

## **Stakeholders' Engagement in the Sustainability Reporting of Companies: *A study within the context of Cameroon***

## **L'implication des Parties Prenantes dans le Reporting Societal des Entreprises: *Une étude en contexte camerounais***

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## Abstract

The preparation of a sustainability report requires stakeholder engagement as a mandatory stage for the publication of a complete, credible and useful document to the stakeholders. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to empirically find out whether this requirement is considered by companies in their sustainability reporting practice by examining the level of stakeholders' engagement in sustainability reporting of companies in Cameroon. To achieve this, a multiple case study was conducted where the stakeholder engagement disclosure items (characteristics) were evaluated through a content analysis of seven sustainability reports of three companies for the periods 2015 to 2017. The investigation reveals that the level of stakeholder engagement in the sustainability reporting of companies is averaged. The stakeholder engagement disclosure item that was regularly disclosed is the "identification of stakeholders" whereas, the "perception" (testimony) of stakeholders on previous reports was the least disclosed items.

**Keywords:** Sustainability reporting; Stakeholder engagement; Stakeholder; Multiple case study; content analysis

## Résumé

La préparation d'un rapport de développement durable (RDD) nécessite l'engagement des parties prenantes en tant qu'étape obligatoire pour la publication d'un document complet et surfilé à l'intention de celles-ci. Par conséquent, le but de cette étude est de déterminer de manière empirique si cette exigence est prise en compte par les entreprises dans leur pratique de reporting en matière de développement durable, en examinant le niveau d'implication des parties prenantes dans les rapports de développements durable des entreprises au Cameroun. Pour atteindre cet objectif, une étude de cas multiples a été réalisée dans laquelle les éléments de divulgation de l'engagement des parties prenantes ont été évalués à travers une analyse de contenu de 7 rapports de développements durable de 3 entreprises pour la période 2015 à 2017. Les résultats montrent que le niveau d'engagement des parties prenantes dans les rapports de développements durable des entreprises est moyen. L'élément de divulgation d'implication des parties prenantes régulièrement divulgué est « l'identification des parties prenantes », tandis que la « perception » (témoignage) des parties prenantes sur les rapports précédent est l'élément le moins divulgué.

**Mots-clés :** Reporting développement durable, Engagement des parties prenantes, Parties prenantes; Etude de cas multiples; analyse de contenu.

## **Introduction**

In our modern day's context, the activities of companies do not longer revolve around profit maximisation only, but also on other aspects such as the environment, human resource, consumers and other social issues (Gunawan & Yudani, 2017). Organisations have come to realise that the success of their business depend on their level of accountability to a wide group of stakeholder, by providing economic, social and environmental information. This growing concern has raised new interrogations as far as the underlying goals of a company are concerned, the most suitable manner to account for and the length to which the expectations of different stakeholders have been satisfy (Adams, 2002). Referring to Tangamani, et al., (2016), the life of a business is increasingly being affected by the nature of organisational stakeholders' relationship, which covers wide range of interest and the most important of which is how a company handles social and environmental matters (Gray et al., 1996; Russo & Perini, 2010). Hence the quest to manage the social and environmental aspect of the firm has given rise to new concept in the name of Corporate Social Responsibility which encompasses the social and environmental dimensions of the firm (Dinia & Louizi, 2021).

The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) comes into play when looking at the relation between stakeholders and the organisation. CSR is defined, as a firm's obligation and accountability for incorporating social and environmental responsibilities into the business decision-making process as well as to use its resources in a way to contribute to the wellbeing of society (Caroll, 1979; Carroll & Shabana, 2010). Following Nakou & Simen (2021), this definition agrees to that proposed by Snider et al. (2013), who consider CSR as an obligation for an organisation to use its resources in a way it will be beneficial to society. This responsibility can be social, such as the role that businesses play in promoting the health and safety of their employees, protecting the environment, the fight against corruption and respect for human rights in the communities where they operate (Toukabri, et al., 2014 p.209). Organisations usually account for these responsibilities by the means of sustainability reports.

Manetti (2011) stresses on the importance for organisations to take into account stakeholders' opinions in the preparation of sustainability reports. This means that CSR activities have to take into consideration all the stakeholders of an organisation. The best way for organisation to obtain stakeholders' views is to engage them in sustainability reporting. The

failure to identify and engage stakeholders may give rise to a sustainability report which lacks credibility before the eyes of firm's various stakeholders. Meanwhile a systematic stakeholder engagement can enhance the acceptance of a sustainability report by stakeholders (Gunawan & Yudani, 2017). This is to say that the credibility and quality of sustainability reports are closely tied to stakeholders' engagement (SE) carried out before or during the preparation of the report.

