

# Corporate sustainability in Africa: A review, trends and future direction

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## ABSTRACT

As the world grapples with grand challenges, Africa remains the most affected yet receives the least research focus. This study adopts a systematic scoping review to analyze the extent of corporate sustainability research in Africa. Using a predetermined search strategy applied to the comprehensive ABI/INFORM Global database, 107 articles were analyzed. This paper's contribution is threefold: (1) it reviews literature to provide an African perspective of corporate sustainability; (2) it critically synthesizes findings in the dataset to illuminate contributions and research gaps; and (3) it provides recommendations for potential future studies and policy implications to enhance management scholarship and practice.

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## Introduction


Amidst organizations' pursuit of economic growth, humanity's future hangs in the balance as the world confronts unprecedented social and environmental challenges. A growing body of literature explores organizational responses to the global sustainability agenda. This research has delved into overlapping yet distinct notions such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Bansal & Song, 2017; Fatima & Elbanna, 2023), sustainability (Derqui, 2020; Walls & Vogel, 2023), climate change (Busch et al., 2020), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Mio et al., 2020; Van Tulder et al., 2021), and sustainable development (de Oliveira et al., 2023). The reality is that, in practice, corporate sustainability means different things to different people (de Oliveira et al., 2023; Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014).

The available reviews have taken stock of global corporate sustainability literature (Burbano et al., 2023), noted its contentious theorizing (Meuer et al., 2020; Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014; Paziienza et al., 2022), and discussed its integration into strategic management (Engert et al., 2016; Rodrigues & Franc, 2019). These studies indicate that this knowledge base is evolving and variable, with scholars adopting different definitions of corporate sustainability, theoretical perspectives, and measurements (Bansal & Song,

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2017; de Oliveira et al., 2023; Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014). Scrutiny of the literature reveals that even though corporate sustainability studies have gained prominence globally (Fatima & Elbanna, 2023; Niccolò et al., 2017), the tendency has been to focus on the financial pillar of sustainability. Prioritizing the financial principle is often the default approach for organizations, due to the assumption that “without sustained profits the organization ceases to exist” (Pazienza et al., 2022, p. 15). Following the well-established business case for sustainability (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002), the social dimension has received significant attention, while fewer studies have explored the environmental aspect of sustainability (de Oliveira et al., 2023; Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014). While this trend indicates advances towards embracing various dimensions, this focus on one or two aspects of sustainability undermines the tripartite theorizing of corporate sustainability and fails to illuminate the necessary integrated practices for accelerating the sustainability trajectory (le Roux & Pretorius, 2019). As emphasized by Pazienza et al. (2022), the three principles are equally important and cannot be substituted. Consequently, an overemphasis on one dimension cannot compensate for the absence of another (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002), and this has implications for both policy and practice in sustainability transitions.

Despite corporate sustainability being a concept inherently embedded in the context (Ivanova-Gongne et al., 2022; Kolk & Lenfant, 2010; Kolk & Rivera-Santos, 2018), prior reviews are limited in their global representativeness (Niccolò et al., 2017; Tipu, 2022). Significant extant literature on corporate sustainability has been predominantly influenced by insights from a Western perspective (Bansal & Gao, 2006; Hogrefe & Bohnet-Joschko, 2023), with limited contribution from the Global South and emerging markets (Kolk & Lenfant, 2010; Rodrigues & Franc, 2019). Complementing this observation is Fatima and Elbanna’s (2023) most recent exploration of CSR literature. The authors reported that empirical samples from developed markets accounted for nearly 65%, while emerging markets made up only 17% (16% Asia and 1% Africa). Similarly, Tipu (2022) highlighted a significant gap in representation of Africa-centric studies. This omission by scholars limits the ability to harness the opportunities enabled by the emerging context and is potentially detrimental to the advancement of knowledge (Hofstetter et al., 2022). Africa faces significant social and environmental challenges (Walls & Vogel, 2023); thus, insights from this context are particularly relevant and useful in advancing knowledge and practice. Furthermore, emerging markets present distinct variations from developed markets, which lead to corresponding behavior in these contexts. These markets have institutional and cultural peculiarities that have the potential to enhance comprehension of sustainability by extending known boundary conditions (Hofstetter et al., 2022; Kolk & Rivera-Santos, 2018).

In the case of Africa, the continent is confronted by a myriad of possibly more pronounced grand challenges than other continents, and yet its vital contribution to scholarly pursuits is rarely explored (Hofstetter et al., 2022; Walls & Vogel, 2023). Including experiences in the dynamic, diverse, and distinct African context is intriguing to scholars and likely to expand our comprehension of the phenomenon (Nachum et al., 2023; Zoogah, 2023). Since corporate sustainability is inherently embedded in the context, efforts to advance this field of scholarship should garner contextual relevance. Exploring studies in Africa offers researchers fresh insights into how sustainability can be advanced

in organizations under institutional, economic, and social constraints (Acosta et al., 2024; Hofstetter et al., 2022).

