperative for MNCs to balance global integration with local adaptation is a basic assumption of international business. Yet, the application and outcomes of this hybrid model are still critically underexplored in the case of Africa. This paper explores the localisation strategy of MNCs operating within the consumer goods and fast-food industries across South Africa, Kenya, and Tanzania. Utilising a qualitative multi-case study approach, it juxtaposes the operational, marketing, and corporate social responsibility strategies of firms such as KFC and Coca-Cola. Results identify an emergent taxonomy: while technological and marketing adaptations abound, often successful, as in the case of KFC's use of Zenput and micro-influencer campaigns. The implementation of labour standards often fails; similarly, CSR initiatives vary from transformative social embeddedness, such as KFC's Add Hope, to more criticised "soft marketing" efforts, as evident in Coca-Cola's water projects. The paper concludes that the effectiveness of the hybrid model is not inherent but rather a function of its implementation. It calls for a co-development paradigm in which MNC performance would be measured by its ability to build equitable partnerships, ensure radical transparency, and align its core operations with SDGs so as to address deep-seated critiques of neo-colonialism and corruption.

Keywords: Multinational Corporations, Global Integration, Local Adaptation, Africa, Corporate Social Responsibility, Kenya, South Africa, KFC, Neo-colonialism, Sustainable Development.

INTRODUCTION

The role of MNCs in the African economic landscape is a prime paradox seen in modern globalisation studies: on one hand, they are generally regarded as crucial drivers of economic development, as they bring immense foreign direct investment, technology transfer, and employment to developing markets Achola 2016; Games 2015. The expansion of global brands into African markets has been linked to modern developments in retail infrastructure, supply chains, and spillover knowledge that could confer benefits on local economies. On the other hand, a strong scholarly tradition frames the very same corporations as modern vectors of neo-colonialism, perpetuating economic dependency and facilitating resource exploitation through sophisticated mechanisms of control Udofia 1984; Nwosu 2023; Yangailo 2024. This perspective underlines that MNCs may often undermine local industries, shape governmental policies for their benefit, and repatriate profits to ultimately curtail meaningful domestic accumulation of capital.

This tension is particularly acute in the FMCG and quick-service restaurant sectors, which involve globally recognised brands embedding themselves within diverse and complex local contexts characterised by distinct consumer preferences, regulatory environments, and socio-economic challenges. The strategic imperative to navigate this complex terrain has given rise to what international business literature identifies as the central challenge of balancing global integration with local responsiveness. The dominant strategic framework for addressing this challenge involves navigating the balance between the GI standardisation of operations, brand identity, and quality control to achieve economies of scale and maintain consistent brand positioning worldwide, and LA the customisation of products, marketing strategies, and business practices to meet specific host-country demands and cultural contexts.

While this "hybrid model" is well-theorised in international business literature, its practical implementation and socio-economic consequences in African markets require deeper, more critical examination. The existing scholarship has often fallen into a polarised dichotomy, with one strand (Muli, 2019; Achola, 2016) focusing on strategic business advantages of localisation strategies and the other (Udofia, 1984; Nwosu, 2023) on macrolevel critiques of corporate imperialism and exploitation. This resulted in a major gap in understanding nuanced, on-the-ground manifestations and variegated outcomes of the GI-LA balance within various operational domains-from supply chain management and human resources to marketing and corporate social responsibility.

This paper addresses the critical gap with the following research question: To what extent does the hybrid model of global integration and local adaptation enable MNCs to achieve sustainable and equitable success in African markets, and under what conditions does this model either transcend or reinforce existing power asymmetries?

We argue, however, that a hybrid strategy, though a necessary condition for both market entry and operational viability, is not sufficient to attain legitimacy and ensure sustainable success in the African context. The model's effectiveness would depend on how far it goes beyond superficial or instrumental adaptation to reach deep and authentic embeddedness in local economic and social fabrics. In a comparative multi-case study of MNC operations in South Africa and Kenya, we reveal that what constitutes the most significant differentiator between successful and failed localisation strategies is whether they are used for simple market penetration or as an instrument for genuine, co-creative development that adds shared value to both corporations and host communities.

