Drivers of Responsible Business Conduct in Low- and Middle-Income Countries

Systematic Literature Review

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November 2025

UK International Development
Partnership | Progress | Prosperity

institute of development studies

This report has been written by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) for the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

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Acknowledgement: The authors thank Seife Ayele, Keir MacDonald, and Jing Gu, who all work at IDS, for their support and contributions for the sector specific studies.

Executive Summary:

This report synthesises recent empirical evidence on the drivers of Responsible Business Conduct (RBC) in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), based on a systematic literature review and detailed analysis of five key sectors: mining, agrifood, textiles, information and digital technologies, and finance.

RBC involves preventing harm to people and the environment while contributing to broader economic and social progress.

After briefly introducing the core concepts and analytical framework, the report maps the most commonly studied areas of RBC, identifies drivers that have proven effective, assesses their sector-specific relevance, examines the enabling conditions and structural barriers affecting their operation, and distils key policy implications.

RBCs are shaped by drivers:

The RBCs identified in the review cluster around a relatively narrow set of areas. Environmental practices, including pollution control, waste reduction, and carbon mitigation, are the most frequently reported. Compliance-related behaviours (labour standards, transparency, anti-corruption) also appear prominently. By contrast, certain forms of market-enhancing related RBC (such as fair-competition behaviours or responses to consumer concerns) and societal RBC (such as community development, R&D with social spillovers, or charitable initiatives) are identified far less often.

This pattern partly reflects differences in pressure, measurability, and research attention. Evidence on areas such as human rights due diligence, tax justice, and wider societal contributions remains limited, making it difficult to judge whether they are less common or simply less studied.

Effectiveness of RBC drivers across sectors:

The analysis identifies five types of RBC drivers:

- **Market-based Drivers:**
    - Effective in sectors where reputation, consumer preferences, and value chain pressures influence competitive advantage, such as agrifood and textiles (e.g.

consumer pressures have been found to enhance environmental and social responsibility in textiles - George, 2021; Chkanikova & Mont, 2015).

- Less effective in price-driven like mining or opaque sectors like finance and ICT.

- **Institutional Drivers:**
    - Most effective where robust national regulatory frameworks exist aligned with national-international standards. (e.g. effective institutional interventions identified by research include mandatory CSR policies in India's mining sector and regulatory reforms improving detection of corporate misconduct in China (Kumar et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2014).
    - Less effective with weak state capacities particularly of enforcement, and in areas where significant information asymmetries exist between the government and companies.
- **Civil Society Drivers:**
    - Most effective in sectors where social and environmental harms are directly visible to workers and communities, such as mining and textiles. (e.g. grassroots movements in Latin American mining have been found to meaningfully reshaped corporate practices and regulatory debates in Argentina and Chile - Haslam & Godfrid, 2023; Marin, 2025).
    - Less effective in complex or less transparent sectors (e.g. ICT, finance), where technical opacity limits public scrutiny and mobilisation.
- **Cultural Drivers and Knowledge & Innovation Drivers:**
    - Though potentially important, these drivers remain underexplored in the empirical literature. Limited evidence suggests that cultural norms around transparency and community engagement may reinforce responsible practices (Luo et al., 2018), and that the adoption of environmental and process innovations based on new knowledge can support improved performance in manufacturing and extractive sectors (Xu et al., 2024). However, compared with market, institutional, and civil-society drivers, systematic evidence on these mechanisms remains scarce.

Sectoral patterns in driver effectiveness:

Our sectoral analysis shows that the effectiveness of responsible business conduct (RBC) drivers depends largely on three structural features: visibility, competition, and complexity (see also the Summary Table).

1. **In competitive, consumer-facing and easy-to-understand sectors, all drivers tend to work well.**
   Typical examples are agrifood and textiles, where consumers have greater capacity to observe harmful practices, reputational pressures are strong, civil society can mobilise effectively, and institutions rely on well-established regulatory and voluntary standards.
2. **In sectors that are distant from consumers and highly concentrated, market and institutional pressures weaken.**
   In mining, for instance, consumers are remote and cannot discipline firms, competition is limited, and governments often have weaker leverage, especially where they depend heavily on extractive revenues. As a result, civil-society mobilisation becomes the primary source of external pressure, frequently at significant social cost to affected communities.
3. **In complex sectors characterised by high information asymmetries, all drivers are constrained.**
   Where harms are difficult to detect or interpret (as in finance and digital platforms), consumers struggle to guide firm behaviour, regulators face significant capacity and information gaps, and civil society finds it hard to hold firms accountable. Two distinct patterns emerge:
   - *Complex but competitive sectors* (e.g. some digital services): partial influence of market and institutional drivers.
   - *Complex and concentrated sectors* (e.g. finance and big tech): very limited influence of all external drivers.

Overall, these three features, visibility, competition, and complexity, systematically condition the strength of RBC drivers, generating uneven patterns of responsibility across sectors.

Structural Enablers and Barriers

- **Enablers:**
  - Robust educational and awareness programmes.
  - Effective stakeholder participation and strong transparency tools, such as GRI reporting or blockchain systems for traceability.
  - Regulatory frameworks aligned with, and supported by, international and institutional collaboration.

Summary table: Sectoral varieties matter for RBC drivers.

Sector Characteristics	Example Sectors	Market Forces	Institutional Pressures	Civil Society	Knowledge & Innovation
High competition, consumer-facing, traditional	Food & Textiles	High	Medium	Medium to High	Low to Medium
		Consumers reward ethical practices, certifications matter, branding sensitive	Monitoring SMEs is hard, but international and national standards exist	Civil society can mobilise consumer pressure (e.g. Fair Trade, Fashion Revolution)	Less R&D-intensive; some innovations in sustainability exist but less central
High concentration, less consumer visibility, traditional	Mining, Oil & Gas	Low	Medium	High	Low
		Reputation less tied to consumer demand, more B2B	Harder to enforce regulations due to government dependence and corporate power	Local resistance and mobilisation (e.g. social licence to operate) often effective	Innovation exists but is not systematically linked to RBC practices
High competition, consumer-facing, newer	ICT (Digital platforms, Tech)	Low to Medium	Low	Low to Emerging	Medium to High
		Consumers lack information, some emerging demand for privacy/responsibility	Institutional capacity gaps and technical asymmetries hinder enforcement	Still organising around key issues like data misuse, AI ethics	Innovation central, but often not directed towards RBC; potential under right incentives
High concentration, less consumer visibility, newer	Finance, Big Tech	Low	Low to Medium	Low	Medium
		Complex products reduce consumer influence	Global frameworks exist but enforcement weak; domestic capacity gaps	Civil society needs expertise, often limited influence	Innovation exists (e.g. fintech, ESG scoring), but not always linked to RBC

Source: Authors' own.

- **Barriers:**
  - Captive and opaque value chains that restrict transparency and accountability.
  - Competitive pressures that prioritise cost-cutting over investment in responsible practices.
  - Weak regulatory enforcement and corruption that erode institutional and market incentives for RBC.
  - High technical complexity that limits the capacity of regulators and civil society to monitor corporate conduct.

Policy implications:

- **Tailor Policies to Sector Specificities:** Design interventions that reflect sectoral differences, such as levels of competition, consumer awareness and proximity, and technological complexity, while taking into account country specific context.
- **Strengthen Support for Neglected RBC Areas:** Human rights, anti-corruption, and tax justice remain less addressed than environmental concerns; these require greater policy focus and incentives.
- **Enhance Civil Society Capacities:** Support civil society to raise awareness, monitor misconduct, and advocate change—especially where regulatory capacity is weak.
- **Promote Innovation as a Driver:** Encourage investment in knowledge and technology that enables RBC, particularly in sectors where traditional drivers are weak.
- **Strengthen Institutional Frameworks:** Improve state capacity to design, enforce, and adapt RBC regulations, ensuring alignment with international standards while addressing local realities.
- **Promote Transparency:** Enhance supply chain traceability and corporate accountability using a variety of tools, such as internationally recognised reporting standards (e.g., Global Reporting Initiative—GRI), blockchain technology, and third-party auditing. Blockchain, in particular, can complement existing transparency practices by offering secure and verifiable records, but transparency does not depend solely on blockchain solutions.
- **Foster Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration:** Support partnerships between governments, firms, and civil society to drive systemic, cross-sectoral change.
- **Improve understanding of unintended consequences:** The multiple impacts of interventions and more in general of changes in the direction of RBC in specific areas

need to be better understood in specific contexts (e.g. country, sector) through research and diagnostics.

- **Address Research Gaps:** More research is needed on underexplored areas, including civil society's role where market and institutional drivers fall short, the effectiveness of institutional innovations, and interactions among different drivers.

In conclusion, promoting RBC requires integrated strategies that combine tailored regulatory frameworks, market incentives, civil society empowerment, and innovation, all adapted to specific sectoral and national contexts.

Contents:

Introduction

In this report, we contribute to understanding how to promote Responsible Business Conduct (RBC) by reviewing and critically analysing recent empirical evidence on the drivers of RBC in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). More specifically, we explore: *What has been found to work in driving RBC in specific contexts? What forms of RBC do these drivers promote? What is effective (or not) in particular sectors?*

Amidst global crises such as climate change, environmental degradation, health emergencies, poverty, and inequality, private companies are increasingly expected to go beyond providing goods, services, and employment. They are called to collaborate with governments and society in tackling humanity's most urgent challenges. Companies command significant global resources, drive innovation, employ millions, and rely on shared natural assets. While they are affected by these crises, they have also contributed to them and continue to shape their trajectory through both market and non-market actions.