In the context of Cameroon, studies point out the absence of a coercive regulatory framework on matters concerning corporate social responsibility reporting (Ndjetcheu, 2013a & 2016; Diawara & Lavalée, 2014) in the OHADA Sub region, yet many companies in Sub-Sahara Africa in general and Cameroon in particular are engaged in corporate social responsibility activities. Following Dongmo (2017), the works of Ndjetcheu (2013); Ngantchou (2015), Moskolai (2016) have revealed that in Cameroon, CSR is practiced by enterprises at the operational level as well as the reporting level because of pressure mounted on them by international norms and regulations. This implies that some companies in Cameroon are engaged in sustainability reporting (SR).

Dongmo (2017) carried out a research work in sustainability reporting in the OHADA zone in which he investigated on the determinants of voluntary corporate social and environmental reporting in the OHADA sub region in general and Cameroon in particular and under environmental factors; he established that pressures from contractual stakeholders have a positive influence on the disclosure of corporate social and environmental information though partially. Furthermore, Dongmo (2019) conducted a research on the mode of production and disclosure of non-financial information in the absence of a regulatory framework in which he establishes that internet websites follow suit by annual integrated reports and sustainability reports are the main avenues via which companies disseminate social and environmental information and showing clearly that the implication in the local community is the main concern of companies following pressure from some stakeholder such as consumer associations. However these studies fail to show the implication of stakeholders in the sustainability reporting processes whereas referring to Manetti (2011), the quality and credibility of a sustainability report depends on the level of involvement of stakeholders in reporting activities. Owing to the fact that previous studies acknowledge the disclosure of corporate social and environmental information in Cameroon in particular and OHADA sub-region in general via internet websites, annual reports

and sustainability reports (Dongmo, 2019), it takes us to ponder on the quality and credibility of such reporting in Cameroon and knowing fully well that the quality and credibility of a sustainability report is usually ascertained via the level of stakeholders' engagement, this definitely brings us to pose our research question as:

**What is the level of stakeholder engagement in the sustainability reporting of companies in Cameroon? Better still, do companies operating in Cameroon adhere to the GRI guidelines on stakeholder engagement in their sustainability reporting process?**

In fact, this is a qualitative study whose main goal is to ascertain the level of stakeholder engagement in the dissemination corporate social and environmental information. In order to achieve this objective, the work comprises three sections. The first section discusses the literature review, the second section focuses on the methodology used and the discussion of result follows there-off in the last section.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Fernando & Lawrence (2014) hold that, the literature on corporate social responsibility reporting (sustainability reporting) reveals that, regardless of the geographical location, or the developmental status of different countries, sustainability reporting is increasingly being adopted by these countries. Following Fernando & Lawrence (2014), till date, no commonly agreed theoretical framework exist accounting for companies' behaviour in relation to corporate social responsibility practices (Gray et al. 1995a). Referring to Fernando & Lawrence (2014), some scholars like Deegan (2002), highlighted that there is no accepted theory in corporate social and environmental disclosures rather there is more variation in theoretical perspective being mobilised. However, three theories are mobilised in this work; the institutional theory, the stakeholder theory and the legitimacy theories. These theories are classified under social and political theories. These theories according to Gray et al. (1995a) provide insightful theoretical perspective on corporate social responsibilities. In addition, Chen & Roberts (2010) highlight that one characteristic shared by these theories is that all assume that any organisation is influence by the society in which it operates and in turn, the organisation also influences the society.

## **I.1. Social and political theories explaining the disclosure of non-financial information**

Gray et al. (1995a) consider institutional theory; stakeholder theory and legitimacy theory as social and political theories.

### **I.1.1. Institutional Theory**

Institutional theory regards the relationship between the environment and organisations as being based on how organisations integrate institutional norms and rules into the organisation in order to gain stability for company survival (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). According to Carpenter & Feroz (2000) cited by Fernando & Lawrence (2014) institutional theory focuses on the premise that organisations respond to pressures from their institutional environments and adopt structures and procedures that are accepted by the society as being the appropriate organisational choice.

Institutional theory does not focus on the values of society; rather it focuses on the established institutional beliefs. These beliefs are thought to be the representation of the social value system (Chen & Roberts, 2010). Therefore, from the perspective of institutional theory, a firm would produce sustainability disclosure in order to conform to socially accepted norms and principles.

### **I.1.2. Legitimacy Theory**

Legitimacy theory is derived from the concept of organisational legitimacy, which has been defined as a condition or status which exist when an entity's value system is congruent with the value system of the large social system of which the entity is part (Mousa & Hassan, 2015). The legitimacy theory therefore seeks to explain why a firm makes social and environmental disclosure and holds that a firm is legitimised when its value system matches that of the society in which it forms part and that legitimacy is threatened when the firm's value system does not match that of the social system (Lindblom, 1994). Mousa & Hassan (2015), present examples of legitimisation as complying with legislation, establishing an environmental committee or the position of environmental manager to oversee a firm's ecological impact, developing networks or committees with local community representation, conducting environmental audits, establishing an emergency response system and aligning the firm with environmental.