This paper is organised to advance this argument step by step. Section 2 lays out the theoretical framework, combining the GI-LA model from the international business literature with critical political economy perspectives on MNC operations in developing contexts. Section 3 outlines the qualitative, multi-case study methodology used in this study. Section 4 provides the empirical results, considering localisation strategies in four key domains: market entry structures, operational processes, marketing communications, and corporate social responsibility initiatives. Section 5 discusses these findings, highlighting the critical disparity between policy and practice in localisation efforts. Finally, Section 6 concludes by calling for a conceptual shift from a strategic hybrid model to what we term a "co-development paradigm" for MNC operations in Africa, a framework that places equitable partnerships, radical transparency, and adherence to the sustainable development goals as prerequisites for long-term corporate legitimacy and success.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The study is done at the juncture between international business strategy and critical development studies, two areas that often have conflicting perspectives on the nature and role, and implications, of Multinational Corporations. In order to capture the complexity of MNC operations in Africa, two distinct yet complementary pillars form the theoretical framework of this paper: first, the strategic imperative of the GI-LA framework, and second, the critical political economy lens that focuses on power relations and neo-colonial continuities.

2.1 The Strategic Imperative: Global Integration vs. Local Adaptation

The GI-LA framework is one of the cornerstones of international management theory and provides a pragmatic lens to understand how MNCs structure their global operations, according to Jain (2024) and Miao (2023). The pursuit of GI is driven by the rationale of standardisation and efficiency. MNCs utilise GI to maintain consistent brand identity, achieve uniform product quality, ensure economies of scale in production and supply chain management, and spread best practice and innovation across their global network. This integrative force often becomes centralised at corporate headquarters and is crucial to making a cohesive, recognisable global brand.

On the contrary, LA is a responsive strategy. The inevitable heterogeneity of global markets necessitates choices by MNCs through the adaptation of their offerings to disparate consumer tastes and preferences, distinctive regulatory and political environments, unique competitive configurations, and deeply entrenched cultural norms. This could involve changes in product formulation, localised marketing campaigns, adaptation of pricing policies, and modification of human resources practices. Choices for firms are seldom binary; a hybrid approach is often the rule, although the particular point of balance adopted is always shifting and tends to vary from industry to industry, corporate function to corporate function, and host country context to host country context.

For example, Hansen (2020) views "local content" as an increasingly formalised, often legislated expression of LA applied to the extractive sector, where MNCs would be obliged to incorporate local labour and suppliers and local knowledge into their value chains; this is a strategic response both to governmental pressure and pragmatic requirements for social legitimacy. In a similar vein, the widespread use of franchising in the fast-food sector can be seen in KFC's entry into Kenya, reported by Achola (2016); this is a structural hybrid model that inherently balances GI-global brand and operational standards with LA local franchisee ownership and market knowledge.

2.2. The Critical Lens: Neo-Colonialism, Corruption, and the New CSR

In tandem with this managerialist argument is a strong, critical body of literature that contests the supposedly benign view of MNCs as simple economic agents. From a perspective informed by dependency and worldsystems theories, the massive economic power of MNCs can replicate, under new conditions, colonial-era power dynamics, a phenomenon variously termed neo-colonialism (Udofia, 1984; Nwosu, 2023). In this light, MNCs do not act as disinterested agents of development; often, they play into structuring the global economy in such ways as to reinforce the economic dependency of African nations through facilitating the outflow of resources and profits, hampering local industrial development (Mthombeni, 2006).

