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Research Article

Formal Imperialism and Contemporary Business Practices in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT:
This study examines how the legacies of formal imperialism continue to shape contemporary business practices in Cameroon, focusing on the interaction between inherited historical structures and present-day economic life. Although Cameroon gained independence decades ago, colonial-era policies still leave their mark on its regulatory frameworks and business environment. The research analyses how these inherited structures affect local enterprises and their capacity to compete in a market increasingly dominated by multinational corporations (MNCs). Drawing on a qualitative design, the study uses semi-structured interviews with ten business leaders from five institutions to surface the challenges local firms face. Participants described substantial bureaucratic obstacles rooted in outdated colonial-era regulations that constrain daily operations and leave domestic firms at a disadvantage against better-resourced MNCs. The findings point to a dual economy marked by historical inequities and uneven market power. At the same time, they suggest that collaborative partnerships between local firms and MNCs can produce mutually beneficial relationships that help domestic enterprises adapt and innovate. On this basis, the study argues for policy reforms that confront the historical legacies of formal imperialism and cultivate a fairer business environment. By building an inclusive regulatory framework and actively supporting local entrepreneurship, Cameroon can move toward sustainable growth and greater resilience within a globalised economy. These insights are intended to inform policymakers, business leaders, and scholars concerned with the enduring influence of historical forces on present-day commerce.
Keywords: Formal Imperialism, Business Practices, Business Environment, Economic Development, Cameroon.

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Introduction

Formal imperialism established direct political and economic control over colonised territories, and in Cameroon it left an enduring imprint on the structures and habits of commercial life. Even after independence, the arrangements built during the colonial period continue to influence trade, investment patterns, and entrepreneurial activity. Understanding this relationship between historical imperial influence and the present-day business environment is the starting point for this analysis.

The study sets out to trace how the remnants of formal imperialism surface in contemporary business practice. It looks in particular at the regulatory frameworks that evolved out of colonial governance and asks how those frameworks shape the fortunes of local enterprises and foreign investors alike. Alongside this, it examines the relationship between local businesses and the multinational corporations operating in Cameroon, weighing the challenges and the opportunities that this interaction creates.

By drawing on the experiences of local businesspeople, the research highlights the strategies entrepreneurs use to work within a market still marked by imperial legacies. The broader aim is to offer a clearer view of how formal imperialism continues to influence business in Cameroon, and in doing so to deepen understanding of the country's economic development within a globalised context.

Statement of the Problem

Cameroon's business landscape remains shaped by the lasting influence of formal imperialism, which continues to affect both economic practice and regulatory design. Despite independence, the imprint of colonial policy shows up in many forms, creating difficulties for local firms and colouring the dynamics of foreign investment. A large number of private enterprises struggle to grow in an environment where inherited practices, regulatory

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constraints, and economic dependencies still hold sway.

Local businesses frequently run up against obstacles that originate in outdated regulations and structures established during the colonial era. These barriers dampen their competitiveness and restrict their access to resources and markets. The relationship between local entrepreneurs and multinational corporations is often marked by power imbalances, with foreign firms dominating key sectors and raising real concerns about equitable growth and long-term sustainability.

Compounding the problem, there is little comprehensive empirical research on how formal imperialism shapes current business practice in Cameroon. This gap leaves policymakers and business leaders without the evidence they need to design strategies that make the most of the country's economic realities while addressing its historical legacies. The present study therefore investigates the contemporary implications of formal imperialism for business in Cameroon, with the aim of offering practical insights that can support a fairer and more resilient economy.

Research Objectives

Main Research Objective

To analyse the influence of formal imperialism on contemporary business practices in Cameroon, with attention to its implications for local enterprises and economic development.

Specific Research Objectives

1. To evaluate the impact of colonial-era policies on current business regulations and practices in Cameroon.
2. To examine the role of multinational corporations in the Cameroonian market and their relationship with local businesses.

Central Research Question

What is the influence of formal imperialism on contemporary business practices in Cameroon?

Specific Research Questions

1. How do colonial-era policies continue to shape business regulations and practices in Cameroon today?
2. In what ways do multinational corporations affect the competitiveness of local businesses in Cameroon?

Significance of the Study

The value of this study lies in the light it can shed on the relationship between formal imperialism and contemporary business practice in Cameroon. By investigating that relationship, the research clarifies how historical colonial policies continue to influence the present economic landscape, and it offers something useful to several groups of stakeholders.