A good number of the existing researches on why companies disclose environmental information in annual report indicate that legitimacy theory is one of the probable explanations

for the increase in environmental disclosure since the early 1980s. Deegan & Rankin (1996) report that a company will provide information to the users of accounts to justify or legitimise the company's continued operations within the society. They suggested that one of the functions of accounting and subsequently accounting reports is to legitimise the existence of the corporation.

### **1.1.3. Stakeholder Theory**

Stakeholder theory pertaining to managing organisations has become one of the major paradigm shifts of the last century and is concerned with the nature of the relationship between the firm and its stakeholders (Ayuso, et al., 2006). The theory is traced back to Freeman's (1984) now classic definition of stakeholders, arguably the most popular definition cited in literature (Kolk & Pinkse, 2006) which proposed that stakeholders are "any group and individuals who can affect, or is affected by the achievement of an organisation's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Donaldson & Preston (1995) defined stakeholders as any persons or groups that claim interests in an organisation which implies that all stakeholders are of value and deserve equal treatment.

Stakeholder theory postulates that organisations must engage with stakeholders for normative and instrumental reasons (Ayuso, et al., 2006; Donaldson & Preston, 1995). In the normative explanation, relationships between the organisation and stakeholders takes place on an ethical basis suggesting that managers must consider the interests of those stakeholders who have a legitimate stake in the organisation (Ayuso, et al., 2006; Preble, 2005). In normative theory there is a moral obligation for the organisation to engage with stakeholders (Greenwood, 2007; Preble, 2005) and people have a democratic right to participate in the decision making process (Reed, 2008). By contrast instrumental theory sees stakeholders as being valuable in helping the organisations achieve objectives since participation is seen as a means to an end (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Preble, 2005).

Referring to Gunawan & Yudani, (2017), Clarkson (1995) classified stakeholders into primary and secondary stakeholders. The primary stakeholder (shareholders or investors, employees, consumers, suppliers) is considered as the group whose presence is vital for the survival of the company; and company may cease to exist if the primary stakeholders are not present whereas, secondary stakeholders (local community, media, non-governmental organisations and special interest groups) are those who can impact or are impacted by a company's existence, but it is not directly take part in the company's activities or better still, the

company can survive without them. Thus, stakeholder theory considers sustainability disclosure as a way for managers to demonstrate their commitment to stakeholders.

### 1.2. Stakeholder Engagement and sustainability reporting

Following Gunawan & Yudani (2017), the Institute for Social and Ethical Accountability (ISEA, 1999) defines stakeholder engagement as a process of finding out the stakeholders' opinion on the organisation. The literature defines stakeholder engagement as the process of involving individuals and groups that are affected by the activities of the company in a positive way (Greenwood, 2007). Involving stakeholders in the reporting process and responding to their concerns will not only enhance the performance of a company, but it will also consolidate the competitive strength of the company (ISEA, 1999).

Following Gunawan & Yudani (2017), GRI (2006) holds that, sustainability report is the act of evaluating, disseminating, and being accountable to both primary and secondary stakeholders for organisational performance in view of moving towards sustainable development. The authors suggest that a sustainability report should provide an adequate representation of the sustainability performance integrating both positive and negative contributions of the company to the society. The UN Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) 4 guidelines on stakeholder engagement with two other SE features identified in the literature are illustrated on the table below.

**Table 1: GRI guidelines on stakeholder engagement.**

<b>GRI 4 (G4)</b>	<b>GUIDELINES</b>
G4-24	List of stakeholder groups engaged by the organisation.
G4-25	How are stakeholder groups identified?
G4-26	Approaches to stakeholder engagement (who, how and what outcomes)
G4-27	Stakeholder concerns and how the organisation has responded. Report stakeholder groups that raised each concern.
<b>Stakeholder engagement features identified in the social accounting literature</b>	
<b>Authors</b>	<b>SE characteristics</b>
Manetti & Toccafondi (2014)	Representation of stakeholder in SR.
Gunawan & Yudani (2017)	Perception of stakeholders on previous sustainability reports.

**Source: Adapted by the author**



## **2. THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND EMPIRICAL BASES OF THE RESEARCH**

This section exposes the philosophical worldview, the research approaches, the research designs and the research methods adopted in this work to conduct our inquiry in order to achieve the objective of this paper.

