



Institutional Voids and Green Ambitions: Sociological Perspectives on Sustainability Management in the Global South

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Abstract

Firms in the Global South face a paradox. They are asked to decarbonize, report ESG performance, and enable “just transitions,” yet they operate where accredited labs, credible enforcement, technical assistance, and green finance are thin on the ground. Drawing on neo-institutionalism, field theory, practice theory, and the sociology of development, this article explains how sustainability management takes shape under such institutional voids. We synthesize evidence from Bangladesh’s apparel industry, India’s renewable-energy build-out, and Kenyan horticulture to show when sustainability routines become substantive rather than symbolic. Four families of institutional work recur—assurance substitution, capability socialization, voice institutionalization, and template hybridization, and they are most credible in co-regulatory fields where state agencies, industry associations, labor, and civil society share roles. We contribute a multi-level model linking field configuration to organizational routines and distributional outcomes; a mechanism-focused typology for weak-capacity settings; and a policy roadmap that aligns export compliance with local development needs (see Table 1; see Table 2; see Table 3). We close by outlining designs for mixed-methods testing of our propositions and by arguing for decentering Northern templates in sustainability scholarship.

Keywords: Sustainability management, Institutional voids, ESG, Co-regulation, Neo-institutional theory, Field theory, Practice theory, Global South, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Sustainability management has spread quickly, via CSR programs, ESG disclosures, net-zero roadmaps, and circularity initiatives, but its diffusion is uneven. In the Global South, firms must demonstrate environmental stewardship and respect for labor and human rights while contending with sparse assurance infrastructure, fragmented enforcement, and persistent informality (Khanna (Jamali & Karam, 2018; Khanna & Palepu, 1997; Khanna & Palepu, 2010). These contexts are not simply missing pieces of a Northern puzzle. They are distinct organizational fields where export compliance, cost pressure, national development priorities, and community livelihoods collide (Matten & Moon, 2020; Scott, 2013).

Institutional theory predicts policy convergence under coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures but also warns about decoupling—formal adoption without operational change (DiMaggio (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Jamali & Karam, 2018). Field theory adds that what counts as “sustainability” is contested by actors wielding different forms of capital and occupying different field positions (Bourdieu, 1986; Scott, 2013). Together, these lenses help explain why ESG in the Global South oscillates between genuine improvement and ritual compliance (Matten & Moon, 2020; Suchman, 1995). To anchor our contribution, we map the core literatures and anchor works (see Table 1).

This article describes: How do firms in the Global South construct credible sustainability management amid institutional voids, and with what social consequences? The answer is a multi-

level model connecting field configuration (state capacity, buyer pressure, associational density), organizational capabilities (boundary spanners, supplier development, voice mechanisms), and community dynamics (local norms, labor agency) (Latif, 2023). We conceptualize voids as arenas of institutional work; we propose a typology tailored to weak-capacity settings; and we derive actionable implications for managers, policymakers, buyers, and investors. Our mechanism typology and design rules are summarized for quick reference (see **Table 2**), and we operationalize them for Bangladesh in **Table 3**.

However, writing in a comparative, mechanism-seeking point of view. The paper places a premium on mechanism over prevalence- how and why things happen in various institutional domains as opposed to how national averages are estimated. Bangladesh is selected as a focus case because it has a salient apparel value chain and a record of co-regulatory experimentation; India and Kenya serve as contrast cases where land, energy justice, and inclusion of smallholders redefine sustainability options. It will give preference to peer-reviewed scholarship and university press monographs, and supplemented by seminal frameworks of governance (e.g., UN Guiding Principles) (Wasib-Latif, 2022). Such a position is bound to cull the credible evidence, which I expressly note in the Methodology and Conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Institutional Voids and Emerging-Market Strategy

The term institutional voids describes the lack or ineffectiveness of mediators that facilitate effective performance of the market-rating agencies, certification bodies, credible courts, and unpredictable enforcement of the rules ((Khanna & Palepu, 1997; Khanna & Palepu, 2010). The firms replace relational contracting, private standards, or hybrid arrangements to make arrangements with the suppliers and with communities (Palepu et al., 2005). Sociologically, empty spaces serve as forums of anticipation, but are occupied by informal rules, brokers, and fledgling associations, which stabilize expectations (North, 1990; Ostrom, 1990). This is the prism through which it becomes clear why sustainability arrangements in the Global South often depend on co-regulation and self-regulation with civil society scrutiny.