This raises a central question: how can firms be incentivised and guided to act not only in the interest of shareholders but also in service of broader societal goals? How can they become central actors in the transformations needed to address global crises—working for the common good while remaining profitable and resilient?

Governments, development agencies, and international institutions have advanced the concept of Responsible Business Conduct (RBC) to frame corporate engagement with social demands. The OECD defines RBC as "making a positive contribution to economic, environmental and social progress… while avoiding and addressing adverse impacts" (OECD 2011: 19–20). A responsible firm is thus one that not only creates social value but also avoids harm. This dual expectation is reflected in many RBC definitions (Enneking & Veldman 2019; MacDonald 2022; Quak 2022).

The OECD (2023) highlights eight areas of RBC: human rights; employment and labour relations; the environment; anti-corruption; consumer interests; innovation and technological capacity; fair competition; and tax practices.

Yet despite this consensus, evidence on how RBC emerges in practice across different contexts remains fragmented. We know relatively little about which incentives work, what types of RBC they promote, and how these dynamics vary across sectors in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

This report addresses these gaps by conducting two complementary reviews: a systematic search of recent peer-reviewed evidence on RBC drivers, and a sectoral analysis focusing on mining, oil and gas, agrifood, textiles and garments, finance, and ICT. As a synthesis of existing research, our findings reflect both the insights and the limitations of the available evidence, highlighting where knowledge is solid and where important gaps remain.

The report is structured as follows. We begin by reviewing the concept of RBC, including its evolution and ongoing debates. We then outline the theoretical framework and research questions, followed by our methodology. Results are presented in two parts, findings from the systematic review and from the sectoral comparison. We conclude with a summary of insights and their policy implications.

1. Key Conceptual Definitions

1.1 Evolution of the RBC concept

The idea of a responsible firm has evolved over time, expanding from conventional corporate social responsibility (CSR) frameworks toward more complex ethical and political expectations. Carroll's (1991) CSR Pyramid remains a reference point, identifying four core responsibilities, economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic. The model underscores that businesses must first ensure profitability and legal compliance, while also considering ethical standards and voluntary contributions to society.

Much of the early literature, including Friedman's (1970) view that the primary duty of business is to increase shareholder value, assumed a world of stable social norms and effective regulatory frameworks. These assumptions have increasingly been challenged. In reality, firms operate across diverse institutional settings, where norms are not universally shared, and mechanisms to hold businesses accountable often lack strength.

Donaldson and Dunfee (1994) responded to this challenge by proposing a model of "integrative social contracts theory," which acknowledges the coexistence of global ethical standards ("hyper-norms") and context-specific values. They argue that business ethics must reflect both universal principles and respect for local customs, offering a way to navigate moral complexity in cross-border operations.

Scherer and Palazzo (2008) went further by highlighting the political role of corporations. They argue that large firms, particularly multinationals, act as political entities that shape the socio-political landscape, especially in areas where states are weak or absent, but not only. These firms influence laws, policies, and governance structures, and therefore must be accountable not just for complying with existing norms, but for helping to construct and uphold fair systems of global governance. In a "post-national constellation," they are expected to take responsibility for social and political outcomes, including labour rights, environmental sustainability, and access to essential goods like healthcare, because they actively help shape these outcomes.

This growing recognition of firms as political agents has expanded expectations of corporate responsibility. No longer confined to voluntary CSR or compliance with existing laws, companies are increasingly judged by their willingness and ability to engage in governance processes and promote social justice, particularly in contexts where state regulation is weak or contested.

1.2 A Minimum Standard

While expectations of responsible corporate behaviour have expanded, firms continue to be involved in human rights violations and environmental harm. Early corporate scandals such as Nestlé’s infant formula marketing or business complicity with Apartheid in South Africa sparked international concern. More recent events, like the Brumadinho dam collapse in Brazil and the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh’ garment sector (see Annex 1 - Box 3), have reinforced the urgency of stronger standards.

The Business and Human Rights (BHR) framework emerged in response to these challenges. Rooted in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), developed under John Ruggie’s leadership, the framework establishes a clear and non-voluntary set of responsibilities. Companies are expected to prevent, mitigate, and remedy adverse human rights impacts across their operations and value chains, regardless of national laws or voluntary commitments. This means conducting human rights due diligence, ensuring accountability, and offering remedy to victims, often through non-judicial grievance mechanisms. Crucially, the BHR framework rejects cultural relativism and affirms the primacy of universal human rights.

In this view, a responsible business is one that:

- avoids harm by proactively identifying and mitigating human rights risks in its own activities and through its relationships;
- engages in continuous human rights due diligence to assess, act, and monitor its performance; and
- ensures access to remedy for those harmed, even in the absence of legal mandates.

This vision marks a departure from CSR as a philanthropic or reputational strategy. It implies that firms must act regardless of consumer pressure or government enforcement. They must internalise social justice goals and be prepared to operate in ways that prioritise people and the planet alongside profit.

As such, it can be concluded that a unifying insight across these perspectives is that firms must be accountable for the impacts they create. At a minimum, they should avoid causing harm, in line with universal principles such as human rights. But given their central role in today's political and economic systems—holding key resources, shaping markets, influencing policy, and driving technological and social change—companies also have the capacity and responsibility to contribute to wider social and ecological goals. In short, their power makes their responsibility unavoidable: firms are not only economic actors but political ones and should be held to standards that reflect the influence they exercise.

1.3 Drivers of Responsible Business Conduct

Across LMICs and beyond, studies highlight that RBC is influenced by a combination of market incentives, institutional frameworks, civil society mobilisation, cultural norms and internal capabilities, as well as by how these drivers interact.

Market incentives are often seen as the most direct "pull" toward RBC. Firms tend to align voluntarily with ethical and environmental standards when they believe these will strengthen consumer loyalty, improve their chances of inclusion in preferred value chains, or facilitate access to impact-oriented finance. Initiatives such as Fairtrade or the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) aim to reward responsible practices. Yet their effectiveness varies: in some contexts, voluntary standards improve working conditions and livelihoods, while in others they risk tokenism, serving mainly branding purposes without meaningfully transforming business operations (Bartley, 2007; Giuliani et al., 2017). In consumer-facing sectors, responsibility can become a brand asset (e.g. Patagonia), whereas in B2B industries such as mining, market incentives tend to be weaker, and investor pressure, rather than consumer demand, plays the more significant role (Goya & Marin, 2025).

Institutional and policy frameworks for RBC have historically been largely normative, setting expectations for responsible behaviour without creating strong legal obligations. Only parts of these frameworks are fully enshrined in law and enforceable; most remain voluntary. Nevertheless, even voluntary frameworks can exert significant top-down pressure through incentives, directives, regulations, treaties and sustainability-oriented procurement rules. Recent developments mark an important shift toward hard law. A key example is the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), adopted in 2024, which requires large EU companies, and large non-EU companies operating in the EU, to conduct human rights and environmental due diligence across their value chains. Despite ongoing uncertainty due to amendments proposed under the EU Omnibus Package, the adoption of the Directive signals a move toward binding obligations and greater legal enforceability in the governance of transnational supply chains.

Yet even where regulations exist, implementation gaps remain significant. As the uneven adoption and transposition of the CSDDD illustrates, enforcement challenges persist, particularly in LMICs where regulatory capacity, oversight mechanisms and institutional coordination are limited (Giuliani et al., 2023; Marin & Goya, 2021). Brazil's experience with tailings regulation after the Mariana and Brumadinho disasters shows how formal rules may be in place but lack adequate oversight and technical capacity. In India, similarly, ambitious environmental and labour standards in mining and textiles are often weakened by subcontracting structures and limited inspection capacity.

These gaps point to the importance of actors beyond the state, particularly civil society, in shaping corporate behaviour.

Civil society can be a powerful actor where markets and states fall short (Marin & Palazzo, 2025). Grassroots resistance, NGOs and activist campaigns hold companies accountable for labour abuses, environmental damage and human rights violations. Examples range from the mobilisation following the Brumadinho dam collapse in Brazil to transnational campaigns such as #WhoMadeMyClothes, which pressured firms to strengthen supply-chain transparency. As Marin and Palazzo (2024) show, resistance in the extractive sector frequently compels companies to revise or cancel projects in response to social contestation and reputational risk. Sectoral and country context matter greatly, as spaces for civil society in many LMICs are shrinking under increasing political repression.

Cultural and normative expectations also shape corporate responsibility. In countries with strong communal traditions—such as Japan or the Scandinavian nations, corporate engagement in social and environmental issues often reflects long-standing societal norms rather than legal requirements. In LMICs, diverse cultural histories, from Confucian legacies in China to Catholic-influenced ideas of cidadania in Brazil, inform how responsibility is understood and practised (Fiaschi, Giuliani & Nieri, 2015).

Internal drivers relate to the cognitive frames of business leaders and the organisational capabilities firms possess to respond to external pressures. Many executives remain anchored in a shareholder-value mindset, prioritising short-term profitability over long-term resilience. Shifting these mental models often requires leadership, training or exposure to alternative organisational visions. Yet mindset alone is not enough: even firms willing to act responsibly may lack the skills, systems or partnerships needed to do so effectively. Organisational capabilities therefore play a decisive role in enabling companies to embed responsible practices in their operations.