Contribution to academic knowledge

The study enriches scholarly debate on organisational behaviour and economic development in developing countries. Its focus on Cameroon helps fill a gap in the literature concerning the legacy of formal imperialism and its bearing on business practice, offering a more textured account of how historical factors continue to shape modern economic realities and contributing to the wider fields of international business and development studies.

Practical implications for business leaders

For entrepreneurs and managers in Cameroon, the study offers workable strategies for operating within a demanding business environment. A clearer grasp of how formal imperialism shaped today's regulatory frameworks can help local firms adjust their strategies, and the research points to the value of building collaborative relationships with multinational corporations so that domestic firms can draw on foreign investment while protecting their competitive position.

Policy development

The findings carry direct implications for policymakers. By identifying the difficulties local businesses face as a result of imperial legacies, the study can inform fairer and more effective policy. It supports the design of regulatory frameworks that strengthen local enterprises within a globalised economy and encourages closer partnership between government agencies and private business in the pursuit of development.

Enhanced stakeholder engagement

The study underlines the importance of stakeholder engagement across the business ecosystem. In examining the interaction between local firms and multinational corporations, it shows why inclusive decision-making matters: bringing government officials, business leaders, and community members into conversations about economic policy tends to produce more sustainable and equitable outcomes.

Contribution to organisational development

By focusing on resilience and adaptability in the face of historical constraint, the research also speaks to the broader literature on organisational development. Its findings can serve as a reference point for organisations in other sectors confronting comparable pressures, illustrating how resilience-building strategies travel across contexts as firms adapt to the ongoing influence of formal imperialism.

Future research directions

Finally, the study opens avenues for further inquiry by mapping questions that remain unanswered. In exploring the reach of formal imperialism into business practice, it invites subsequent work on other dimensions of this relationship, both in Cameroon and in other post-colonial settings, and encourages continued attention to the challenges and opportunities that historical legacies create in contemporary economies.

Review of Literature

Review of Concepts

Making sense of formal imperialism and business practice in Cameroon requires a working grasp of several related ideas. This section reviews the concepts that anchor the analysis: formal imperialism, organisational resilience, the impact of colonial policies, stakeholder engagement, and economic development.

Formal imperialism

Formal imperialism refers to the direct political and economic control a colonial power exercises over a territory. In practice, it involves imposing governance structures, legal systems, and economic frameworks that serve the coloniser's interests while marginalising local populations. In Cameroon, this legacy still colours the regulatory landscape and everyday business practice, which is why the concept is foundational for understanding how historical policy shapes the present environment (Aka, 2016).

Organisational resilience

Organisational resilience is the capacity of an organisation to anticipate, prepare for, respond to, and recover from disruptive events. For Cameroonian firms navigating the constraints inherited from formal imperialism, resilience is especially important: organisations that cultivate it are better placed to absorb shifting market conditions and external pressures, which makes the concept central to any account of how businesses survive and grow in a post-colonial setting (Hamel & Välikangas, 2003).

Impact of colonial policies

The influence of colonial policy on present-day business is a crucial line of examination. Colonial administrations put in place economic policies that reshaped trade, industry, and investment across Cameroon, typically in ways that favoured the coloniser and produced a dual economy in which local firms were disadvantaged (Njeuma, 1996). Tracing what remains of those policies helps explain the regulatory hurdles local enterprises face as they compete against multinational corporations in a market still marked by historical inequity (Mboua, 2017).

Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement involves the active participation of everyone affected by a firm's operations, including employees, customers, suppliers, and the surrounding community. In Cameroon, engagement of this kind is essential for building collaboration between local businesses and multinational corporations. Drawing stakeholders into decision-making improves business practice and contributes to a more inclusive economy (Freeman, 1984), and understanding its dynamics helps clarify how local firms can use partnerships to counter the pressures created by formal imperialism.

Economic development

Economic development refers to the kind of progress that raises living standards, creates jobs, and improves overall economic wellbeing. In Cameroon, the legacy of formal imperialism presents both obstacles and openings for such development. By examining how historical factors shape current business practice, this study aims to clarify the routes through which the country might achieve more sustainable growth (Ngoh, 2018).