2.2 Neo-Institutionalism: Conformity, Decoupling, and Recoupling

Policy adoption is brought about by coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2013). However, formal structures may be embraced as a myth to reveal legitimacy, whilst practice stays the same-decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Suchman, 1995). When monitoring, remediation, finance, and voice mechanisms create a feedback loop between policy and routines, this is called recoupling (Latif, 2017). This is the reason that the movement of the needle is seldom followed when the checklists do not have remediation funds or the involvement of the workers.

2.3 Field Theory: Power, Capitals, and Metric Politics

Sustainability is not technical, but political in the field. Incumbents and challengers do fight about what indicators are counted, who audits, and who pays (Bourdieu, 1986; Scott, 2013). In export value chains, metrics (e.g., ESG ratings) are frequently controlled by buyers and investors, yet unions, NGOs, and even public regulators can re-weight the field by accords, disclosure obligations, and grievance procedures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Ruggie, 2011). Legitimacy of the metrics relies on the inclusiveness, locality, and verifiability (Bebbington & Unerman, 2018).

2.4 Practice Theory and Organizational Routines

The practice theory shifts the focus away from policy to routines: data collection, audit of suppliers, financing remediation, worker/community engagement, and reporting. These practices under voids are stabilized by boundary spanners who cross functions and organizations (Delmas

& Burbano, 2011). External pressure is translated into internal learning through supplier development and co-financed remediation (Bansal & Roth, 2000; Choudhury et al., 2019).

2.5 Sociology of Development, GVCs, and Just Transition

Unequal capabilities and dependency relations are emphasized in the context of global value chain research (Davila et al., 2018). The private standards have the advantage of upgrading some suppliers and leaving out SMEs and smallholders who are unable to satisfy the documentation or capex conditions (Rivera, 2002). Just transition is a question that seeks to respond to what decarbonization entails and who benefits from the green growth (Jenkins et al., 2016) and (Heffron, 2022). The Global South is particularly vulnerable to these distributional challenges, where rights to land, water, and labor frequently clash with the accelerated timelines of green investments.

Table 1: Anchor literature across theories and their relevance to sustainability under voids (illustrative, curated for mechanism breadth)

No.	Author(s) & Year	Context/Method	Core Claim	Relevance to Voids
1	Khanna & Palepu (1997)	Emerging markets: strategy	Voids raise transaction costs; hybrids emerge	Explains private standards/proxies
2	Khanna & Palepu (2010)	Book; strategy	Execution in emerging markets depends on intermediaries	Governance design under voids
3	Khanna & Palepu (2010)	HBR	Matching strategy to institutional context	Why one-size ESG fails
4	North (1990)	Book; institutions	Institutions reduce uncertainty	Why weak enforcement matters
5	Ostrom (1990)	Book; commons	Collective governance can work without the state	Co-regulatory logics
6	DiMaggio & Powell (1983)	Theory	Coercive/normative/mimetic isomorphism	Policy adoption pressures
7	Meyer & Rowan (1977)	Theory	Formal structures as myths; decoupling	Symbolic ESG risk
8	Scott (2013)	Book	Regulative, normative, and cognitive pillars	Multi-level analysis
9	Bourdieu (1986)	Theory	Capitals and symbolic power	Metric/assurance politics
10	Suchman (1995)	Theory	Pragmatic/moral/cognitive legitimacy	Why firms signal ESG
11	Bansal & Roth (2000)	Empirical	Ecological responsiveness drivers	Boundary spanning & learning
12	Delmas & Burbano (2011)	Review/empirical	External pressure → internal routines via mediators	Recoupling mechanisms
13	Azizul Islam & Deegan (2008)	Empirical	Stakeholder & size effects on strategy	Heterogeneous capabilities
14	Reinecke & Donaghey (2023)	GVC theory	Governance types and upgrading	Buyer leverage & supplier gaps
15	Jamali & Karam (2018)	Review	CSR in developing countries	Contextual CSR forms