Framing Our Inquiry:

With the aim of contributing to a better understanding of the drivers of Responsible Business Conduct (RBC) in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), this systematic literature review addresses the following questions:

- Which specific drivers have been found to be effective in promoting the uptake and scaling of responsible business practices in LMICs?
- Which types of responsible business conduct have been found to result from these drivers?
- Are different drivers equally effective across different sectors?
- What are the policy implications of the existing evidence on drivers of RBC in LMICs?

These questions reflect what the existing research has investigated and what can be identified in the empirical evidence. Some important questions, for example, regarding unintended consequences of existing RBC drivers, or intervention or contextual features that act as barriers and facilitators to drivers, are not directly discussed, as these aspects have not been systematically explored in the available literature.

To reflect these limitations, the report highlights important gaps in the literature and areas where further research and policy attention are needed to support more context-specific and effective pathways toward responsible business practices.

2. Methodology

We conducted two complementary reviews: a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) to identify broad evidence on the drivers of Responsible Business Conduct (RBC), and a Focused Rapid Evidence Assessment (FREA) to analyse specific economic sectors in greater depth.

The REA followed established guidance from the Cochrane Rapid Review framework (Garritty et al., 2021) and the Natural Environment Research Council's REA Guide (Collins et al., 2015), incorporating PRISMA reporting principles adapted for rapid reviews. These frameworks ensured transparency, methodological rigour, and minimal bias.

Scope and Search Strategy:

The review focused on responsible business practices and their associated societal outcomes. Searches were conducted in Scopus using combinations of terms related to:

Responsible business practices: responsible business, responsible business conduct, responsible business practices, good business, positive impact, corporate social responsibility, CSR, ethical business, corporate responsibility, corporate change, multinational corporations, MNC.

Societal outcomes: human rights, labour rights, slavery, forced work, child labour, safe work, worker participation, sustainability, environment, climate change, biodiversity, degradation, deforestation, pollution, waste management, corruption, bribery, anti-corruption, fair business, fair competition, anti-competitive, price fixing, local innovation, local innovative capacity, rigged bids, tax compliance, tax evasion, transparency, accountability.

To ensure quality, we limited results to top-tier journals in economics, development, business ethics, and management. The search yielded 632 articles.

Screening and Selection:

The first screening, based on titles and abstracts, applied three inclusion criteria:

- Relevance for LMICs: All LMIC-focused studies were included; those on high-income countries were retained only if they analysed MNC operations relevant to LMICs.
- Focus on drivers of RBC: Only studies identifying mechanisms or determinants of responsible business conduct were selected.
- Date range: Publications from 2009 onward were included, with earlier studies retained only if highly relevant, to ensure contemporary coverage.

Each abstract was independently assessed by two of four coders to ensure consistency. This stage resulted in 338 papers.

Full-Text Review and Quality Assessment:

A second round of full-text review applied stricter criteria:

- Studies had to provide empirical evidence that a driver influenced business behaviour toward more responsible conduct (not merely symbolic or theoretical claims); and
- The study had to demonstrate high overall quality in design, argument, and theoretical grounding.

After this stage, 126 articles remained for detailed coding and analysis.

Coding and Synthesis:

Using our conceptual framework of RBC drivers (market-based, institutional, civil-society, and cultural), we coded all selected studies, adding categories inductively when new types of drivers emerged. Each study was further coded by sector, geographical focus, and type of RBC outcome (e.g., environmental sustainability, human rights).

The coded data were used to construct an evidence map summarising which types of drivers were supported across contexts. A thematic analysis then synthesised the findings into broader conceptual themes aligned with the framework.

Sectoral Focus Review (FREA):

To understand sectoral dynamics, we used the same coding template to identify studies focused on key LMIC sectors: mining, oil and gas; food and agriculture; textiles and garments; finance; and ICT. Of the 126 papers, 28 had clear sectoral focus (15 mining/oil/gas, 5 food/agriculture, 6 textiles/garments, 1 finance, 1 ICT). The remaining 85 were cross-sectoral and excluded from the sectoral synthesis. This revealed significant evidence gaps for sector-specific drivers of RBC.

Supplementary Sector Evidence:

To fill these gaps, four sector experts conducted targeted searches using a snowballing approach, combining database searches with expert knowledge of relevant literature. This process identified an additional 161 sources across the five sectors. While these sources were not systematically coded, each was assessed for its relevance to the RBC driver framework and rated low, medium, or high in relevance for LMICs. These materials were integrated into the sectoral analysis to provide a more complete understanding of how RBC drivers operate in specific industries.

3. Results

3.1 Results from systematic literature review[1]

We explored and analysed the literature on these two key questions:

- Which specific mechanisms within each broad category of drivers have shown to effectively promote RBC in specific contexts?[2]
- Which types of responsible business conduct have been found to result from these drivers?

3.1.1 Effective Drivers of Responsible Business Conduct

An important finding from the review is the identification of specific forces within each broad category of drivers that effectively promote RBC in particular contexts. For each type of driver, we examine how frequently empirical studies have found evidence of their effectiveness and the approach used (i.e., econometric, case study, systematic review, mixed methods, etc). Table 1 summarises the results.

Each article reviewed provided evidence on the effectiveness of one or more drivers under specific circumstances. The frequency reported simply indicates how often a study in the sample identified positive effects for a given driver. Studies varied in methodological approach, with most employing econometric designs and fewer relying solely on case-study evidence. Table 1 illustrates which drivers have worked in different contexts, but the evidence remains highly contextual. This review does not allow us to assess the relative importance of each driver; lower frequency may reflect weaker effects, more limited applicability, or simply a lack of research. This is an important limitation of the study.

[1] In the Annex 3 we show the countries and sectors of the studies from which we draw the evidence used in this section.

[2] Our broad categories of drivers are market-based, institutional-based, civil society-based, culture-based, and knowledge and innovation-based.

Within **market-based drivers**, existing research identifies seven specific mechanisms that have been effective in particular contexts in encouraging firms to adopt RBC. Studies point to firms' pursuit of improved performance and profitability, efforts to bolster reputation and legitimacy, and value-chain pressures from buyers or lead firms. Research also highlights the influence of consumer behaviour in visibility-sensitive sectors, the role of international standards in shaping expectations, investor-led pressures related to risk and disclosure, and the effects of competition, which can incentivise firms to differentiate through responsible practices.

Market-based drivers were identified in 78 cases to promote changes in RBC[3]. Within these, firms' pursuit of improved performance and profitability is the most extensively studied mechanism and is consistently associated with a range of responsible practices (see next section). Studies report positive links between RBC and operational or financial gains (Panda & Ray, 2023; Adams et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2022). For example, pro-disability policies helped ICT firms in India retain skilled workers (Kaul et al., 2022), while ISO 14001 adoption increased the market value of multinational firms (Margaret et al., 2023). Firms also engaged in community initiatives to build stakeholder relationships and enhance legitimacy (Beddewela & Fairbrass, 2015). Additional evidence shows that value-chain and consumer pressures can drive environmental practices (El Baz et al., 2016; Sa de Abreu, 2009), and that internationalisation, investor demands, and competition influence ESG outcomes (Park, 2018; Duran & Bajo, 2012; Shubham et al., 2018; Moskovics et al., 2023; Kamarudin et al., 2021).

[3] Our unit of analysis are drivers, not journal articles here. Thus it might be that the same study identified that more than one driver worked in practice.

Table 1. Subcategories, frequency of drivers, and type of study

Sub-category	Drivers							
Market-based	Performance & profitability (19)	Reputation & legitimacy (13)	Value chain pressures (11)	Consumer behaviour (10)	International standards (8)	Investor-led pressures (6)	Competition in markets (7)	*Total observations (78)*
Type of studies	Econometric (18), case study (1)	Econometric (12), case study (1)	Econometric (9), case study (2)	Econometric (8), case study (1), systematic review (1)	Econometric (7), case study (1)	Econometric (4), case study (2)	Econometric (6), case study (1)	
Institutional-based	Regulations[2] (12)	Institutional strength (12)	Political[4] (6)	Government support (3)	Government pressure[3] (2)	Institutional innovations (1)		*Total observations (36)*
Type of studies	Econometric (6), case study (4), mixed (1), systematic review (1)	Econometric (9), case study (3)	Econometric (4), literature review (1), case study (1)	Econometric (3)	Case study (2)	Econometric (1)		
Civil society-based	General public pressure (10)	Civil society mobilisations (7)						*Total observations (17)*
Type of studies	Case study (10)	Econometric (3), case study (4)						
Cultural-based	Social structure (3)	Religion (2)	Social trust (1)	Respect for authority (1)				*Total observations (7)*

Type of studies	Econometric (2), mixed (1)	Econometri (1), mixed (1)	Econometric (1)	Econometric (1)	
Knowledge and innovation-based	Technology acquisition (3)	Technology development (1)			*Total observations (4)*
Type of studies	Econometric (3)	Econometric (1)			

Authors' own: All studies listed showed a positive correlation between driver and RBC. Parenthesis ( ) show frequency.

[1]Subsidies, tax breaks, R&D, and other incentives, [2]Legal requirements, [3]Informal pressures i.e., with no legal requirement, [4]Ties, networks and connections; other political processes such as elections.

Institutional drivers identified in the literature include formalised mechanisms such as regulatory frameworks and government support or pressure schemes, as well as less formalised but context-shaping factors, including institutional strength, political dynamics, and emerging institutional innovations.