### **2.1. The philosophical worldview of the study**

Creswell (2013) uses the term worldview to mean a general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher brings to a study. According to Creswell (2013), others have called them paradigms (Lincoln et al., 2011; Mertens, 2010); epistemologies and ontologies (Crotty, 1998), or broadly conceived research methodologies (Neuman, 2009). This study adheres to the interpretivist paradigm given that this paradigm relies heavily on naturalistic methods such as interviews, observation and analysis of existing texts. Secondary data research is also popular with interpretivism philosophy. Interpretive researchers believe that the reality consists of people's subjective experiences of the external world; thus, they may adopt an inter-subjective epistemology and the ontological belief that reality is socially constructed.

#### **2.1.1. Research approach**

Willis (2007) asserts that interpretivists tend to favour qualitative approach as he explained that, qualitative approaches often give rich reports that are necessary for interpretivists to fully understand contexts. The research will employ a qualitative research approach as it is concerned with qualitative phenomenon of sustainability reporting, to uncover and explore the previously published sustainability reports by companies operating in Cameroon. Varvasovszky & Brugha (2000) argue that qualitative studies are useful when analysing complex issues such as policy issues as the methodology eliminates premature focusing on a few aspects while neglecting other items that may emerge in the data collection and analysis.

#### **2.1.2. Research design**

Research designs are types of inquiry within qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches that provide specific direction for procedures in a research design (Creswell, 2013). It specifies the methodology for collecting and analysing data (Zikmund, 2003).

- **Sample and Unit of analysis**

In this study, our sample consists of a multiple case studies of three companies producing SR. The sample comprises one of the companies that have been classified by *Association pour la communication sur les maladies tropicales* (ASCOMT) amongst the top ten “corporate social responsibility best practice” in Cameroon as of 2016. Also considered as sample in this research work are sustainability reports of two companies quoted to the Douala Stock. The sampling technique used is the iterative sampling, which Glaser & Strauss (1967) called theoretical sampling. Glaser & Strauss (1967) suggested that the iteration of data collection continues until the description of the experience is saturated, that is, until the new sources repeat what has been previously learned and no longer deepen or challenge the finding. The researcher was looking for companies whose sustainability reports comply with the GRI guidelines on SE. The unit of analysis in this research was the theme expressed as a word or parts of a sentence. The researcher was looking at words or parts of a sentence that could indicate themes of stakeholder engagement. The companies as per industry type are summarised below:

**Table 2: Numbers of companies per industry.**

Industry Types	Number of companies	Number of sustainability reports	Reports
Telecommunication	1	3	A, B & C
Agricultural	1	3	D, E & F
Cement	1	1	G
Total	3	7	

**Source: By the author**

- **Instruments of data collection**

This work made used of a combination of two data gathering instruments; document analysis and interview guide, in order to enhance the credibility of this study. Firstly, the document analysis was carried out on the sustainability reports downloaded from the companies’ website. Secondly, an interview guide was used via the administration of semi-structured questions to the top management of the companies concerning the six features of stakeholder engagement presented in table 1 above. This was intended to obtain the view of top management on the evidence gathered from the sustainability reports analysis.

- **Method of data analysis**

This study uses the content analysis method. Guthrie (2004) cited by Gunawan & Yudani (2017) considers content analysis is a method of codifying the characteristic-alike texts to be written in a variety of groups and classified depending on a specific criterion. The process involved a detailed examination of the content of the data or interview transcripts. The data from both secondary source (sustainability reports) and primary source the (interviews) made up the raw data for the analysis.

Performing the content analysis involved a number of steps as detailed in Krippendorff (1980) and Stemler (2001). The process starts with the researcher becoming fully conversant with the data and transcripts by reading and re-reading the reports and transcripts as well as the notes taken during the interviews. However, before the commencement of the analysis, the data was transcript. A multiple case study is adopted involving the sustainability reports of three companies that regularly publish CSR reports in accordance to the Global Reporting Initiative guidelines on stakeholder engagement.

### **2.3. The relevance of choosing Cameroon as an area of investigation of stakeholder engagement in sustainability reporting**

The choice for Cameroon as our area of investigation is explained by the fact that the research belong to this country of sub-Sahara Africa which has one of the most resilient economy in Central Africa. Being describe as “Africa in miniature”, one can easily understand that it possesses some of the socio-economic characteristics as well as companies with similar attributes found in other African countries. In addition, the current absence of work in the social accounting literature in French-speaking sub-Sahara African countries on the engagement of stakeholder in sustainability reporting prompted us to focus our research on Cameroon. Furthermore, the coexistence of two of the most spoken languages; English and French, in Cameroon favoured our choice for Cameroon. This is because this specificity attracts the establishment of great multinational companies in Cameroon hence, making Cameroon a very special country amongst the others in the continent. Also, this choice would have made it possible for sustainability reports (which were drafted in English) and the interviews carried out to be analysed without going for translation into the researcher’s main language which is English.