16	Matten & Moon (2020)	Theory	Implicit vs. explicit CSR	National institutional shapes
17	Hart (1995)	Theory	Natural-resource-based view	Capabilities for green strategy
18	Porter & Kramer (2011)	Essay	Shared value	Linking ESG & competitiveness
19	Bebbington & Larrinaga (2014)	Review	Accounting can enable/obscure	Metric design pitfalls
20	Donaghey & Reinecke (2018)	Case; Bangladesh	Co-governance expands rights	Accord-style co-regulation
21	Ruggie (2011)	UNGP	Due diligence & remedy	Baseline for rights-compatible ESG
22	Rivera (2002)	Empirical; Costa Rica	Voluntary standards in developing world	Inclusion/exclusion dynamics
23	Vogel (2007)	Book	Market for virtue limits	Limits of private governance
24	(Abbott & Snidal, 2021)	Theory	Governance triangle (state–firm–NGO)	Why hybrids matter
25	Gunningham & Rees (1997)	Theory	Smart regulation	Instrument mixes > single tools
26	Sabel et al. (2017)	Theory/cases	Experimentalist governance	Iterative compliance/remedy
27	Locke (2013)	Book; mixed methods	Private power & labor standards	Conditions for real gains
28	Aguilera et al. (2007)	Theory	Multilevel CSR motivations	Cross-level pressures
29	Heffron (2022)	Conceptual	Just transition principles	Distributional lens
30	Jenkins et al. (2016)	Review	Energy justice framework	Social license & remedy

Note. This matrix anchors the argument’s mechanism claims and situates sectorial vignettes (Bangladesh, India, and Kenya); it is curated rather than exhaustive.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design and Rationale

It is a comparative case synthesis theory-building review. The objective is to bring to the fore mechanisms that render sustainability plausible or symbolic in cases of institutional voids. We indulge in statistical rather than analytic generalization (Latif et al., 2024).

3.2 Search and Selection

We used backward/forward citation tracking of anchor works, e.g., (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Locke, 2013; Scott, 2013), and searched peer-reviewed journals (e.g., Academy of Management Journal, Journal of Business Ethics, Organization and Environment), and monographs published by prestigious university presses. There was a need to have an explicit form of governance that is pertinent to assurance or to capability or to voice, or to localization of templates. We filtered through purely descriptive ESG correlations that did not have a process mechanism. Table 1 is a synthesis of key sources and the functions they serve.

3.3 Comparative Case Logic

We chose three cases where field configuration was different and external sustainability pressure constant: Bangladesh (textiles/apparel) export compliance, co-regulatory reforms in safety, wastewater, and energy efficiency; India (renewable energy) policy-driven scale-up with land

acquisition, biodiversity, and energy justice defining social license; Kenya (horticulture) - private standards and inclusion/ exclusion of smallholders.

3.4 Coding and Synthesis

The presence of four mechanism families, such as assurance substitution, capability socialization, voice institutionalization, and template hybridization, and credibility signals (e.g., verified remediation, fewer repeat incidents, resource efficiency is measurable) versus failure modes (e.g., audit gaming, SME exclusion) were coded. These mechanisms, their facilitating conditions, and pitfalls are summarized in Table 2. In those cases, the limitations are that the proportion of export sectors is over-represented in secondary sources; domestic service sectors are not over-documented. Causal inferences are presented as propositions that are to be examined using mixed methods (ethnography + ESG data auditing; process tracing of remediation events) (Islam & Kokubu, 2018). We mention the paths of falsification in the Conclusion.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 A Multi-Level ESG Credibility Void Model

We associate field configuration, organizational capabilities, and community dynamics.