Taken together, these concepts provide the conceptual scaffolding for analysing the relationship between formal imperialism and contemporary business practice in Cameroon. Read alongside one another, formal imperialism, organisational resilience, the impact of colonial policy, stakeholder engagement, and economic development offer a rounded view of the current landscape and guide the development of practical insights for stakeholders across the Cameroonian economy.

Theoretical Review

Two theories offer particularly useful frameworks for understanding the dynamics at work between formal imperialism and business practice in Cameroon: dependency theory and stakeholder theory. Each helps explain how historical legacies continue to shape contemporary economic relationships.

Dependency theory

Dependency theory holds that a country's economic development is heavily conditioned by its historical and structural relationships with more developed nations. On this view, resources flow from peripheral countries, often underdeveloped or developing, toward core, industrialised ones, producing a dependency that stifles local growth (Frank, 1967). Applied to Cameroon, the theory helps explain how formal imperialism continues to weigh on local business.

During the colonial period, Cameroon's economy was organised to serve colonial interests, which fostered reliance on cash crops and raw materials for export. That arrangement left local businesses at a structural disadvantage, competing in a market tilted toward foreign investment and multinational corporations (Amoah & Osei, 2019). As a result, local entrepreneurs often find themselves vulnerable, struggling to escape patterns of dependency forged during the imperial era. Read through this lens, historical inequalities continue to shape business practice, regulatory design, and economic relationships, revealing the barriers that stand in the way of sustainable local development.

Stakeholder theory

Stakeholder theory, developed by Freeman (1984), stresses the importance of engaging every party affected by an organisation's operations, from employees and customers to suppliers and the wider community. It argues that firms should look beyond shareholder value to weigh the interests and wellbeing of all stakeholders. In Cameroon, this emphasis is especially pertinent to the interaction between local businesses and multinational corporations.

The legacy of formal imperialism has produced an economy in which stakeholder engagement is central to inclusive growth. Multinational corporations often dominate key sectors, and their decisions can weigh heavily on local firms and communities (Tchamyou et al., 2021). Viewed through stakeholder theory, the study can trace how local enterprises work with governmental bodies, foreign investors, and other actors to manage the constraints they have inherited. Effective engagement can also give local businesses a stronger voice, encouraging collaborative decision-making and, in turn, a fairer economy. Understanding these relationships offers valuable insight into how firms can use partnerships to strengthen both their competitiveness and their resilience.

Together, dependency theory and stakeholder theory form a coherent framework for analysing the effects of formal imperialism on business in Cameroon. Dependency theory illuminates the historical economic structures that continue to disadvantage local enterprises, while stakeholder theory foregrounds the collaborative relationships that help firms navigate today's environment. In combination, they yield a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities Cameroonian businesses face as they seek to thrive in a post-colonial context.

Empirical Review

This section reviews key studies that illuminate the impact of colonial policy, the interaction between local and multinational businesses, and the role of stakeholder engagement in shaping Cameroon's economy.

Njeuma (1996) draws attention to the lasting effects of colonial economic policy on the structure of Cameroon's economy. The study describes how colonial administrations prioritised resource extraction and put in place trade practices that favoured foreign interests, leaving behind a dual economy in which local firms struggle to compete with established multinational corporations. Njeuma argues that regulatory frameworks inherited from the colonial period continue to disadvantage local entrepreneurs by limiting their access to resources and markets.

In a similar vein, Mboua (2017) analyses contemporary business regulation in Cameroon and shows that much of it still echoes colonial-era policy. The study finds that local businesses face bureaucratic hurdles that hold back their growth and competitiveness, underscoring the case for reforms that address the historical inequities embedded in the regulatory framework.

Amoah and Osei (2019) examine the place of multinational corporations in the Cameroonian market, weighing both the openings and the obstacles they create for local firms. Their work suggests that while MNCs bring investment and technological advances, they frequently dominate the market and raise barriers for local entrepreneurs. The authors stress the value of a more collaborative environment in which local businesses can engage with MNCs to build their own competitiveness.

Tchamyou et al. (2021) turn to the dynamics of stakeholder engagement in settings shaped by multinational corporations. Their findings indicate that local enterprises which actively engage stakeholders, including government bodies and community members, are better positioned to navigate a business environment shaped by formal imperialism. The study highlights the importance of inclusive decision-making that takes the interests of all stakeholders into account, arguing that such processes ultimately contribute to more equitable economic outcomes.