#### **2.4. Disclosure items which form the bases of the content analysis**

The Global Reporting Initiative (2006) has produced guidelines to promote routine and comparable sustainability reporting by business in order to ensure that both a minimum standard is maintained in terms of content and such content is inclusive and relevant. One of the guideline to be adhered by companies in their sustainability reporting process is stakeholder engagement. According to GRI, 2006, the quality and credibility of a sustainable report depend on stakeholder participation in the decision making process.

Hence the level of stakeholders' engagement in SR is evaluated base on the information present in sustainability report pertaining to SE as per the GRI requirements (criteria) on SE alongside SE features identified in the social accounting literature. The characteristics related to stakeholders' engagement under observation include:

##### ***2.4.1. Stakeholder groups identified by companies:***

It corresponds to criterion 1 of GRI on SE. The identification of stakeholders is the preliminary stage to comply with before the attainment of stakeholder engagement. If in a sustainability report, stakeholders are not identified and mentioned, a grade of '0' was allocated. If a company undertook specific identification and selection processes, a grade of '1' was given.

##### ***2.4.2. The criterion for identifying and selecting stakeholders with whom to engage:***

This involves the organisation's process of defining its stakeholder groups and determining which groups to engage with or not. It relates to *criterion 2* of GRI on SE. If a sustainability report did not mention the criteria for identification, a grade of "0" was attributed but if a specification was made in that direction a grade of "1" was allocated.

##### ***2.4.3. Approaches to stakeholder engagement:***

It includes the manner in which stakeholders are engaged. This could comprise surveys, focus groups, community panels, advisory panels, written communication, management or union structures, and other means. It relates to *criterion 3* of GRI on SE. If an engagement process was not done, a grade of '0' was allocated; if an engagement process was carry out, a grade of '1' was attributed.

***2.4.4. Key topics and concerns that have been raised through SE, and how the organisation has responded to them:***

This corresponds to *criterion 4* of GRI on SE. Gunawan & Yudani (2017) posit that engaging stakeholders in decision making process permit stakeholders to be involved in business management; implementing information sharing and conducting dialogue. Any information going towards this direction in a sustainability report obtained a grade of “1” and the inexistence of information that relates to this characteristic of SE won a grade of “0”.

***2.4.5. Indication of representatives of stakeholders:***

It involves those who were appointed to governing bodies. This corresponds to *feature 1 of SE* identified in the social accounting literature. The identification of such information in a sustainability report attracted a grade of “1” meanwhile the absence of such information obtained a grade of “0”.

***2.4.6. The perception of stakeholders on the published sustainability report:***

It relates to *feature 2* identified in the social accounting literature. Sustainability reports which disclosed stakeholders’ testimonials were attributed a grade of “1” whereas the absence of stakeholder views on any published sustainability report by a company obtained a grade of “0”.

The method of evaluating the level of SE in this study is inspired from Gunawan & Yudani (2017). Each disclosure item will be observed in seven sustainability reports. Hence the maximum grade of each disclosure item observed is 7. The level of engagement for each item is divided as follow:

**Grade 0 – 1: Weak level of engagement      Grade 2 – 3: Average level of engagement**  
**Grade 4 – 5: High level of engagement      Grade 6 – 7: Very high level of engagement**

This implies that, the total maximum grade of the overall engagement that can be achieved is 42 given that there are 6 engagement items (criteria/features) to be observed in 7 sustainability reports. The category of the global engagement level of stakeholders in sustainability reporting is divided by:

**Grade 0 – 8: Very weak level of engagement      Grade 9 – 17: Weak level of engagement**  
**Grade 18 – 26: Average level of engagement      Grade 27 – 34: High level of engagement**  
**Grade 35 – 42: Very high level of engagement**

At the individual level, the engagement level of company 1 and 2 is categorised below with a maximum score of 18 since six stakeholder engagement requirements are analysed across three sustainability reports for company 1 and 2.

**Score 0 – 4: Weak level of engagement      Score 5 – 9: Average level of engagement**

**Score 10 – 14: High level of engagement      Score 15 – 18: Very high level of engagement**

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section discusses the findings obtained from the content analysis pertaining to the six disclosed items which correspond to the GRI guidelines on SE as well as to the SE features.

