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The content and context of Strategic Human Resource Management in Cameroon

Julius Nyiawung[a], Serge Mandiefe Piabuo[b], Marian Crowley-Henry[a] and Janice Tieguhong Puatwoe[c]

[a]School of Business, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland; [b]World Bank, Yaoundé, Cameroon; [c]Research Centre for Sustainable Development (RECSUD), Yaoundé, Cameroon

ABSTRACT
This paper explores the content and context of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) in a Global South setting. SHRM practices in the West-Central African country, Cameroon (with over 27 million inhabitants), are unpacked from 74 qualitative research interviews within organisations of different size and ownership and from secondary sources. The findings show a complex mix of local, imported and adapted SHRM strategies and practices which are socially embedded in a simultaneous flux of adoption, redesign and disuse by the organisations, depending on their perceived usefulness and on the particularities of the organisations (size, sector). The findings delineate the macro-level cultural contextual focus on beneficence policies and practices (prioritisation of social capital, consensus building, family friendly work practices and socialisation) as key antecedents in the adoption of agile SHRM practices (content and context factors). A theoretical model from the systems, society, dominance and corporate (SSDC) framework of SHRM is shared that further empirical research may use to investigate contextual features which moderate SHRM practices. The study contributes to SHRM scholarship by presenting a socially embedded agile SHRM approach in Cameroon, where internal organisational stakeholders are informed by dynamic, overlapping and changing multi-level factors over time in the pursuit of organisational goals.

KEYWORDS
Cameroon; Strategic Human Resource Management; SSDC-Effects; Global South

Introduction

Most research in relation to international Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) assimilates all country contexts to that of western countries where SHRM models and frameworks are developed and upon those specific institutional and cultural contexts where the respective

CONTACT Marian Crowley-Henry marian.crowleyhenry@mu.ie Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland.
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SHRM foci are grounded (Cooke, 2018). This approach fundamentally neglects the contextual influences that play a role in the adoption, adaptation or rejection of these human resource (HR) practices in specific non-western contexts (Mayrhofer et al., 2022), such as in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), to enhance employee and organisational performance (Aloumedjo, 2018; Thierry et al., 2018).

Scholars have been arguing for the need to pay more attention to the context-related SHRM challenges for organisations operating in the Global South (Hermans, 2018; Ogunyomi & Bruning, 2016). Key challenges of SHRM in multinational corporations include resource constraints (financial and human resources), cultural and institutional differences (diverse cultural norms, legal frameworks and business practices), talent acquisition (skilled employees, especially in competitive industries and regions) and retention and their complex interplay (Muhajan, 2024, p. 9). However, Cooke (2018) has argued that most of the research that has shown how human resource (HR) practices influence employee and organisational performance in non-western contexts is based on predominantly western literature. A persistent re-occurring issue in Human Resource Management (HRM) literature has been the lack of focus on contextual influences (Mayrhofer et al., 2022) in understanding patterns of planned human resource deployments, the associated activities and the resulting outcomes in developing countries. Thus, the significance of examining contextual influences lies in the fact that a socio-historical analysis is paramount to provide a comprehensive view of SHRM in each context (Chen et al., 2016). This is particularly relevant in the context of SSA and the global south more generally.

In extant literature, organisations' HRM practices are also shaped by micro-level influences such as strategic choice (Wilton, 2006) or organisation-level contingencies (Geary & Hunek, 2019). These insights allude to the importance of both the external (global, national and sectoral) and internal (organisational) influences in shaping organisations' HRM approaches and practices in any given context. In Cameroon and SSA in general, the content and context of people management in organisations are mainly shaped by socio-cultural, institutional and technological factors. The works of Farr (2024) on customs administration discerned that endogenous traits such as tribalism, nepotism, favouritism, family and community ties affected accountability and SHRM effectiveness to enhance overall organisational performance in Cameroon. The impact of national culture and institutions on SHRM practices in Cameroon also underscored their value to the success of organisations in the services sector (Mahouat et al., 2023). Similarly, the effectiveness of training and development as well as adaptation of Western HRM models, considering cultural and institutional specificities in SSA, have been shown to benefit organisational outcomes (Fomude et al., 2020; Nyiawung et al., 2024). Jonathan et al. (2019) and Tchatchoua (2022) also observed how electronic green HRM and online recruitment methods enhanced organisational efficiency, but their adoption was limited and faced significant resource challenges, particularly in the finance sector in Cameroon. In SSA, SHRM further highlights the integration of digital technologies, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI), into HRM practices across key sectors, identifying cultural and institutional challenges as well as opportunities such as improved service delivery, employee records management and reduced bias in recruitment, training and development (Chilunjika et al., 2022). As such, the nature of SHRM in organisations in Cameroon are predicated on the macro- (national and international), meso- (industry/sector/organisational) and micro- (internal structures and processes, leadership, policies etc.) level features therein.

However, key SHRM issues in SSA include Western multinational enterprises finding it difficult to transfer HR practices to their African subsidiaries (Nyiawung, 2021) and the inadequate understanding of digital technology to build competitive advantages by local firms (Aloumedjo, 2018). While empirical SHRM studies have been few and far between in SSA and particularly in Cameroon, they have focused on individual practices, sectors, organisations and their origins (Cooke, 2018; Thierry et al., 2018) and lack nuanced analyses across diverse organisation types (size and ownership). As such, there is a need to understand and explain contextual influences on the variations in the adoption of SHRM policies and practices (Aloumedjo, 2018; Nyiawung et al., 2024). Bearing in mind these gaps in the literature, the overall objective of this study was to explore and share the content of and contextual influences on SHRM in Cameroon as a unique SSA context.

To explore SHRM in Cameroon in greater depth, we drew upon a dominant contextualised integrated approach in the literature: the systems, society and dominance (SSD) framework (Smith & Meiksins, 1995) and its extension provided by Delbridge et al. (2011) which introduced corporate (C) effects as a fourth influence. The SSDC framework is employed as an overarching framework where the contextual nuances across international SHRM practices may be unpacked. The SSDC framework allows researchers to specifically focus on the respective country contextual factors that influence the adoption of HRM practices locally. It provides a framework to help explain the different pressures at the local country level that inform the adoption strategies of HRM practices. This study set out to address two specific research questions: (1) how do key contextual factors (historical, political, economic, institutional, organisational and societal) shape SHRM policies and practices in Cameroon?

(2) how and why are the variations of SHRM policies and practices adopted in the country?

Our study makes three contributions to international SHRM literature. First, it introduces and highlights the importance of beneficence policies and practices (signifying a prioritisation on social capital, consensus building, family friendly work practices and socialisation as evidenced in this study). Here, the varied SHRM approaches that were adopted by the organisations in this study did not only emphasise principles of flexibility, collaboration and a people-centred culture to drive performance and foster employee outcomes (Ibrhim et al., 2025; Kadhim et al., 2023), but also enhanced employees' wellbeing and doing good for their families and communal circles. Second, we extend international SHRM literature through our application of the theoretical SSDC framework, a pre-eminent context-anchored approach to SHRM in SSA which deviates from the mainly managerial-deterministic instrumental approach (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; T. Jackson, 2014; Nyiawung et al., 2024) of the predominantly western SHRM literature. Thus, by anchoring this study in the SSDC framework, an examination of the interactions between the structures, processes and how they were leveraged by actors to pursue organisational goals was possible, demonstrating the dynamic interaction effects on international SHRM practices. Third, we present a theoretical model of SHRM in SSA, adapted from the SSDC framework, as a foundation for further empirical research to investigate the key contextual features of SHRM in the Global South. This empirically-derived model informs SHRM in Cameroon in particular and the global south in general, by adapting the SSDC model to include unique firm-level contingencies, macro-economic (geopolitical) forces, the country's historical and socio-cultural values and norms and workforce power resources that are embedded in the context to explain the dynamic nature of people management across organisations in the global south. As such, the empirically-derived model underscores a more sophisticated foundation to examine the layered nature of multiple (macro, meso and micro) effects and the scope for actors' agency to shape SHRM in a global south context, Cameroon (Geary & Nyiawung, 2022).

