CSR Strategies in the O&G Industry: The Need to Focus on Local Communities in Developing and Host Countries

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Abstract

The oil and gas (O&G) industry faces unique challenges and opportunities in terms of corporate social responsibility (CSR), due to their operations' direct impact on the environment. This paper analyzes the effectiveness of CSR strategies within the sector, with a focus on understanding the needs of developing host economies. Focusing also on Eni and its operations in Nigeria to apply a real-world example behind suggested theories of existing literature. Eni is seen as a pivotal case study through its investments and focus on renewable energy sources. Through a qualitative approach, this research highlights insights from expert interviews and secondary data sources. Through the findings, it is noted that while Eni has demonstrated commitments to sustainable development, including investments in different regions' infrastructure and renewable energy projects, there are still major controversies, such as oil spills and socio-economic challenges in these host economies. A significant gap was discovered between Eni's operations and its local community's needs, highlighting ineffective CSR strategies. This paper therefore details the need for local engagement, standardized reporting, and long-term initiatives to benefit the socio-economic and environmental landscape to improve the firm's CSR engagement, reputation, and competitive advantage.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, Oil and Gas industry, Nigeria, Socio-economic, Environmental, Developing countries

I. Introduction

As social pressure grows to transition society into a sustainable environment, the O&G industry has been one of the most scrutinized for unsustainable business practices. Considering the environmental impacts of fossil fuels, the industry is considered one of the biggest threats to building a sustainable society and improving conditions related to climate change. The O&G industry is estimated to account for 42% of emissions globally, where 9% arise directly from their operations and the remaining 33% stem from the fuels they produce and export to consumers (Beck, Rashidbeigi, Roelofsen, & Speelman, 2020). Many believe that O&G industries have the resources and funds to advance technologies to propel our worldwide economy away from its dependency on fossil fuels and shift their business operations towards clean energies (Menéndez-Sánchez, Gómez, & De La Mata, 2023). Furthermore, accounting for almost half of global emissions, it appears that achieving the low carbon emission goals worldwide and diminishing the implications of climate change is impossible without the restructuring of how we use fossil fuels, and how this industry operates. Apart from blaming the oil industry, Edelman's 2024 Trust Barometer indicates that society globally tends to trust businesses more than Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), media sources, and governments. Particularly in terms of developing innovative 'green' technology. Consequently, stakeholders and the public have placed growing pressures on big industries to play a bigger role in solving climate related issues. The combination of public feelings towards big business and the role of the oil industry in climate change has caused the O&G industry to be in the forefront of public scrutiny, considering their role in pollution and being the 'backbone' of the global economy in terms of fossil fuel production. The large profits of these O&G multinational enterprises (MNE) appear to give them the means to actively reduce the impacts of climate change through green innovation. Consequently, O&G MNEs have faced immense pressure and incentives by society, investors, media sources and various regulatory bodies to improve their operations. These regulations and pressures from key stakeholders originate largely from well developed countries, with a focus on environmental concerns and, specifically, carbon emission reduction.

Although we acknowledge the significance of this matter, it seems that research has primarily focused on assessing the environmental impacts of the O&G industry, reflecting the priorities of developed nations from which these policies originate. While most researchers acknowledge that the top players in the O&G industry operate on a global scale, and are dependent on oil and other natural resources from developing nations, they appear to overlook the implications of this outside an environmental perspective. Therefore, as O&G industries are being pushed to transition their business models towards clean energies, we have chosen to focus our study on the socioeconomic implications, including poverty alleviation, infrastructure development, and education, of their operations in developing host countries. We address three research questions:

1. Does the current CSR strategy within "social responsibility" have a positive impact on the developing countries where they operate, or does it serve other interests?
2. What are the perceptions of local communities, government officials, and non-governmental organizations regarding the effectiveness and impact of CSR initiatives undertaken by oil multinational companies in developing countries?
3. How can the current strategy be improved to better meet the needs of the country?

Employing a qualitative approach through expert opinions and a case study, our study specifically explores Eni's CSR approach in Nigeria, a prominent oil-rich region, and its opportunities to enhance its impact on the business environment. Our findings show how O&G MNEs can include the needs of these nations in the restructuring of their business models. Overall, this study contributes to developing improved CSR guidelines tailored to the specific needs of the local community and environment, which complements the O&G industry's sustainable transformation to green energy.

II. Literature Analysis

CSR Practices in the Oil and Gas Industry

CSR strategies have become important in today's business environment, affecting shareholder value and

company perceptions. However, in a review of relevant literature, a gap exists in the effectiveness of strategy within the O&G industries. Investments in clean energy and improving environmental conditions, stemming from the interests of developed nations, have effectively overlooked the needs of emerging and developing economies in which those multinational companies operate.

An industry-wide initiative to reduce emissions and environmental effects has prevailed within the O&G industry. Researchers have since been drawn to study how such a movement has affected the economy and socio-economics of the countries, as well as the environment within the industry. A theme of such research uncovered that CSR strategies utilized by O&G MNEs tend to be initiated due to external pressures from stakeholders and governments. Hartmann, Inkpen, and Kannan (2021) investigated multiple hypotheses regarding country-specific institutional factors and firm-specific factors affecting companies' decisions to transition to renewable energy. They concluded that O&G MNEs, particularly those whose home country has strict standards and guidelines towards sustainability, are more likely to invest at a higher scale and make bigger claims regarding their efforts towards clean energies and sustainability. Moreover, the authors noted that companies falling into this category tend to be based in well-developed countries with access to mature high level technologies. Doni, Corvino, and Martini's empirical analysis (2022) on sustainability-oriented corporate governance supported this. They found that well-developed countries developed sustainability guidelines. Focusing heavily on environmental impacts has therefore pushed O&G corporations to focus on technological investment to diversify energy sources. Furthermore, Cherepovitsyna, Sheveleva, Riadinskaia, and Danilin (2023) assessed ten of the largest and most influential companies in the O&G industry. These companies were selected from CDP (Customer Data Platform) reports based on their business readiness for a low-carbon transition, and were subsequently narrowed down through various criteria by the researchers. The authors employed various methods, including scholarly literature analysis and primary information disclosed by the companies, as well as an original quantitative methodology to assess the activities aimed at reducing carbon emissions. They observed that, in addition to government regulations, industry investors now consider it essential for

