Motives, challenges, and strategies of CEE companies in (very) distant markets. The case of Polish firms in Sub-Saharan Africa*

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Abstract

This research note aims to explore the motives of internationalisation, the barriers to internationalisation, and the actions Polish companies entering distant markets of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have taken to address them. We conduct a comparative case study involving four Polish MNEs with branches or subsidiaries in SSA. We reveal that existing theories of International Business (IB) can effectively explain the challenges faced by Polish companies in SSA in terms of the motives and barriers to internationalisation. What is new and interesting, however, are the differences in how these challenges are addressed in countries of significant distance from Poland. Our research suggests that, with the limited resources and visibility of Polish companies as well as the rather symbolic than real institutional support for their internationalisation, the ability to quickly acquire knowledge and utilize 'unconventional' competitive advantages, particularly 'relational' and 'entrepreneurial', play a significant role.

Keywords Multinational enterprise, internationalisation, distance, Poland, CEE, Sub-Saharan Africa
JEL codes M-16, L-26

Introduction

The internationalisation of business activities is arguably one of the most challenging ways for companies to develop, as it requires overcoming numerous barriers posed by a lack of resources and knowledge, geographical distance, and cultural differences. Companies from emerging markets face particular barriers in the internationalisation process for two reasons. The first reason is the inherent characteristics of the country of origin such as its weak reputation on the international stage and a lack of accumulated foreign experience. The second reason is the limited material and non-material resources of these companies compared to their competitors from developed countries (Yamakawa et al. 2013; Zhang 2022).

Despite these natural constraints, we observe that companies from China, India, Brazil as well as Central European countries systematically internationalise their activities. Notably, they increasingly embark on expansion into markets that are geographically and culturally distant (Ciszewska-Mlinaric/Obloj/Wąsowska 2016). Examples of such markets include the SSA countries, which have

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become a battleground for multinational enterprises (MNEs) from developed countries and emerging economies over the last decade (Benfratello/D'Ambrosio/Sangrigoli 2023; Horwitz/Ronnie/Kamoche 2023; Nachum et al. 2023). Polish companies such as Asseco, Ursus, and Navimor have also participated in this competition.

The expansion of Polish companies into Africa has been accompanied by (limited) governmental support and initiatives (e.g., the 'Go Africa' program) as well as some media interest due to the exotic nature of the target countries (Cibian 2017). However, this expansion has not yet been the subject of systematic research that would help to better understand the nature of the challenges faced by CEE companies operating in SSA markets, explore ways of dealing with these challenges, and evaluate their effectiveness. The present study addresses this gap by expanding our understanding of how Polish companies seek their place in the global economy. More specifically, we address the following research questions:

(1) What are the motives for the internationalisation of Polish enterprises into the SSA markets?
(2) What barriers do Polish enterprises encounter when entering the SSA markets?
(3) In what way do Polish enterprises entering the SSA markets overcome these barriers?

Given the difficulties associated with the internationalisation of business activities, most companies (both in Poland and other countries worldwide) operate locally, never entering foreign markets (Pedersen/Shaver 2011). Companies that do expand internationally often use simple entry forms such as exports. Only a few companies engage abroad in a capital-intensive manner, and they usually choose markets that are close both geographically and culturally (Gorynia et al. 2015). Even the largest MNEs tend to adopt regional rather than global internationalisation strategies (Rosa/Gugler/Verbeke 2020). Therefore, the expansion of Polish companies into SSA markets is particularly worth understanding.

Literature Review

The internationalisation of business activities requires overcoming a series of constraints stemming from differences between the home market and the target market. IB scholars have long analysed the impact of various distances, such as geographical (e.g., Hakanson/Ambos 2010), cultural (e.g., Kogut/Singh 1988), economic (e.g., Ghemawat 2018), psychic (e.g., Johanson/Vahlne 1977), and institutional (e.g., Kostova et al. 2020), on the functioning of firms in the international space. The multidimensionality of the distance experienced by firms opting for internationalisation is described, for example, by the CAGE model, which encompasses cultural, administrative, geographic, and economic dimensions (Ghemawat 2007).