Theoretical background

To examine the variations and influences on SHRM in Cameroon, this study drew on the systems, society, dominance and corporate (SSDC) framework (Delbridge et al., 2011; Smith & Meiksins, 1995) that integrates three theoretical perspectives and addresses their weaknesses in analysing workforce management in international and national firms. The three theoretical perspectives are the institutional, political and market-based perspectives that can be seen in the HRM literature. Their assumptions, basic tenets, strengths and weaknesses have been extensively addressed in the literature (see Adeleye, 2011; Delbridge et al., 2011; Elger & Smith, 2005; Munir, 2021; Suddaby & Young, 2015), but they tend to be insufficiently unpacked together in the analysis of HRM, which thereby limits their usefulness and relevance in theorising the management of employment practices by organisations (Delbridge et al., 2011) in specific contexts. Researchers have tried to overcome such deficiencies by integrating different theoretical perspectives in their studies. Two prominent and highly cited models of such integrated frameworks in management and business literatures are the political economy approach by Edwards et al. (2007) and the system, society and dominance (SSD) model by Smith and Meiksins (1995) and Elger and Smith (2005). The political economy model pays inadequate attention to the influence of organisational-level institutions (culture, norms, policies, metrics, rules and standards) and the operating context's wider societal and historical influences in its analysis (Delbridge et al., 2011). The SSDC framework—incorporating the systems, society and dominance (SSD) framework (Smith & Meiksins, 1995) and its extension provided by Delbridge et al. (2011) which introduced corporate (C) - addresses these limitations of the political economy approach. The SSDC framework also considers, among other influences, the socio-economic factors impacting on companies and their strategic choices and allows for variation within institutional arrangements and organisational practices.

In this regard, to enable our examination of the content and context of SHRM practices in Cameroon, we adopt and adapt the SSDC framework by considering the role of unique organisational specificities including strategic imperatives (e.g. corporate governance), size, time of arrival, ownership, sector, product/service market, history, etc. in influencing the organisations' respective HRM strategies and practices. Initially, the SSD model of Smith and Meiksins (1995) posited that international and national workplaces reflect a complex three-way interaction of contextual and interest group effects derived from different structural sources. This interaction is derived from the mode of production (system effects), unique national institutions, cultures and histories (societal effects) and the diffusion of best practices (dominance effects). System effects relate to property rights, profit-driven production processes and governance systems that emphasise owners and non-owners (Elger & Smith, 2005). Thus, the emphasis is on the political and economic system at a general level, with core features such as competitive market relations and access to labour in a particular domain. Societal effects encompass the informal relationships and social ties such as strong family networks, informality, the existence of powerful dynasties and nepotism. In Cameroon, for example, historical legacy continues to shape the socio-economic and political landscape. The colonial powers and Bretton Wood institutions imposed different institutions on Cameroonian people who had previously adhered to African traditional socio-cultural systems. This has created a mixture of weak formal and strong informal institutions which are still evident in Cameroon today. Societal effects emphasise social capital as a key element. Social capital underscores the role of social relations, customs and norms in orienting employment practices (in recruitment for example, social networks may hold more sway). The thrust of societal effects and social capital's influence on HRM practices builds on the existing empirical evidence on how actors construct organisations and how the society in which the actors belong influences the process (Mueller, 1996). A bonding type of social capital is created when interactions take place between family members, friends and close relatives (Schuller, 2007). In the Cameroonian collectivistic context, family ties, tribal inclinations and kinship are the 'holy grail' of life that underpin the humanistic view of people in society and organisations (Nyiawung, 2021). As such, local management styles are generally based on social and personal relations.

Dominance effects are essentially leading-edge, globally dominant methods of organisation that are hegemonic and internationally emulated (Elger & Smith, 2005). These take the form of either a dominant sector or individual organisation's practices, such as has been the case for Western HRM practices. As Smith and others note, this allows for organisations to borrow, or adapt, practices by, for example, recruiting managers from organisations from other countries. The significance of dominance effects lies in its presumption that innovative practices are developed by leading companies within globalised industries in hegemonic states. These innovative methods of production and work organisation within the dominant organisations, which make them successful, are referred to as 'best practices' (Edwards et al., 2007). The emphasis on 'best practice' means that this is readily identifiable and that successful management has the capacity to diagnose their organisation's needs effectively and to transfer practices across operating units (Royle, 2006; Smith & Meiksins, 1995). In Cameroon for example, a legacy perception based on a history of the dominance of MNEs from former colonial countries has been that their management practices, including HRM, are superior (Nyiawung, 2021). As such, western approaches to HRM practices have essentially been imported to Cameroon, and national organisations have had the tendency to emulate them (Jonathan et al., 2019).

However, in seeking to allow for greater recognition of the strategic choice available to corporate actors, Delbridge et al. (2011) added a fourth level, 'corporate effects' to complete the SSDC model. This allows for analysis of variations in agency across contexts, recognising how workplace actors may make local settlements and acknowledging the place an individual workplace has within the wider strategy (and corporate division of labour) of the parent organisation (Delbridge et al., 2011). Nonetheless, and there is a risk that a focus on 'dominance' effects might lead to less emphasis on how other factors (like societal institutions) shape organisational outcomes, potentially neglecting the agency of local actors.

In sum, the strength of the SSDC framework to examine SHRM in specific contexts is in its ability to provide an alternative lens for understanding the complex, cross-national influences on organisational practices, by highlighting the dynamic interaction between global economic modes of production (system), national institutions and cultural contexts (society) and the influence of powerful, often corporate, actors (dominance) within a specific timeframe (dos Reis Cardillo & Basso, 2025). However, its effectiveness is limited by the inherent challenge of isolating the distinct impact of each factor, as they are deeply intertwined (exerting influence simultaneously) and the risk that a focus on 'dominance' effects might lead to less emphasis of how other factors (like socio-cultural institutions) shape organisational outcomes, thereby potentially neglecting the agency of local actors (Zhu, 2023). Bearing in mind its weaknesses, we argue that the SSDC framework is appropriate to examine the content and context of SHRM in Cameroon as it provides a vantage point to understand and explain how and why organisational practices are complicated by the effects of societal and national cultures, the political economy of the country, forces that transcend national borders and the strategic choices organisations make to pursue their outcomes (Geary & Nyiawung, 2022). As such, the SSDC framework broadly anchors people management policies and practices within the operating context of organisations. This aligns with calls in the SHRM literature to situate our understanding of SHRM within the operational context since the challenges, particularities and outcomes of SHRM differ from one environment to another (Cooke, 2018; Hermans, 2018).

The literature thus prompts us to pay particular attention to the idiosyncratic features of the context which might influence the shape of the phenomenon (SHRM in this case) being investigated (Geary & Nyiawung, 2022). The content of HRM policies and practices to pursue employee and organisational performance in a given context is anchored on the interactions derived from the mode of production, core features such as competitive market relations, histories and societal values and norms in a particular setting and the recognition of the strategic choice available to corporate actors (Delbridge et al., 2011). Hence the SSDC framework emphasises the 're-contextualisation' of workforce management by observing and accounting for salient features within the macro, meso and micro-operating environment of the organisation. In that sense, the contextual features of Cameroon where the researched organisations are located can be of critical interest and of great explanatory power. As such, and to re-iterate, this study set out to address two specific research questions: (1) how do key contextual factors (historical, political, economic, institutional, organisational and societal) shape SHRM policies and practices in Cameroon? (2) how and why are the variations of SHRM policies and practices adopted in the country?

Methods

Both the novelty and multi-level complexity of exploring SHRM practices in a developing country suggest that an interpretive approach would be suitable, as we are investigating a phenomenon comprising of manifold patterns of interaction that have not yet been well understood (Dixon et al., 2014; Yin, 2018). In line with Cooke's (2018) arguments for more qualitative research in non-western contexts, this in-depth study explored the SHRM practices of recruitment and selection, compensation, training and development, performance management and industrial relations, which are considered as the 'falcon' of work and employment practices (Geary & Aguzzoli, 2016).

The research context: Cameroon

The unique features of Cameroon's socio-cultural and political economy strongly shape management, including HRM, in the country. Organisational practices in Cameroon are predicated on the effects of the societal and national culture which underscores the community focus and the humanistic view (non-Western) of the intrinsic value of people (human value) within the workplace as the cornerstone of the African belief and value system (T. Jackson, 2014; Nyiawung et al., 2024). The Economic Intelligence Unit report of 2019 noted that while formal institutions such as industrial relations' systems, education and training, labour market, financial, laws, labour courts and corporate governance that regulate and sustain Cameroon's political economy exist on paper, a serious lack of implementation is observed in practice. This creates space for informal structures and processes (corruption, clientelism, personal and political relationships) to take effect in all aspects of Cameroon's political economy. Bratton (2007, p. 98) posits that such structures and practices are 'stable, valued and recurring patterns of behaviour', to which all political actors are acutely attuned. So too, Cameroon's labour market (the informal economy stands at 74%) is under-developed because of institutional rigidities and is pervasively corrupt (see https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022), where issues of political governance overwhelm corporate governance (Dickerson, 2007).