O&G companies to invest in green technologies and demonstrate efforts to mitigate environmental impacts in order to secure continued investment. They concluded in their research that the data presented by O&G companies showed exponential development into this sector. However, despite the impressive claims their quantitative analysis showed, the actual progress of these companies in practice is not reflective of the claims being made. Further supporting this claim, a recent case study (Menéndez-Sanchez et al., 2023) revealed that despite the wide range of investments in clean energy technologies, the industry has been slow to actually implement those technologies. A study by Cherepovitsyn, Kazanin, and Rutenko (2023) reviewed 14 prominent companies in the O&G industry from 1995 to 2022 to track the change of their strategic goals. They noted differences in the shift to green diversification from each organization based on various prerequisites, while most diversification stems from the renewable energy sector.

The aforementioned 2023 systematic literature review (Cherepovitsyna et al., 2023) explains the importance of companies to inform their stakeholders of CSR practices to maintain legitimacy and competitive position in the market. Within O&G, companies who face increased scrutiny to report such practices to preserve "institutional credibility", reporting their practices and goals, have become a center of public relations. Notably, despite the cruciality of such reporting measures, the review concluded that the low quality and lack of systematic reporting within the reports are not sufficient, partially due to the high costs to produce these reports. Tackling the prevalent limitation from the literature review of various academic studies regarding the absence of systematic methodologies to quantitate the outcomes of clean energy investments. A 2023 study by Kwarto, Nurafiah, Suharman, and Dahlan aimed to see the reliability of CSR directly from the perspective of workers in the industry by conducting semi-structured interviews in Indonesia. Workers demonstrated a lack of understanding regarding sustainability concepts and their relevance within the O&G process, which risked the effective implementation of sustainable practices of the industry. A year prior, the same team (Kwarto, Nurafiah, Suharman, & Dahlan, 2022) investigated the reliability of CSR reports within the industry and found that the O&G companies lacked

proper assessment methodologies for corporate social and environmental disclosures. Companies compensate for the resulting lack of transparency within the reports by formatting public information in only an overwhelmingly positive and declarative sense, useful in improving public perception with increasingly environmentally and socially conscious stakeholders. Applying persuasion theory and critical discourse analysis, Nwagbara and Belal (2019) investigated the persuasive discourse found in CSR reporting, focusing specifically on CSR reports from O&G companies operating in Nigeria. Their analysis found that these reports are full of persuasive language schemes, which when deconstructed show an intent to shape opinions and reinforce ideas of the company's commitment to sustainability, and are particularly positioned towards stakeholders.

The O&G industry presents a unique array of ethical and sustainability challenges arising from its operational practices, rendering the development of CSR strategies within this sector particularly intricate and crucial compared to other industries. This complexity stems from the substantial environmental and social impacts associated with oil extraction, notably in terms of CO^2 emissions, which stand among the highest globally. Furthermore, extraction predominantly occurs in developing economies, exacerbating the profound influence of the industry on these nations. While exports primarily flow to developed countries like the United States and EU nations, studies underscore the profound effects of such activities, particularly in the developing countries where the O&G MNEs are. Additional research highlights the exploitative nature of oil companies in these regions, detailing environmental degradation, displacement, and economic disparities caused by oil rigging activities (Elum, Mopipi, & Henri-Ukoha, 2016). Specifically, the research finds that despite being significant contributors to the gross domestic product (GDP) of these regions, O&G companies often exploit the local workforce and fail to adequately address socioeconomic, environmental, educational, and safety concerns. Notably, Adegbite, Amaeshi, Nakpodia, Ferry, & Yekini (2020) underscore the disconnect between CSR strategies and local contexts, with companies resorting to large-scale donations to external charities while neglecting the direct impact of their operations on the local communities. Moreover, studies, such as from Du and Vieira (2012),

advocate for a shift towards CSR strategies targeting the home countries of these oil companies, emphasizing the potential for positive economic and social impacts through employment opportunities and infrastructure development. The research highlights the negative impact that an inward focused, internal CSR strategy has on a company in the long term. Linking oil exploitation to large, seemingly exterior issues such as human trafficking in regions like the Niger Delta shows the lack of substantive action implementing effective CSR strategies (Uduji, Okolo-Obasi, & Asongu, 2019).

Further, research points out the economics of the O&G industry, noting the high volatility that makes for a boom and bust environment in the industry. This aspect makes the industry very detrimental for ecosystems that rely solely on these companies' incomes and wealth, providing them with little long-term security (Höltge, Theron, Jefferies, & Ungar, 2021). Many emerging and developing countries with oil reserves like Nigeria and Yemen see the detrimental effects of oil exploitation: namely, a weakened economy, unstable politics, and security unrest (Kassem, Khoiry, & Hamzah, 2020). In recent years, there have been notable issues regarding CSR in certain countries, particularly regarding the absence of effective CSR strategies aimed at benefiting these nations, rather than exploiting them. However, there seems to be some progress in this regard. For instance, Ndubisi, Al–Shuridah, and Capel, (2020) suggests a concept of mindfulness towards green technologies which offers hope for a more equitable approach to oil extraction practices in these countries. This concept refers to a social process characterized by extensive and continuous real-time communication and interactions between teams during meetings, briefings, and work activities. The authors found that despite being one of the largest economic sectors globally, the oil industry's CSR strategies have fallen short in addressing the pressing issues within the communities where they operate, calling for a more holistic and locally tailored approach to meaningful change in the regions affected by oil extraction activities.