Due to the limitations imposed by distance, most companies operate only at the local level (Ghemawat, 2018). Even entities most advanced in the internationalisation process such as MNEs typically have a regional rather than a global reach (Verbeke/Asmussen 2016). Companies deciding to internationalise their activities must face various challenges. Firstly, due to their liability of foreignness (Zaheer, 1995), they usually struggle with language barriers and unfamiliarity with the specifics of the target market, including applicable legal regulations and buyer customs. Secondly, they must cope with the liability of "outsidership", i.e., a lack of network ties in foreign markets and the associated outsider status (liability of outsidership) (Johanson/Vahlne 2009). Thirdly, companies from emerging markets also grapple with the "liability of origin", including limited access to technological, marketing, managerial, and financial resources as well as difficulties in adapting to stakeholder expectations and gaining legitimacy to operate in foreign markets (Pant/Ramachandran 2012).

The decision to internationalise business activities, and the associated challenge of overcoming distance and related constraints, can be motivated by various factors. A popular typology of internationalisation motives by Dunning (1993) includes market-seeking, resource-seeking, strategic asset-seeking, and efficiency-seeking. A more recent typology inspired by the behavioural theory of the firm involves two dimensions: the use versus the search for resources and the search versus avoidance of specific environmental conditions (Cuervo-Cazurra et al. 2015). The intersection of these dimensions allows the distinguishing of the following motives for internationalisation. Firstly, companies aim to "sell more," i.e., leverage resources and skills available in the home country while simultaneously seeking favourable market conditions to increase sales. Secondly, they want to "buy better," i.e., utilize resources and skills available in the home country while avoiding high operating costs in the domestic market. Thirdly, companies may want to "upgrade" their market position by seeking resources and skills in foreign markets. Fourthly, companies may want to "escape" from the home market, seeking better conditions in foreign markets. Previous research suggests that the internationalisation of Polish companies is primarily driven by market motives (Gorynia et al. 2015).

IB theories offer two fundamental ways of understanding how companies deal with limitations in the internationalisation process. Firstly, economic theories assume that effective competition with local firms requires the foreign company to have specific advantages to neutralise barriers to foreignness (Hymer 1976; Dunning 2000). According to the traditional internalisation theory based on studies of multinational corporations from highly developed markets, the main source of "firm-specific advantage" lies primarily in technological and marketing resources. Some researchers have argued that these theories have limited applicability to companies from emerging markets (e.g., Mathews 2006). The so-called "new" internalisation theory responds to this criticism by proposing an expansion of the concept of firm-specific advantage. "Atypical" sources of advantage may include characteristics of the main decision-maker, relational resources, political support, or the ability to operate in challenging institutional conditions (Verbeke et al. 2014; Verbeke/Kano 2015).

Secondly, behavioural theories of internationalisation assume that overcoming barriers created by distance occurs through the acquisition of knowledge and experience (Johanson/Vahlne 1977; Surdu/Greve/Benito 2021). The main sources of knowledge in the organisation include experiential learning, congenital learning from the founder's previous experiences, vicarious learning from others, grafting from newly hired employees, and searching and analysing market information (Huber 1991). The two types of knowledge acquired in this way concern the specifics of a particular foreign market (market knowledge) and the internationalisation process itself (De Clercq et al. 2012).

In summary, IB scholars have been analysing firms' decisions to internationalise and their context for many years. At a general level, we know the main motives for internationalisation, ways of entering foreign markets, and the constraints that companies must deal with. However, accumulated knowledge primarily concerns typical and predictable cases of firms from highly developed markets, and only relatively recently have we started to create knowledge about the internationalisation of firms from new markets, such as CEE. Much indicates that they will follow a similar pattern to their predecessors from developed countries in the case of typical motives and trajectories of internationalisation (Gorynia 2021). Still, little is known about the specifics of their behaviour in the case of atypical variants of internationalisation, including attempts to expand into distant, unknown, and less predictable African markets.