36 empirical cases identified by our review highlighted their role. Regulatory measures, such as Tanzania's Local Content Policies in the natural gas sector, have directed CSR efforts towards community needs and employment (Mwanyoka & Mdemu, 2024), while broader regulatory reforms in China, Russia, and India improved misconduct detection and influenced firm behaviour (Zhao et al., 2014). Political ties have shown mixed effects, sometimes reducing misconduct (Deng et al., 2020), but also enabling strategic CSR for political gain (Zhao, 2012). Government support, such as subsidies, has improved firm-level carbon performance (Meng et al., 2023), though not all incentives, like Tunisia's CSR-related tax breaks, have been effective (Kacem and Omri, 2022). Informal pressures, as seen in Libya's NOC-led transparency guidelines (Alshbili & Elamer, 2020), can also promote RBC. Additionally, institutional innovations like China's carbon trading scheme have driven green investments in polluting sectors (Chen et al., 2023).

Civil society shapes corporate behaviour through two channels. General public pressure emerges when individual citizens generate media attention and raise awareness, influencing stakeholder expectations. Civil society mobilisations involve organised actions by NGOs and social movements that challenge companies' social licence to operate and bring harmful practices to public attention.

Empirical studies report 10 cases where civil society pressures led to improved corporate practices. For instance, in China's paper industry, public reporting and media exposure of corporate pollution prompted firms to adopt energy-saving and emission-reduction measures (He et al., 2018). In Latin America, organised resistance by local communities against mining operations in Argentina, Chile, and Peru pressured firms to implement RBC initiatives such as recycled water use, social infrastructure, and financial contributions to communities (Saenz, 2021; Haslam & Godfrid, 2023; Marin 2025). Similarly, in Brazil, community and NGO opposition to environmental damage by mining companies drove improvements in pollution control and water management (Sa de Abreu, 2009).

The literature also identifies several **cultural-based drivers**: social structures that shape expectations of fairness and responsibility, religious norms that reinforce ethical conduct, social trust that facilitates cooperation, and respect for authority that supports compliance with responsible practices.

Seven studies identified cultural-based drivers as influencing RBC. For example, Luo et al. (2018) show in a cross-national analysis that features of a country's social structure matter: where power is more dispersed, firms disclose more and act more transparently. In Ethiopia, Bekele et al. (2024) find that religious values shape managerial decisions on community development initiatives. Ang et al. (2014), analysing US-listed Chinese firms during a period of widespread fraud allegations, show that firms located in provinces with low social trust and weak respect for authority were significantly more likely to engage in misconduct.

Knowledge and innovation, although not part of the initial driver typology, emerged in several studies as an important factor shaping RBC. These drivers relate mainly to firms' acquisition of new technologies that enable improved environmental or social performance, as well as to the development of technologies or processes that strengthen responsible practices. Across the reviewed studies, we identified four cases of RBC improvements were linked to technology acquisition and direct investment in R&D. Three studies showed that technological acquisition, often through collaborations with innovative suppliers, led to better environmental practices (Wu & Li, 2019; Yu et al., 2022; Blum-Kusterer & Hussain, 2001).

One study highlighted the role of internal technological development, where R&D investment generated innovations that reduced pollution (Xu et al., 2024). Beyond LMICs, existing research also emphasises the relevance of digital technologies—including blockchain, AI and advanced monitoring systems—for improving transparency in human rights practices and strengthening oversight of workers' health and safety (McGrath et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2024; Parteka et al., 2024). While evidence remains limited, these studies suggest that innovation can offer important pathways for advancing RBC, particularly in sustainability-related domains.

3.1.2 What Types of Responsible Business Conduct Do These Drivers Encourage?

For this review, we group the eight OECD (2023) RBC areas into four broader categories, adding charity and animal welfare, which appeared in the studies reviewed.

- **No-harm conduct** refers to compliance with national and international norms, including labour rights, fiscal responsibility, anti-corruption, and transparency. Several studies show firms going beyond domestic requirements to implement procedures aligned with international agreements (e.g. Jamali et al., 2015; Kaul et al., 2022; Mwanyoka & Mdemu, 2024).
- **Positive behaviour toward market actors** includes firms' responses to consumer demands and value-chain expectations, and actions to uphold fair competition. Examples include firms proactively adjusting products and processes to meet consumer concerns (Jabeen et al., 2023) or collaborating with industry peers to develop shared standards (El Baz et al., 2014), though some initiatives have been criticised as pre-empting regulation (Bartley, 2018).
- **Positive environmental behaviour** captures measures to reduce emissions, improve resource use, or minimise ecological harm; studies document investments in pollution control, cleaner processes, and biodiversity-related practices (e.g. Subham et al., 2018; Borah et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2024; Haslam & Godfrid, 2023).
- **Positive behaviour toward society** includes firms' efforts to support local needs or address social challenges—for example, R&D or technology acquisition that generates wider societal spillovers, or goodwill activities such as charitable initiatives.

Across the studies, many drivers were associated with more than one type of RBC, and a substantial share of articles relied on composite indicators (e.g. ESG scores), which capture several dimensions simultaneously. Such studies are quantitative in nature and aim to identify general relationships between drivers and RBC (see Zhou et al., 2022; Amran et al., 2013; or Li and Cuervo-Cazurra, 2023). In these cases, we classify outcomes under "multiple" RBCs. Table 2 summarises the RBC types linked to each driver category.

Table 2. RBCs associated with main driver categories

Market-based		Institutional based		Civil Society-based		Culture-based		Knowledge -based	
Type of RBC	**Freq**	**Type of RBC**	**Freq**	**Type of RBC**	**Freq**	**Type of RBC**	**Freq**	**Type of RBC**	**Freq**
Environment	32	No Harm	12	Environment	8	No harm	5	Environment and society	4
Multiple	20	Environment	11	No harm	2	Society	2		
No Harm	14	Multiple	9	Society	2	Multiple	1		
Society	4	Environment and society	2	Multiple	2				
Environment and society	2	Environment and no harm	2	Environment, society, and market	2				
Environment, society, and market	2	Environment, society, and market	1	Environment and society	1				

Environment and no harm	2				
Market actors and no harm	1				
Environment and market	1				
Total	78	37	17	8	4

Source: Authors' own.

RBCs associated with market drivers:

The review identifies environmental responsibility as the most common area of RBC influenced by market drivers. This reflects both the urgency of environmental issues and the relative ease with which companies can demonstrate environmental improvements. Firms frequently respond to market incentives by investing in clean energy (Dinçer et al., 2023), adopting green production and procurement practices (Subham et al., 2018; Borah et al., 2024), and reducing pollution, waste, and resource use (Sa de Abreu, 2008; Ma et al., 2022). Some studies highlight intersections between environmental goals and broader societal benefits. For example, Ma et al. (2023) show that access to green finance led to increased green patents in China's high-carbon industries.

Other cases show how market drivers interact with regulatory compliance or supply chain expectations to encourage multi-dimensional responsible behaviour. Kader et al. (2021) found that government support and buyer pressures led Malaysian food SMEs to adopt recycling practices, improve labour conditions, avoid harmful additives, and contribute to community initiatives. Some firms also use philanthropy to enhance legitimacy (Zhang et al., 2013; Beddewela & Fairbrass, 2015). Finally, market forces have discouraged harmful practices—like child labour (Jamali et al., 2015) and fraud (Chen et al., 2014)—or promoted inclusion, such as disability-friendly policies in India (Choudhury Kaul et al., 2022).

RBCs associated with institutional drivers:

Institutional forces most commonly encourage firms to comply with national and international norms. These RBCs typically relate to adherence to standards on human rights, labour conditions, fiscal responsibility, and environmental protection. For example, political ties in China were found to reduce tax evasion (Deng et al., 2020); local content policies in Tanzania improved employment access and labour standards in the gas sector (Mwanyoka & Mdemu, 2024); and in India, mandatory CSR rules led mining companies to invest in community development (Kumar et al., 2020). Environmental RBCs are also frequently associated with institutional drivers. In Malaysia, Brazil, and Tunisia, regulations prompted firms to adopt practices such as carbon reduction and improved waste management (Abdullah & Yaakub, 2014; Sa de Abreu, 2008; Achabou et al., 2017). In some cases, environmental efforts intersected with broader RBCs addressing harm prevention and improved treatment of workers and consumers. In China, India, and Russia, the strengthening of regulatory institutions improved governments' ability to detect misconduct, leading to changes in corporate behaviour across multiple dimensions of RBC (Zhao et al., 2014). Notably, no studies identified institutional drivers as promoting positive social or market behaviour independently of compliance.

RBC Associated with Civil Society Drivers:

Research shows that civil society pressure most commonly drives improvements in firms' environmental practices (Haslam & Godfrid, 2023; He et al., 2019; Sa de Abreu, 2008). This reflects growing concern over corporate contributions to environmental degradation. Mobilisations, public campaigns, and social conflicts have led to changes in pollution control, emissions reduction, and clean-up measures (Sa de Abreu, 2008; He et al., 2019; Pierk and Tsiachniouk, 2016). Fewer studies show civil society actors promoting compliance with norms or broader societal responsibilities. However, in some cases, environmental improvements intersect with other positive behaviours. For example, mining companies seeking social licence to operate from affected communities have provided direct financial benefits, invested in social infrastructure, improved access to employment, and implemented water recycling (Haslam and Godfrid, 2023; Saenz, 2021). These examples suggest that civil society mobilisation can be an effective driver of RBC, especially when linked to environmental and community-based concerns.