It is highly debated whether this signifies internal or external changes of current CSR approaches by O&G MNEs. However, data points out that government interventions in the oil industry have further hindered companies' motivation to invest in local communities, primarily due to the imposition of high

royalty payments to the federal government. Gabriel (1994) observed a significant increase in accumulated shares, after Nigeria's accession to the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). This surge in shares has substantially constrained the ability of oil companies to fulfill their obligations towards host communities, particularly in critical areas such as education. Despite sporadic efforts, such as the provision of scholarships for manpower development and assistance in constructing laboratories and classrooms, the contributions made by oil companies to local educational development pale in comparison to the extensive environmental damage caused by the industry, as consistently found from literature analysis across all levels.

Oluwaniyi's (2019) findings echo this sentiment, shedding light yet again on the catastrophic consequences of oil refineries on the local, natural, and economic environments, disproportionately impacting vulnerable populations, particularly women. The spillages, leaks, and waste generated by these refineries have severely disrupted agricultural, farming, and fishing industries but have also resulted in the destruction of vital local infrastructure, including schools, private residences, and academic institutions. Omorodion (2004) underscores how the traditional livelihoods of women, primarily centered around fishing, have been upended by the pollution caused by oil extraction. Women have been forced to obtain fish from non-domestic places, necessitating travel across borders, which has resulted in diminished income within already low-income professions. Furthermore, Darkwah (2010) points out that the failure of oil companies to provide alternative income-generating opportunities for women has exacerbated existing gender inequalities and deepening female reliance on men for financial stability. Moreover, women are disproportionately vulnerable to health risks associated with oil exploration activities. This includes an elevated risk of developing respiratory issues, skin disorders, and pregnant women experiencing increased mortality rates. Compounding these issues, the escalation of conflicts in oil-rich regions has placed women at even greater risk, exposing them to heightened levels of violence and abuse from both state actors and MNEs.

These extensive findings underscore a disturbing reality: MNEs prioritize profit maximization

over the sustainable social development of local communities, neglecting their socioeconomic and environmental well-being. In countries like Nigeria and similar developing nations, the scant benefits derived from these companies fall far short of offsetting the negative impacts they inflict on the region's overall development and the livelihoods of its inhabitants. Therefore, there is a discrepancy between MNEs global CSR strategy investments and the content of its public communication and how it is implemented in the oil-rich host countries.

III. Methodology

Study Design

The objective of our study is to investigate the effectiveness of CSR strategies within the O&G industry in developing countries. Given the contentious nature of the oil industry, primarily due to its significant Scope 1 emissions (direct greenhouse gas emissions), our research seeks to explore the issues arising between CSR strategies and the specific needs of countries, rather than directly engaging with the industry's inherent controversies. Therefore, we take a qualitative exploratory approach (Palinkas et al., 2015) and conduct a single case study (Crowe et al., 2011) on Eni's operations and sustainability efforts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the environmental and socioeconomic issues associated with the presence of O&G MNEs in oil-rich host countries.

Case Sample of Eni SpA

To investigate our research questions, we purposely selected Eni SpA, an integrated energy company, as our case for this study (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Palinkas et al., 2015). From their 2021 Annual Report, the company writes that "Eni is a global energy company with a high technological content, engaged in the entire value chain: from the exploration, development, and extraction of oil and natural gas, to the generation of electricity from cogeneration and renewable sources, traditional and bio-refining and chemical, and the development of circular economy processes" (p. 2). They operate largely in Africa,

followed by Asia, Oceania, Europe, and the Americas (Country by country report, 2021). Eni is considered an information rich case due to its encompassing strategies and their more modern sustainability initiatives, visible through their larger investments in renewable energy sources, compared to competitors. Given its global presence, with operations ranging from well-developed to emerging economies, and its position as a leader in O&G, the organizational structure aligns well with examining our research questions. Moreover, as a publicly traded company, the availability of company data has provided a wider context for this investigation.

We chose to look at Eni's oil extracting operations in Nigeria, whose economy depends on the O&G industry (High dependency on oil, 2024). Nigeria is Africa's main oil producer and maintains its key producer by producing high value, low sulfur crude oil. As of 2022, Nigeria recorded a production average of 1.49 million barrels a day (Nigeria – oil, gas, and mining sectors, 2023). Their high production rate puts them in the world's top five of liquefied natural gas (LNG). With Nigeria's intent to continue to expand and invest in the O&G industry, it still faces CSR issues that need to be addressed. Given that Nigeria is both a developing country and Africa's primary oil producer, we can grasp the broader implications of external factors commonly observed in developing nations reliant on oil production.

Systemic Issues within Nigeria, A Struggling Host Country

As an emerging economy with large oil reserves, O&G MNEs have frequently exploited Nigeria. Due to these business operations, the country has seen a multitude of systematic issues within its political, economic, environmental, educational, and societal growth. Research highlights that Nigeria has suffered from the adverse effects of natural resource extraction including "exploration, exploitation, refining, and exportation of crude oil" (Gabriel, 1994, p.99), impacting its arable land, water bodies, and associated livestock and vegetation. This has significantly reduced Nigeria's economic prowess in terms of agricultural exports (Elum et al., 2016). Additionally, the country has one of the highest human trafficking rates in the world due to high unemployment, poverty and inequality, and "the dream of a

better life" (Uduji et al., 2019, p.8). These trends are largely driven by the exploitative power of O&G companies, which profit from the systemic issues of the region, hindering the country's development.