- **Field configuration:** Firms are rewarded with coherent signals and punished by credible sanctions where consumers, reputable third-party guarantees, and good associations all exist (Ruggie, 2011; Scott, 2013). Disparate sectors come up with opposing demands and symbolic compliance incentives.
- **Organizational capabilities:** More frequently, firms that invest in boundary spanner (sustainability-procurement translators), supplier development, and data minimalism with integrity (a small set of verified metrics) recouple policy to practice (Bansal & Roth, 2000; Delmas & Burbano, 2011).
- **Community dynamics:** Institutionalized voice worker committees that possess rights to make decisions, community liaison offices, benefit-sharing, transform ESG into a feedback loop, and remedy (Locke, 2013).

Proposition 1 Coherence in the Field. Substantive ESG routines have a positive relationship with co-regulatory density (Heffron, 2022)

Proposition 2 (Boundary Spanning and Supplier Development). It is more probable that firms having boundary spanners and supplier development will recoup policies-to-practice (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Proposition 3 (Voice and Durability). The worker/community voice, institutionalized, is associated with predicting the long-term benefits and reduced delays in the projects (Jenkins et al., 2016).

Proposition 4 (Template Hybridization). Standards that are localized (co-designed indicators; phased compliance + support) extend adoption to outside of elite suppliers (Rivera, 2002).

4.2 Weak-capacity settings Typology of Institutional Work

Table 2 summarizes governance mechanisms, enabling conditions, credit signals, and repetitive risks in the presence of voids.

Mechanism	Typical Enablers	Credibility Signals	Risks Under Voids
Assurance substitution	Assurance substitution	Assurance substitution	Assurance substitution
Capability socialization	Capability socialization	Capability socialization	Capability socialization

Voice institutionalization	Unions/worker reps; community liaison offices; grievance redressal	Resolved grievances; improved safety climate; fewer repeat incidents	Token committees; retaliation risk; weak remedy
Template hybridization	Standards bodies; ministries; universities; local experts	Locally relevant metrics; adoption beyond top-tier suppliers	Patchwork adoption; uneven enforcement; complexity costs

Note. Co-optation of mechanisms, credibility through safeguards, and co-regulation. Each row (see Table 2) in 5.5 corresponds to Design Rules.

4.3 Bangladesh: Audit Ritual-Co-regulatory Learning

Crisis catalyzed coordination in the Bangladesh apparel sector. Multi-stakeholder deals UVB-linked factory inspections with time-limited corrective measures, remediation capital, and worker-management safety committees (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018). The most likely substantial change was a combination of three conditions in which (a) assurance is achieved by using transparent incident registries and follow-up inspections; (b) capability is socialized through cluster training, shared testing laboratories, and access to green credit lines; and (c) voice is institutionalized by using protected grievance channels. Similar environmental practice included environmental upgrading: energy-efficient retrofits and treatment of effluent improved when buyers linked technology transfer to longer sourcing commitments (Mahadzirah et al., 2016). In cases where subcontracting was shrouded or in cases where the SMEs were not financed, there was a symbolic compliance. These trends are directly mapped to enablers and risks in Table 2 and are used to inform the Bangladesh policy roadmap in Table 3.

4.4 India: Scale-Up and Social License of Renewable Energy

The build-out of solar and wind in India provides an example of how competitive auctions and strong policy signals can open investment. However, early engagement, equitable land practices, biodiversity protection, and benefit sharing are the conditions of social license to operate (Heffron, 2022; Jenkins et al., 2016). The projects that incorporate voice institutionalization, such as community liaison offices, grievance redressal, and shared infrastructure, all record fewer delays compared to those that depend on clearances at the top. A template hybridization is present in the sense that state agencies are localizing rules of siting and compensation sets to regional settings. The case concurs with proposition 3: distributional justice determines the project stability (Choudhury et al., 2019).