RBC Associated with Cultural Drivers:

A small number of studies show that cultural factors can promote RBC, particularly in relation to compliance with norms, laws, and regulations. In five cases, cultural drivers were linked to reduced financial fraud and greater transparency. For example, Luo et al. (2018) found that more dispersed power structures were associated with increased transparency in firms' carbon reporting. Ang et al. (2014) showed that low social trust and weak respect for authority were linked to higher fraud among Chinese MNCs. Religious values and collectivist norms were also found to influence managerial decisions in favour of community development in Ethiopia (Bekele et al., 2024). Finally, Liu et al. (2020) found that the higher social status of entrepreneurs in China correlated with improved overall RBC performance.

RBC Associated with Knowledge and Innovation:

A few studies identified knowledge and innovation as drivers of RBC, all linked to environmental improvements. In these cases, innovation acted both as a driver and a form of responsible conduct. For example, Xu et al. (2024) found that increased R&D investment in China's oil and gas sector generated new knowledge, leading to pollution-reducing technologies. These innovations not only improved firms' environmental performance but also had broader societal benefits by making cleaner technologies available. Notably, we did not find evidence that new knowledge or innovation prompted improvements in other areas of business conduct, such as human or labour rights, anti-corruption, fiscal responsibility, or product quality.

3.2 Results from the sector specific analysis

In this section, we present the findings from the sector analysis. Table 3 summarises the main insights, showing significant sectoral differences in the relevance of different RBC drivers. The classifications of high, medium and low reflect the strength of the available evidence on how strongly a given driver contributes to RBC in LMICs. "High" indicates consistent evidence that a driver plays an important role in a sector; "low" indicates evidence suggesting a limited contribution; and "N/A" means that the evidence is insufficient to draw conclusions. A "low" rating does not imply future irrelevance, but rather limited empirical support in existing studies. Overall, thus, Table 3 reveals substantial variation in the contribution of specific drivers across sectors, as well as notable evidence gaps.

Table 3. Main findings on the contribution of specific drivers to RBC in LMICs with examples for sources

External Drivers	Extractives	Food and agriculture	Textiles and garments	Finance	ICT
Market Drivers					
Consumer behavior	Low *(Marin et al, 2025; Shaobo and Shibin, 2023; Calzada Olvera, 2022)*	High *(George, 2021; Girón et al, 2020; Chkanikova and Mont, 2015)*	Medium *(Chekima et al., 2016; Monyaki & Cilliers, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2022)*	Medium *(Wörsdörfer, 2015; Wright, 2012)*	Low *(Ozalop et al., 2022; Adelola et al., 2014)*
Industry standards and value chain pressure	Medium *(Goya and Marin, 2025; Saner, 2022; Dashwood, 2013; Deberdt and Billon, 2021)*	High *(Chelang'a et al., 2023; Laosutsan, et al., 2019; Brinks et al., 2021)*	High *(Bartely and Egels-Zandén, 2016; Schrage and Gilbert, 2021; Mulubiran and Karlsen, 2021)*	Medium *(Weber et al, 2014; Wörsdörfer, 2015)*	Low *(Thomason, 2021; Varoufakis, 2023; OECD, 2020)*
Investor-led	Medium *(Saner, 2022; Smith and Wentworth, 2022;*	Medium	N/A	N/A	Low

	Deberdt and le Billon, 2021)	(Majoch et al., 2017; Chkanikova and Mont, 2015)			(*Bloom et al., 2023; Chatfield et al., 2017; Labrique et al., 2018)*
Others (reputation and competition)	Medium *(Sánchez and Hartlieb, 2020)*	High *(Alizadeh, 2022; Chkanikova and Mont, 2015)*	High *(Kabeer et al., 2020; Thorisdottir and Johannsdottir, 2020; Mulubiran and Karlsen, 2021)*	Medium *(Gocher et al., 2024; Adams et al., 2022)*	Low *(Bloom et al., 2023; Thomason, 2021)*
Institutional Drivers					
International institutional pressure	Medium *(Mendonca Severiano et al., 2024; Viveros, 2017; Muruviwa et al., 2014)*	High *(Brinks et al., 2021; Chelang'a et al., 2023; Laosutsan et al., 2019)*	High *(Rossi, 2019; Hossain, 2019; Schrage and Gilbert, 2021)*	High *(UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights, 2021; Arun et al., 2021; Contreras et al., 2019)*	Medium *(Schembera and Hengevoss 2019; Bentotahewa et al., 2022; Curtiss, 2016)*

Government support and regulations	Medium-low *(Bravo-Ortega and Muñoz, 2021; Claussen et al., 2022; Marin and Goya, 2021)*	Medium-High *(Brinks et al. 2021; Chkanikova and Mont 2015; Mphaga et al., 2024)*	Medium *(Nikam, 2023; Mulubiran and Karlsen, 2021; Schrage and Gilbert, 2021)*	Medium-High *(Arun et al., 2022; Pasiouras, 2016; Andic et al., 2011)*	Medium-Low *(Adelola et al., 2014; Mukuki and Assenga, 2024; OECD, 2022)*
Institutional strength	*Medium-Low* *(Lauwo et al., 2016; Marín et al., 2021.)*	Medium-High *(Cooke et al., 2021; Tallontire, et al., 2014)*	Medium-Low *(Mulubiran and Karlsen, 2021; Amengual and Chirot, 2016; Schrage and Gilbert, 2021)*	Medium-Low *(Belasri et al., 2020; Etter-Phoya et al., 2022)*	Medium-Low *(Bloom et al., 2023; Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, 2017; OECD, 2022)*
Civil society Drivers					
Civil society organisations	Medium-High *(Marin and Palazzo, 2025; Banerjee et al, 2021; Walter & Wagner, 2021)*	Medium *(Louw, 2022; While, 2024; Wenting et al., 2022)*	Medium *(Schrage and Gilbert, 2021; Mulubiran and Karlsen, 2021)*	Low *(Mader et al., 2021; Dhlamini and Giamporcaro, 2023)*	Low *(Hoven et al., 2012; Frost et al., 2018; Mann, 2018)*

Media exposure	Medium *(Marin and Palazzo, 2025)*	Medium *(ILO, 2023; WRD 2020; Alizadeh, 2022)*	Medium *(Borah et al., 2024; Rahsilaputeri et al., 2022; Adamkiewicz et al., 2022)*	Low *(Watts, 2024; Kim and Yoon, 2022)*	Low *(Bloom et al., 2023;)*
Social license to operate	High *(Saenz, 2021; Mwanyoka and Mdemu, 2024; Ho et al., 2022)*	Low *(Vanclay and Hanna, 2019; Alizadeh, 2022; Ayele et al., 2020)*	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: Authors' own. Max 3 sources per driver, see Annex 4 for full referencing.

3.2.1 Market forces

The analysis of various cases shows that market forces are more effective in promoting RBC in sectors where competition is based on quality rather than price. In industries where firms rely on brand reputation, especially those visible to end consumers, they are more likely to prioritise RBC to protect their public image. By contrast, in sectors where competition is primarily price-driven, market incentives are weaker, as firms tend to prioritise cost-cutting over responsible practices.

For instance, in the textile and garment sector, reputation-dependent fashion brands are more inclined to adopt socially and environmentally responsible production standards. However, in price-sensitive segments of the same industry, such as basic garments, market drivers are far less effective in fostering meaningful RBC (Bartley & Egels-Zandén, 2014; Reinecke & Donaghin, 2020; Mulubiran & Karlsen, 2021; Schrage & Gilbert, 2021).

Market pressure is also stronger when consumers can understand or relate to the production process. In emerging sectors such as IT, where sustainability issues are less tangible or harder to grasp, client-driven pressure tends to be weaker (Chatfield et al., 2017; Frost et al., 2018; Bloom et al., 2023). A similar pattern is observed in the financial sector, where product complexity limits public understanding and, consequently, reduces societal engagement (Belasri et al., 2020; BankTrack, 2020a, b).

Market drivers are also more effective when consumers can clearly feel/understand the consequences of corporate misconduct. In the food sector, irresponsible practices can directly endanger consumer health, making responsible behaviour both visible and urgent (Gosselt et al., 2019; Girón et al., 2020; George, 2021). Food-safety crises such as the BSE (“mad cow disease”) outbreak in Europe or the melamine contamination in China’s dairy industry show how quickly consumer demand can collapse when health risks become evident, prompting rapid corporate and regulatory responses. At a more routine level, food companies, such as Morocco’s food-processing SMEs—have thus been compelled to upgrade quality and safety standards after consumer complaints signalled dissatisfaction and loss of trust (El Baz et al., 2014). By contrast, in IT or finance, misconduct such as data misuse or tax avoidance does not directly affect product performance, and may even improve efficiency or profitability—weakening consumer-driven pressure (Carter, 2017; Thomason, 2021; Ozalop et al., 2022; Bloom et al., 2023).

Market forces are also weaker in highly concentrated sectors with strong entry barriers. In monopolistic or oligopolistic markets, a small number of dominant firms face little competitive pressure to improve their conduct, and responsible practices do not offer meaningful opportunities for differentiation (Klitkou et al., 2015; Marin et al., 2021; Saner, 2022). When buyers have limited alternatives, or when lead firms govern value chains tightly, suppliers have few incentives to invest in responsible behaviour beyond minimum compliance.

Attempts to strengthen market forces through transparency initiatives and voluntary standards, especially in sectors with high information asymmetries such as mining, have achieved only limited traction (Hossain, 2019; Bair et al., 2020; Schrage & Gilbert, 2021; Saner, 2022). Evidence suggests that voluntary schemes often lack enforceability and fail to shift behaviour where power is concentrated. To improve effectiveness, some scholars advocate for mandatory disclosure and due-diligence requirements, while others call for harmonised standards that remain sensitive to local contexts and institutional diversity.