Extant literature in this area suggests that people management in Cameroon has an internal stakeholder focus, where managing results are determined by stakeholder interests in the African context (Zoogah & Beugré, 2013). Paternalism, as an ideology, is evident in Cameroonian organisations, developed from the traditional Cameroonian context of communities living in clans or chiefdoms (Fonchingong, 2005). The management ethos in organisations is largely authoritative and administrative. This is the result of two legacies: firstly, the collectivistic and communalistic societal norms and, secondly, the colonial administration. These norms have embedded the perception and consideration of the workplace as a clan-type community. This has given rise to the feeling among workers that they are part of a bigger chiefdom, with the 'owner' or 'chief' being, at the same time, the provider and ruler for his people (Nyiawung et al., 2024). We therefore argue that the content and variation of SHRM practices in firms in Cameroon have been significantly shaped, over the decades by these contextual legacies.

However, an analysis of the content and influences on people management in Cameroon shows that a uniform model of SHRM does not exist. The complex socio-cultural features influence and are in turn shaped by, HR practices in a dynamic, relational way. This leads to a complex mesh of strong indigenous and weak imported people management policies and practices in the country. Also, the socio-cultural norms and values of communal living and relationships, respect for chiefdoms following an authoritative ethos, internal stakeholder focus and paternalism aligns to Hofstede's (2025) collectivistic culture, high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance attributes, respectively (Fainshmidt et al., 2018) in Cameroon. As such, the manifestations of these cultural attributes in organisations serve as the 'glue' between organisational stakeholders, beget immense reverence, enhance employees' experience and well-being and are fundamentally influential in how contemporary SHRM practices are enabled in organisations in Cameroon (Nyiawung et al., 2024).

Research sample and procedure

The primary data for this study were collected from a sample of international (MNEs) and national organisations in different sectors (forestry,

Table 1. Overview of firms in the study & participant interviews.

Sector & size (small, medium & large)	National	International	Total by category/sector	Number of interviewees
Hospitality (2 small & 2 medium)	4	1	5	10
Oil and gas (large)	1	2	3	6
Telecommunications (large)	1	2	3	6
Banking and finance (large)	3	2	5	10
Transport (small)	5	0	5	10
Agri Industry (large)	3	1	4	8
Cement production (large)	1	1	2	4
Research and development (medium)	3	2	5	10
Forestry (2 medium & 3 large)	2	3	5	10
Total number in the sample	23	14	37	74

transport, banking, hospitality, communication and others) in Cameroon, as shown in Table 1. We focused on the formal and principally the private sector. Through the researchers' networks, access was gained to the organisations from senior managers. Pilot testing (*via* semi-structured interviews) was conducted before the fieldwork, which helped the researchers, later, to confidently collect data from the organisations. The research project received ethical approval from the first author's academic institution in March 2016 (Ref: IR/HR28314). A purposeful sample selection strategy was used (Kuzel, 1992) to recruit informants who could provide rich information about the topic. For ethical considerations, all interviewees were briefed on the entire research project and required to sign a consent form prior to the interviews. The organisations and informants were assured of the voluntary and confidential (their identity remains anonymous) nature of the study to encourage participation. There were 74 interviews (face-to-face at the informants' workplace) conducted in 37 organisations altogether. Efforts were made to study organisations of different sizes and diverse interviewees to capture HRM practices from different perspectives.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended probing questions to elicit the required information (Saunders & Townsend, 2016). These interviews lasted between 52 and 98 mins and were conducted in English and French by the bilingual researchers. We used a specific interview protocol developed from the literature. Specifically, the respondents were asked to characterise the socio-cultural and political economic context for HRM in Cameroon. The questions included (1) how participants would characterise the impact of government policies, (2) sociocultural factors and their influence on HRM practices and in the studied context, (3) what kind of relationship they perceive between the existing education system and HRM policies and practices and (4) what impact the standards of MNEs has had on the

HRM practices of the organisations in the country. We stopped interviewing after the 74th participant as data saturation was reached, with no new information emerging from the last two informants. Yin (2018, p. 124) notes that data saturation is attained during qualitative data collection when no new relevant information is being provided by the data 'subjects' following further probing. The interview guide is included in Supplementary Appendix 1.

In addition to the data generated from the in-depth interviews, we used secondary sources such as the employee handbooks or published HRM strategies, policies and practices of the organisations and collective agreements and labour laws in Cameroon to triangulate the emerging findings. In some cases, we had access to archives on employee compensation and performance management practices. These sources also provided further insights into the developmental process of the organisations and the socio-economic context in which the organisations and their HRM were embedded and as such, was a way of contextualising the data (Wolf, 2019).

Data analysis

The recorded data were transcribed and thematically analysed in the recorded language to avoid translation issues. Team meetings and discussions were held by the authors to identify the key themes that depicted the nature of HRM practices and their cultural underpinnings. In line with Braun and Clarke (2006), we, first, read the transcripts to familiarise ourselves with the data and identify themes drawn from the literature. Second, we engaged in open coding to locate additional themes. Third, we identified useful utterances, extracted pertinent information and grouped them according to themes and patterns to reflect the study's aim (Esmaeili et al., 2014). Fourth, we collated the themes within each code by tagging and naming the chunks of text within each data item. Fifth, we identified through axial coding the relationships between the various themes, using Nvivo mapping, which was then mapped to the initial themes developed in conjunction with the literature. Sixth, 5 different overarching themes and 18 sub-themes of the sampled organisations' HRM practices were sorted. We reiterate that the initial overarching five themes (each aligned to one of five considered SHRM practices for this research) were developed from the literature and the 18 sub-themes of HRM policies and practices were derived from the data analysis in-vivo codes (see Figure 1). Finally, we iteratively revisited the data to confirm the themes and the relationships that were identified and to ensure coding involved all significant themes.

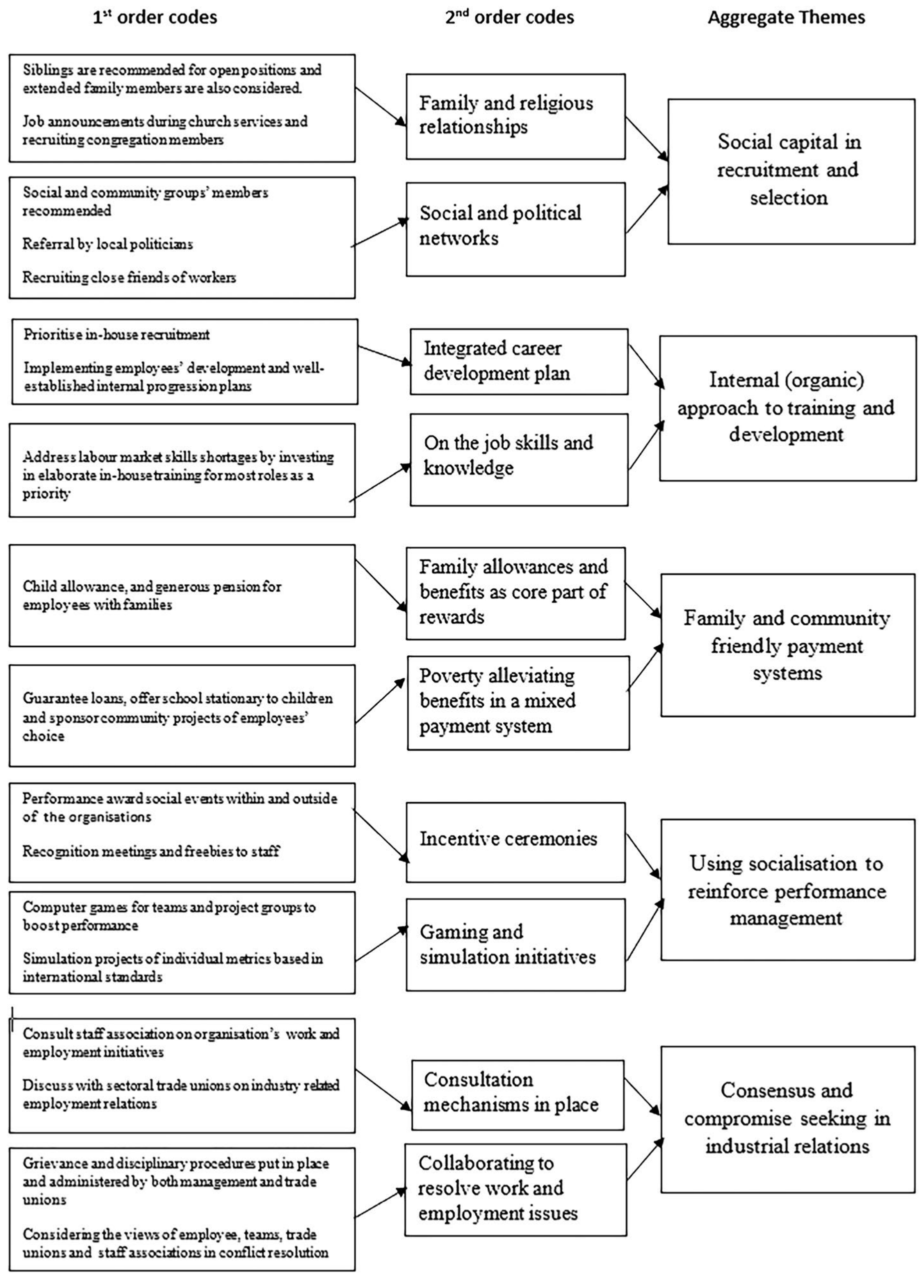

Figure 1. Codes & themes from the analysis.