The deficiency in studies on corporate sustainability in Africa signals various gaps and the need for future studies. Future studies are needed to explore the opportunities that the emerging market context holds for advancing corporate sustainability knowledge and to counterbalance the current lack of global representativeness (Nachum et al., 2023). Recently, journals such as the *Journal of Management Studies* (Acosta et al., 2024), *AIB Insights* (Newburry et al., 2024) and the *Journal of Management Education* (Slavova et al., 2024) have issued calls for studies that seek to illuminate the African perspective. These are a testament to the fact that scholars recognize this missed opportunity and are making strides to embrace these prospects.

This study aims to address this gap in corporate sustainability within the African context through a systematic scoping review of the literature. The purpose of the study is to provide an African perspective on corporate sustainability by highlighting key developments and context-specific insights. Central to this review is the guiding research question: What are the patterns, challenges, and emerging opportunities in the African corporate sustainability literature? The study synthesizes existing literature, illuminates key contributions and research gaps, and offers recommendations to guide potential future studies and policy for the enhancement of management scholarship and practice.

## Methodology

Several review methods are available for synthesizing knowledge on a particular theme, field, or subject. Sutton et al. (2019) analyzed and classified review families, which differ in their key associated attributes. An elucidation of the distinctions across the identified review types according to the Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, and Analysis (SALSA) framework is provided in Grant and Booth (2009). The impetus for adopting the systematic scoping review method stems from its suitability for addressing the broad research question posed in this study. The systematic scoping review was deemed appropriate to answer the question – What are the patterns, challenges, and emerging opportunities in the African corporate sustainability literature? The study provides a comprehensive, unbiased assessment of the literature on corporate sustainability in Africa. Literature reviews advance knowledge by synthesizing data gathered from reliable, comprehensive data sources (Linnenluecke et al., 2020; Tranfield et al., 2003) and identifying gaps in existing literature (Munn et al., 2018). The data were gathered using the comprehensive ProQuest ABI/Inform Global database, renowned for its extensive coverage of Business and Management Research (Bansal & Song, 2017; Fatima & Elbanna, 2023).

## Data Searching and Mining

Several techniques were applied to ensure reliable results that can illuminate trends and deficiencies in the current scholarship, thus enabling the identification of future research avenues (Munn et al., 2018). A specialist librarian was involved in testing and determining a suitable search query using common keywords that describe the scope of the study. The final search query was applied alongside the Boolean operators “OR” and “AND” to search for articles in October 2024 (see Table 1 for the search strategy). No restrictions were

**Table 1.** Data search strategy.

Data search strategy	
Data source	ABIINFORM global
<b>Search query</b>	noft("corporate sustainability" OR sustainability OR "corporate social responsibility" OR "social responsibility" OR "corporate responsibility" OR "environmental responsibility") AND noft(Africa OR Algeria OR Angola OR Benin OR Botswana OR "Burkina Faso" OR Burundi OR "Cabo Verde" OR Cameroon OR "Central African Republic" OR Chad OR Comoros OR "Democratic Republic of the Congo" OR "Republic of the Congo" OR Djibouti OR Egypt OR "Equatorial Guinea" OR Eritrea OR Eswatini OR Ethiopia OR Gabon OR Gambia OR Ghana OR Guinea OR "Guinea-Bissau" OR "Ivory Coast" OR Kenya OR Lesotho OR Liberia OR Libya OR Madagascar OR Malawi OR Mali OR Mauritania OR Mauritius OR Morocco OR Mozambique OR Namibia OR Niger OR Nigeria OR Rwanda OR "Sao Tome and Principe" OR Senegal OR Seychelles OR "Sierra Leone" OR Somalia OR "South Africa" OR "South Sudan" OR Sudan OR Tanzania OR Togo OR Tunisia OR Uganda OR Zambia OR Zimbabwe) AND stype.exact("Scholarly Journals") AND at.exact("Article") AND la.exact("English") AND subt.exact("sustainability" OR "social responsibility" OR "decision making" OR "business ethics" OR "ethics" OR "environmental management" OR "sustainability management" OR "corporate responsibility" OR "strategic management") AND PEER("yes"))
<b>Publication dates</b>	All dates

Source: Own elaboration.

applied to the publication period to enable a broad representation of data. Only studies published in the English language were included to eliminate complexities arising from translation (Trollman & Colwill, 2021). To maintain the rigor and objectivity required for a quality review, the search was limited to empirical peer-reviewed, full text studies. In alignment with previous related reviews (Hogrefe & Bohnet-Joschko, 2023; Mio et al., 2020), reports, books, book chapters, and conference proceedings were excluded.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion**

The initial output of 2879 hits was scanned and 1013 duplicates were removed. The remaining 1866 articles were subjected to screening according to the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 2), based on their titles, keywords, and abstracts to ensure alignment with the study objectives. Sixteen articles were excluded from the screening process because they did not fit the article type criteria. Furthermore, 1738 articles that did not address the required concepts as per the set criteria were considered irrelevant to the current study purpose and discarded.