Table 4. Contribution of market drivers to RBC in LMICs per sector

	Consumer pressure	**Industry standards and value chain pressure**	**Investor led**	**Others (reputation and competition)**
Extractives	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium
Food and agriculture	High	High	Medium	High
Textiles and garments	Medium	High	N/A	High
Finance	Medium	Medium	N/A	Medium
ICT	Low	Low	Low	Low

Source: Authors' own.

3.2.2 Institutional pressures

We categorise institutional drivers into two types: international and national.

International Drivers:

International frameworks tend to be more effective in traditional sectors with well-known risks, such as food, textiles and finance, where public concern is high and regulatory architectures are already established. For example, the FAO's Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) and the ILO's labour standards have long shaped national policy and corporate behaviour in the agricultural and textile sectors. In the financial sector, firms aligned with UN initiatives such as the Principles for Responsible Investment (UNPRI) often demonstrate stronger RBC performance (Bauckloh et al., 2023). Yet effectiveness varies. A 2020 study cited by the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights found that only 9% of large asset managers could identify negative human-rights impacts linked to their investments, pointing to persistent due-diligence gaps.

International institutions exert far less influence in newer sectors, especially digital technologies, where global frameworks remain underdeveloped. Critical risks are poorly understood, definitions are contested, and public awareness is limited. Issues such as data privacy, algorithmic bias or manipulative design are only partially reflected in international guidelines (OECD, 2020; Schembera & Hengevoss, 2019; Bloom et al., 2023). Unlike long-established concerns such as child labour or pesticide use, digital-sector harms are largely invisible to users and policymakers, reducing the traction of international norms.

Sectors like mining present a different but related challenge. Because environmental and social harms occur far from consumers in high-income countries—and therefore outside the scope of institutions most responsive to citizen pressure—international scrutiny has historically been weaker (Lèbre et al., 2020; Clausen et al., 2022). However, this is beginning to shift. As minerals become central to the energy transition and other global agendas, institutions such as the UN, the OECD and development banks are placing greater emphasis on sustainability, participation and justice in the mineral sector (Franken & Schütte, 2022).

Across both opaque sectors (such as digital technologies) and geographically distant ones (such as mining), raising awareness and understanding of impacts and risks among consumers, policymakers and investors is a critical first step toward strengthening the influence of international institutional frameworks.

National Drivers:

National policies and institutions could, in principle, play a crucial role in fostering RBC, but their effectiveness varies considerably.

In globally concentrated sectors such as mining and digital platforms, where large multinationals dominate, LMICs face significant obstacles in influencing firm behaviour through regulation. Firms in these sectors often wield substantial economic leverage, especially in countries highly dependent on their investments (e.g. minerals account for 30–50% of exports in at least 40 LMICs, UNCTAD 2021). As a result, governments may hesitate to enforce strict standards for fear of deterring investment. In the IT sector, this imbalance is compounded by major knowledge asymmetries. The complexity of digital technologies makes it difficult for policymakers to regulate issues such as algorithmic bias, monopolistic behaviour and data privacy (Bloom et al., 2023; Varoufakis, 2023). Regulatory capacity and technical expertise are often limited. Nonetheless, there are exceptions: for example, Kenya's Business Law (Amendment) Bill (2024) targets the BPO and IT-enabled services sector, making outsourcing firms legally responsible for claims raised by data workers, an important step toward protecting digital labour.

Traditional sectors such as food and textiles benefit from clearer norms. Labour standards, environmental impacts and product safety are better understood, enabling international and domestic institutions to work more synergistically. For example, the Basel Accords guide financial regulation, and the Codex Alimentarius provides benchmarks for food safety. These frameworks can be adapted to national contexts, allowing global standards to align with local implementation.

However, these same sectors face a different set of institutional barriers. Although power asymmetries are less pronounced because of the strong presence of SMEs, enforcement is weakened by the large number of actors, informality and limited monitoring systems (Tallontire et al., 2014; Mulubiran & Karlsen, 2021). In textiles, for instance, detecting child labour or unsafe working conditions is difficult due to subcontracting and informal arrangements (Schrage & Gilbert, 2021). Research by Murcia et al. (2020) shows that companies with stronger RBC performance tend to outsource less and maintain tighter control over their supply chains, reducing these enforcement challenges.

This evidence suggests that while broad recommendations such as strengthening regulatory and enforcement capacity remain essential, they are not sufficient. In concentrated sectors, such as mining and digital platforms, addressing power asymmetries and preventing regulatory capture are central, and this might require stronger accountability mechanisms, including the meaningful participation of civil society. By contrast, in more fragmented sectors like food and textiles, the main challenges stem from informality, dispersed supply chains and weak inspection systems; here, improving monitoring, supporting SMEs and formalising relationships.

Table 5. Contribution of institutional drivers to RBC in LMICs per sector

	International institutional pressure	Government support and regulations	Institutional strength
Extractives	Medium	Medium-Low	Medium-Low
Food and agriculture	High	Medium-High	Medium-High
Textiles and garments	High	Medium	Medium-Low
Finance	High	Medium-High	Medium-Low
ICT	Medium	Medium-Low	Medium-Low

3.2.3 Civil society pressures

Given the limitations of market and institutional drivers, particularly in globally concentrated sectors marked by power and knowledge asymmetries—civil society could and have played a crucial role in promoting (RBC). However, its influence varies sharply across sectors and regions, depending on the ability of civil society actors to shape company practices, profits and timelines.

In the mineral sector, where most output is exported and local consumers have little leverage, civil society and affected communities often exert influence through their ability to disrupt operations. Here, the “social licence to operate” becomes central. Resistance to mining—motivated by concerns over environmental degradation, displacement and social injustice—has repeatedly forced companies to delay, redesign or cancel projects. Evidence from Chile, Peru and Argentina shows that strong local opposition has pushed firms toward more responsible engagement with communities (Taylor & Bonner, 2017; Fraser, 2021; Walter & Wagner, 2021). Social mobilisation also carries significant economic consequences. Franks et al. (2014) document the high cost of conflict for firms, and in Chile alone mining disputes have delayed or suspended investments worth an estimated US$25 billion (Observatorio de la Productividad, 2020).

In more traditional sectors such as food and textiles, civil society tends to influence RBC through public scrutiny and consumer mobilisation. Issues like child labour, poor working conditions and pesticide misuse are widely recognised, enabling advocacy, boycotts and reputational pressure. Movements such as Fair Trade and Fashion Revolution have pushed firms to improve transparency and labour standards. Local NGOs also play a critical role by documenting abuses in production clusters and supporting campaigns. However, in some garment-exporting LMICs—including Bangladesh—NGOs face legal, financial or administrative restrictions that limit their capacity to monitor conditions or influence national debate (Schrage & Gilbert, 2021).

In sectors characterised by high information and knowledge asymmetries, such as finance, civil society faces far greater obstacles. Financial misconduct—tax evasion, opaque investments or predatory lending—often requires technical expertise and access to data that grassroots organisations lack, making mobilisation more difficult. Similarly, in the IT sector, civil society is still building its capacity to address digital harms. As issues such as data privacy breaches, algorithmic bias and unethical uses of artificial intelligence become more visible, civil society action has focused on raising awareness, demanding accountability and pushing for stronger regulation (Bloom et al., 2023). High-profile campaigns targeting companies such as Meta and Google have sparked public debate on misinformation, surveillance and rights abuses along AI supply chains.[4]

Overall, civil society plays a pivotal—though uneven—role in advancing RBC. Its influence is strongest where harms are visible and communities or

[4] See for example two articles from Mohammad Amir Anwar in The Conversation: "**Africa's data workers are being exploited by foreign tech firms**" (March 2025) and "**For workers in Africa, the digital economy isn't all it's made out to be**" (February 2022).

consumers can exert pressure, and weakest where complexity, opacity or repression limit the capacity for mobilisation.

An important challenge however is that civil society's capacity to influence corporate behaviour is not evenly distributed across political contexts. In more authoritarian or politically constrained environments, mobilisation around labour rights, environmental harms or community impacts carries significant personal and organisational risk. Reports by Global Witness (2023) and Front-Line Defenders (2024) document consistently high levels of violence, intimidation and criminalisation against environmental and human-rights defenders, particularly in resource-dependent regions. In such contexts, civil society oversight is weakened precisely where it is most needed, limiting the potential of social mobilisation to act as an effective driver of RBC. Strengthening protections for civic space—in law, in practice and through international partnerships—is therefore essential if civil society is to fulfil its role in promoting responsible business conduct.

Table 6. Contribution of civil society drivers for RBC in LMICs per sector

	Civil Society Organisations	**Media Exposure**	**Social License to Operate**
Extractives	Medium-High	Medium	High
Food and agriculture	Medium	Medium	Low
Textiles and garments	Medium	Medium	N/A
Finance	Low	Low	N/A
ICT	Low	Low	N/A

Source: Authors' own.