Ngoh (2018) considers the wider implications of stakeholder engagement for economic development in Cameroon. The study contends that collaboration between local businesses and a range of stakeholders can support sustainable growth, and that a clearer understanding of these relationships can help policymakers build an environment that nurtures local entrepreneurship and strengthens economic resilience.

Read together, this body of work shows how deeply historical legacies continue to shape Cameroon's economy. The studies demonstrate that colonial policy still conditions the regulatory landscape, complicating the interaction between local firms and multinational corporations, and they identify stakeholder engagement as a critical ingredient of resilience and equitable development. Collectively, the literature points to the need for continued research and for policy interventions that confront the historical inequities persisting in the Cameroonian economy, so that local enterprises can grow and endure.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the influence of formal imperialism on contemporary business practices in Cameroon. A qualitative approach was well suited to the task, since it captures the nuanced experiences and perceptions of individuals within their own contexts and allows for a deeper reading of a complex subject.

Sampling Strategy

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. The researcher interviewed ten businesspeople drawn from five different institutions, a selection designed to capture a range of perspectives and to reflect varied experiences of operating within a business environment shaped by formal imperialism.

Data Collection Methods

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with the selected participants. This format offered enough flexibility to follow participants' experiences while ensuring that the core themes were addressed consistently. The interviews focused on three areas:

- Experiences of regulatory challenges shaped by historical policies.
- Strategies used to compete with multinational corporations.
- Perspectives on stakeholder engagement and collaboration with other actors.

Results and Findings

This section presents the findings from the qualitative study, which are based on semi-structured interviews with ten businesspeople from five institutions. The analysis surfaced several recurring themes that together capture the participants' experiences and perspectives.

1. Legacy of colonial policies

One of the clearest themes to emerge was the continuing weight of colonial policy on current business practice. Participants observed that many regulatory frameworks still reflect the priorities of former colonial powers, creating difficulties for local firms. Several pointed to bureaucratic hurdles and outdated rules that slow down their operations. As one participant put it, “The regulations we have to follow often seem designed for foreign companies, not for us.”

2. Challenges faced by local businesses

Interviewees consistently described challenges rooted in the legacies of formal imperialism. Many worried about a competitive landscape in which local firms struggle against multinational corporations, and a common view was that MNCs enjoy better access to resources, technology, and market opportunities. One entrepreneur captured the sentiment plainly: “We are often outmatched by larger companies that have more capital and influence, making it difficult for us to grow.”

3. Adaptation strategies

Despite these pressures, participants shared a variety of strategies for working within the market. Many stressed adaptability and innovation, with some firms turning to niche markets or developing products tailored to local needs. As one interviewee remarked, “We have to find our own space in the market; otherwise, we risk being overshadowed.”

4. Importance of stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement emerged as central to local business success. Participants reported that working with government bodies, community members, and international partners was essential for overcoming obstacles and building resilience. One business leader noted, “Building relationships with stakeholders has helped us gain support and navigate the regulatory environment more effectively.”

5. Perceptions of multinational corporations

Views of multinational corporations were mixed. Some participants welcomed foreign investment for the jobs and technology transfer it brings, while others were uneasy about the dominance of MNCs in the market. Several called for policies that level the playing field, insisting that local firms deserve an equal chance to compete. As one participant emphasised, “We need a fair chance to grow, not just be sidelined by big companies.”

Overall, the findings confirm the strong influence of formal imperialism on contemporary business practice in Cameroon. The legacy of colonial policy continues to shape the regulatory landscape and to create difficulties for local enterprises. Yet local businesses are also finding ways to adapt, innovate, and engage stakeholders as they work through these constraints. The mixed reception of multinational corporations points to the need for balanced policies that support local and foreign investment alike, and the results as a whole offer valuable context for understanding Cameroon's economic dynamics.

Discussion

The findings offer a clearer view of how formal imperialism influences contemporary business practice in Cameroon, and they can be read directly against the study's research questions.

Influence of formal imperialism on contemporary business practices

The central question—what is the influence of formal imperialism on contemporary business practices in Cameroon?—is answered through the experiences participants shared. The legacy of formal imperialism surfaces across several dimensions of the business environment. Participants observed that many regulatory frameworks still reflect colonial interests, producing a landscape that tends to favour multinational corporations over local enterprises and reinforcing a cycle of dependency in which local firms struggle against historical inequity. As one participant put it, “The system feels rigged against us; many of the policies were made without considering our needs.”