This critical lens underlines a number of key pathologies. It investigates how MNCs can influence government policies unduly, contribute to or create propitious conditions for corrupt practices to occur (Zekeri, 2016), and seek to repatriate profit without creating meaningful local value and reinvesting it therein. From within this frame, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is invariably regarded with heavy scepticism. Rather than an authentic concern for social well-being, CSR is often presented as a variant of "soft marketing" or a legitimising device in strategic discourse intended to obfuscate exploitative practice at its core and secure a "social license to operate" without changing core business behaviour substantively (Buckley, 2009). This critique asserts that CSR reports more often than not remain "narrative as opposed to scientific, and exaggerative in their claims" (Buckley, 2009, p. 3), serving a public relations function rather than a transformative one.

Valid critiques have coalesced into calls for a new, even transformative, approach to corporate citizenship. Indeed, other scholars such as Amodu (2020) and Mangaliso (1992) emphasise that for MNCs to be seen as legitimate and sustainable actors in Africa, their CSR should be transformed from peripheral philanthropy to being aligned directly with the most pressing developmental needs of the continent, as represented by the SDGs. This "new CSR" is one in which social and environmental considerations are not ancillary add-ons but are integral to core business strategy, creating shared value between the corporation and the host society.

2.3. Synthesising the Frameworks: An Integrated Analytical Approach

This paper synthesises these two dominant perspectives into a more holistic and critical analytical framework. We use the GI-LA as an appropriate and robust analytical tool for the dissection and categorisation of the strategic choices and operational mechanisms employed by MNCs in Africa. From there, one can systematically examine how these corporations attempt to balance competing pressures. Simultaneously, we utilise the critical political economy framework to assess the quality, intent, and ultimate impact of those strategies. A dual framework enables us to ask key questions that neither perspective could adequately address in isolation: whether a specific local adaptation constitutes a genuine response to local needs or a cynical calculation for market access; whether a globally integrated policy empowers or disempowers local stakeholders; whether a CSR initiative represents "co-development" or "soft marketing". This integrated approach allows for a differentiated analysis that takes into account the strategic imperatives of MNCs while

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not overlooking the significant power disparities and related ethical responsibilities within their operations. It takes the debate beyond the question of whether MNCs must adapt to one that more usefully questions how they adapt, to what ends, and to whose benefit. The synthesis below informs the conceptual basis upon which the succeeding multi-case study analysis is founded. It allows for a critical review of whether the hybrid model acts as a vehicle for equitable development or simply as a sophisticated reiteration of embedded power asymmetries.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative multi-case study design (Yin 2018) is employed in this research to investigate the complex

context-dependent MNC localisation strategy phenomenon in Africa. This approach is most suitable for addressing "how" and "why" questions of contemporary events over which the researcher has little control and is best suited to offer the most extensive, nuanced explanation of the implementation of the GI-LA hybrid model and its consequences in nature. By focusing on multiple cases, the study adopts a replication logic that is then supported by analytical generalisation, which enhances robustness and validity by showing how the hybrid model manifests across contexts and operational domains.

3.1. Case Selection and Rationale

The study has a focus on the FMCG and fast-food industries in South Africa, Kenya, and Tanzania. These countries have been chosen because they represent major economic hubs that are diverse in their market maturity, regulatory environments, and socio-political contexts in Eastern and Southern Africa, thus allowing for a comparative analysis of how contextual factors influence localisation strategies.

A purposive sampling strategy has been used in selecting information-rich cases to illustrate varied facets of the GI-LA dynamic. The main cases include:

KFC (Yum! Brands): This case has been analysed across multiple dimensions and countries to provide a holistic view of the strategic approach of a single MNC.

Market Entry & Structure: An essential example of the structural hybrid model is its use of franchising in Kenya, Achola, 2016.

Operational Adaptation: The implementation of Zenput's platform in South Africa as narrated by Crunchtime, 2024, represents a very clear example of using technology to enforce global standards and solve a local operational inefficiency.

Corporate Social Responsibility: The Add Hope program in South Africa represents a possible benchmark for deep, socially-embedded local adaptation (KFC Add Hope Report, 2024). The Kenyan cut-flower industry provides a critical case of the failure of policy implementation. This is poignantly highlighted by the study of the Kenya Flower Council KFC Silver Standard by Mwaniki (2008). It underlines the difference between formal adoption of a local labour code and the actual, on-the-ground implementation and brings out the limitation of superficial adaptation.