Data Collection

By triangulating data (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014) from interviews with external experts in the CSR field and in the O&G industry with secondary data, such as academic reports on controversies in oil extraction regions, correlative studies of the operations of O&G MNEs, and public reports from O&G MNEs, we aim to understand areas lacking effective CSR approaches in vulnerable oil-rich regions. Specifically, we collected empirical data from individuals with experience in either CSR implementation or the O&G industry. Due to the challenge of establishing direct contact with Eni, we instead conducted two remote interviews with experts in the field. Both experts prefer to stay unnamed. One holds two bachelor's degrees in both Business Administration and Environmental Ethics and Policy. He has three years of hands-on experience, within two different companies, as a CSR strategist and sustainability program coordinator in the United States. The other expert has long-time experience in the O&G industry in Europe and Libya, specifically with the Remal oil company. From the interviews with a CSR expert and an O&G industry expert, we gained a comprehensive understanding of the current and past practices of CSR and practices of the O&G industry.

Thereby, the former mentioned interview data guided the development of a comprehensive literature review map, in which we classified all relevant sources into subtopics, which provided the basis for our data analysis to identify patterns and gaps in the field of study. The main underlying concepts include: human trafficking, exploitation, women's empowerment, education, and shareholder costs and benefits. We categorized these sources through a data collection table. The table contains a range of sources, including case studies, academic research, and interviews. Each type of data is meant to serve the specific purpose of validating (or invalidating) our research and providing: first-person perspectives

through interviews, building specific understandings and insights from academic and digital literature, and verifying real-world applicability through case studies.

	Interviews:	**Digital Literature:**	**Academic literature:**	**Case: Eni**
Criteria	Experience: 1) CSR, understanding through higher education and work experience. 2) CSR for MNE in emerging/developed economies, oil and gas industry experience.		MNE oil and gas From the last 6-7 years CSR in O&G industry	MNE Oil and Gas Company Investment strategy that reflects most academic literature (technologies)
Purpose	Verify our findings from literature; give 1st person perspective	Verify our findings from literature	Form initial understandings and solidify ideas	Real-world application of our findings
Validity	Qualifications and experiential backgrounds	Academic institutions, ratings, writers background	Academic institution, DOI, recent publication date, writers reputation.	Public company, with publicly filed forms/documents etc.
Data Collection	Face to face and email	Sorting thematically	Includes already mentioned (database, criteria for choosing sources, etc.)	Document analysis from company (public documents)

Table 1. Mapping of the literature review and methodology process. **Source:** Made by the authors (2024).

In a second step, we systematically segmented the topic of Eni's CSR strategy into main areas of interest to gather data from multiple secondary sources. This was identified from our prior expert-led analysis of academic literature: (1) Eni's global CSR standards with a focus on investment in green technologies, (2) its adaptation to Nigerian conditions and local stakeholder relations, (3) its CSR shortcomings, (4) impact on Eni's reputation and competitiveness. The rational division of subtopics allowed us to show the combined relevance in explaining the multi-layered topic and how they interrelate.

Theoretical Framework

This paper aims to analyze how the O&G sector applies CSR to their operations and identify areas of improvement in terms of host country initiatives. CSR refers to how corporations organize business operations holistically, to encompass social responsibility considering social, economic, environmental,

and ethical issues (Piasecki and Gudowski, 2017). The assumption that the O&G industry is one of the largest contributors to environmental and socioeconomic issues globally, guided our research. The Triple Bottom Line approach (Ksiezak and Fischbach, 2018) supports the application of CSR theory by providing a framework that underscores not only operational and financial performance, but also social and environmental impacts. This framework enables a practical highlight of the importance of O&G operations, not only in terms of profits, but also the socio-economic and environmental consequences. O&G MNEs face increasing external regulations and pressures to fulfill this triple bottom line approach. Consequently, based on institutional theory, our paper is interested in understanding how institutional pressures shape the CSR strategies of O&G MNEs. Examining Eni as a case study, we analyze how the company has structured its business model, particularly emphasizing its utilization of technological innovation and investments aimed at diminishing environmental impact. In addition, based on stakeholder theory (Doni et al., 2022), we evaluate the effectiveness of CSR strategies in relation to the needs of stakeholders at the local level. Thereby, we investigate the impacts of Eni's operations on local communities within the Nigeria river delta region, which should guide adaptation of global CSR strategies, targeted to set standards for developed nations, to the different realities of emerging and developing economies from where raw materials are typically sourced. Overall, our tri-fold framework on Eni's operations in relation to CSR distinguishes between 1) Eni's investment strategies in relation to its "green technologies", 2) the initiatives of Eni to respond to the socio-economic needs of oil rich developing countries where Eni operates, and 3) the grievances of the inhabitants of the areas of operations, as reported by Eni. Utilizing this framework enables a holistic understanding of the multi-dimensional entity of sustainability.

IV. Case Study findings on Eni's CSR Strategy in Nigeria

Eni operations in Nigeria

Eni's operations in Nigeria extend far beyond mere oil extraction; they have firmly established themselves as an all-encompassing and dominant organization in the region. These operations include a wide range of initiatives aimed at resource optimization, access to off-grid energy, and clear water sanitation solutions (Community projects, n.d.).

According to our interview with a member of the Remal management team, it further validates these initiatives by discussing Meleta, Remal's subsidiary, and Eni's developed large-scale projects aimed at reducing fossil fuel consumption and switching to clean, renewable energy sources. This partnership has successfully improved energy efficiency, reduced emissions, and diversified into renewable energy sources. Furthermore, Eni uses subsidiaries to conduct operations in both Niger Delta's onshore and offshore operations. Its primary subsidiary, Nigerian Agip Oil Company (NAOC), carries out onshore activities. NAOC operates under a joint venture agreement with Nigerian Petroleum Development Company (NPDC) (60%), NAOC (20%), and Oando (20%). The corporation is responsible for four oil blocks, comprising 5,313 square kilometers, split into the Land Area (LAR) and the Swamp Area (SAR), in the states of Bayelsa, Delta, Limo, and Rivers. The business also manages two onshore exploration leases: OPL 282, in which it holds a 90% stake, and OPL 135, in which it holds a 48% share (Onshore operations, n.d.).