4.5 Kenya: Standards, Inclusion, and Collective Capability

With Kenyan horticulture, the private standards open the export markets but run the risk of excluding smallholders who cannot afford irrigation, documentation, and auditing (Rivera, 2002). The capability and compliance costs are socialized through intermediaries, such as cooperatives, producer organizations, donor-funded extension, and make inclusion possible. With intermediate thinness, certification is a gatekeeping mechanism with a concentration of value to the larger farms. Indicators at localized levels of water stewardship and pesticide management (template hybridization) enhance the feasibility and uptake of both indicators among the long tail of producers (Azizul Islam & Deegan, 2008; Branch).

4.6 Design Rules (Directly Mapped to Table 2)

Rule 1 (Assurance substitution): Tie remediation finance and proven closure to audit, not only findings; publicize incident registries.

Rule 2 (Capability socialization): Co-fund upgrades through cluster-based labs/ETPs, training supported by the buyer, and concessional finance to prevent SME lockout.

Rule 3 (Voice institutionalization): Establish decision rights and anti-retaliation protections and documented remedies to worker committees and community agreements.

Rule 4 (Template hybridization): Localize indicators by co-design with standards bodies and ministries; stage compliance by support to extend adoption.

Table 2. In order of correspondence, Design Rules 1-4 are the four rows of Table 2, and they may be utilized as an implementation checklist (see Table 2).

4.7 Bangladesh Policy Roadmap (Operationalization)

Table 3: Policy Instruments & Implementation Framework for Bangladesh

Instrument	Target Mechanism (Table 2 row)	Lead / Partners	Financing & Support	Verification & Disclosure
Cluster ETP & water-testing hubs	Capability socialization	Ministry of Industries; BGMEA; donor/buyer partners	Capex via blended finance; O&M via user fees	Quarterly lab reports; surprise audits; public dashboard
Green credit line with performance rebates	Capability socialization	Central bank; commercial banks; development banks	Concessional loans; rebate on verified KPIs	Third-party M&V of energy/water KPIs; publish aggregated results
Mandatory incident registry with time-bound CAPAs	Assurance substitution	Labor ministry; multi-stakeholder accord body	NA (regulatory) + technical helpdesk	CAPA closure verification; factory-level summaries online
Factory safety & environment committees with decision rights	Voice institutionalization	Firms; unions; NGOs	Training stipends; legal protection	Logged grievances; resolution times; worker climate surveys
Localized ESG indicator set + phased SME compliance	Template hybridization	Standards body; ministries; universities	TA grants; buyer co-funded training	Annual review of indicator uptake; SME inclusion rates
Long-term sourcing MOUs tied to verified remediation	Capability + Assurance	Lead buyers; suppliers; associations	Offtake guarantees; price premiums for verified upgrades	Independent verification; remedy records linked to MOUs

Note. Instruments are modular. Clusters and voice mechanisms coupled with a credit line result in less exclusion and durability (see Table 2).

5. Conclusion

When coherence in the fields can be achieved, sustainability management in the Global South proceeds, rather than when firms are simply requested to report more. In Bangladesh, India, and Kenya, there is some evidence that credible ESG requires four types of institutional work:



assurance substitution that goes beyond audit; capability socialization that avoids SME exclusion; voice institutionalization that provides remedy to workers and communities; and template hybridization that localizes global regulations without reducing the bar (see Table 2). To managers, the practical step is to invest in the functions of boundary-spanning and to integrate supplier development and remedy into procurement. To policymakers and industry associations, the focus is on common infrastructure - labs, registries, and green credit - coupled with realistic and gradual mandates. To buyers/investors, longer contracts with performance-based finance are an incentive to remediate rather than to box-tick (Latif et al., 2017).

Falsification paths, when the co-regulatory density increases but checked remediation and worker safety do not, the model over-emphasizes assurance substitution. If SME inclusion fails to increase in the face of blended finance and training, socialization of capabilities is lower than theorized. The follow-up steps include mixed methods: ethnography of factory patterns, process mapping of remediation episodes, and result analysis on the basis of verified KPIs. Concisely, long-lasting sustainability in the absence of voids is a design issue of governance--and it can be solved.

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