Research Methods

Due to the study's focus on a novel and poorly understood phenomenon as well as the exploratory nature of the research questions, qualitative methods were utilized (Doh 2015; Yin 2014). A multiple case-study approach was chosen, involving four purposively selected companies with subsidiaries and branches registered in Sub-Saharan African countries. Our case-selection strategy was phenomenon-driven (Fletcher et al. 2018)), and the sample was drawn from the composition of the Polish Investors' Council in Africa, initially comprising 10 firms in 2016. Contrary to the council's name, most of its members were not extensively engaged in capital-intensive activities in African markets. Commencing in 2019, the current research ultimately included only four companies operating in Sub-Saharan African countries (refer to Table 1), as others either suspended or concluded their operations in those markets.

The main data source comprised interviews conducted within the studied companies, targeting key informants knowledgeable about internationalisation motives, barriers, and corresponding actions. Semi-structured interviews used a questionnaire covering topics like company history, internationalisation processes, motives, forms in African markets, encountered barriers, overcoming strategies, and stakeholder relationships. All interviewees were members of the management responsible for internationalisation or employees active in African markets. Seven interviews were conducted in Company A, four in Company B, and two in each of the remaining companies, recorded and transcribed verbatim, except for five where notes were taken. Since our study is part of a larger research project, triangulation of data obtained in the above manner was possible using diverse empirical material. Firstly, publicly available sources were utilized (financial reports and annual reports of the studied companies, press articles, TV programs, and websites). Secondly, to better understand the context in which Polish companies operate, 32 interviews were conducted with their stakeholders (diplomatic missions, non-governmental organizations, government agencies, and representatives of local communities) in Poland as well as Angola and Nigeria. The latter two countries are among the largest economies in Sub-Saharan Africa and are crucial directions for the expansion of Polish companies. Thirdly, archival sources (gathered, among others, in the Archive of Modern Records in Warsaw) were used, and interviews were conducted with eight diplomats with experience in African countries. This allowed understanding how historical ties between Sub-Saharan African countries and Central-Eastern European countries became a bridge for current business relationships. The study encompassed a total of 15 interviews with Polish company representatives (refer to Table 1) and an additional 40 interviews for triangulation (8 diplomats, 32 stakeholders). Interviews were initially conducted in 2019–2020 and resumed in 2022–2023 after COVID-19-related restrictions were lifted, with the first round in Poland and the second mainly in Angola and Nigeria.

Table 1. Firm characteristics

Firm	Industry	Year of establishment	Employment	Sales revenues (in mln PLN)	Markets	Informants
A	IT services	1991	32 700	17400	SSA: Nigeria, Ethiopia, Angola	■ Member of supervisory board ■ Member of management board ■ 3 middle-level managers ■ Managers of 2 subsidiaries in SSA
B	**Geosynthetic products and geotechnical services used in civil engineering**	1960 (tannery) 1990 (PVC windows producer) 2010 (geosynthetic products and geotechnical services)	250	64	SSA: Rwanda, Nigeria	■ Member of management board ■ Communication Director

Firm	Industry	Year of establishment	Employment	Sales revenues (in mln PLN)	Markets	Informants
C	Semi-trailer production	1996	3100	3433	SSA: Cote d'Ivoire	■ Member of management board ■ Commercial Director ■ Regional director ■ Legal counsellor
D	Production of grain silos	2007	160	76	SSA: Tanzania	■ 2 members of management board

Source: own work

Research findings

Motives for internationalisation

For all the studied companies, the primary motive for internationalizing into SSA was "market-seeking", following Dunning's typology, or alternatively, the motivation to "sell more" according to Cuervo-Cazurra et al. (2015). Although there were sporadic cases of attempts to invest in extractive activities in SSA, corresponding to Dunning's "resource-seeking" and Cuervo-Cazurra et al.'s "buy better" motive, these attempts failed (as in the case of KGHM) or a decision to divest, as in the case of Kulczyk Investment. The attempt to "revitalize" Ursus through expansion into SSA in search of a market for old tractor models without European market homologation also ended in failure.