The first specific question—how do colonial-era policies continue to shape business regulations and practices in Cameroon today?—is examined through the participants' accounts. Many pointed to the remnants of colonial policy visible in bureaucratic hurdles and outdated regulations. The procedures for securing permits and licences, for instance, were seen to reflect a colonial mindset that prioritises foreign interests and complicates operations for local entrepreneurs. This perception strengthens the case for reforms that address these legacies and make the regulatory environment easier for local firms to navigate.

The interviews also revealed that the regulatory framework does little to support innovation or entrepreneurship. Participants voiced frustration that policies fail to keep pace with the current economic context, often dampening competition and narrowing market opportunities. By clinging to colonial-era regulation, the business environment remains less hospitable to local innovation and growth, reinforcing the disadvantages that domestic enterprises already face.

The second specific question—in what ways do multinational corporations affect the competitiveness of local businesses in Cameroon?—is addressed through participants' mixed assessments of MNCs. Some acknowledged the benefits these firms bring, including job creation, technology transfer, and investment, while others raised concerns about the competitive imbalances that flow from their dominance.

Many participants noted that MNCs enjoy greater access to resources, networks, and capital, which allows them to outcompete local firms. As one entrepreneur observed, “It's hard to compete with companies that have so much backing; we often feel like we are fighting an uphill battle.”

The presence of MNCs can also tip the market toward monopolisation, leaving local businesses sidelined and searching for a niche. The findings suggest that local enterprises are frequently forced to adapt simply to survive, with some pursuing innovative approaches such as focusing on local needs or developing products for specific market segments. These moves, however, tend to be reactive rather than proactive, which again points to the need for an environment that actively supports local entrepreneurship.

The influence of formal imperialism on business in Cameroon is, in short, both profound and multifaceted. Colonial-era policy continues to shape the regulatory landscape, while the dominance of multinational corporations further complicates the competitive environment and often disadvantages local firms. Addressing these issues will require coordinated effort from policymakers, business leaders, and other stakeholders to build a fairer and more supportive framework. By encouraging innovation, collaboration, and fair competition, Cameroon can work toward a more resilient and sustainable economic future.

Conclusion

This study has examined how formal imperialism continues to shape contemporary business practice in Cameroon, and it reveals how deeply historical legacies still mark the economic landscape. The findings show that colonial-era policy continues to affect business regulation, producing a demanding environment for local enterprises. Because such policies often favour multinational corporations, with their greater resources and market advantages, competitive imbalances persist. The accounts offered by local businesspeople point to a clear need for reforms that confront these inequities and open up a fairer field of play.

At the same time, the study documents the resilience of local firms, which adapt through innovation and stakeholder engagement. For that resilience to translate into sustained growth and competitiveness, however, a supportive regulatory framework is indispensable. Above all, the research underscores the importance of understanding how historical influences and contemporary practice intersect, and it offers insights of value to policymakers, business leaders, and scholars alike.

Recommendations

Policy reform

The Cameroonian government should undertake comprehensive reforms to address the remnants of colonial-era regulation. Modernising these rules to better fit the needs of local businesses would strengthen their operational viability and competitiveness.

Support for local enterprises

Initiatives that provide financing, training, and resources to local entrepreneurs deserve priority. Access to grants, low-interest loans, and business-development programmes would help local firms compete more effectively against multinational corporations.

Encouraging stakeholder engagement

Inclusive decision-making that draws in local entrepreneurs, community members, and other stakeholders can help ensure that policy and practice reflect the economy's diverse needs. Collaborative platforms can open dialogue between local businesses and MNCs and foster mutually beneficial partnerships.

Strengthening local capacity

Capacity-building programmes centred on innovation, technology adoption, and market research can help local firms identify and capture niche markets. Encouraging diversification would also improve their resilience against market fluctuations.

Monitoring and evaluation

Mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the effect of policy changes on local businesses will be essential. Ongoing assessment can reveal where improvements are needed and help ensure that the regulatory environment continues to evolve in step with the economy.

By acting on these recommendations, stakeholders in Cameroon can help build a fairer business environment—one that acknowledges and addresses the historical legacies of formal imperialism, and that ultimately supports sustainable growth and resilience among local enterprises.

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