Meanwhile, its offshore activities consist of oil extraction from Nigeria's deepwater resources in the Abo field, through its subsidiaries Agip Energy and Natural Resources (AENR) and Nigerian Agip Exploration (NAE). The former operates in shallow water off the shore, while NAE operates in deep and ultra-deep sea. Additionally, AENR holds service contracts for regions such as Okono and Okpoho, demonstrating its ability to oversee multiple offshore projects simultaneously. Moreover, within over 29,265 square kilometers of developed and undeveloped land, Eni produced an average of 131 kboe/d of oil and gas in 2020 (6,438 net square kilometers to Eni). The corporation also has a stake in 32 mining

leases, operating 10 of them. Eni's upstream activities in Nigeria are controlled by production-sharing agreements and licensing contracts.

Eni's Global CSR Strategy

Eni's operations encompass the exploration, development, and extraction of both oil and natural gas, alongside the generation of electricity through cogeneration and renewable sources, as well as traditional and bio-refining activities. As of 2014, Eni was the first company to begin the shift from being a traditional refinery to a bio-refinery (Pickl, 2019). Eni was selected based on their company's core focus on sustainability within the O&G industry, with respect to the growing demand for diversifying energy sources.

This data was analyzed empirically in relation to common themes found throughout investments. These technological investments have been classified into two main themes: renewable energy forms and a circular economy (the focus on efforts to maximize efficient resources, eliminate waste and develop bio-based materials from waste). Decarbonization of processes is a central theme of Eni's technological investments, setting a company-wide initiative to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. Therefore, it is placed as an overarching theme, as Eni has implemented elements of this process throughout most of their investments. As of 2022, decarbonization goals have been solidified, with the expectation of further investment of approximately 13.8 billion euros according to Eni's strategic plan for 2023-2026. In the realm of renewable energy, Eni has focused on R&D in their centers in Italy. Their focus relies on the creation of new technologies that are able to extract energy from the sun and wind. Additionally, they focus on biofuels (those coming from processing raw biogenic materials) to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions in their transport sector. Eni has also created numerous subsidiaries: EcoFuel, Eni Gas & Power S.p.A, and Eni Plentitude. Considering the better availability of funding as a subsidiary, rather than of Eni as a whole, and the ability to focus on specific tasks related to the specific missions of each subsidiary, Eni has seen huge success with the technologies emerging from these subsidiaries. EcoFuels' for instance,

has developed original alternative sustainable fuel from in-house tech, high-octane alkyl. They have industrialized it to a level which provides the capacity for sales reaching one million tonnes per year internationally. Eni Plentitude has seen success through its integrated approach, combining the production of energy from renewable sources, and the sale of such energy through charging points for electric cars.

In exploring our second theme, a circular economy, Eni has invested heavily in developing new technologies. As a whole, Eni has focused on creating new production cycles based on material recycling, rather than sourcing and utilizing new material. Eni Rewind, Eni's environmental company, was established to focus on investing in a circular economy. Their operations include research activities, in-house technology development in cooperation with Eni research and development, as well as partnerships with universities to promote innovative technological developments in this sector.

It may be fair to say Eni has centered its CSR on environmental initiatives. While this may be up for debate, we present this assumption, considering their corporate structure focuses on incorporating several subsidiaries responsible for enhancing operations through more sustainable and environmentally conscious practices. Furthermore, our interview with a member of Remal's management praised Eni's commitment to developing and supporting the communities and regions in which it operates. Eni has committed vast amounts of resources to implementing comprehensive CSR strategies that prioritize sustainable economic growth, education, healthcare, infrastructure development, and the environment. The interviewee especially recognized the company's ability to navigate Africa's complex socio-political environment while promoting long-term, positive impact through its community-focused CSR programs. Considering Eni's position as an O&G MNE in an unstable political region, it appears Eni has seen great success in the creation of technologies and tech by-products, which have allowed Eni to not only grow in terms of profit, but also align to more environmentally conscious goals.

Eni's Local CSR Strategy in Nigeria

While Eni subsidiaries operate in Nigeria's largest regions and serve over 300 communities, they also invest significantly in CSR and regional development, making the NAOCs' network pipeline a key stakeholder in their operations (Community projects, n.d.). Eni publicly announces their alignment of their activities with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), incorporating the 17 SDGs into the company's mission and purpose statements. This approach aims to encourage collaboration and participation in project development with the local community.

Eni's CSR Investment in Nigeria

Eni has committed several billion dollars to social initiatives in key areas, such as education (Community projects, n.d.). The company constructs and equips schools, in addition to offering scholarships, training programs, workshops, and entrepreneurship programs. Furthermore, Eni has made substantial investments in the region's infrastructure, including the construction of community centers, sewage systems, and waste disposal plants, along with the development of roads and bridges near its operational sites. Additionally, Eni provides and constructs hospitals to further support local communities. Furthermore, Eni has demonstrated its commitment to diversifying Nigeria's energy supply and improving energy access through its investments in the country's gas and power industries and in independent power plants (IPPs) such as the Okpai IPP. In addition, the NAOCs were recently awarded the Sustainability in the Extractive (SITEI) Conference 2019 Community Engagement Award (Community projects, n.d.), demonstrating that Eni is playing its part in community development in Nigeria through its CSR standards.