3.2.4 Summing up the sectoral findings

Table 7 distinguishes sectors into four broad types that help explain why RBC drivers vary in effectiveness. The first type includes competitive, consumer-facing, traditionally regulated sectors (such as food and textiles), where products are familiar, risks are visible, and consumers can reward or penalise firms. The second type comprises competitive but complex sectors (such as

ICT), where high information asymmetries make harms less perceptible, limiting market and civil society influence despite competition. The third type refers to concentrated, low-visibility traditional sectors (such as mining and oil and gas), where production occurs far from consumers and market competition is limited, leaving civil-society mobilisation as the most influential driver. Finally, the fourth type covers concentrated, complex sectors (such as finance and digital platforms), where opacity and technical complexity weaken all external drivers, market, institutional, and civil society, making responsible conduct significantly harder to enforce. Table 6 summarises the effectiveness of key drivers across these four types of sectors.

Table 7: Sector characteristics and sources of RBC

Sector Characteristics	Example Sectors	Market Forces	Institutional Pressures	Civil Society	Knowledge & Innovation
High competition, consumer-facing, traditional	Food & Textiles	High	Medium	Medium to High	Low to Medium
		Consumers reward ethical practices, certifications matter, branding sensitive	Monitoring SMEs is hard, but international and national standards exist	Civil society can mobilise consumer pressure (e.g. Fair Trade, Fashion Revolution)	Less R&D-intensive; some innovations in sustainability exist but less central
High concentration, less consumer visibility, traditional	Mining, Oil & Gas	Low	Medium	High	Low
		Reputation less tied to consumer demand, more B2B	Harder to enforce regulations due to government dependence and corporate power	Local resistance and mobilisation (e.g. social licence to operate) often effective	Innovation exists but is not systematically linked to RBC practices
High competition,	ICT (Digital	Low to Medium	Low	Low to Emerging	Medium to High

consumer-facing, newer	platforms, Tech)	Consumers lack information, some emerging demand for privacy/responsibility	Institutional capacity gaps and technical asymmetries hinder enforcement	Still organising around key issues like data misuse, AI ethics	Innovation central, but often not directed towards RBC; potential under right incentives
High concentration, less consumer visibility, newer	Finance, Big Tech	Low	Low to Medium	Low	Medium
		Complex products reduce consumer influence	Global frameworks exist but enforcement weak; domestic capacity gaps	Civil society needs expertise, often limited influence	Innovation exists (e.g. fintech, ESG scoring), but not always linked to RBC

Source: Authors' own.

Our sectoral analysis reveals clear patterns that help explain why the effectiveness of RBC drivers varies across sectors. These patterns extend beyond the specific cases reviewed.

First, sectors that are competitive, consumer-facing, and relatively easy to understand show the strongest influence of all drivers.
Where consumers can see and evaluate the impacts of production, such as agrifood or textiles, market and civil-society pressures are effective, and institutional frameworks reinforce these effects. Firms compete on quality and reputation, and international standards are well established, allowing external drivers to work in combination.

Second, distance from consumers and market concentration weaken both market and institutional pressures.

In sectors such as mining, where production is geographically distant from end-users and value chains are highly concentrated, consumers cannot penalise firms, and competitive pressures are minimal. Institutional influence is also uneven, particularly in countries where mining generates significant fiscal revenues, employment, and foreign currency, limiting governments' willingness or ability to enforce stringent standards. In this context, civil-society mobilisation becomes the primary external force shaping corporate behaviour. However, it often does so at considerable social cost, as communities must bear the burden of sustained resistance to make their concerns visible.

Third, complexity and information asymmetries create a different set of challenges, affecting driver effectiveness across all types of sectors. When risks are difficult to see or understand, market demand cannot guide behaviour, regulators lack the technical capacity to enforce standards, and civil society faces steep barriers to scrutiny.

Within this broad group of complex sectors, two distinct patterns emerge:

- **Complex but competitive sectors**, such as some digital services, where competition exists but consumers cannot easily assess harms. Here, institutional drivers remain weak, and market signals operate only partially because responsibility is difficult to evaluate.
- **Complex and concentrated sectors**, such as finance and certain digital platforms, where opacity combines with high market power. In these cases, all traditional drivers—market, institutional, and civil society, are severely constrained, leaving firms largely insulated from external pressures.

Overall, the analysis shows that **visibility, competition, and intelligibility** shape the strength of market and institutional drivers, while **distance and complexity** significantly limit all three. This creates highly uneven landscapes of responsibility across sectors, as reflected in the table that follows.

3.3 Knowledge gaps

Overall, the review highlights the need for more systematic evidence to understand what works, what does not, and what risks or unintended effects different drivers may generate. Existing studies are fragmented and uneven across sectors, making it difficult to compare drivers or assess their relative influence in different contexts. A large-scale study that collects primary data using a common analytical framework, one capable of distinguishing sectoral characteristics such as visibility, competition, concentration, and complexity, is crucial for advancing the field.

Sector-specific findings also reveal important gaps. Evidence on market-based drivers remains limited in areas such as consumer behaviour in LMIC contexts, particularly where visibility is low or value chains are opaque. Institutional drivers are understudied in sectors characterised by high concentration and state dependence, such as mining or finance. Civil-society drivers are well documented in extractives but less so in digital and financial sectors, where technical complexity poses barriers to mobilisation. Evidence on cultural, knowledge and innovation drivers remains especially scarce across all sectors.

The sectoral review highlights several important gaps in understanding the drivers of Responsible Business Conduct (RBC) in LMICs. Evidence remains uneven across drivers, sectors and types of practices.

First, market-based drivers, especially consumer pressure, are underexplored in LMICs. Existing studies focus mainly on food and fashion, leaving gaps in social issues and in non-consumer-facing sectors such as ICT and finance. The role of investors as drivers of RBC is also insufficiently studied, particularly in textiles, ICTs, and finance. Likewise, while voluntary international initiatives and industry standards have received attention, the impact of new mandatory due-diligence regulations in importing countries on firms in LMICs remains poorly understood. Research on cultural drivers, religion, local norms, social trust, remains scattered, with little analysis of how these interact with sector dynamics or firm characteristics.

Second, institutional and civil-society drivers are unevenly analysed. Evidence on how LMIC governments support or enforce RBC is limited, particularly regarding state–business relations, procurement, and the political economy of regulatory implementation. Civil society's shrinking civic space is an emerging concern, especially in ICT and finance where its influence is already weak. In sectors such as mining and agriculture, local community mobilisation remains important, but there is little comparative work examining how social licence and resistance shape RBC across other industries. Internal organisational drivers, leadership, managerial cognition, employee motivation, are also under-researched, with most studies still anchored in a narrow CSR logic rather than broader RBC expectations.

Third, there is limited understanding of how misinformation, digital campaigning, or social media dynamics shape the effectiveness of different drivers, including investor, policy and civil-society engagement.

Finally, the review shows a persistent gap in analysing the unintended consequences of RBC interventions. Impacts vary significantly across political, institutional and socio-economic contexts. Without thorough political economy diagnostics, interventions can backfire. For example, following the Rana Plaza disaster, multi-stakeholder initiatives in Bangladesh sought to strengthen labour standards but failed to engage meaningfully with the government, ultimately prompting resistance that undermined further implementation (Annex 1, Box 3). Such cases underscore the need for systematic context analysis, stakeholder mapping and due-diligence processes when designing RBC instruments.

4. Final Reflections

We offer two concluding reflections: first, on the main findings about drivers of Responsible Business Conduct (RBC); second, on the evolving concept and implementation of RBC.

4.1 Drivers of RBC

The general review highlights that market drivers, especially those linked to profitability, reputation, and client or investor demands, have often been effective in promoting RBC across contexts. From a policy standpoint, aligning RBC with performance incentives offers a promising avenue. However, the sector analysis reveals these incentives do not work equally well across all sectors. In industries where impacts are opaque to consumers, or where price competition dominates—such as many commodity markets, market-based approaches are far less effective.

A key policy question, then, is how to enhance the role of markets where these mechanisms fall short. Creative policy solutions, including targeted institutions that substitute for weak market signals, are needed. Direct government support (e.g. subsidies) and regulations with penalties have proven effective, while institutional strength and innovation also play a critical role in detecting and sanctioning misconduct. Embedded relationships between firms and government can support behavioural change, though they risk becoming counterproductive when used for lobbying or regulatory capture.

Yet institutional effectiveness varies. In sectors where governments face strong asymmetries in power, knowledge, or economic dependence, such as mining in Chile or Peru, regulatory leverage is limited. International frameworks can help, especially in traditional sectors with broadly agreed norms (e.g. labour, environment, product safety), where global and national standards are mutually reinforcing. However, in emerging sectors, like digital platforms, where new risks and harms are not yet widely recognised, international frameworks are still underdeveloped. Institutional responses in these areas lag behind, as consensus around what constitutes harm often emerges only after significant damage (Coad et al., 2021).

Civil society plays a vital role in raising awareness and pressuring firms, particularly where it can influence profits and public legitimacy. This is most effective in sectors like mining, where firms need a “social license to operate.” By contrast, in sectors like finance or IT, civil society faces difficulties due to information asymmetries, technical complexity, and lack of visibility. Still, indirect influence through reputational pressure has led to meaningful corporate change. Policies that empower civil society and raise awareness among stakeholders about their rights and tools can enhance this impact.

Innovation and new knowledge also emerge as potential drivers of RBC, especially in environmental domains. Examples include pollution-reducing technologies and blockchain for fraud prevention. Yet this remains an underexplored area in the literature. Further research is needed to assess how innovation can drive RBC across sectors and issue areas.

Taken together, these findings underscore the need for multi-pronged strategies. Policymakers and firms must combine national and international frameworks, align market incentives with regulation, and balance top-down and grassroots approaches. Effective RBC promotion requires tailoring solutions to specific sectors, regions, and institutional settings. Coordinating these forces is key to embedding responsibility in the global economy, especially in light of mounting environmental and social crises.