#### 3.1. The item of stakeholder identification

Stakeholder identification practiced by companies in their sustainability movement is considered *high*. These companies acknowledge that the identification of stakeholders will permit them to take down the worries of each stakeholder group. The table below gives a summary of the different stakeholders disclosed in sustainability reports

**Table 3: A summary of stakeholders identified in sustainability reports**

<b>Company 1</b>	Employees, Government, Regulators, Customers, Communities, Civil society, Media, Suppliers & business partners, Industry body, Investors and Shareholders. (The company considered them as their primary stakeholders)
<b>Company 2</b>	Employees, community, Government, Civil society, Non-Governmental Organisation and investors
<b>Company 3</b>	Shareholders, Employees, Community, Government and Regulatory bodies.

**Source: By the author**

All the companies have identified their stakeholders via the process of stakeholder mapping as company 1 put it;

*Successful interactions with our stakeholders are essential for sustainable value creation. We strive to understand what is important to those who impact our business as well as to those on whom we have an impact, and to be responsive to their expectations. This informs our material issues, our strategy development and evaluation as well as our market risks;*

*Company 3 point out that; we understand that to fully implement and sustain our sustainability strategy, there is need to engage all our stakeholders in developing our strategy, approach and implementation of our sustainability programme.*

Out of the primary stakeholders observed, in this research, employees appeared to be the stakeholder group that has received the highest attention followed by community and customer. The primary stakeholder who received the least attention is supplier given that the sustainability reports contained little information concerning suppliers. A company should take into account its stakeholders before establishing social responsibility policy. This is because via stakeholder identification, it will be relatively easy for companies to capture the worries of stakeholder and by so doing, will be able to satisfy them accordingly given that the companies have a deeper understanding on the stakeholders' expectations. In fact a successful stakeholders' engagement in sustainability reporting begins with the identification of stakeholders.

### **3.2. The item of criteria (bases) of stakeholder identification**

The criteria on which the companies rely to identify stakeholders in their sustainability movement are considered *moderate*. Only reports A, B and C out of the seven sustainability reports examined in this paper reveal the base (background) for stakeholder identification. The literature suggests that companies identify their stakeholders based on several factors such as power, urgency, and legitimacy (Mitchell et al., 1997). The main criterion of stakeholder identification of the company producing reports A, B and C is interest as company held that *the target audience of our report is the stakeholders that have shown the most **interest** in the management of our sustainable business responsibility.....*

The criteria usually mobilised in the literature to explain the base for stakeholder identification alongside their importance to an organisation is explained in terms of stakeholder salience which comprise power, legitimacy and urgency. The model of Mitchell et al (1997) on stakeholder salience, (which says that companies identify their stakeholders based on several factors such as power, urgency, and legitimacy) was observed in sustainability reports.

Only reports A, B and C out of the seven sustainability reports examined in study reveal the base (background) for stakeholder identification. The main criterion of stakeholder identification of the company producing reports A, B and C is interest. According to company 1, only stakeholders that have shown interest in the company's management of sustainable business responsibility are their target audience. Hence, the interest shown by stakeholders is the only criterion of stakeholder identification as well as stakeholder involvement in sustainability reporting. The model of Mitchell et al (1997) which holds that stakeholder identification is based



on power, legitimacy or urgency does not hold true base on the result of this study given that company 1 talks of interest shown by stakeholders meanwhile company 2 and 3 do not even reveal the criteria employed to identify their stakeholders.

### **3.3. The item of approach to stakeholder identification**

The approach or the mechanism used by companies to engage stakeholders in SR is considered *very high*. The different approaches identified in the literature comprise surveys, focus groups, community panels, advisory panels, written communication, and management union structures. An assessment of the stakeholder engagement processes adopted by each company was undertaken and six reports (A, B, C, D, E and F) clearly reveal the various vehicle of stakeholder engagement adopted by the companies. The main approaches of engaging stakeholders identified in report F include; round table discussion, newsletter, internal bulletin, social media and text message system.

In this study, the observed that the main approaches of engaging stakeholders used by company 2 are; round table discussion, newsletter, internal bulletin, social media, text message system and company 1 uses letters, regional workshops and emails. But none of the companies mentioned how communication practices with their stakeholders have affected sustainability activities and report content

Employees were being given regular communication channels and methods to channel their worries. There was a two-way communication practice between the company and the employees. However, the opinion of employees may not be taken into account and consequently they might not have any weight in the company's decision making process.

### **3.4. The item of topic and concern raised by stakeholder and how it was addressed**

This study revealed that this aspect of stakeholder engagement is *weak* given that in a good number of sustainability reports (A, B, D, E, F and G) companies report that their sustainability strategy is based on stakeholder concerns but 85% the reports failed to provide the concerns raised by stakeholder and how they responded to them. Regarding Company 1, some of its plan of action concerning sustainability reporting was discussed with stakeholders as the company puts it:

*The material issues important to the group's sustainability are determined by reviewing the issues most important to our stakeholders, and the impact of these issues on the achievement of*



our business objectives. Material issues are prioritised according to the scale and nature of impact on business operations, economic performance and interests of our stakeholder groups..... To determine the issues most material to the group's sustainability, the following sources are considered:

- Feedback from all stakeholders who review the annual sustainability report.
- Engagement with all stakeholders through the e-mail addresses
- Information gained through engagements with regulatory authorities, media organisations, civil rights groups, and community-based organisations, our customers, and general members of the public.
- Information from third-party questionnaires and assessments of our publicly reported performance by universities and other third parties independent of the group.