Coca-Cola South Africa: This provides an important contrasting perspective on CSR as being contested. The critical review by Buckley (2009) of its water projects serves as a good example of how CSR might be framed as "soft marketing" and scrutinises its likely alignment with controversial policy directions like privatisation, presenting a counter-narrative to more celebratory accounts of corporate citizenship.

3.2. Data Sources and Collection

Considering the cross-national nature of this investigation, coupled with its corporate strategy focus, the research in this study relies on an in-depth secondary data analysis supported by a robust and diverse set of data sources. This enables the triangulation of evidence, enhancing the construct validity and reliability of the findings since insights are checked across several independent sources. The data corpus will consist of:

Academic Literature: Refereed journal articles, academic books, and postgraduate dissertations (e.g., Mwaniki, 2008; Achola, 2016; Buckley, 2009) that present rigorous empirically-based analysis.

Industry and Corporate Publications: Published case studies from consulting firms, corporate sustainability reports, annual reports, and official corporate websites provide an indication of the strategic intent and selfreported outcomes of MNCs. (e.g., Crunchtime, 2024; Wowzi, n.d.)

Independent Reports and Media: Reports from NGOs, other international bodies, and investigative media articles provide critical external perspectives that can help mitigate corporate reporting bias.

3.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the collected data, following a systematic process of coding and theme development. Both deductive and inductive approaches were followed in the analysis. A first set of codes was developed deductively directly from the integrated theoretical framework, including:

GI stands for Global Integration; examples of codes include 'GI-Brand Standardisation', 'GI-Operational Efficiency', and 'GI-Centralised Control'.

Local adaptation (LA): Codes include 'LA - Product Modification', 'LA - Marketing Localisation', 'LA - Community Engagement', 'LA - Regulatory Compliance'.

Critical Evaluation: Codes include 'CSR - Soft Marketing', 'CSR - SDG Alignment', 'Power Asymmetry', and 'Implementation Gap'.

These codes were systematically applied to the case data by using techniques of qualitative data analysis. The process entailed iterative cycles of reading, coding, and reflection in order to identify recurring patterns, salient contradictions, and emergent themes related to the drivers, manifestations, and consequences of localisation strategies. For example, data from the KFC Zenput case was coded for both 'GI - Operational Efficiency' and 'LA - Technological Solution', whereas data from the cut-flower case was coded for 'Implementation Gap' and 'LA - Labour Welfare (Failed)'. This rigorous process allowed for the identification of cross-case themes, such as the critical role of enforcement mechanisms in successful adaptation and the spectrum of CSR authenticity, which structure the findings and discussion that follow.

4. Empirical Results

The same GI-LA hybrid model applied across African markets has yielded a wide range of results, from spectacular success to total failure. This points to the fact that the effectiveness of the model is far from given and instead depends on the strategic domain in question, the authenticity of implementation, and appropriateness to local developmental contexts. The findings are organised across four critical operational domains, indicating the multifaceted nature of localisation.

4.1. Market Entry and Structure (Franchising Model as a Structural Hybrid)

KFC's market entry into Kenya is a good example of a structurally embedded hybrid approach. According to Achola (2016), franchising is an institutional mechanism that codifies the balance between GI and LA. The global franchisor still has tight control over the core elements of Global Integration, such as brand standards, secret recipes, operating procedures, and quality assurance measures. At the same time, this model strategically exploits the advantages of Local Adaptation by leveraging the franchisee's domestic capital, intimate knowledge of the Kenyan consumer environment, established supply chain linkages, and familiarity with the complex local regulatory and bureaucratic arrangements.