According to Eni's sustainability reporting publication for 2022, the corporation reported a total investment of 76.4 million euros in 2022, towards socio-economic based CSR initiatives. Notably, while also boosting a 14.631 billion dollar net income for the same year. Eni reports that around 93% of this investment went towards countries used for exploration, drilling and extraction, and other operations classified as upstream activities. In relation to Nigeria, Eni has reported a focus for 2022 on supporting economic differentiation primarily in the agriculture sector. Eni also prioritized maintenance of wells run

by a photovoltaic system (the conversion of sun radiation into energy) in the northwestern regions of Nigeria. Overall, Eni reports didn't specify what countries investment was received, instead choosing to consolidate into regions. Nevertheless, investment was provided by intervention themes, which are presented below in Table 2.

Investment by Sector of Intervention	**Initiatives**	**Amount invested in Million Euros (2022)**
Economic diversification	(i) agricultural sector (ii) support of local and youth entrepreneurship, (iii) fishing activity development programs,	36.7
Education and vocational training	(i) training activities and instruction supporting the school programs (ii) renovation of school buildings	17.4
Health	(i) strengthening the skills of health personnel (ii) construction and rehabilitation of health facilities and their equipment (iii) information, education and awareness-raising on health issues among the populations involved	10.3
Access to off-grid energy	(i) access to clean cooking	4.1
Life on Land	Not disclosed	3.9
Access to water and sanitation	(i) starting up a potable water supply plant (ii) maintenance on wells (iii) activities and initiatives on the topic of water access	2.8

	(iii) building of water plants	
Compensation and Resettlement	Not disclosed	1.2
Total		76.4

Table 2. Eni investments by sector of intervention. **Source:** Developed by the authors using data from Eni's Sustainability Report (2022).

Eni's Local Stakeholder Engagement through CSR

Findings from digital interviews with the surrounding community showed the lack of engagement between Eni and stakeholders in managing community relations in Nigeria (Izidor, 2016). Eni's engagement with potential stakeholders is a complex, multi-stage process that involves collaboration between several departments within the company, starting with the initial contact. Eni managers claim to initiate contact first, while community members insist they must approach Eni before any contact takes place. This contradiction reflects a lack of engagement and an overall deficiency in the channel of communication between the company and the local community. This validates our former interview with a member of the higher management and advisory board of Remal oil company where he stated foreign companies often find it difficult to implement effective CSR initiatives due to their limited understanding of local cultures, communities, and environmental dynamics in Africa. This lack of familiarity makes it difficult for multinational companies to address the specific needs and concerns of the local environment in which they operate, which further emphasizes the need for engagement between MNEs and the local community.

Additionally, the communication gap makes it difficult for the company's board to understand and act on community demands and needs, and also for community representatives to know who to

contact regarding specific issues and requests. Respondents from the community stressed the need for a more comprehensive community plan, which includes Eni providing infrastructure for education, water, and electricity, as well as more employment opportunities. Failure of the Nigerian government to fulfill these fundamental obligations led host communities to look for alternatives to these necessities from oil MNEs.

On the other hand, respondents from Eni expressed concerns about extreme behavior displayed by members of the community, such as disruption of operations, closing of facilities in protests and blockades, theft of equipment, and kidnapping of staff. Eni proposes that communities submit written requests and wait for a response. On a more positive note, both Eni managers and community members recognize the company's engagement in the social and cultural life of host communities by participating in cultural festivals and providing funding for community events. This is perceived as a way by which Eni could strengthen its relationships with host communities. However, rising community expectations and corruption within the Nigerian government remain major obstacles. The Nigerian government's joint venture partnership with oil MNEs and the debts it owes to these MNEs further hinder MNEs' ability to meet the demands of the community. In conclusion, while Eni engages in community relations initiatives, the processes are complicated by communication challenges, unmet expectations driven by government corruption, resulting in tension and mistrust between both parties.

Major Controversies of Eni's Operations in Nigeria

Oil Spills

There have been numerous reports of destructive oil spills in local communities. In 2010, a pipeline burst 250 meters from a creek north of one of the local Ikebiri communities, leading to a spill and destroying local livelihoods and ecosystems. Eni's subsidiary, NAOC, operated the pipeline. Despite the leak being repaired and claims of a cleanup by NAOC, community representatives argued it was inadequate, and this resulted in court action in Milan in 2017. While the case led to negotiations causing a settlement in 2018,

it did not include the cleaning of the pollution from the spill, leaving the issue unresolved. Moreover, with Eni reiterating that the spill was properly cleaned up in 2010, certified by Nigeria's Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA), no further clean-up was required, and a ruling was avoided on whether Eni could be held responsible for harm caused by an overseas subsidiary (Case Study: Eni Settlement with a Nigerian Community, 2020).

Similarly, recent spills in Rivers State, southern Nigeria, have drawn criticism and allegations of slow responses from Eni. The human rights group, Amnesty International, previously alleged Eni took weeks to respond to reports of spills and published "misleading information about the cause and severity of spills" (Nigeria: Amnesty activists uncover serious negligence by oil giants Shell and Eni, 2018). The Ferret, an investigative journalism platform based in Scotland, visited Nigeria to find that crude oil contaminated the oil and drinking water. A soil sample revealed severe pollution, affecting the local communities' water sources and agriculture. Lyon Umdukari, a community leader, told The Ferret that the spills had become more frequent, and no one had visited the community nor paid any compensation for oil damage to crops (Kelvin-Alerechi, 2023). The contaminated water caused illnesses, rashes, and hunger for the local people, who had no choice but to drink and bathe in this water supply. Eni now highlights measures such as advanced leak detection technology and increased surveillance to prevent more spills, specifically stating that "compared to previous years, in 2020 we have observed a significant decrease in the number of spills due to sabotage, presumably due to the declining social tensions after the 2019 election period and an increased surveillance (around -22%)" (Oil asset and production integrity, n.d.). However, ongoing community grievances and environmental concerns highlight the need for sustained efforts and accurate reporting to address the impacts of oil spills in Nigeria.