Thereafter, the full texts of the remaining 112 articles were extracted for in-depth review. An additional five articles were removed because, although their abstracts and keywords were relevant, the full texts did not provide adequate coverage of the study objectives. Thus, a final set of 107 articles was individually assessed by all authors and jointly confirmed for final inclusion. To ensure methodological rigor, we adhered to the well-established Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analysis (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009) (see Figure 1). This ensured a structured and transparent process for collecting and evaluating extant data (Linnenluecke et al., 2020).

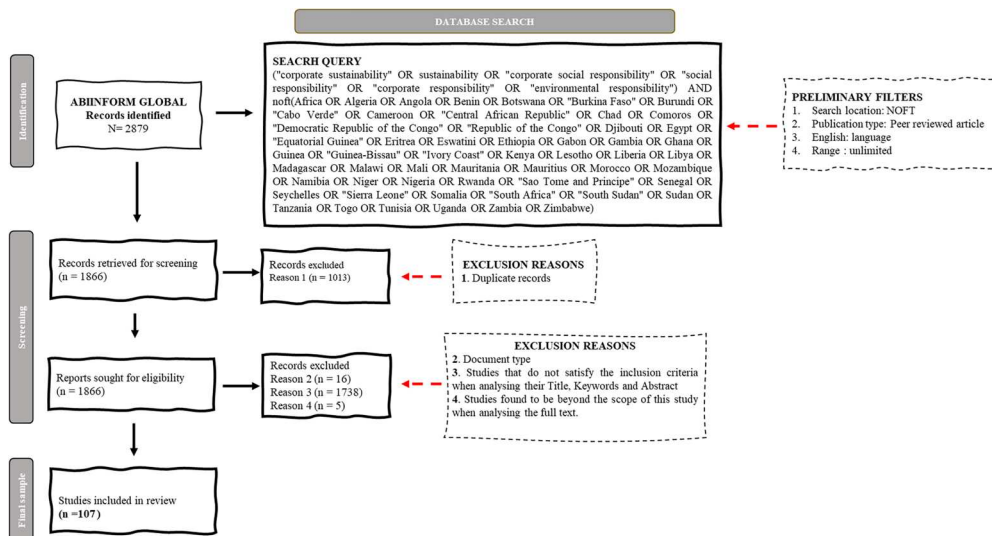
In highly rated journals, there is a notable scarcity of studies specifically referencing the African continent (Eticha et al., 2024; Fatima & Elbanna, 2023; Niccolò et al., 2017). To ensure comprehensiveness, the commonly used but controversial assessment of quality – journal impact factor (Mahmood, 2017; Sullivan et al., 2024) – was not considered as an inclusion criterion for analysis. The study aimed to provide an unbiased and

**Table 2.** Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Included	Excluded
<p>Studies that mention in their title, abstract and keywords – ["corporate sustainability" OR "sustainability" OR "corporate social responsibility" OR "social responsibility" OR "corporate responsibility" OR "environmental responsibility"] AND ["Africa" OR "African" OR "sub-Sahara Africa" OR "Algeria" OR "Angola" OR "Benin" OR "Botswana" OR "Burkina Faso" OR "Burundi" OR "Cabo Verde" OR "Cameroon" OR "Central African Republic" OR "Chad" OR "Comoros" OR "Democratic Republic of the Congo" OR "Republic of the Congo" OR "Djibouti" OR "Egypt" OR "Equatorial Guinea" OR "Eritrea" OR "Eswatini" OR "Ethiopia" OR "Gabon" OR "Gambia" OR "Ghana" OR "Guinea" OR "Guinea-Bissau" OR "Ivory Coast" OR "Kenya" OR "Lesotho" OR "Liberia" OR "Libya" OR "Madagascar" OR "Malawi" OR "Mali" OR "Mauritania" OR "Mauritius" OR "Morocco" OR "Mozambique" OR "Namibia" OR "Niger" OR "Nigeria" OR "Rwanda" OR "Sao Tome and Principe" OR "Senegal" OR "Seychelles" OR "Sierra Leone" OR "Somalia" OR "South Africa" OR "South Sudan" OR "Sudan" OR "Tanzania" OR "Togo" OR "Tunisia" OR "Uganda" OR "Zambia" OR "Zimbabwe"]</p> <p>Studies published in English language Peer reviewed literature</p>	<p>Studies that address only one of the key concepts in their title, abstract and keywords ie only corporate sustainability or only Africa</p> <p>Studies in languages other than English Grey literature – reports, working papers, conference papers, dissertations</p>

Source: Own elaboration.

inclusive review of available literature to allow for diversity in research output and avoid bias toward more prevalent publication outlets. Accordingly, the study focused on journals within the subject areas of sustainability OR social responsibility OR decision making OR business ethics OR ethics OR environmental management OR sustainability management OR corporate responsibility OR strategic management.