While the model facilitates rapid market penetration, it also exposes the inherent tensions of the hybrid strategy: Achola's 2016 research on the challenges faced by franchisees, including heavy taxation and burdensome formalisation procedures, directly impacts the profitability and scalability of the model. This shows that the success of a globally designed structural hybrid is directly mediated by local institutional and regulatory realities, necessitating a permanent negotiation of the global strategy with the local context of operation.

4.2. Operational Adaptation (Technology as a Hybrid Enabler)

A paradigmatic example of successful operational localisation is the adoption of the Zenput platform by KFC South Africa. Confronted with a locally specific operational inefficiency, an antiquated, paper-based audit system that was slow, prone to data loss, and offered delayed insights, the franchisee implemented a technological solution. This intervention represents a sophisticated form of glocalisation in that it served the objective of Global Integration, enforcing uniform standards in regard to food safety, cleanliness, and product appearance, but did so through a Local Adaptation to address a critical local operational weakness.

The results were transformative: the platform provided real-time data and automated corrective actions, yielding a 6.6% improvement in product appearance tests and freeing up over six hours of administrative work by area managers per week (Crunchtime, 2024). This case underlines the fact that effective LA is not limited to changing products for local tastes but can be extended to the use or development of tools that improve the very conduct of GI so that a virtuous cycle ensues in which local efficiency gains feed back into global brand standards.

4.3. The Implementation Gap (The Chasm Between Policy and Practice in Labour Standards)

In contrast, the Kenyan cut-flower industry, critically reviewed by Mwaniki (2008), exposes a total failure of policy localisation. The KFC code was devised as an explicit Local Adaptation to national and international pressure, setting a "Silver Standard" for worker welfare, safety, and fair labour practices consistent with conventions of the ILO. Mwaniki's empirical investigation into Thika District farms revealed an extreme implementation deficit. Evidence from the study showed that most workers were not provided with protective clothing, unfair dismissal was rife, and employees were not guaranteed safe and reliable transportation.

This case illustrates a critical theoretical point, namely that the presence of a localised policy or code is necessary but insufficient for meaningful adaptation: in the absence of robust, transparent monitoring systems, accountability mechanisms, and corporate will to enforcement, LA is little more than a hollow, performative exercise. The gulf here between de jure policy and de facto practice serves to underscore the ways in which power asymmetries can be perpetuated beneath a veneer of corporate social responsibility and tends to affirm the perspectives of critics who question the sincerity of such self-regulatory schemes.

4.4 Corporate Social Responsibility (The Litmus Test of Corporate Intent)

It is within the domain of CSR that the tension between strategic and critical perspectives reveals itself most vividly, ranging from cynical instrumentalism to transformational embeddedness. The Critique: CSR as 'Soft Marketing' and Privatisation Catalyst. Indeed, an exploration of the critical view can be well-constructed with Buckley's in-depth analysis of water projects undertaken by Coca-Cola South Africa (CCSA) in 2009. The study characterises CCSA's CSR initiatives as "little more than soft marketing," aimed at protecting the corporate image. It argues that projects like the Munsieville leak repair, touted as benevolent community support, ultimately facilitated the municipality's broader agenda of water commercialisation, including the installation of pre-paid meters, a policy widely criticised for disproportionately burdening the poor. This aligns with the neocolonial critique, suggesting that corporate intervention can serve to advance market-centric political agendas under the guise of social responsibility, thereby reinforcing, rather than alleviating, existing socio-economic inequalities. The Transformative Potential: CSR as Social Embeddedness. On the other hand, KFC's Add Hope initiative in South Africa presents a model of CSR as deep social embeddedness. The programme, which has raised over R1 billion and provided more than 325 million meals since its inception, is structurally hybrid (KFC Add Hope Report, 2024). It is funded through a combination of Global Integration, a fixed percentage of revenue derived from KFC and its franchisees, and Local Adaptation, that is, micro-donations from South African customers and partnerships with over 120 local NPOs. By directly addressing the acute local challenge of child hunger (SDG 2), it has become a core part of the brand's local identity. An independent impact assessment by Toefy (2024) documented outcomes, including improved nutritional well-being, improved school attendance, and child potential being unlocked. This points toward a transformative CSR model that is scalable, sustainable, and moves beyond peripheral philanthropy to become an integrated, co-creative partnership with the local society, directly answering calls for a "new CSR" that is aligned with developmental imperatives (Amodu, 2020).