Findings

Our findings in relation to the content and context of SHRM in organisations in Cameroon are presented below, following the main themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis (see Figure 1) and under the different HRM practices (recruitment and selection, training and development, payment system, performance management and industrial relations) considered in this research. We start by presenting the *content* of each of the themes under the respective HR practice, followed by unpacking *how and why* the corresponding people management policies and practices were adopted in the organisations in Cameroon. To illustrate our findings, we incorporate quotes from the data (Rockman & Vough, 2024).

Social capital in recruitment and selection (R&S)

While the findings reveal that the R&S process of staff for different positions varied by the size of the organisation and the sector of activity, social capital was used extensively across all of the organisations, at the personal level (all the relationships an individual has both within and outside the organisation), the intra-organisational level (the relationship within and between groups and teams) and the extra-organisational level (the relationships of organisational role holders, such as the top management team, with entities outside of the organisation, such as investors, clients, competitors, etc).

Small organisations (with less than 50 employees) predominantly used paper-based application systems where applications were deposited at the organisation's head office or branch office. However, in medium (up to 249 employees) and large (greater than 250 employees) organisations, online-based applications were widely adopted. The selection of candidates within small-sized organisations followed two routes. First, most candidates were originally brought, mostly by referrals, into the organisation through internships, and in most cases, the highest performing interns were offered a position based on their performance during the internship. A second route was through recommendations from similar religious backgrounds (e.g. Pentecostal and Muslims), family and friends. These routes were preferred by the organisations because they didn't have a large applicant pool. Workers were recruited based more on their ability to do the job and their moral integrity. For these organisations, moral integrity was reported to be of great importance, as managers stated: 'we prefer to spend time to teach someone we trust than [to] recruit a qualified person we don't trust'. A HR manager in a transport organisation noted:

> ….there are departments and positions where the level of education and competence required cannot be compromised. For instance, the position of a professional driver, most often, even with referrals, the applicant's competence is critical [and] verified.

However, medium and large organisations employed more innovative processes in R&S, with increasing emphasis on reaching a large pool of candidates and reducing costs. Therefore, online applications, testing and interviews were preferred by these organisations (on which, also see Johnathan et al., 2019), drawing mainly on the social networks of employees and managers to source recruits. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, these systems were further developed and have proven to be cost-effective for these organisations. Candidates with the required qualifications, experience and success in the different stages of the R&S process were usually the preferred candidates that were offered the positions. Some medium and large organisations also sourced candidates through the national employment fund, which is often marred by political interference from the governing elites (Nyiawung, 2021). In particular, this was the case when organisations wanted cheap labour since the fund paid part of the employee's salary. In these organisations, managers reported that in R&S, recommendations from professionals in the organisations, sector and candidates from competitor organisations (e.g. leading organisations) were also highly preferred. It was the case that these employees must already have the relevant skills and knowledge from their previous roles. A mid-level operations manager in a telecommunications organisation explained as follows:

> We employ former employees of our competitors on the belief that, in addition to the experience already gained, they must have gained popularity among some customers who called them for related services. So, employing them will likely pull these customers to us.

In addition, for roles that required financial management, recommendations and background checks were very important and were often handled diligently during R&S. Furthermore, the option to recruit through family and friends or through public open applications depended on the role. For lower-level roles that required little experience or casual workers, most organisations used personal and political networks (Geary & Nyiawung, 2022). These options were preferred because they were seen to be cheaper and more reliable since the recommendations from family and friends were believed to have some level of moral integrity.

Semi-state organisations and public organisations had a more specific R&S system. Although the labour laws required the opening of vacant positions to all qualified applicants, most positions were often open to the public but not sufficiently shared as was the case in other large national organisations and MNEs. In this sector, selection was often based on recommendations from top government officials or affiliations. Also, for certain critical roles, the candidates were selected based on loyalty to the government and political allegiance before competence was considered. A manager in a semi-state oil and gas organisation expressed this in the following words:

> Politicians have a role to play on who and how we recruit here……, we do, in some cases, …prefer employees from the locality in strategic positions to avoid social outbursts.

Social pressure, through community employment advocacy groups, to recruit applicants from localities where organisations were located was also a critical factor in shaping the R&S system of many large national organisations and MNEs. Although these organisations had an objective to recruit the most qualified, they were often obliged by collective agreements and special conditions in their operating licences (Che, 2012) to recruit local community members and to train them so that they can in turn facilitate their operations in the local environment. It also reduced community pressure on the organisations and reinforced the corporate social responsibility of these organisations. This was increasingly common in the timber (forestry) and mining sectors where these organisations operated, primarily in rural areas (Cabestan, 2015).

Also, R&S was shaped by government policy as MNEs were often obliged to have a certain percentage of their staff as nationals of the host country, to benefit the local economy. MNEs also pursued policies related to the recruitment of women and disadvantaged persons. The implementation of these novel policies was gradually being copied by other national large- and medium-sized organisations in Cameroon, in order to have an equitable representation within their staff ranks. Additionally, small, medium and large organisations indicated their preference in carrying out informal recruitment when there was an existing vacancy rather than advertising it publicly. Similarly, even though it was acknowledged that making a public call for applicants might result in more qualified candidates for the available positions, internal recruitment was often preferred based on its cost effectiveness and trust exigencies. One managing director in a bank stated:

> Informal recruitment is preferably done for those who may have served in the organisation as interns or volunteers or support staff. Priority is given to such persons because they understand the job description and will easily be effective rather than a newcomer. In other words, it is an informal method to ensure cost-effectiveness for the organisation.

This was emphasised by other respondents in the cement manufacturing, agri-business, hotel and tourism organisations who all corroborated the following statement:

> Recruitment without making the available positions known to the public is important in the R&S process of our organisation. This cuts the cost on advertising vacant positions and organising interviews…… we don't have to always emulate big foreign companies ….

This study's findings show how the R&S practices varied across organisations depending on the organisation's size, ownership and industry, as well as the particular role being recruited for. Different approaches were adopted with all organisations keenly aware of local and national expectations and norms in relation to their R&S that was principally based on employees, HR managers and political elites' relationships within and beyond the organisations.

Family and community friendly compensation systems (CS)

Just like R&S in the studied organisations, the findings of our research show that their CS were highly heterogenous but underpinned by beneficence policies and practices too. Most small organisations offered staff compensation based on how similar organisations in their locality paid their workers. Also, these small organisations did not have a clearly written compensation system, or a career path progression plan that employees could refer to with regards to compensation and pay rises. The CS was often based on either the organisation's performance, seniority of the worker/employee, or the managerial prerogative. For medium and large organisations, well-established CS with pay grades and salary brackets were more evident. So, employees of these organisations had more transparent compensation packages and promotion opportunities. Other elements of the CS such as paid leave, insurance for employees, festive period allowances/gifts and immediate family education allowances were often available, as well as sponsorship of employees' preferred community projects, mostly, for employees of large organisations. A compensation director of an agri-business organisation shared that:

> …due to societal demands, extra benefits or gifts are provided to employees during festive periods. Food items are distributed during the Muslim and Christian feasts, meanwhile the organisation's fabric [traditional fabric affiliated to the organisation] is distributed on Labour Day (May 1), organisations' anniversary day, and International Women's Day.