**Figure 1.** PRISMA inspired data selection workflow. Source: Own elaboration.

## **Data Charting**

A data extraction matrix was developed to capture key elements of the dataset in relation to the study objectives. In accordance with similar studies, Microsoft Excel was used to chart information on the authors, publication date, affiliation, location of study, methodology and key results (Galdino et al., 2018). This information was necessary for a comprehensive, unbiased assessment of the literature on corporate sustainability in Africa. The data were reviewed repeatedly, moving back and forth within the full texts to capture the essential information.

## **Data Analysis**

Due to the interpretive nature of the study, thematic analysis was employed to identify and analyze recurring patterns in the literature. Following Braun and Clarke (2006) six-step guidelines, a recursive analytic process was adopted to allow for necessary movement amongst the phases. This included gaining familiarity with the data, generating initial codes, developing themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and preparing the report. Additionally, to analyze keyword evolution over the study period, keyword visualization was performed using VOSviewer software (Mas-Tur et al., 2020; Munisi, 2024).

## **Findings**

### **Data Characteristics**

The earliest study encompassed within the scope of this study was conducted by Eraqi (2007) on sustainable tourism in Egypt. Over a 10-year period following this publication, there was a minimal increase in the number of studies, with only eight publications recorded in the year 2017, and the highest number of articles appearing at the 20-year mark. Beyond 2021, there was a decline, with only five articles recorded in the fourth quarter of 2024. This indicates that research within the scope of this study is still emerging and presents potential avenues for future inquiry. The data in this review was dominated by studies conducted in Nigeria (34), South Africa (16), sub-Saharan Africa (10), Ghana (8), and Egypt (5). Appendix 2 presents a visualization of the geographical distribution of studies by country.

The African context is characterized by wide diversity, with each country representing variations in resources, demographics, and environment, all of which have a significant bearing on their economic activity (Eticha et al., 2024). While several articles in this study did not specifically state the industries or sectors under investigation (Acquah et al., 2021; Ajibade & Mutula, 2021), a substantial number of studies were conducted in the financial services sector (Adams & Tewari, 2020; Gold & Aifuwa, 2022). Other studies explored, among others the tourism and hospitality industry (Eraqi, 2007; Thebuho et al., 2022), mining (Baah-Ennumh & Forson, 2017), agriculture (Fina, 2015; Mbatha et al., 2021), and education (Abou-Warda, 2014; Agu et al., 2022). Studies on financial services addressed issues relating to economic development, with a particular focus on banking, microfinancing, insurance, and investments. This observation is not surprising, as global trends indicate that financial sustainability is often prioritized (Pazienza et al., 2022). However, the economic activity of interest varied across studies and was



**Figure 2.** Common sectors in the top 5 countries. Source: Own elaboration.

generally consistent with each country's main sources of revenue. For instance, findings revealed that studies conducted in South Africa focused on the tourism industry, which is recognized as a crucial pillar for accelerating economic development (Thebuho et al., 2022), while in Nigeria the oil industry attracted significant attention, consistent with its role as the leading contributor to the economy (Akanbi, 2015). Figure 2 illustrates the sectoral focus of the five most frequently studied countries.

Although there were similarities among countries in terms of sectoral focus, varying degrees of complexity hinder the implementation of sustainability initiatives. The case of agriculture in Africa is particularly complex, both across and within countries. For instance, the Msinga region in South Africa faces challenges such as disease outbreaks and the impacts of climate change on maize and barley farming (Mbatha et al., 2021). Meanwhile, in the Mhashe municipality of South Africa, Bese et al. (2021) identified that farmers' adoption of sustainable agricultural practices was influenced by personal characteristics, farm size, and access to resources. Additionally, in the Gamo Highlands of Ethiopia, farmers' sustainability practices were impeded by labor shortages, limited land, urbanization trends, and inefficiencies in government policies.

Similarly, in the tourism industry, accommodation service providers faced various challenges. In Egypt's hospitality sector, transport services and accommodation required the most assistance due to misunderstandings among participants in the industry (Eraqi, 2007). In South Africa, accommodation providers have been impacted by key challenges such as resource constraints, industry dynamics, limited policy and infrastructure support, and employee inadequacies in commitment, skills, and knowledge (Idahosa & Ebhuoma, 2020). These examples demonstrate the need for contextualized understanding of the nuanced realities of the population in these regions to properly understand the sustainability trajectory in Africa (Hofstetter et al., 2022).

### **Conceptualizing Corporate Sustainability in Africa**

Consistent with global perspectives (de Oliveira et al., 2023; Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014), the conceptualizing of corporate sustainability in Africa is equally varied. In this study, several concepts have emerged, such as green supply chain management (Famiyeh et al., 2018), inclusive entrepreneurship (youth and women) (Kimuli et al., 2022; Ogamba, 2019), poverty eradication (Anuoluwapo & Uwizeyimana, 2021), green human resource management (Acquah et al., 2021), sustainable consumer protection (Best et al., 2019), sustainable tourism (Eraqi, 2007), corporate governance (Erin et al., 2022), disclosure and integrated reporting (Adegboyegun et al., 2020), ethics (Ike, 2011), sustainable technology (Buba et al., 2022), and SDGs (Viegas et al., 2021). While these



nonprofit organizations (Kumi, 2019). Keywords such as “Africa” and “South Africa” appear frequently, with notable emphasis on responsibility within the tourism sector. Tourism is arguably one of the most studied sectors across Africa (see Figure 2), due to its ability to effect benefits that transcend both economic and social impacts on societies.