DISCUSSION

The empirical results presented here show that the GI-LA hybrid is not a monolithic, uniformly applied strategy but rather a fluid, often contradictory, highly context-dependent practice. Its adoption does not predetermine its success in sustainably creating value for both the corporation and the host society. Efficacy is critically dependent, instead, on two interrelated factors: first, the specific functional area in which it is applied, and more fundamentally, the authenticity of the MNC's commitment to meaningful embeddedness. This section synthesises the cross-case findings to detail the core conditions under which the hybrid model either realises its potential or reveals its limitations.

5.1. The Determinants of Effective Localisation: Beyond Policy to Enabling Systems

The huge contrast between the failure of the Kenya Flower Council code and the success of the KFC Zenput platform highlights a key determinant of successful localisation: the presence or absence of enabling systems to implement it. Both initiatives were designed as localised mechanisms to enforce standards, one for social welfare and the other for operational quality. Their outcomes were very different because of the infrastructural underpinning for enforcement.

Where the Zenput platform succeeded was in that it was an integrated system which combined strategic decentralisation with performance transparency. It empowered local and area managers with real-time data, clear accountability, and changed a global standard from a static directive into a dynamic, manageable process. The technology itself served as a neutral arbiter and tool for empowerment, helping local actors solve problems proactively.

In contrast, the KFC code in the cut-flower industry was a paper policy that remained devoid of analogous enabling systems, meaningful monitoring, credible grievance mechanisms, or clear sanctions for noncompliance. A governance vacuum emerged in which corporate commitment was neither verifiable nor enforceable at the operational level. The critical implication of this disjunction is a key theoretical and practical message: Local Adaptation requires more than the crafting of context-sensitive policies; it requires the parallel investment in the technological, organisational, and governance structures that can make those policies actionable and enforceable. Without such systems, LA can too easily be hollowed out by cost-cutting pressures and managerial indifference, reinforcing the very gap it is intended to bridge.

5.2. CSR as a Litmus Test for Corporate Intent and a Strategic Differentiator

Juxtaposing Coca-Cola's water projects with KFC's Add Hope initiative positions Corporate Social Responsibility as a particularly powerful litmus test in discerning corporate intent. This domain most acutely exposes the tension between the strategic and critical perspectives on MNCs.

Cases like Coca-Cola's Munsieville project really give strong validation to the critical view of CSR as a legitimising tool or "soft marketing" (Buckley, 2009; Zekeri, 2016). When CSR initiatives are poorly integrated, unilaterally designed, or, as critically argued, align with controversial state policies like privatisation, they function as a superficial veneer. It's such projects that enforce the neo-colonial critique by

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showing how corporate power can be used to mould socio-political landscapes in one way or another to serve the interests of market-centric agendas, often at the cost of communities that are already vulnerable.