Successful interactions with our stakeholders are essential for sustainable value creation. We strive to understand what is important to those who impact our business as well as to those on whom we have an impact, and to be responsive to their expectations. This informs our material issues, our strategy development and evaluation as well as our market risks.

However, it is only CSR report C, produced by company 1 that disclosed some concern raised by their stakeholders and how they were able to respond to them. They are shown in the table below:

**Table 4: Stakeholder concern disclosed by company 1 in report C**

Stakeholder Concern
<i>Can the company demonstrate that it clearly understands the steps that must be taken to manage digital human rights matters?</i>
<i>What company's principles are expressed in the group's digital human rights policy?</i>
<i>Is the company guided by United Nations frameworks in managing events?</i>
<i>Is senior management actively involved in managing events that affect rights?</i>
<i>How are decisions made if requests received from authorities may infringe on rights?</i>
<i>Are the group's digital human rights management toolkit, checklists and guidance notes, which the company started compiling in 2016, complete and being used operationally?</i>
<i>Are regular risks assessments undertaken?</i>

**Source: Company 1 2017's sustainability report, p.44**

The aspect of topic and concern raised by stakeholders received less attention on the part of companies as these companies only limited themselves at declaring how their CSR strategy was adopted prior to the consultation of stakeholders. That is their responsible management policy adopted was based on stakeholder concern and aims at satisfying the demands and expectations of stakeholder engagement. Even though company 1 started disclosing stakeholder concern and the management's response in its 2017 annual sustainability report (report C), the majority of the reports failed to describe some topics and concerns raised by stakeholders during the various consultations and how they were addressed by management.

Topic and concern raised by stakeholders is one of the criteria that companies ought to consider when engaging stakeholders in sustainability reporting. But base on what has been observed, this requirement is not fully implemented by companies in sustainability reporting given that about 85% of the CSR reports only make mention of the fact that the contents of the report was drawn up base on stakeholder expectation without describing the topics raised by the different stakeholder group as well as the involvement of stakeholders in organisation management and decision making. Hence it can be said that the companies do not actually adhere this guideline when producing sustainability report.

### **3.5. The item of stakeholder representation in sustainability reporting**

This work shows that stakeholders' representation in corporate social responsibility activities is *weak* given that over 85% of the companies could not go beyond grade 2. It was observed only the employees had representation in the form of trade union structures especially in the situation of company 2 in report F. The study also reveals that Shareholders were represented in the sustainability movements of the company, but were principally involve in sustainability reporting covering economic issues through the General Meeting of Shareholders (GMS) as disclosed by company 3. The community had been engaged in sustainability activities (as disclosed in report D, E and F). Other stakeholder such as customers, suppliers and Partners had little or no room to express their views over the sustainability activities.

Stakeholders' representation in sustainability reporting is one of the requirements for an effective stakeholder engagement as identified in the literature. More than 85% of the sustainability reports analysed in this study never mentions the presence of stakeholder

representatives in the process of sustainability reporting. Base on the result, it can be said that companies pay paid little attention to this characteristic of stakeholder engagement.

### 3.6. The item of stakeholder perception of sustainability reports

This study reveals that the disclosure of stakeholders' perception on previous sustainability report is *weak*. Globally, no stakeholders' perception or testimonials was discovered in corporate social responsibility reports. Stakeholder perception shows that stakeholders were participants to the dissemination process. In fact this characteristic of stakeholder engagement identified in the literature was not considered by companies when producing their sustainability reports given that none of the analysed reports made mention of stakeholder perceptions.

The results of the analyses of the sustainability reports of each company as per each stakeholder engagement features as and the generalised result are presented in the table below:

**Table 5: Summary of results of the study**

SE Features	Company 1			Company 2			Company 3	Total	Level
	Report A	Report B	Report C	Report D	Report E	Report F	Report G		
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7	Very high
2	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	3	Average
3	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	6	Very high
4	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	Weak
5	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	Weak
6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	Weak
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>Average</b>

**Source: By the author**

Looking at the results individually, we realised that in company 1, the engagement level of stakeholders in sustainability reporting is relatively high (*obtaining a grade of 10 out of 18*) given that it had begun disclosing key topics and concern raised by stakeholders (the guideline which shows the beginning of stakeholder engagement) and the way she has been able to addressed them in its 2017 sustainability report. In company 2, the engagement level of

stakeholder is average (*obtaining a grade of 7 out of 18*) since company 2 has been able to comply with the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> stakeholder engagement guidelines. As for company 3, stakeholder engagement level is weak (*obtaining a grade of 1 out of 7*). Company 3 is still at the initial stage of stakeholder engagement which is the identification of stakeholders.