Environmental management, which is the third theme, focuses on managing the ecological space in which businesses operate. Studies within this theme have addressed topics relating to environmental impact (Eljayash, 2017; McClain, 2013), with literature reviews frequently used to better understand these issues, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Notably, climate change and environmental impact emerge as key issues in this theme. This is unsurprising, as environmental protection and climate resilience are growing global concerns (Acquah et al., 2021). Climate change is commonly viewed as a consequence of the environmental damage caused by economic activities (Burbano et al., 2023; Lindawati & Meiryani, 2024). The fourth theme, resource economics, examines the interplay between resources and economic systems, applying scientific methods to analyze and optimize natural resources for sustainable transitions. Studies within this theme (Eraqi, 2007; Rana et al., 2017) feature keywords such as economics, science, and natural resources, focusing on resource sustainability.

Additional insights were drawn from the interpretation of the size of the nodes, which indicate the level of research attention a keyword has received. The colors correspond with the year of publication in the legend. Smaller, more recent keywords point to emerging themes that are still underexplored and thus present opportunities for future studies. Based on these findings, several avenues for future research are proposed, including topics such as climate change, education, marketing, ethics, debt, and decision-making in the African context (Appendix 4).

### ***Theoretical Perspectives on Corporate Sustainability***

Literature within the scope of this review is rooted in varying theoretical perspectives. A significant stream of studies draws upon normative economic and fiscal theories (Adeosun et al., 2021) to evaluate, predict, and comprehend relationships between key economic variables within sustainability literature. Structured models were utilized to analyze various sustainability relationships (Famiyeh et al., 2018). Other studies were underpinned by positivist theories such as agency theory, stakeholder theory, institutional theory, the theory of planned behavior, and legitimacy theory, among others. These theories provide insights for understanding of the sustainability endeavors.

Agency theory was employed to understand how practitioners’ reporting behaviors can be used to avoid possible conflicts in the relationship between the agents and the shareholders of the organization (Adegboyegun et al., 2020). The theory assumes that agency costs arise due to conflicts of interest between the principal (shareholders) and the agent (the practitioners who are hired to oversee the organization) (Aliyu, 2019). Stakeholder theory and institutional theory are underpinned by the notion that organizations exist within an array of internal and external pressures, and hence seek to explain the organizations’ congruence with these expectations (Adedeji et al., 2020). Stakeholder theory was used to explore the perceived influence of stakeholders in an impoverished society near a large South African city (McIntyre et al., 2015). The study revealed that companies must recognize the perceived influence of society on their license to

operate, regardless of their welfare status. Legitimacy theory explains how organizations adapt and conform to institutionalized normative pressures in order to gain acceptance (Eljayash, 2017). The theory of planned behavior seeks to explain sustainability behavior as a function of one's attitudes, norms, and perceived behavioral control (Abutaleb & El-Bassiouny, 2020).

Other studies sought to enhance their exploration by integrating two or more theoretical underpinnings in literature (Adedeji et al., 2020; Adegboyegun et al., 2020; Eljayash, 2017). This observed paradigm shift in research suggests the use of complementary theories to explain and examine sustainability variables (Eljayash, 2017). Adegboyegun et al. (2020) anchored their study in agency theory and stakeholder theory to explore the impact of integrated reporting practices on the performance of banking institutions in Nigeria. The study indicated that the effects were only significant in the long-run rather than in the short-term. Using stakeholder theory, institutional theory, and legitimacy theory, Eljayash (2017) found that environmental disclosure was influenced by organizational pressure to respond to institutional demands, stakeholder expectations, and legitimacy objectives, rather than a genuine commitment to sustainability. Employing stakeholder theory, institutional theory, and agency theory, Adedeji et al. (2020) determined the significant effects of corporate governance practices on the performance of medium-sized non-financial organizations in Nigeria.