Impact of Eni's CSR Strategy in Nigeria: Risk of losing social license

Due to the aforementioned continued unstable environment of Nigeria and the multitude of challenges faced by local communities, Eni risks losing its social license (the situation in which a project has ongoing

approval within the local community and among other stakeholders, including political and public acceptance) if it fails to address the socio-economic issues of its host communities (Maintaining a social license, n.d.). While our findings suggest that Eni's operations in Nigeria seem to contribute to the region's development, Izidor (2016) argues that MNEs like Eni often struggle to meet society and community expectations while developing their CSR initiatives, and argue that each affected party could differently interpret CSR initiatives differently. For example, the government of Nigeria views CSR implementation by MNEs as a way to delegate some of its responsibility, as they expect them to allocate a portion of their revenues to the development of the regions they operate within.

MNEs commonly view CSR as a way to boost their reputation, address social concerns, and increase profits, while local communities expect economic opportunities and contributions to the development and demands of the local community. For example, in rural regions of Nigeria, where access to clean water is scarce, the local community expects MNEs to extract their resources to incorporate access to clean water into their CSR initiatives. Furthermore, in order for MNEs to meet community expectations, it's crucial to recognize and understand each host community and their unique values and culture, which is why MNEs behave and implement different strategies when operating in different regions. Failing to acknowledge the differences between aligning CSR initiatives with the values and expectations of society, and not tailoring their mission, will cost them the respect of the community they are operating in. They will be judged not on their activities in the country, but rather on their lack of engagement within communities, in which they face the risk of losing their social license. MNEs should therefore prioritize constant engagement with the local community to meet society's expectations and foster further development and operations in the region.

When we compare Eni to its competitors, they are generally on par with industry leaders in terms of ratings, investments, and initiatives. According to Du and Vieria (2012), major competitors like Exxon Mobil, BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, Valero Energy, and Marathon Oil have faced criticism for lacking in areas deemed important for CSR strategies by experts. This theory closely aligns with our initial

hypothesis, where we expected to find that oil companies have not allocated resources effectively. For example, “employees as a key stakeholder group received inadequate attention, with employee-related CSR actions mostly limited to workplace safety and employee health” (Du & Vieria, 2012, p.419). Some of the major areas needed for improvement are wholly engaged strategies that represent minority stakeholders with less capital that are operationally important. Moreover, the study finds that these companies lacked long-term, enduring initiatives, instead focusing on less complex areas. This theory is consistent with many other expert opinions and analysis on O&G industry responsibility and implementations.

More recently, however, O&G companies have altered their strategies to better fit stakeholder preferences and demands, as well as public image. Eni, unlike its competitors, strategically positions itself to emphasize CSR as a core element of its operations. This emphasis is clearly evident through their corporate website and other publications. Despite these outward appearances, Eni is currently rated as average in terms of sustainability compared to its competitors. Although O&G companies have traditionally been contentious due to their significant carbon footprint, there has been a recent trend of increased investment aimed at promoting a more sustainable business model. In a 2022 BloombergNEF study, the leading ten sustainable oil and gas companies were assessed based on their adaptability and preparedness for the transition to a cleaner energy future. Eni was ranked averagely among these leading sustainable companies, scoring 6.93 out of 10 on the sustainability scale (Oil and gas companies most able to transition to clean energy in 2022, 2024).

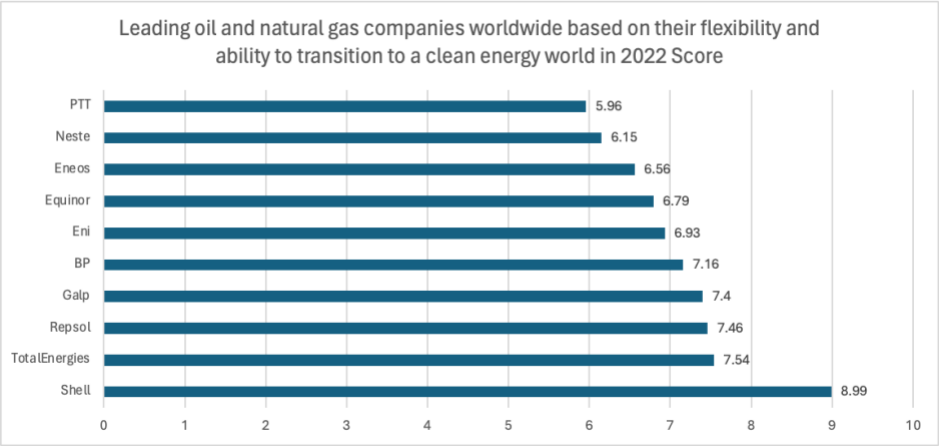


Figure 1. Leading oil and natural gas companies worldwide based on their flexibility and ability to transition to a clean energy world in 2022 Score. **Source:** Statista (2024)

Moreover, Morgan Stanley Capital International (MSCI) finds that Eni has an ESG rating of A, average in the industry. This comparative rating is made up of 35 factors, and within that, MSCI finds that Eni is an ESG leader in carbon emissions, toxic emissions and waste (ESG Ratings & Climate Search tool, 2024). However, it falls behind in the category of corporate behavior.