Globally, the combination of the individual result corresponding to each characteristic of stakeholder engagement resulted into an average level (*grade of 18*) of stakeholder engagement in the sustainability reporting in companies operating in Cameroon.

## Conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to determine the level of stakeholder engagement in the sustainability reporting of companies. After carrying out a content analysis on seven sustainability reports which required the identification of stakeholder engagement features as per Global reporting Initiative guidelines in addition to two other stakeholder engagement characteristics identified in the literature, the results reveal that the level of stakeholder engagement in sustainability reporting is “average”. The outcome of this result is largely explained by two points; identification of stakeholder and stakeholders’ perception. These two characteristics have the highest possible *grade* in opposite direction; *very high* and *weak* respectively.

This average level of stakeholder engagement is explained by the fact that identification of stakeholders was the criterion that was mostly adhered to by companies in their sustainability reporting. The companies acknowledge the fact that their long-term success depends on their ability to satisfy the needs and expectations of the different stakeholder groups. The perception of stakeholders on previous sustainability report is the criterion of stakeholder engagement that was less considered by companies in the reporting process whereas this aspect is very important given that its absence usually gives the wrong impression that the sustainability reports published by a company has been unilaterally prepared by the company’s management.

The corporate social responsibility reports depict that stakeholder representation is still weak. Therefore, one can say that companies instead manages the expectations of stakeholder rather than getting them involved in decision making owing to the low level of reporting on the last two disclosure items.

The findings of this research work are of great implications; given that its contributions can be found at the empirical, methodological and managerial levels. As for the empirical background, by studying the characteristics of stakeholder engagement in sustainability reporting, this research work makes a significant and original contribution to the social accounting literature in Cameroon in particular and in Sub-Sahara French speaking countries at large. This is because no study has been carried out so far in these contexts in the area of stakeholder engagement in sustainability reporting. The existing literature mostly addresses issues of company perceptions towards CSR, the practices of CSR by companies and the factors explaining the disclosure of social and environmental information and modes and procedures of SR. Also the results of this study could be valid for other countries in Sub-Sahara Africa given that the companies selected are big companies with subsidiaries in some Sub-Sahara African countries.

At the methodological level, this research work uses content analysis method to analyse information disclosed in sustainability reports through multiple case study, which helped in analysing data within situation and across situations (Yin, 2003); that is within a company and across companies. This method renders the evidence obtained from the multiple case studies reliable.

At the managerial level, it will help organisations to understand that the production of sustainability reports should not aim only at informing the public of its socially responsible actions but they should consider stakeholders' expectations and interest when preparing sustainability reports. This is because potential investors pay attention to the credibility of information contained in a sustainability report when examining the possibility of investing in a given company. The goodwill of organisations is improved when the public realises that stakeholders were engaged in sustainability reporting. Therefore, managers should consider engaging stakeholders in sustainability reporting because this may enhance the reputation of the organisation and by so doing it may attract new investors.

Better still, in their evaluation of investment opportunities, international investors increasingly are evaluating ethical and social issues along with financial returns. It would therefore be in the best interest of the companies to embrace SR and the associated stakeholder engagement requirements as core to their business strategy. This is because with time, such activity could influence investment decisions (Williams, 2007).

However, those findings may not be generalised as this study focus on the analysis of seven sustainability reports consistently published in the period of 2015-2017. Content analysis as a technique of analysis cannot be totally free of subjectivity. Furthermore, this study was only carried out upon the information disclosed in sustainability reports and may not perfectly reflect the stakeholder engagement that is actually practice by companies on the field. In addition, the outcome of the research would have probably been different if the research had carried a single case study instead of a multiple case study. This is because the good result of one company may be pull down by the poor result of another company.

The weaknesses discuss above pave the way for future research. In an attempt to wipe out subjectivity which characterises qualitative studies and content analysis, future research can adopt a quantitative approach alongside data collecting instruments such as questionnaires, structured interview with stakeholder's representation, managers and directors. Another research study may focus only on the sustainability reports published by one company over a good number of years (single case study). In that same direction a comparative study on stakeholder engagement in sustainability reporting can be made between a country in the OHADA zone and other country out of the OHADA zone in Africa. The materiality and quality of the content of sustainability report published by companies in Cameroon is another promising area of research which researchers ought to consider.

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