The findings indicate that corporate sustainability research is influenced by varying theoretical perspectives, demonstrating how the theoretical landscape of corporate sustainability research is both diverse and evolving. This reflects the multifaceted nature of sustainability itself. The limitation of using positivist theories to explore phenomena lies in their predetermined assumptions and variables, which often fail to capture contextual nuances (Walls & Vogel, 2023; Zoogah et al., 2015). These nuances can be explored by adopting constructivist approaches that reflect local realities and knowledge (Masterson et al., 2019). There is a need to explore the relevance of the underlying assumptions of these Western-inspired theories in the African context (Eticha et al., 2024). Moreover, it is crucial to adopt African theoretical lenses in Africa-centric studies. Mamman et al. (2024) succinctly capture the essence of applying African theoretical lenses to comprehend phenomena as they unfold. For instance, the African lens of Ubuntu explains how values of community good over individual gain guides behavior and decision-making in African socio-economic interactions (Mwipikeni, 2018). As demonstrated in the case of African entrepreneurship, Western inspired theories are criticized for overlooking the African value system, which is ingrained in its people and therefore influences motives, decision making, and practices across the board (Mamman et al., 2024). Together, the theories and lenses discussed illuminate the complex interplay between economic rationality, organizational behavior, and societal expectations within corporate sustainability research. They also highlight the necessity for integrative approaches (Zoogah et al., 2015) in advancing both scholarly understanding and the practical implementation of sustainability in various contexts.

### **Barriers to Sustainability**

The African context is vast, with varying characteristics across the regions, countries, and even within countries (Eticha et al., 2024; Martins et al., 2023). Likewise, the continent

experiences varying degrees of challenges in issues such as poverty, hunger, health risks, gender inequalities, and illiteracy (Martins et al., 2023). The environment in these countries has a considerable impact on their systems, and the manifestation of systemic interactions varies (Eljayash, 2017). For instance, in Nigeria, the southwest region presents the most conducive region for economic activity due to its high urbanization, low poverty rates, and high purchasing power (Adedeji et al., 2020). Martins et al. (2023) identified inherent gender inequalities that disadvantage women and girls, and hence challenge their participation in economic activity in the sub-Saharan African region. Drawing insights from research on the challenges of the Millennium Development Goals, Anuoluwapo and Uwizeyimana (2021) highlight corruption, lack of infrastructure, lack of awareness, the politics of poverty, untargeted welfare programs, and environmental factors as key barriers to achieving sustainability.

In the case of sustainability disclosures, several issues have been identified that have a bearing on the disclosure of sustainability practices. Despite recognized positive effects (Adegboyegun et al., 2020), organizational sustainability reporting is varied and lacks impact (le Roux & Pretorius, 2019; Odhiambo et al., 2016). Companies in sub-Saharan African countries grapple with contextual challenges that affect their reporting, such as political environments, external interference, the emergence of civil society, and issues related to the availability of relevant research (Tilt et al., 2021). As alluded to by Viegas et al. (2021), the interference from donors in aid-funded projects also results in fragmentation in sustainability disclosure.

A recurring challenge is the presence of weak institutional structures (Akinyemi et al., 2021) that are ill-equipped to enforce regulation and curb unethical business practices, a presence that appears endemic across different sectors and regions of the continent. The prevalence of corruption in the Nigerian oil sector (Ayadi et al., 2017) and in multiple sectors across West African countries (Ike, 2011) attests to the persistence of the challenge. This situation raises questions with implications for both practice and scholarship: How and why were these institutions formed? Recognizing that financier-driven reporting can create a mismatched understanding of accountability (Viegas et al., 2021), how can accountability be reimagined to reflect a more inclusive and co-constructed practice in African institutions?

Inevitably, meaning plays an important role in determining the success of sustainability programs. As demonstrated by Masterson et al. (2019), pro-environmental programs in local communities were hindered by conflicts between local and Western ideologies of conservation. Similarly, beyond mere conformity to laws and regulations, hospitality enterprises in South Africa were influenced by society's conception of legitimate norms (Rambe, 2018). In conservation efforts, different meanings have been attributed to the concept of place, leading to a misalignment between cultural context, economic value, and meaning, thus inhibiting a shared agenda for sustainability (Masterson et al., 2019). The recent call for studies that address the meaning of social and environmental responsibility in the Global South (Acosta et al., 2024) signals that scholars are increasingly attentive to the pluralism in this area of research. In this context, a lingering question worthy of exploration is: How is meaning created and shared?