Our research indicates that motives such as searching for markets, resources, or escaping were treated by decision-makers in a very general way, without a detailed understanding of specific market conditions. The studied companies decided to enter Africa simply seeking, as one of our interviewees put it, "greener pastures", i.e., markets with lower competition intensity than highly developed ones, combined with relatively high sales potential. Managers perceived African countries as "virgin markets," reminiscent in many ways of Poland during the period of political transformation. Government initiatives were also a reinforcing factor for Polish companies' motivation to expand in this direction.

The choice of a specific country was often influenced by the presence and activity of Polish diplomatic missions in SSA. Embassy employees often served as the "first contact" for Polish companies in the market, mediating in establishing cooperation with potential partners. The limited number of embassies (currently seven) was also one of the criteria for eliminating markets designated for expansion.

Limitations and barriers to internationalisation

The studied companies faced various barriers due to their limited resources and a lack of knowledge about distant and complex markets as well as the unique nature of the SSA region itself. Our research indicates that these barriers, acknowledged by IB scholars, were challenging for practitioners to anticipate. Firstly, a significant problem was geographical distance, which, despite the availability of electronic communication and, in the case of SSA, the same or a similar time zone to Poland, still matters. As one of our interviewees points out:

> *Communication at a distance… let's say we have a potential partner who (...) represents us or tries to create a prelude to some transactions (...) We send him an email – a week. We send a reminder – the second week. After a month, he responds that it needs to be done immediately, and now you must be there next Tuesday. So it's quite challenging to coordinate (...) without being physically present in those markets, which is, of course, quite expensive. [C1]*

Secondly, a significant challenge was understanding cultural differences. One of them, often pointed out by our interviewees, is the perception of time. As one interviewee indicates:

> *We agree on a time, for example, 1:00 PM, and the interlocutor comes at 3:00 PM. And then we're in a good situation because maybe he'll come the next day, right? There is such an approach that the more important a person is, the more time he can take, even recommended to be late to show his rank. [C1]*

Differences in the perception of time, as well as unclear structures and decision-making powers on the side of local partners not transparent to Polish managers, made it almost impossible to predict schedules for task implementation or even determine the likelihood that a given task will be completed:

> *It's hard to find your way in the chaos there. There is no beginning and no end; you never know where you are in the process. [A2]*

A significant barrier to expansion was the language differences, especially in French and Portuguese-speaking countries. However, even in English-speaking countries, Polish managers report numerous communication problems. For example, one of our interviewees admitted that, although he speaks English, in Nigeria he "was terrified because [he] understood roughly 30 % of what they were saying." [A1] (...)

Another culturally conditioned challenge for Polish companies was the crucial importance of personal relationships in doing business. As one interviewee notes:

> *In Africa, anonymous business is not possible. Business is done with specific individuals who know each other, in circles of mutual trust, to secure transactions. [C3]*

Thirdly, dealing with economic disparities, including poorly developed infrastructure and unstable exchange rates, poses another difficulty for companies entering Sub-Saharan African markets. Fourthly, companies must overcome administrative barriers related to opaque legal systems, corruption, and the significant and unclear involvement of the state, political elites, and officials at various levels in the economies of host countries. As one interviewee points out:

If someone doesn't want to release our equipment from the ports, I have to find out if they want bribes, even though we don't give them, or if they want something else, some payment. [D1]

In summary, Polish companies entering Sub-Saharan African markets faced difficulties created by significant cultural, administrative, geographical, and economic distance, in line with Ghemawat's (2001) CAGE model. These differences reinforced the effects of three fundamental limitations described in the IB literature.

Firstly, the studied companies clearly experienced the liability of foreignness associated with unfamiliarity with the local market, legal regulations, languages, and customs. Talking about their first experiences in African markets, Polish managers mention fear [C1], shock [D1], and surprise [A3]. All the studied companies found it challenging to understand how the market functions, and the local culture.