However, the case of KFC's Add Hope illustrates how CSR can rise above this critique to become a wellspring of transformational value. The reason the program works is because it is, at its core, co-creative; it was both designed and implemented with the active engagement of a network comprising over 120 local NPOs, scalable and sustainable, both because of corporate revenue and customer micro-donations directly speaks to a key developmental challenge, SDG 2 Zero Hunger (Amodu, 2020). Beyond philanthropy, it is an approach that secures what might best be described as social embeddedness, where the corporation's identity becomes inextricably linked to its positive social impact. This is much more than an academic distinction; it carries with it profound strategic implications. Superficial CSR exposes MNCs to reputational risk and accusations of neocolonialism, undermining their long-term social license to operate. Authentic, embedded CSR nurtures a deep reservoir of public goodwill and trust. Social capital buffers the firm through crises, tightens brand loyalty, and encourages a friendlier, more stable operating environment. In sum, the decision between superficial and embedded CSR would cease to be merely an ethical choice but become a strategic compulsion toward long-term viability in increasingly conscious African markets. In other words, the hybrid model pays off only when LA is operationalised through robust enabling systems, and when CSR is pursued as an authentic strategy of codevelopment. What really makes the difference between MNCs that are perceived as extractive and those that are welcomed as partners is the demonstrable authenticity of their commitment to creating shared value, moving from a logic of exploitation to one of mutual reinforcement.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of the GI-LA hybrid model for MNCs operating in Africa. Our multi-case analysis across fast food, horticulture, and beverages in Kenya and South Africa confirms that the model is a strategic imperative if the business is to gain entry to and remain viable within markets. However, the outcomes are highly uneven, ranging from exploitative to transformative corporatecommunity relations. What clearly emerges as the central conclusion is that success is not guaranteed by the adoption of the model but is critically determined by the depth, authenticity, and ethical integrity of its implementation. The hybrid model is a vessel; the value of the contents depends on the corporate philosophy that fills it.

6.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of this research carry significant implications for both academic theory and corporate practice.

This paper makes a primary theoretical contribution by forcefully integrating the critical perspectives of political economy into the mainstream, often managerially-focused, GI-LA discourse. It demonstrates that analysing localisation as a purely technical or strategic challenge, focusing only on what is adapted and how, is analytically inadequate. Our synthesis reveals that localisation must simultaneously be understood as an ethical and political endeavour. The cases of the Kenya Flower Council code and Coca-Cola's water projects show that without this critical lens, research can overlook how power asymmetries, neo-colonial legacies, and the potential for "soft marketing" can subvert the developmental potential of adaptation. This enriches the GI-LA model by insisting that the purpose and power dynamics of localisation are as important as its operational mechanics.

For business leaders and strategists, the implications are clear and actionable:

Move beyond superficial adaptation to systemic empowerment: Localisation needs to be embedded in core operations and empowered with the right tools and authority. In the Zenput case, as elsewhere, it is this investment in technologies and governance structures that can enable transparent monitoring-decentralised execution that turns policy into practice. By contrast, in the cut-flower industry, policy without an enforcement mechanism is little more than a press statement.

Elevate CSR from philanthropy to co-development: Social initiatives must be co-designed with local partners, strategically aligned with the SDGs, and integrated directly into the business model. The Add Hope program provides a model for that, which shows that when CSR stops being a peripheral charity but instead is made part of the core and is revenue-funded, it acquires unparalleled social capital and a license to operate.

Legitimacy through Radical Transparency: MNCs will have to practice radical transparency in financial transactions, supply chains, and social impact reporting to actively confront allegations of corruption and exploitation. Paying taxes, sourcing products, and reporting verified outcomes of social interventions are no longer a choice but a precondition for trust in an increasingly cynical and networked world.

6.2. Towards a Co-Development Paradigm

This, in turn, points to the conceptual evolution that is required in framing the role of MNCs in Africa. We suggest a movement away from the strategic hybrid model and toward a co-development paradigm, one that is much more than a semantic shift but represents instead a vital reorientation of corporate purpose and practice. The co-development paradigm would be characterised by three core principles: Equitable Partnership in Value Creation: This goes beyond transactional relationships or local content quotas. It involves sharing value creation more equitably by incorporating local stakeholders into high-value activities like research and development, product design for regional markets, and corporate governance-such that local knowledge and interests shape the corporate trajectory from within. SDG-Aligned Core Operations: Rather than the SDGs being a separate checklist for CSR, in a codevelopment paradigm, positive social and environmental impact becomes a central strategic pillar and an important key performance indicator for core business. This would mean business models are inherently designed to address, not inadvertently exacerbate, challenges like inequality, climate change, and poverty.