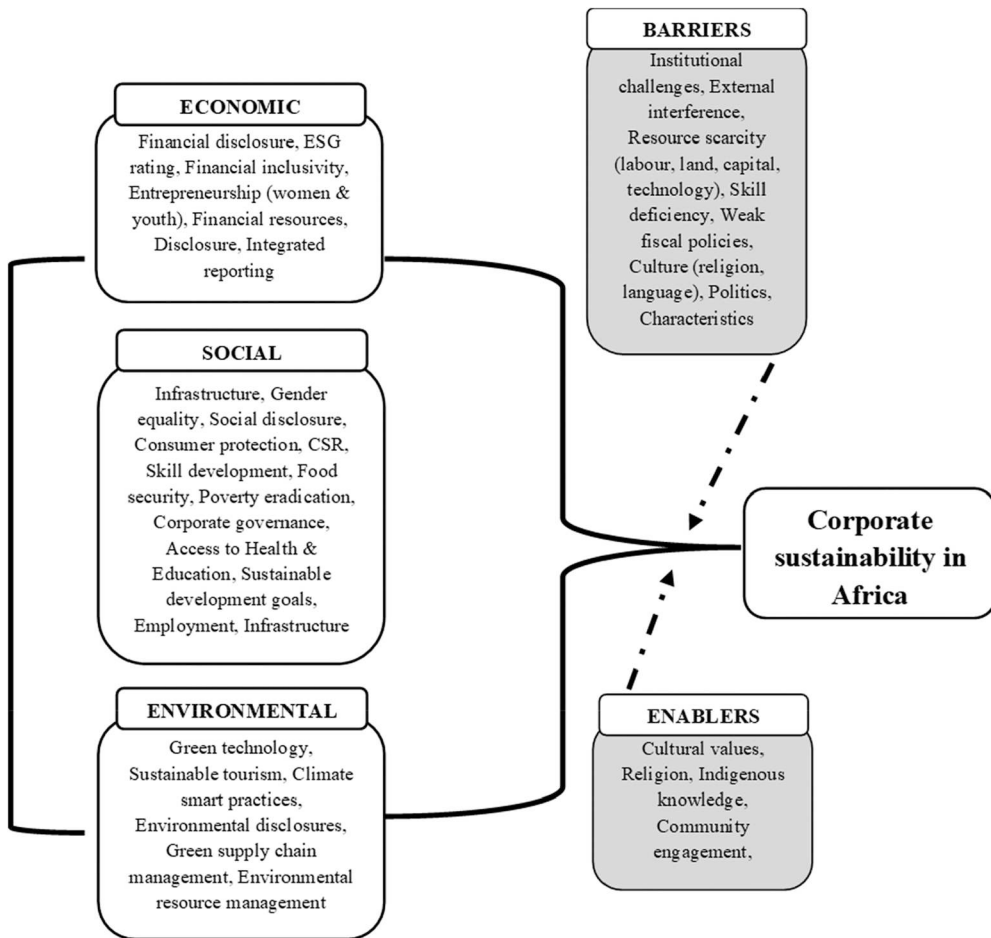
Other factors, such as individual and organizational characteristics, have also been found to influence the corporate sustainability of organizations. Aifuwa et al. (2022) explored how the ethnicity of board members has a varying effect on the sustainability

reporting of banking institutions. The presence of majority tribes on the board was found to have a significant positive effect on sustainability, while the inverse was observed with members from minority tribes. In Zimbabwean Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), CSR practices are ad hoc and rest solely with the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), as shaped by their values and upbringing (Chanakira & Masunda, 2019). At the organizational level of analysis, it was determined that corporate environmental reporting was positively and significantly influenced by board independence and the frequency of board meetings (Aliyu, 2019). This recognition of various factors signals the need for integrated multilevel approaches that explore how macro, meso and micro influences interact to drive meaningful sustainability practice.

### ***Enablers of Corporate Sustainability***

The findings from this study indicate that several opportunities exist that can propel the African continent towards sustainability. However, due to their variations, developing countries face limitations in the application of Western economic models, and hence there is a need to promote the cultivation of indigenous knowledge for economic growth (Vilakazi & Mashau, 2021). The review indicates that the community plays a very influential role in sustainability. Community-based approaches are effective in ensuring social accountability and collaboration between the government, community and service providers (Butler et al., 2020). Therefore, businesses are heavily influenced by values and indigenous knowledge for operational sustainability. Leveraging indigenous knowledge and practices, which are specific to different contexts within the continent, can enhance Africa's pursuit of sustainability. For instance, Assefa and Bork (2017) found that in Ethiopia, indigenous farmers have effective resource management practices, such as building terraces, which have effectively influenced environmental conservation. Hence, there is a strong need to preserve and develop this important cultural heritage of exemplary sustainable land use. Hofstetter et al. (2022) highlighted how leveraging indigenous approaches to telephony has revolutionized telecommunications infrastructure. These examples highlight the need for fostering collaborations that integrate context grounded solutions in driving sustainable change.

The African continent is surrounded by a strong cultural heritage of values and upbringing, which play a defining role in sustainability decision-making (Chanakira & Masunda, 2019). Agu et al. (2022) demonstrated that morals and education are significant in shaping human behavior, as well as in intentions to act responsibly towards one's society. In Ghana, charity is embedded in the society due to the society's respect for strong kinship and family obligations (Kumi, 2019). Moreover, other facets of culture, such as religion, have also been found to have inherent strength and resources to influence sustainability goals in Kenya (Moyer et al., 2012). An evaluation of philanthropy in Ghana's mobilization routes indicated that there is more commitment to giving to family and the church rather than to formal institutions (Kumi, 2019). In the same vein, Rosenberg (2022) established that values of togetherness, care, dignity, and faith significantly influenced and shaped the socio-ecological system of coffee production in Burundi. The African cultural influence arguably transcends individual and corporate-level decision-making and practice.



**Figure 4.** Corporate sustainability voices in Africa. Source: Own elaboration.

Drawing from the synthesis of literature in this review, [Figure 4](#) provides a visualization of the corporate sustainability discourse by highlighting the common areas of research interest, barriers, and enablers to sustainability.