Secondly, the surveyed companies face the liability of outsidership and the associated lack of connections in global networks covering African markets:

I won't enter the Chinese network because they have their suppliers. The Lebanese pull supplies from Turkey, etc. It's global competition, but non-transparent. We Poles have a more challenging situation because we don't have the support of our group, Chinese, Indian, or Lebanese. So, we fight from contract to contract. [C3]

The severity of the outsider status is exacerbated by the lack of colonial ties and only episodic historical relationships with SSA, putting Polish companies in a more challenging situation compared to competitors from the UK, France, or Portugal. As noted by one of our informants:

At the end of the day, Nigerians who claim they don't like the English, when it comes to organizing a conference, they hire British companies (...) Angola, which says it has enough of Portugal, Portugal is everywhere, and if they need something, they take Portuguese companies. [A4]

Thirdly, the studied companies, despite the declared support of the government administration, clearly experienced the "liability of origin". These manifestations include limited access to financing for risky African investments, a lack of accumulated knowledge in the domestic market, limited activity in national economic diplomacy, and the absence of a strong country brand. As one interviewee notes:

The problem is that when we, as a Polish company, appear in a new country, a new ministry, we are completely unknown. Information about Poland or knowledge about Poland is very limited to: John Paul II, Lech Wałęsa, and Solidarity. [C1]

Ways of overcoming limitations

Despite such strong constraints and generally weak preparation for the internationalisation process in terms of knowledge and resources, Polish companies overcome limitations encountered in Sub-Saharan Africa in many ways. Behavioural and economic theories provide an understanding of these ways. Behavioural theories emphasize the crucial role of learning in the internationalisation process. As research results show, experiential learning is a key method for these companies to deal with expected and unexpected limitations and barriers. The companies we studied primarily use experiential learning, considering searching for and analysing market information less helpful. As one of our interlocutors points out:

> *You can order a detailed report on Africa from E&Y for PLN 1 million, but if you don't go and see how hot it is there, reading a report that it's 35 degrees won't make you feel how hot it really is [A1].*

Another source of learning is the exchange of knowledge by Polish companies. Initially, the Council of Investors in Africa, created by Jan Kulczyk, was the platform for this type of learning. It brought together ten companies planning to expand into African markets. Their managers knew each other, often participated together in trade missions to African countries, exchanged information on how to do business in Africa, and shared insights into emerging market opportunities. The pioneers of expansion into African markets gathered within the Council and then shared knowledge with subsequent companies considering internationalisation in that direction:

> *We often receive inquiries from Polish companies that would like to do something (...) and they received information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that we are already there permanently, so we are very willing to share information, contacts because it is in our interest to build the image of Polish companies, also to present our Polish activities in a positive light because it simply strengthens our credibility [C1].*

A less accessible but very valuable source of knowledge for Polish companies is the hiring of new employees (grafting) with experience in conducting business in African markets:

> *Company [C] established a joint venture and suggested that I become the director because I had connections and experience. We started with cement businesses where I knew a portfolio of 800 transport companies, to which I had access and connections. In Africa, you need to have people in your mobile phone. And those were trade goals [C3].*

However, the process of acquiring market knowledge is very complicated in African conditions due to the great diversity within the region, even within individual countries. To reduce cognitive load and support learning processes, Polish managers use cognitive simplifications and seek what is “common”:

> *These differences are significant, but there are many things that connect – the way of thinking, behaviours, etc. (...) Despite these differences, what these Africanists will insist on, I will insist on what is common to these Sub-Saharan countries [A1].*

According to economic theories, overcoming barriers in the internationalisation process is possible primarily through possessing specific, company-specific competitive advantages. However, the companies we studied have relatively few "traditional" resources and skills (such as a strong brand, highly developed technology, experience in internationalizing activities, or the ability to use stable, supportive institutions in the home country) typical of global corporations from highly developed markets, as described by internationalisation theories (Dunning 1993; Gorynia 2021). However, the most interesting result of our research is the revelation of "atypical" sources of advantage that the studied companies used to neutralize the limitations resulting from foreignness, outsider status, and the weakness of the country of origin.