The aim is to turn an institution that is perceived to be of the community, not just in it. This would mean the success of the corporation is inextricably linked with the resilience and well-being of the community. It contributes to the social fabric, not as a benefactor, but as a mutually invested stakeholder; thus, it changes the narrative from extraction to mutual growth. In conclusion, while the GI-LA hybrid model provides the essential strategic framework for MNCs to operate in Africa, it is the commitment to this more profound, equitable, and transparent co-development paradigm that will determine their ultimate legacy. The choice is stark: will they be remembered as catalysts for sustainable progress who partnered in Africa’s ascent, or will they be consigned to history as the neo-colonial entities of their critics' portrayal, adept at adaptation in form but not in spirit? The answer lies not in their strategies, but in their integrity.

7. Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

While this study offers a new theoretical synthesis and rigorous qualitative analysis of the GI-LA hybrid model in Africa, there are important limitations to this study, which naturally point toward fruitful paths for further scholarly inquiry. A qualitative, multi-case study design was chosen due to its depth and the nuanced unravelling of causal mechanisms that it afforded, but by design, it inherently limits generalizability across all MNCs and sectors in Africa. Future research could build on this foundation in several important ways:

A logical subsequent step might be to create a quantitatively testable framework based on the co-development paradigm proposed herein. Researchers could operationalise its principles, such as equitable partnership, for example, measured by local representation in senior management and R&D; SDG-alignment, for instance, by the percentage of core operations linked to specific SDG targets; and authentic embeddedness, such as longitudinal trust metrics among local communities, into a set of quantifiable indicators. This would enable large-N statistical analysis to correlate these practices with long-term corporate performance and social impact metrics. Future studies might focus on more systematic primary data collection. This could involve standardised interviews with a wider range of stakeholders mentioned earlier, MNC managers, local suppliers, representatives of civil society, and government officials across cases, and the collection of discrete, comparable data points such as local employment statistics, local sourcing ratios, and detailed CSR expenditure breakdowns. Table 1 below provides a proposed framework for such a comparative analysis that would allow for a more structured identification of patterns across countries and sectors.

Table 1 Proposed Framework for Comparative Analysis of MNC Localisation Strategies

Strategic Dimension	**KFC (Kenya)**	**KFC (South Africa)**	**Cut-Flower Industry (Kenya)**	**Coca-Cola (South Africa)**
GI–LA Balance	Structural Franchising	Operational Technology Integration	Policy Labour Code	CSR Community Relations
Implementation Mechanism	Franchise Agreement	Zenput Quality-Control Platform	KFC Silver Standard	Community Water Projects
Outcome	Market Penetration	Product Quality and Consistency	Widespread Labour Non-Compliance	Contested Corporate Legitimacy
Key Success/Failure Factor	Local Partner Knowledge	Technology-Enabled Accountability	Weak Regulatory Enforcement	Alignment with National Privatisation Agenda
Proposed Metric for Future Research	Percentage of Local Management	Audit Compliance Rate	Worker Grievance Reports	Community Impact Index

Note. GI–LA = Global Integration–Local Adaptation.

Source: Author

Third, while this study has consciously incorporated critical political economy perspectives, further work might enhance the epistemic representation by more centrally drawing on or engaging with the rich and growing body of scholarship from African academic institutions and thinkers on development, corporate governance, and postcolonial business practices. This would further embed the analysis in local intellectual traditions and perspectives.

Finally, there is a need for focused exploration of the policy implications of the co-development paradigm. For example, research might delve into the exact regulatory instruments, incentive structures, and partnership models that African governments and regional bodies like the AfCFTA could use to incentivize MNCs to move away from a hybrid model toward a co-development approach. This would directly translate the conceptual contribution in this paper into actionable guidance for policymakers desirous of maximising the developmental benefits of foreign direct investment.

By addressing these areas, scholars can continue building a more empirically robust, methodologically diverse, and policy-relevant understanding of how multinational corporations can operate in Africa, not just as efficient entities but as equitable and embedded partners in sustainable development.

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