Employees of small and medium organisations did not often enjoy these benefits. Some of their employees only took leave in cases of urgent family emergencies. Since MNEs offered better compensation packages to employees with good knowledge of the national political economic system and with appropriate technical training, other competitor (large) organisations were increasingly adjusting their CS to retain their best workers, so they would not be poached by MNEs. Medium-sized organisations knew they could not compete with MNEs along these lines and thus adopted a differential CS based on their strategic position (Piabuo et al., 2017). These medium-sized organisations offered good pay packages for strategic roles such as senior managers, accountants, or technical directors in order to keep the core team. However, other, more easily replaceable roles were not compensated based on industry trends. A senior director in a research and development organisation noted as follows:

> We offer handsome pay and benefits to our talent occupying strategic positions… For low skilled positions, there is always very high supply of labour. However, we know that MNEs come in with already established standards and still apply those standards for low skilled positions. We also try to find local solutions and not always copy MNEs.

Most small and medium organisations compensated their employees in a manner to maximise their profits and did not try to amend their CS based on those of their competitors. Some of these organisations ($N=23$) used seniority as a basis for pay increases. They also offered other compensation benefits such as health insurance, an education allowance and in some cases a housing allowance. The CS of large national organisations and MNEs were often influenced by staff associations and/or trade unions that pursued options to enhance their members/employees' well-being at work. Staff associations' and trade unions' officials often drew on CS in other competitor organisations and used such information as the basis for discussions or negotiations for some advantages they believed their members were entitled to. An employee relations manager in an oil and gas organisation noted that:

> Trade unions here do put pressure on us to offer certain pay elements and benefits that are offered in other companies… To keep our talent, we sometimes heed to such pressures. In professional meetings, we constantly hear of a trend where even staff associations garner information on the CS of other companies and then use that as leverage….

Trade unions and staff associations constantly check the general pay levels in similar sized organisations operating in the same economic sectors and monitor the prices of goods and services. They then bring this information to the attention of their employers, for instance, when the cost of living is increasing, to encourage and persuade their employers to amend their compensation packages to meet general price levels and to alleviate pervasive poverty in Cameroonian society. However, this is generally applicable to full time staff only, not part-time or contract workers. Also, these staff associations and trade unions are often active in large-sized national organisations and MNEs and not in small and medium organisations. As such, each employee normally tries to use their respective personal relationships within the organisations to improve their compensation, or they leave for better opportunities elsewhere (see also Akwaowo, 2013).

It is apparent that family, poverty-alleviating and community-friendly policies were the dominant factors and influences concerning the CS that were applied in different organisations in Cameroon, with employee associations and unions also playing a progressive part in seeking better CS for their members.

Organic approach to training and development (T&D)

T&D varied considerably by organisation size too but, overall, the organic (internal) approach to T&D was preferred due to the weaknesses of the vocational and educational system in the country. For small organisations, training was often done on the job, as most trained their new staff for one to two months before they were fully onboarded into their respective roles. While on the job, staff were usually prepared for different roles through internal training, which followed a 'learn by doing' approach. This facilitated the replacement of departing staff. This option was preferred because small organisations lacked the funds to send employees externally for training, and it was easier to do on-the-job training based on the knowledge of existing staff. However, some managers of small organisations acknowledged that this approach to T&D was a critical limitation to growth because they often recruited those they trained, and thus the knowledge base of the staff depended, mostly, on that of the in-house trainers. As such, there was little innovation resulting from having inadequate diverse training expertise. This led to difficulties in their organisations' growth and expansion. A HR manager in a hotel & tourism organisation stated:

> In-house training is mostly favoured, and it is cost effective. We understand and manage the limitations…… lack of diverse expertise, limited growth opportunities, etc.

Meanwhile medium and large organisations invested in mostly internal T&D options to update their staff's skills and knowledge. Nonetheless, the level of engagement of this category of organisations in T&D was more heterogeneous. Medium organisations often trained new recruits internally and only spent on external T&D for positions they considered to be key and/or of future potential to them. Due to competition from leading and larger organisations (even through offering better CS), medium organisations, as noted by an operations director in a transport organisation, 'did not want to spend a lot on T&D for staff they suspected could easily be lost to competitors'. However, they did spend on developing a small number of key staff and for whom they had special compensation packages to retain them. Also, with the development of digital learning spaces, most of these medium organisations were making some paid or free online courses mandatory for their staff. They often included attendance and completion of these courses in their performance evaluation (Bandibeno & Ndongo, 2017).

Large national organisations and MNEs emphasised the significance of T&D for their competitiveness. These organisations, similarly, to the small and medium organisations, were also developing inhouse and outsourced options to enhance staff T&D. The T&D options pursued were based on cost efficiencies, with different options organised for different categories of staff. A T&D manager in a mining organisation noted:

> ….on the job or off the job training is often based on the cost and number of employees. When there are many employees to be trained in a particular location, we prefer on the job training, but when one or two employees are to be trained, off the job training is preferred.

Moreover, due to advances in E-learning, these organisations were increasingly paying for online T&D packages for their staff. These organisations did not undertake selective - staff-wise - training like medium-sized organisations. They constantly kept all of their staff up-to-date and searched for staff improvement opportunities. Large national organisations were also emulating leading MNEs by establishing special services or roles for T&D and used the T&D courses as part of employees' annual evaluations.

Socialisation to reinforce performance management (PM)

PM was critical for all organisations, although it was practised to a lesser extent and for pragmatic reasons in small organisations. Small organisations directly connected their employees' performance to that of the organisation, and all their staff were evaluated based on the overall achieved targets. Based on the employees' performance and engagement handbook of a small telecommunications organisation, there was no clear path running from organisational performance targets to individual performance targets to serve as the basis for their PM evaluation. A mix of individualistic, community and relationships-based practices was used by most medium and large organisations as socialisation pathways to reinforce their PM. These are described in the quotes below from a supervisor in a bank, a logistics team member in a construction company and a manager in an oil multinational, respectively:

> the company will fully sponsor social events during which team-building activities, [such as] critical skills development in a group setting are fostered to underpin positive relationships and a sense of belonging.

> collective wellbeing and our work community is prioritised and preserved when PM goals are established and communicated for a team or group of workers

> rather than to an individual worker. … individual goals are set with senior managers …though.

> We have mentoring programmes, but because of the cultural considerations, only an older employee can mentor a colleague. Also… we strive to preserve the social structure and respect for elders when giving feedback … I can not give feedback to someone older than me.

However, for some roles such as sales and marketing in medium and large organisations, compensation following PM evaluation was based on the ability of sales and marketing staff to meet targets. A compensation manager in a forestry organisation noted:

> Premiums on basic pay are often added when staff perform beyond targets. These are evaluated monthly or quarterly, and new targets are also set… for other staff categories, we do it annually and organise social events to mark the occasions.

Medium and large organisations also reported a more structured PM system. Their systems were based on setting annual performance goals, followed by a mid-term and end of term performance evaluation. These organisations had clear performance objectives which were broken down within the different operational units, teams and individuals. This facilitated performance planning, review and evaluation. MNEs and some large national organisations had developed more advanced PM systems with well identified metrics for performance planning and evaluation. The below quotes from a branch manager of a bank and the HR director of an oil and gas organisation, respectively, explain, generally, PM in large organisations:

> Since we operate in many countries and locations, a computerised performance management system has been established, with employee score ratings that show the highest performing employees. There is a transparent performance management system that facilitates promotion and employee compensation.

> There is an annual flagship performance compensation ceremony where best employees, following different performance indicators per department, are rewarded. This is often done through performance medals, cash rewards and rewards in kind.

PM systems were gradually being adopted by most large national organisations, public state-owned bodies, and some medium-sized organisations as options to enhance and compensate high performing staff. One of the biggest innovations in HRM practices was seen in the increasing adoption of a computerised PM system by national organisations. A HR manager of a telecommunications organisation noted that:

> These systems permitted employees to see their dashboards and see how well they are evolving with respect to their performance targets. We also use games and simulations….

There was widespread adoption of technology in PM in private sector large- and medium-sized national organisations. These organisations also used socialisation, including incentive ceremonies, gamification and performance simulations' software to reinforce their PM systems. Cameroonian cultural socialisation practices were used in PM through adapted western practices that underscored social status, hierarchy, building work communities and relationships. Individualistic PM practices were also used for certain roles and senior managers in the organisations. However, firms in public administration and a few newly arrived MNEs from Asia were slow and reticent to adopt these PM systems. This was principally due to their R&S system, which was not often competence-based but more politically motivated. Interviewees reported that top managers occupying high positions in public and semi-public organisations who were recruited based on political affiliations spurred internal disputes from high-performing employees due to inadequate evaluation of, and reward for, their efforts.