Firstly, a source of advantage is the experience gained in other emerging markets (including the country of origin) and the flexibility and ability to operate in conditions of uncertainty associated with it. Studied companies are managed either by entrepreneurs or by people who think like entrepreneurs and focus on seeking market opportunities. This is facilitated by a flexible, flat decision-making structure and a limited level of management formalization, adapted to complex, unclear, and often unstable operating conditions in the country of origin. As one interlocutor points out:

> *You always have to have other options available. And here our Eastern experiences pay off. We are flexible, and Germans are not. For example, I had a case where the product was ready on the square, and the customer said to repaint the trailers. And the German says "No, I won't repaint 50 trailers because that wasn't the contract". And the Pole will repaint – we calculate whether it's worth it and paint [C3].*

Secondly, studied firms, in the face of successive constraints, started the process of building and mobilizing specific relational resources. For example, the expansion of company C was supported by Western international corporations providing products complementary to C's products in Africa. To neutralize the liability of outsidership, two of the studied companies also used the relational resources of their subsidiaries located in countries that once had colonies in Sub-Saharan Africa, namely the United Kingdom and France (company C), and Portugal (company A). Relational resources on African markets also come from the slow, patient building of networks and strengthening ties with key stakeholders. One of our interlocutors declares, for example, that he "has all important ministers in his phone" [C1]. Due to the cultural specificity of African markets, closer contacts ("strong ties") seem more important than superficial relationships ("weak ties").

Finally, managers use as important relational resource-specific narratives, thanks to which the cultural and geographical distance of Polish companies in Africa becomes a potential advantage. The narratives of Polish managers reach deep and use several threads creating a mosaic of meanings. First, they present Poland as a country formerly "colonized", with its partitions in the 18th century and occupation in the 20th century. Second, they use the times of communism when CEE countries supported independence movements in Sub-Saharan

Africa. Third, they use Poland's recent history of bravely fighting for freedom, with Lech Wałęsa at the forefront. Poland is presented as an example of the success of transformation that can serve as a model for Sub-Saharan African countries. Fourth, Polish managers emphasize that they understand their partners from SSA countries well because, during the transformation period, they experienced oppression or neglect from Western managers of corporations investing in Poland in the 1990s. Fifth, managers in their narratives emphasize that Poland is an economy modestly catching up, but unlike China, has neither the intention nor the resources to economically colonize African countries. This is evidenced by both the limited size of Polish companies and the scale of their activities in Sub-Saharan African countries. Finally, no less important, companies emphasize tangible and intangible benefits from their actions for local partners and the host economy.

The above narratives serve to build bridges. They tell partners that Polish managers understand the hardship of being colonized, the struggle for independence, the challenges of peaceful transformation, and the difficulty of being a weaker partner against stronger Western corporations. In this narrative, Polish companies that do not treat partners from SSA countries patronizingly appear as ideal suppliers, who – as emphasized by the interviewees – "are on the same side of the barricade". All surveyed companies used these micro-stories and narratives about the past, a sense of shared suffering, and similarities in history to reduce tensions between them and stakeholders and to establish their legitimacy to operate in African markets.

Conclusions

Our research on the activities of Polish companies in SSA markets is exploratory, and to the best of our knowledge, this is the first such study in CEE. Its primary limitation is the small sample size (although the population of Polish companies operating in Africa is both limited and variable). Nevertheless, the study allows for formulating some significant conclusions, addressing the research questions we posed.

Firstly, the key motive for the internationalisation of Polish companies into Sub-Saharan Africa is the search for markets. Secondly, when entering African markets, Polish companies must overcome significant barriers resulting from cultural, administrative, geographic, and economic differences. In doing so, they experience three types of liabilities resulting from their foreignness, outsidership, and country of origin. Thirdly, a key method of dealing with these constraints and barriers is acquiring knowledge, especially through experiential learning. Fourthly, a new and interesting finding in our research is the identification of unique approaches to overcoming challenges in internationalizing into distant countries. Unlike companies from highly developed economies, where resources like marketing and technology are crucial, the studied firms focus on building entrepreneurial and relational advantages to navigate barriers and overcome liabilities.