## Conclusion

Corporate sustainability scholarship from the African perspective is multifaceted and has been explored through diverse disciplines and theories. This review provides a comprehensive analysis of 107 articles drawn from the ABI/INFORM Global database. It contributes to a better understanding of corporate sustainability in Africa. In so doing, key contributions and gaps in the literature were identified, leading to emerging opportunities for future studies and the enhancement of management scholarship and practice.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

In reviewing the literature, numerous challenges emerged that constrain the continent's advances towards achieving sustainability. Several policy recommendations are made to

enhance the sustainability trajectory of the African continent. To address the noted weaknesses in skillset and education (Butler et al., 2020; Ogola, 2012), there is a need for more tailored educational programs to provide skills and knowledge that are essential to support key economic sectors on the continent. This reform can be a catalyst for creating much-needed employment and diversifying the economy (Ayadi et al., 2017).

To curb policy inefficiencies, collaborative sectorial policy reforms need to be implemented to ensure the participation of key stakeholders in shaping the policy landscape. These reforms can ensure context-specific solutions to address the distinct needs of different sectors (Kimuli et al., 2022). The existence of weak institutions that fail to efficiently enforce governance and curb unethical business practices (such as corruption) (Ayadi et al., 2017) can be addressed by collaborative institutional reforms (Akinyemi et al., 2021) that build upon indigenous practices of accountability. These reforms can potentially give rise to stronger and more effective regulatory systems and accountability in corporate sustainability performance. To better target the marginalized communities, reduce poverty, and improve livelihoods, the redesign of targeted social programs is essential. Government planning should provide equitable and inclusive education to underserved parts of society to enhance access to equal opportunities. Finally, there is dire need for infrastructure reforms to support economic activity, thereby fueling employment creation and ultimately leading to sustainable development.

Practically, this review provides insights for practitioners to enhance sustainability transitions on the African continent. There is a growing need to tap into context-specific advantages by integrating African social capital (knowledge and practices) that can enhance the efficiency of sustainability practices. For instance, several local agricultural practices have been identified (Assefa & Bork, 2014; Assefa & Bork, 2017), which can be enhanced to effectively support sustainability efforts. Additionally, this review offers coverage of studies within the African context, which can be used for benchmarking by practitioners in similar contexts. Several studies in this review ((Chanakira & Masunda, 2019); Olowookere et al., 2022) foreground the critical role of human capital in advancing sustainability transitions, highlighting the need for deliberate investment in people.

### ***Limitations and Future Research Directions***

While insightful, the study was not without limitations. The ability to gather nuanced understanding, as provided by the interpretive nature of the study, also presents an inherent liability in the process. These effects can be minimized by maintaining a clear trail of decisions, and processes followed. This review adopted a systematic process to ensure transparency and applied an inclusion and exclusion criteria, which limited its scope (Mehtaa et al., 2024). Future studies could benefit from an expanded focus to ensure a wider, more inclusive range of publications for enhanced comprehension.

The review indicates that research interest in corporate sustainability in this context is limited but growing. Central to our understanding is the insight that meaning construction is critical in shaping corporate sustainability pathways and outcomes (Masterson et al., 2019). This creates opportunities for future studies to address the plurality of corporate sustainability meanings by exploring how meaning is constructed and shared in this context. Theoretically, there are opportunities for future studies to explore the manifestations of corporate sustainability by embracing alternative theories such as

constructivism and those that are shaped by African philosophy. Applying these lenses will permit examination of this phenomenon within its context (Hofstetter et al., 2022) and provide deeper and more nuanced insights. Future research avenues deduced from the analysis of the keyword cluster (see Appendix 4) include, but are not limited to climate change, education, marketing, ethics, debt, and decision-making, amongst others. Exploring these hot topics solidifies the pivotal role of management scholarship in driving the sustainability agenda. Given that the majority of studies in this review (56 percent) employed quantitative methods and relied upon statistical modeling techniques (Acquah et al., 2021; Aliyu, 2019), these studies are subject to the inherent limitation of quantitative methods in exploring complex phenomenon. Thus, a methodological gap exists for studies that adopt qualitative and mixed methods approaches. Future studies could adopt these approaches to provide in-depth, context-specific insights into the contextualized challenges faced by the continent (Hofstetter et al., 2022; Tipu, 2022). Further, the study points to a disproportionate geographical representation of literature in the context, with studies mainly conducted in Nigeria and South Africa. The diversity of the African continent, spanning over 50 countries with over 1 billion inhabitants (Walls & Vogel, 2023), indicates a pressing need for research that explores underrepresented regions. This review signals the need for corporate sustainability research that reflects Africa's unique contexts. By identifying both achievements and ongoing challenges, the study shows the value of drawing on local knowledge, practices, and institutional settings to better understand corporate sustainability in Africa.

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## Data Availability Statement

The authors confirm that all data analyzed during this study are included in this article.

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