Consensus & compromise seeking in industrial relations (IR)

Industrial relations in Cameroon have evolved from the non-union foundations put in place during the colonial era (Nanfosso, 2016). Following the introduction of structural adjustment programmes in the early 1990s, privatisations and drastic reductions in public expenditure, the role of the state as an employer was substantially reduced, and this inevitably undermined the pattern setting influence of public employment and the role of trade unions in Cameroon. As such, IR and trade unions are relatively weak in Cameroon today, although the laws provide for their existence in workplaces. The ability of trade-unions and/or employee associations to shape HRM practices varies significantly by size of the studied organisation. Small organisations reported no consideration of trade-unions' or employee associations' voice in their workplaces. This also emanated from the fact that there were tenuous connections between workers and trade unions because employees of small organisations feared losing their jobs by becoming members. A frontline manager in a transport organisation stated that:

> employees' job security is tied to the success of the business. Also, the small nature of our businesses does not allow for recognition of trade unions and there is no coordination between workers and trade unions. … they are often disconnected …good for us.

Employees in medium and large organisations belonged to staff associations and/or trade unions and some coordination (communications and organising abilities) issues were noted. Evidence shows that these trade unions were venues to discuss terms and conditions of employment. 25% of the organisations in this study confirmed that they consulted trade unions or staff associations before taking certain decisions through a consensus. A finance director in a cement manufacturing organisation noted:

> We consult staff association officials on new policies that will affect employee welfare to understand their views before making it official.

IR activities were mostly reported by large national organisations and MNEs. However, the relationship between employees in the forestry and mining sector and their employers had not been cordial over the past years. This was principally due to repeated complaints of low pay and very poor working conditions. The poor relationship resulted in widespread roadblocks which were later resolved through government intervention and the reinforcement of standards for low-skilled employees (Hamann, 2020). Labour disputes, working conditions and wage determination are handled in a particular local manner. With regards to labour disputes, under Cameroonian labour law, an individual who wants to raise a case of unfair practices may bring the case in the locality where s/he resides, not where s/he works. In practice, this can compel the organisation to dispatch officials to sometimes distant localities where the individual may have better local contacts than the organisation (Nanfosso, 2016). Working conditions are negotiated through collective bargaining where the main instruments are specified in the 1992 Labour Act.

In sum, the employment practices of organisations in Cameroon show some differences but are mostly based on consensus-seeking approaches within the same national country context. The approaches varied mainly by the size, but also by the sector, of the organisations and depended on the particular role/position in question as well. Overall, the broad adoption of work and employment practices (R&S, CS, PM & T&D) was similar across all organisations in that these were adapted to suit the context. The findings demonstrate the heterogeneity of SHRM practices in place across firms in Cameroon, with firms adopting a more 'best fit' approach to their HRM, one that best reflects the size, industry, competitive landscape, political power being imposed and specific job role in question of the organisation. Rather than uniform adoption of Western 'best practice' SHRM practices, it was apparent that the SHRM practices were adapted and tailored on an ongoing dynamic basis to meet the specific organisation's context (size, industry, ownership, etc.) and were socio-culturally embedded in Cameroon's political economy, meaning that for some SHRM practices in some organisations these mirrored, to a lesser extent, Western 'best practice', while for other practices these were informed, to a great extent, by local, organisation-specific contexts and for others again, a more hybrid approach was noted.

Discussion

To reiterate, the objective of this study was to explore and share the content of and contextual influences on SHRM in Cameroon as a unique SSA context. The key findings of the study share how nuanced SHRM is in Cameroon, with a reliance on social capital in recruitment and selection, the pursuit of an internal or organic approach to training and development, the implementation of family and community payment systems, the use of socialisation to reinforce performance management and the favouring of consensus and compromise in industrial relations. Additionally, our research has differentiated specific SHRM practices in MNEs and national organisations (of different sizes) in Cameroon, and how their respective SHRM practices were implemented in response to varied contextual influences.

Key influences on HRM in Cameroon

The evidence in our study shows that SHRM practices in Cameroon were shaped by a complex mix of contextual features (see Figure 1), which correspond with the application of the SSDC framework. Societal effects were observed in the use of social capital in R&S that was often based on recommendations from friends and family with similar beliefs, who shared high levels of trust. Cameroon, being a society that places a high value on collectivism, gives an important consideration to strong family, friends and tribal ties (the African value system) in most spheres, including HRM practices such as R&S. Also, the social network of small business owners in the same sector is an important source for R&S. A recruitment manager in a firm in the hotel industry confirmed that they got most of their hires through recommendations from their colleagues in other similar businesses and through industry networks. As an element of trust, religious affiliation was often used by some employees and employers. For example, evidence discussed earlier point to the fact that Pentecostal- and Muslim- owned small organisations had more employees that were mostly recruited from their religious communities. Medium and large organisations advertised job vacancies online, and newspapers were often used for more technical roles, while low skilled positions that constituted the majority of the workforce in the studied organisations were advertised through social networks. These findings highlight the central influence of the country's historical and socio-cultural values (beneficence) in R&S, CS and PM. It was evident that some elements of the CS are strongly influenced by local customs and societal norms including the provision of family-friendly benefits, social solidarity allowances, poverty alleviation schemes and a preference for fixed pay in all the studied firms.

The influence of best practice (dominance effects) was evident in that national organisations are increasingly emulating leading organisations to apply innovative ways of recruitment by using online job boards. Leading MNEs employed innovative selection tests, interviews through web-systems and employees' behavioural assessment evaluations that permitted the identification and selection of 'ideal' candidates. An operations manager in a timber logging company stressed that they preferred online job boards because of cost advantages and in order to reach the current generation of workers who are generally referred to as the 'Android Generation'. In terms of performance management, it was also increasingly common for national medium and large organisations to follow leading organisations in adopting computerised performance management systems with organisational goals and targets broken down to the level of employees for self-evaluation. A senior quality control manager in a cement factory noted that automating the PM system reduced their workload as they did not have to handle large piles of paperwork. Furthermore, these organisations used annual performance recognition ceremonies and deployed socialisation processes such fully sponsored family events, critical skills development and goal-setting for teams, collective wellbeing programmes and elders providing feedback, to motivate their workers to perform better at work.

Concerning the institutional influences (system effects, especially family and community friend payment systems), SHRM practices in Cameroon are also shaped by national laws and local institutions. A compensation director in an oil firm noted that the Cameroon government had revised the minimum wage over time, which resulted in the modification of the compensation system of all organisations favouring families and the community-friendly payments. Also, the demand by the government for MNEs to employ local community members has re-orientated the R&S strategies of these organisations. It is critical to also note that trade unions, workers' associations and employees enjoyed certain sources of power to influence HRM practices. They acquired significant power resources from legal and collective sectoral agreements, as well as being represented by strong political elites and government officials who put pressure on the organisations to respect local traditions and new government policies. Trade unions were connected to the labour courts in their locality of preference, and such relationships were used to resolve labour conflicts to their advantage. Trade unions also garnered power resources from their connections with workers' advocacy groups and the use of social media to put pressure on management. This points to a degree of agency in how workplace actors (trade unions in this case) may make local settlements and acknowledges the place an individual workplace has within the SHRM approaches adopted.

In terms of the firms' specificities (corporate effects), ownership was also a significant factor in determining the SHRM practices in the particular firms. Foreign-owned firms alluded to their people management practices being influenced to a major extent by the corporate headquarters, bearing in mind contextual exigencies in Cameroon. For example, the managing director of an oil firm stressed that their workforce management approaches such as PM and T&D were initiated by their headquarters, but some elements of the practices were adapted (organic approaches used) to suit the local context. For national firms, it was the case that their practices were mainly embedded in the local context but also needed to be agile to adjustment to competitive pressures of the MNEs and advances in technology (on which, also see Piabuo et al., 2017).

Another key influence that impacted the SHRM approaches of firms, particularly foreign-owned firms, was the changing geopolitical dynamics. A branch manager of an oil firm noted that due to competition from the newly arrived Chinese oil firms, some of their HRM practices, especially recruitment and selection and training and development had to be altered to align with and suit the exigencies of, the local people and regulations. This was so because the Chinese people management practices were more aligned to the local context and were seen by the local population as better than those of western-owned firms. A key influence on large firms' and MNEs' policies and practices was the shifting geopolitical dynamics following the arrival of these Chinese investments in Cameroon. They provided alternative sources of capital and showed a willingness to pay greater attention to local HRM practices (on which, also see Brautigam, 2011).