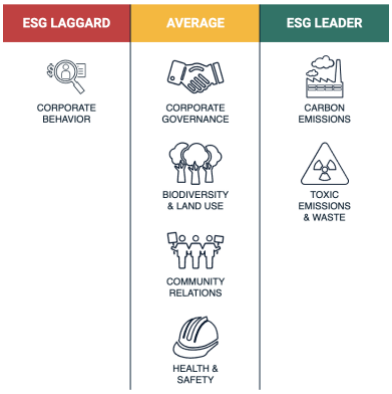
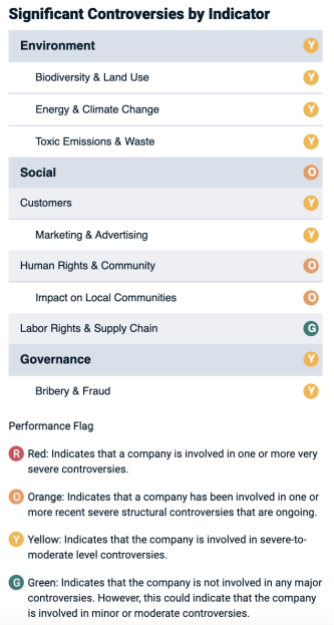


Figure 2. Eni ESG laggards, leaders and average initiatives in line with MSCI ratings. **Source:** ESG Ratings & Climate Search tool, MSCI (2024)

Additionally, through an ESG analysis, MSCI finds Eni is rated orange (which indicates the company has been involved in one or more recent and outgoing severe structural controversies) in social aspects, with human rights and community, as well as impact on local communities as their lowest ratings, in line with our hypothesis.



Significant Controversies by Indicator

Environment	Y
Biodiversity & Land Use	Y
Energy & Climate Change	Y
Toxic Emissions & Waste	Y
Social	O
Customers	Y
Marketing & Advertising	Y
Human Rights & Community	O
Impact on Local Communities	O
Labor Rights & Supply Chain	G
Governance	Y
Bribery & Fraud	Y

Performance Flag

R Red: Indicates that a company is involved in one or more very severe controversies.

O Orange: Indicates that a company has been involved in one or more recent severe structural controversies that are ongoing.

Y Yellow: Indicates that the company is involved in severe-to-moderate level controversies.

G Green: Indicates that the company is not involved in any major controversies. However, this could indicate that the company is involved in minor or moderate controversies.

Table 3. Eni's significant controversies by indicator. **Source:** ESG Ratings & Climate Search tool, MSCI (2024)

Other competitors seem to present the same challenges in their specific ESG ratings, with social initiatives as a weak point (such as BP, Exxon, and Shell). In fact, the benchmark entitled "impact on local communities" presents a consistently low trend of all major O&G companies, proving that focus on the local community has much room for improvement.

V. Discussion, Limitations and Conclusion

Given the insufficient investment in local communities and the significant problems that arise, including environmental damage, socioeconomic challenges, and safety concerns, it is imperative for companies in the O&G industry to revise their CSR strategies to better include local demographics. By doing so, they can shift from reactive approaches to proactive ones, thereby making tangible improvements in improving flawed operational systems. Through our case analysis of Eni's operations in Nigeria and the overwhelming amount of literature, we found an imbalance in community investments. O&G MNEs have been proven to create some of the largest issues in the natural environment today, being one of the highest carbon footprint industries. Those most directly affected are the surrounding operations and the plant.

Moreover, due to widespread corruption and a lack of strong institutions in the regions, socioeconomic and safety issues have become of high concern in these areas.

Therefore, we recommend that these companies engage with their local communities to gain insights into the necessary changes required to improve living conditions, especially those affected by their extraction operations. This approach aims to address the discrepancies between the current situation and the desired outcome. This can be done through forums, surveys, and deeper research into the issues created by operations in the region. Moreover, companies and industries need to develop a comprehensive and systematic way to report these initiatives and present data in a reliable, clearer, and organized way that can be standardized across industries. Specifically, experts point out that O&G companies need to develop a way to track the progress of investment in technological innovations.

Within this, the new focus should be on environmental investments, bolstering economic opportunity for locals, and providing relief to those affected by the company's operations. As society increasingly invests in clean energy technologies and moves away from fossil fuels, it's crucial for companies to align with this shift. The O&G industry should pioneer cleaner technologies and prioritize adopting those with proven lower carbon emissions. Currently, the focus is on worldwide systematic changes, with the goal of lowering emissions gradually. With the lack of arable land and polluted water in extraction regions, O&G companies need to focus on the community and land in which they operate. To develop an effective CSR strategy, the first step is therefore to look at what operations most directly affect, in order to inspire change worldwide.

Limitations

Limitations that may arise and should be noted include those of scope. Primarily, due to the nature of the research and the need to dive deeply into one important region, Nigeria, these takeaways and findings may not be transferred to other countries or regions in which O&G operates. Additionally, while briefly comparing Eni with other companies, our primary focus was on Eni operations and strategy, and therefore

may not be representative of all companies in the industry and their corresponding CSR strategies. Therefore, a deeper analysis would need to be conducted onto individual companies and their operations to develop material recommendations and solutions to cause changes in lacking areas.

Additionally, due to the lack of more current data and publications, our research used data from 2022 and earlier, which may not be completely representative of current trends. Furthermore, this data may not be completely accurate. Multiple sources agree that a systematic quantitative approach does not yet exist to effectively assess all areas of CSR, such as technological investment. This may mean that the results in this study and conclusions presented are not entirely representative of the initiative's impact, and may create difficulties in comparing strategies between companies.

Conclusions

This study enriches the literature on the CSR strategy of O&G MNEs and their alignment of global CSR strategy with local realities in emerging and developing host countries where MNEs operate. Through our empirical case analysis of Eni's operations in Nigeria, we observed a lack of investment in local communities, prevalent in the O&G industry. Our results highlight the need to more wholly include minority shareholders, namely the local community in extraction regions, into their CSR initiatives in order to realize reputational growth and long-term competitive advantage of the firm.

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