The flexibility and rapid adaptation, emphasized by our respondents, seems to stem from entrepreneurial advantages, primarily available to companies from developing markets, just like Poland. As we highlighted, these companies are either managed by entrepreneurs or by individuals who think like entrepreneurs and focus on seeking market opportunities. This is facilitated by a flexible, flat decision-making structure and a limited level of management formalization, adapted to complex, unclear, and often unstable operations in the home country (Obłój et al. 2010).

Relational advantages involve creating and leveraging local ties, often using bridge-building narratives. They latter are highly effective because they are universal in two dimensions. They can be used in any country and with any counterpart, regardless of whether one is selling software, tractors, soft drinks, or technical films. They are also non-specific, thus universally useful and can be mutated as needed by counterparts and their expectations. In the foreign, uncertain, and complicated environment of SSA, they become an essential element of familiarizing the local stakeholders with an unknown Polish company.

In total, our research suggests that given the limited resources and recognition of Polish firms, as well as the more symbolic than real institutional support for their internationalisation, important roles in their success will be played by the ability to quickly acquire knowledge, in line with the behavioural theories of internationalisation (Surdu/Greve/Benito 2021) and the utilization of "atypical" firm-specific advantages, as predicted by the economic theories (Verbeke/Kano 2015). This, in turn, requires companies to be creative and experienced in quick adaptation and building relational resources. The scale of action is also essential because no symbolic resources, such as the creative cognitive maps of managers, speed, or connecting narratives, will completely replace financial resources. As one of our interviewees points out:

> *Africa is such a difficult market and requires so much knowledge that the order should be such that first those big companies should try to enter there, which simply can afford it. Afford to invest for some years and not worry that after a year, a million, two, even just in travel has been invested. And nothing comes out of it. Which have patience. And only when these companies succeed, then involve smaller companies in cooperation. German companies do it, French companies do it, British companies do it. (Interviewee A1).*

The fact that capital expansion by Polish companies into SSA is an extremely rare phenomenon can, therefore, be explained by the early stage of the internationalisation of the Polish economy (Gorynia et al. 2022). At this stage, very few companies can mobilize significant capital or human resources, given the extreme uncertainty resulting from a significant distance. This interpretation is consistent with research results suggesting that internationalisation is not necessarily beneficial, and its effects depend on the resources possessed (Schwens et al. 2019).

Finally, a practical recommendation arising from our research may be to exercise caution in attempts to institutionally (especially governmental) support the distant expansion of Polish companies, especially those less prepared for it. As one of our interviewees rightly summed it up:

> *Encouraging small and medium-sized enterprises is a bit like pushing them onto a minefield. Because it's half bad if the representatives of these companies, or even the owners, treat the trip as a cool trip (...). It's worse if they believe in it (...) and come for the second, third time. Later, the owner won't have time to come, because he has to watch, so he'll have to delegate someone from his company. It rarely happens that in a small and medium-sized company, besides the owner, there is someone who can create business because these are too small companies (...). And these companies spend the next months there, spend money, and come back discouraged. (Interviewee A1)*

Based on the findings of our exploratory research, we suggest the following avenues for future studies. First, the internationalisation of firms from CEE to SSA offers a promising setting to study the entrepreneurial behaviour of MNEs. Building on the results of our study, we believe that it would be interesting to further explore the entrepreneurial advantages of MNEs from CEE, focusing, for example, on entrepreneurial decision-making logic (Sarasvathy 2001), entrepreneurial passion (Cardon/Glauser/Murnieks 2017), and global mindset (Kyvik 2018).

Second, as more companies from Poland and other CEE countries enter SSA, future research could investigate similarities and differences in the patterns of internationalisation among firms from the CEE region. This could include exploring the role of historical legacies (i.e., ties between the regions developed during the times of communism in CEE and decolonization in SSA) in current internationalisation attempts, as suggested by Cibian (2017). Such research could also offer a more nuanced understanding of the relational advantages suggested by our study and the role of historical narratives in bridging the gap between CEE and SSA.

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