Thus, this study has identified key contextual factors such as global macro-economic (geopolitical) forces, specific organisational dynamics, culture and value system, religion, anticolonial ethos and institutional (formal and informal) features in the Cameroonian context which shape SHRM policies and practices in organisations. The extended SSDC (systems, society, dominance (SSD effects, Smith & Meiksins, 1995) and corporate) (Delbridge et al., 2011) framework appropriately incorporates the complex, heterogeneous approach to SHRM which is adopted across different organisations in Cameroon.

Societal effects are clearly seen in R&S where social relations and trust are the most important factors for organisations in Cameroon. Considering the importance of political affiliations, key political leaders hold significant power over whom is recruited in these companies because their recommendations are accorded higher consideration. These views were also reflected by Chowdhury and Mahmud (2012) who showed that political actors played an important role in shaping recruitment in local public and private sectors and subsidiaries of MNEs. Power relations did not only shape R&S, but also IR, which was to a great extent influenced by the embeddedness of trade unions, employees and staff associations in their local Cameroonian context (see Nyiawung, 2021).

For the system effects in the SSDC framework, this study showed how SHRM practices are shaped by national laws and local institutions. In Cameroon, the government had revised the minimum wage over time, which resulted in the modification of the compensation system of all organisations. Also, the demand by the government for MNEs to employ local community members has re-orientated the R&S strategies of these organisations. Some elements of the CS are mostly defined by local customs and societal norms including the provision of family-friendly benefits, social solidarity allowances, poverty alleviation schemes and preference for fixed pay in all the studied firms. In terms of T&D, for small and medium organisations, on-the-job training is preferred. Personal qualities, social networks, common geographical origins, kinship links coupled with common educational backgrounds are important in Cameroon too and have been highlighted as determinants of employees' promotion and career development (Mahmood, 2004). MNEs employ a continuous training strategy because in Cameroon, the skillsets available often do not meet the specific industry requirements. In addition, yearly on the job or off-the-job training schemes are also accorded to staff, to ensure their adequate industry-specific knowledge (also see Vo & Bartram, 2012). Due to societal norms and religious feasts, MNEs, medium and large organisations review and adapt their compensation packages to give special benefits to employees during local festive days (see also, Budhwar & Varma, 2012). In all, how the different SHRM practices operate as a relational system, determined by a hybrid operationalisation of local, national and global practices, was evident in this study across different organisations within the Cameroonian country context.

Dominance effects are also evident as large and medium-sized organisations follow sector-leading organisations to employ competitive compensation systems for key staff for retention purposes. This trend results in increased benefits for some workers in the relevant sectors and significant improvements in these employees' welfare. Finally, with growing international requests for equal opportunity employment, MNEs have brought the EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) domain to the Cameroonian context, which, in turn, has contributed to a number of organisations adopting such HRM practices. EDI initiatives manifest corporate effects where MNEs' headquarters cascade international design practices to their subsidiaries and to Cameroon in this case.

The Cameroonian context is enshrined in a particular history (e.g. formal and informal rules) that shape the organisations' SHRM practices. Historically, the role of trade unions and staff associations has been weakened through post-colonial strategies and thus they are mostly recognised by large organisations and MNEs who try to keep some well-known international standards. The weakness of trade unions stems from the neo-liberal work and employment policies adopted by the government and organisations. However, trade unions have been able to galvanise support and exert influence on organisations through the use of external actors to put pressure on management to heed their demands (Che, 2012). For example, an HR manager in a major forestry firm noted that they (trade unions) use NGOs, social media and anonymous online posts to expose organisations' practices and to rally support for addressing workers' concerns in particular organisations. Most small and medium organisations are locally owned and implement their HRM practices following national regulations, especially in relation to compensation, workers' welfare and lax trade union rules. Notwithstanding the constraints of the Cameroonian context, national organisations also adopt imported practices in two key SHRM areas. First, this is noticeable in the adjustment of the compensation packages of key personnel in medium-sized organisations to match those of leading organisations as a strategy to retain key staff, all in a beneficence manner. A second manifestation is the adoption of PM systems used by MNES underpinned by socialisation events. These findings align with those of Chung (2015) who found dominance effects in Korean organisations copying PM systems of US MNEs. Moreover, there was a small overlap of T&D practices across organisations in Cameroon as the skillsets from the national educational system mixed with those mostly acquired organically in organisations. This leads to a general re-tooling of training by organisations at all levels to meet their respective skills needs.

The above combined insights confirm that the SSDC framework provides an apt theoretical lens to analyse the content and context of SHRM in Cameroon through four interrelated complex and emergent forces: the international and national economic systems that shaped the structures and processes of SHRM in the studied organisations, the strong cultural and institutional features of Cameroon, the transfer and adaptation of international best practices and the strategic choices of stakeholder agents (Delbridge et al., 2011). The context of this study—Cameroon - is unique, characterised by different anchors of socio-cultural institutions (notably, the emphasis on beneficence) and assumptions about the nature of human relationships vis-à-vis organisations/society (where social networks have high value), which, together, form the basis of HRM policies and practices (Kelly, 2018; Nyiawung et al., 2024). The findings point to SHRM practices that reconcile with the African belief and value system of prioritising social capital, consensus building, family friendly work practices and socialisation. The resultant SHRM practices are underpinned and informed by a national culture that prioritises the community, relationships and a benevolent perception of the value of the workforce in organisations. This differs from Western contexts (which are characterised by a more instrumental view of humans in organisations/society and individualistic tendencies) from where the SSDC model emanates. As such, this study validates the SSDC model as an important framework for examining SHRM in Cameroon and the global south more generally. However, our adaptation of the SSDC model (see Figure 2) more comprehensively captures the set of influences of socio-cultural institutions, the human value system and their dynamic interface that shape the content and context of SHRM policies and practices within the complex dynamic relational context of inter-acting macro, meso and micro level factors in different country and organisational contexts. This empirical-derived theoretical model addresses the limitations of the SSDC framework (insufficient attention to the relational, overlapping, multi-level dynamics which are constantly influenced by different actors, socio-cultural institutions and a different, context (country and cultural)-specific human value system) when applied in the global south.

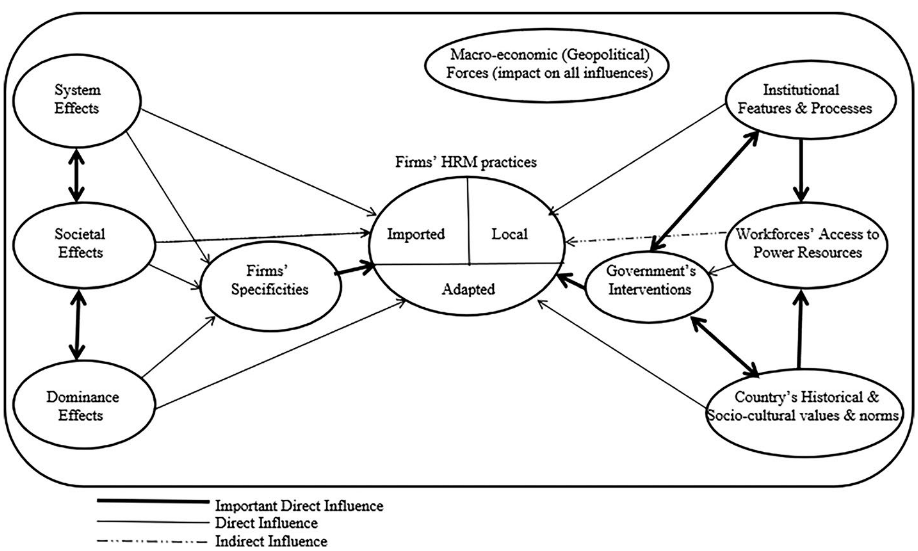

Figure 2. Model of SHRM influences in a developing country. Incorporating an SSDC focus.

Theoretical contributions

Our study makes three contributions to international SHRM literature. First, it highlights the importance of beneficence policies and practices in Cameroon-based organisations. Here, the varied SHRM approaches that were adopted by the organisations in this study did not only emphasise principles of flexibility, collaboration and a people-centred culture to drive performance and foster employee outcomes (Ibrhim et al., 2025; Kadhim et al., 2023), but also enhanced employees' wellbeing and doing good for their families and communal circles. That is, the research points to social capital, consensus building, family-friendly and socialisation schemes as key antecedents that bridge the theoretical gap regarding the content and context of SHRM in Cameroon, thereby adding novel underpinnings to the works of Akwei and Nwachukwu (2023) and Farr (2024). While exploring the effect of contextual factors on SHRM in extant literature is not new, this is the first major study that discerns beneficence policies and practices that affect SHRM and their significance, in the unique global south context of Cameroon. This is novel because these findings have not been markedly observed in empirical works in Western contexts.

Second, we extend international SHRM literature through our application of the theoretical SSDC framework, a socio-culturally anchored approach to SHRM in SSA. This approach deviates from the mainly managerial-deterministic instrumental approach (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; T. Jackson, 2014; Nyiawung et al., 2024) of the extant, predominantly western, SHRM literature, while providing an evidence-based framework for exploring SHRM across countries and cultures. The socio-culturally anchored approach to SHRM, as evidenced in our study, facilitates the adaptation of Western HRM models in SSA contexts, thereby easing their transfer and implementation challenges which has been previously noted in the literature (Hack-Polay et al., 2020). Anchoring this study in the SSDC framework facilitated the examination of the interactions between the structures and processes and how these were leveraged by intra- and extra-organisational actors to influence organisational performance. The nature and significance of these interactions are seldom addressed by the dominant institutional, market-based and political economy perspectives (Edwards et al., 2007; G. Jackson & Deeg, 2019) in the study of people management in specific contexts. However, this present study has shown that the formulation and implementation of SHRM practices across the organisations involved in our study (in Cameroon) stemmed not only from interactions between the contextual features (Nyiawung et al., 2024), but also from the role of internal and external organisational stakeholders' relationships serving as a key mechanism to enhance SHRM (see also Ben-Hador & Yitshaki, 2025) in Cameroon. The dynamic fluidity of the Cameroonian context was of note and reflected across diverse organisation types. Here, it was evident that both employees and HR managers were able to draw upon their social capital within and beyond the organisations in a context underpinned by communal tendencies and personal and political networks to influence particular SHRM outcomes. Moreover, the degree to which different features shaped the respective SHRM policies and practices depended on the role of employees and HR managers leveraging the complex relationship between emergent, competing and commons interests, actors, structures and processes to best ensure their respective organisation's performance. We suggest that the SSDC framework serves as an alternative lens through which international SHRM may be explored across cultures and countries.

Third, this study develops and shares an empirically tested theoretical model, adapted from our application of the SSDC framework in Cameroon (see Figure 2). This model will facilitate further empirical research to investigate a broad range of contextual components in the global south that moderate the establishment and application of SHRM. It provides a comprehensive structure for investigating work and employment practices in the global south, incorporating cultural, institutional, social, historical, competitive, organisational and geopolitical factors that influence SHRM practices. It adapts the SSDC model to include unique firm level contingencies, macro-economic (geopolitical) forces, the country's historical and socio-cultural values and norms and influential workforce members' contextually-embedded power resources to better explain the dynamic nature of people management across organisations in Cameroon. As such, the empirically tested theoretical model underscores a more sophisticated foundation to examine the layered nature of multiple (macro, meso and micro) effects and the scope for actors' agency to shape SHRM in a specific global south context (Geary & Nyiawung, 2022).

Practical implications

There are some practical implications for human resource managers in Cameroonian organisations and for organisations in SSA in general, resulting from this study. Particular constraints across the studied people management practices (recruitment and selection, training and development, compensation system, performance management and industrial relations) were evident. The content and contextual influences outlined in the study point to human capital constraints (see also Piabuo et al., 2017), which require that firms invest significantly in recruitment and selection and employee training and development initiatives in line with the respective organisation's contextual exigencies. To address these shortcomings, organisations in Cameroon specifically and in SSA in general should consider leveraging (by adopting and/or adapting local knowledge in the design and implementation phases) African customs and norms to underpin their recruitment and selection policies and practices, where the complex balance between social capital, family connections and status may be better utilised to underpin employee and organisational performance. Regarding training and development, organisations could consider developing their in-house employee reskilling and upskilling programs with an emphasis on acquiring soft skills (technology, communal, team-building and business adroitness) to aid their employees' development. Finally, the findings suggest that many managers in charge of people management in organisations in Africa are not well trained to adapt home country and best practices to the local contexts. This can lead to misalignment between organisational objectives/performance and the exigencies of the local socio-economic context. We recommend that organisations are sensitive to the specific local contexts and recruit and train senior managers who understand both global SHRM best practices and have a keen insight into the particular socio-cultural features of SSA to mitigate any negative influences of contextual features on their HRM activities (also see Nyiawung et al., 2024). It would also be important for organisations to ensure that their SHRM practices are internalised through socialisation processes and supporting community projects to improve employee and communal engagement and, subsequently, performance, thereby agreeing with Kamoche et al. (2012), Cooke (2018) and Hermans (2018) who have argued that HRM needs to be more contextualised in both conceptualisation and practice.

Limitations of the study

This is a qualitative study of one country in Sub-Saharan Africa, using a purposeful sample and therefore does not quantitatively represent all, or the majority of, organisations in the country. Nonetheless, our study does provide more comprehensive contextual clarity on SHRM in Cameroon, a significant country in SSA.

Another limitation is that we only considered the influences on SHRM that were underpinned by the SSDC model. That is, other contextual influences (such as gender, ethnicity, technology, etc.) were not unpacked in this study. These particular features have been shown to shape management practices in some organisations in SSA following the works of Aloumedjo (2018) and Akwei and Nwachukwu (2023) but were not included in this study and analysis.

Finally, while we explored contextual SHRM in Cameroon, depicting the limits of predominantly WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic) country-informed approaches to global SHRM research, the findings may be inadequately attuned to the contextual realities of strategic HRM in other countries in the Global South or other SSA political-economic contexts.

Directions for future research

Our study highlights the need for further studies to, similarly to ours, deeply probe our understanding of the context-specific nature of SHRM. We specifically encourage studies to incorporate investigations into managerial prerogatives and contextual features that influence SHRM in other global south contexts to facilitate both employees' and organisational performance. This is because other global south contexts may characterise unique features, for example, similar to the exigencies of a Cameroonian society underpinned by social capital, pervasive poverty, consensus building and communal tendencies which greatly shaped the content and context issues of SHRM in this country. This is often at odds with SHRM approaches developed and practised in the West, mostly through managerial and competitive imperatives and transferred, usually, unaltered to Africa in efforts to ease human capital challenges, leading to abysmal outcomes because they are detached from local realities (Kiiza & Basheka, 2018).

Also, while our study focused on depth, breadth could be achieved by other scholars through developing our work and conceptual model to undertake quantitative survey investigations with large data sets in order to ascertain general trends in influences which may relate to different phenomena, such as local country context, industry sector, ownership, organisation size etc.

Furthermore, since SHRM is primarily concerned with organisational outcomes, the dearth of research on the socially embedded nature of SHRM requires more attention in SSA since it is a non-traditional setting for management research. While this qualitative study has made initial inroads here, we call on other scholars to study this further, employing both qualitative and quantitative research methods to develop both depth and breadth, at the same time, of knowledge in this area.

Conclusion

Workforce management practices in particular contexts have been widely discussed in the literature, theorised under the SSDC framework and extensively applied in North America, Europe and Asia (see Suhail & Steen, 2021). However, the empirical application of workforce management practices to the context of SSA is sketchy. This study's findings underscore the manifestation, with marked idiosyncratic features, of the SSDC framework in Cameroon by delineating the content and context issues of SHRM in a Global South context. The strength of the SSDC framework is that it provides insights on the significant influences of contextual factors on SHRM in a unique context, Cameroon, in an era witnessing an increasing shift towards context-specific research in management studies.

The evidence of religious affiliations, social capital and family relations in R&S, on the job and integrated career development approaches in T&D, family friendly, socialisation processes to enhance PM, social solidarity benefits and poverty alleviating allowances in CS as well as consensus-seeking in IR, not only point to the socially-embedded nature of SHRM but also the challenges (see Muhajan, 2024) to SHRM in an SSA context. Thus, this study comprehensively highlights the fluidity of workforce management practices in a specific business context, Cameroon, as a socially embedded agile SHRM approach, where internal organisational stakeholders are informed by dynamic, overlapping and changing multi-level factors over time in the pursuit of organisational goals/performance. This points to the limits of predominantly WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic) country-informed approaches to global SHRM research, which are inadequate and unattuned to the contextual realities of the Global South.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Julius Nyiawung http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2927-3913
Serge Mandiefe Piabuo http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8263-7985
Marian Crowley-Henry http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9207-0863

Data availability statement

The data supporting this study's findings are available from the first author on request.

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