4.2 The Evolving Idea and Practice of RBC

Our review indicates that, across the available empirical studies, RBC outcomes are concentrated in a relatively narrow set of areas. The literature most frequently reports improvements in environmental practices—such as pollution control, waste reduction, and carbon mitigation—driven by market, institutional, and civil society pressures. This suggests not only that external actors prioritise environmental performance, but also that environmental outcomes are easier to measure and have therefore attracted greater research attention. By contrast, the literature documents far fewer cases of firms proactively engaging with the “Do No Harm’’ dimension of RBC. Large-scale disasters such as the Brumadinho dam collapse, the Rana Plaza tragedy, and the Volkswagen Diesel-gate scandal illustrate the urgency of preventing harm, yet empirical evidence on how drivers support such prevention remains limited. Similarly, studies report fewer examples of market-related RBC (e.g. fair-competition behaviour or consumer-oriented improvements) and societal RBC (e.g. community development, R&D with social spillovers, charitable initiatives). This uneven distribution partly reflects differences in regulatory and market pressures, but also the types of RBC that have been most commonly researched. As a result, the evidence base remains thin for important areas such as human rights due diligence, tax justice, and wider societal contributions, making it difficult to determine whether these practices are genuinely less prevalent, less effectively encouraged by existing drivers, or simply less studied.

Another insight is the need to balance universal, non-negotiable principles (e.g. human rights) with flexible, adaptive tools. As new technologies and business models emerge, frameworks for RBC must remain dynamic, capable of responding to novel challenges.

A final, often overlooked dimension is the political role of business. Following Scherer and Palazzo, we emphasise that corporations are also political actors. This has two implications. First, their lobbying activities often reshape regulatory frameworks, frequently in ways that favour business over the environment or other stakeholders. In LMICs, where lobbying is typically unregulated, this can have harmful effects—as seen in Brazil’s deforestation debates.

Second, in contested sectors like mining, companies must engage with stakeholders to secure legitimacy. This political engagement can take responsible forms, such as the Cerro Verde project in Peru, which involved negotiation with local communities and investments in shared infrastructure. But it can also take extractive, manipulative forms, such as dividing communities or offering short-term incentives for long-term environmental harm. These cases exemplify the misuse of political power and highlight the need to include political responsibility as a core pillar of RBC.

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Annex 1: Examples of RBC drivers

Box 1: Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act

The law defines conflict minerals as: Tin, Tantalum, Tungsten (3Ts), and Gold (collectively known as 3TG). These minerals are often sourced from conflict-affected and high-risk areas, particularly the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and its neighbouring countries.

Key Requirements for Companies

1. Disclosure and Reporting:
    - Publicly traded companies in the U.S. are required to determine if their products contain conflict minerals.
    - If minerals are used, companies must trace their supply chains to identify the source and disclose whether these minerals originate from conflict-affected areas.
2. Due Diligence:
    - Companies must conduct due diligence following guidelines such as the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals.
    - They are required to submit an annual Conflict Minerals Report (CMR) to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC).
3. Independent Audits:
    - Companies sourcing minerals from conflict areas may need third-party audits to verify due diligence processes.

Implications for Value Chains

1. Supply Chain Traceability:
    - Companies must improve traceability and transparency throughout their supply chains to ensure minerals are conflict-free.

- This often requires mapping suppliers across multiple tiers (downstream and upstream) to identify the origins of minerals.

2. Compliance Costs:
   - Compliance with the law can be costly and resource-intensive, particularly for companies with complex, global supply chains.
   - Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face additional challenges due to limited resources for supply chain auditing.
3. Supplier Pressure:
   - Companies often place pressure on their suppliers to provide detailed documentation and certifications proving the minerals they source are conflict-free.
   - Suppliers in high-risk regions may lose contracts if they cannot demonstrate compliance.
4. Shift in Sourcing Practices:
   - To avoid risk, some companies have opted to shift sourcing away from the DRC and surrounding regions. While this reduces reputational risks, it has inadvertently harmed legitimate artisanal miners who depend on mining for their livelihoods.
5. Innovation in Certification Schemes:
   - The Dodd-Frank Act has driven the development of certification initiatives (e.g., the Conflict-Free Smelter Program) and blockchain solutions to track minerals across value chains.
6. Corporate Accountability:
   - The law has increased corporate responsibility for ethical sourcing practices, encouraging more businesses to adopt sustainable and responsible procurement policies.

Broader Impact

While Dodd-Frank Section 1502 primarily applies to U.S.-listed companies, its ripple effects are global. Companies outside the U.S. that supply or do business with U.S. firms must also comply with conflict mineral requirements.

This has led to a growing emphasis on ethical sourcing across industries, particularly in electronics, automotive, and jewelry manufacturing.

Controversies and Criticism

1. Economic Impact on the DRC:
    - Critics argue that the law has negatively affected artisanal miners in the DRC by disrupting legitimate supply chains.
2. Complexity and Effectiveness:
    - Tracing minerals through multi-tiered supply chains remains challenging and expensive.
3. Unintended Consequences:
    - Many companies prefer to avoid the region entirely, which does not necessarily solve the conflict problem but further marginalises local communities.

The Dodd-Frank Act Section 1502 has significantly influenced global value chains, particularly for companies dealing with 3TG minerals. It has promoted greater transparency, accountability, and ethical sourcing practices but also sparked debates on its unintended economic impacts on high-risk regions.

Box 2. Equator Principles

Perhaps the most relevant global guidelines in the financial sector to LMICs are the Equator Principles, launched in June 2003. Contreras et al (2019) analyse the drivers of Equator Principles' adoption by banks. Adoption is driven by different factors. In a study of 18,729 collaborations between financial institutions funding projects between 2003 and 2014 worldwide, peer pressure was shown to have an impact on adoption of the principles. Those faced with highest peer pressure were 33% more likely to adopt when pressured by a peer financial institution compared with those faced with lowest peer pressure. Even without pressure, financial institutions collaborating with adopters, such as during co-financing of projects, are more likely to adopt the Equator Principles. External public pressure also increases adoption, but Contreras et al find that larger actors are more likely to be immune to this public pressure. This is an interesting finding, indicating that the adoption of international standards relies less on public pressure, but more on the shifting of norms and expectations within the industry towards alignment with principles of RBC.

However, as with other international guidelines and standards, there are critiques that in practice they are not effective in improving business conduct. Wörsdörfer (2015) provides a critical evaluation of the Principles, which notes that they are limited in scope to project finance, bridge finance, and project-related corporate loans despite the fact that these instruments account for around 5% turnover of multinational banks. Wörsdörfer advocates for extending the EPs to "any transaction with a potential significant adverse impact on the socio-ecological environment, local communities and in particular indigenous peoples" (Wörsdörfer 2015: 6). In addition, as of 2013 a "high number" of BRICS country banks are not members of the Equator Principles Association (EPA) – especially in India and China. One major risk to improved RBC which Wörsdörfer identifies is that projects seeking financing engage in "shopping around" lenders to find those who have the lowest standards for responsible conduct while also offering a reasonable cost of capital, hence pushing out financial institutions who are members of the EPA. This has been observed with Chinese, Indian, and Russian banks are named as those that can undermine the EPs by providing "dirty" finance which does not have stringent environmental requirements for projects.

The Equator Principles have been critiqued for the lack of transparency in disclosure of project consultations with stakeholders, especially communities, leading to a lack of accountability and enforcement. Financial institutions often hide behind client confidentiality, stating that borrowers whose projects are being funded have a right to non-disclosure of key project details (Wörsdörfer 2015). Wright (2012) also finds that the Equator Principles do not stop institutions from funding projects with significant environmental and social costs, and that even though relations between lenders and stakeholders have improved since the Principles were first instituted in 2003 there remains a lack of transparency and therefore accountability. Banktrack (2020a & b) provide a number of case studies of Equator Principles projects, which demonstrate that many do not have appropriate stakeholder engagement or complains mechanisms in practice, which especially reduces the accountability of projects to local communities.

Box 3. What drove change after the Rana Plaza Disaster in Bangladesh

In 2013 the world was shocked by the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory complex in Bangladesh killing 1,134 workers and injuring more than 2,500, mainly women. Stakeholders in the global garment value chain, from fashion brands and governments in consumer markets, to manufacturers, trade unions and the Bangladesh government all responded with actions and promises to protect workers and improve working conditions in the textile and garment sector (Bair et al., 2020). Two key multistakeholder initiatives were adopted. The Accord was an agreement between more than 200 international brands from 20 mainly European countries and two global union federations, along with eight affiliated Bangladeshi unions, and four international labour rights NGOs as witness signatories (Kabeer et al., 2020). The smaller Alliance came into existence a few months later with 27 brands, overwhelmingly from North America, as signatories.

Both initiatives were able to increase independent inspections on compliance with Bangladesh building rules and drew up corrective plans. Both initiatives were also setting up Health and Safety Committees in factories combined with trainings in worker safety (Barrett et al., 2018). Kabeer et al. (2020) looked at how both initiatives have impacted on more responsible garment manufacturing in Bangladesh. It shows that workers in factories with Accord and Alliance affiliation were more likely than those in non-affiliated factories to report improvements in building safety, healthy environment, safety training, opportunities for complaint, opportunities for training, timeliness of payments and sexual harassment. But smaller factories were less likely to report improvements in building safety than larger ones and (unexpectedly) more likely to report improvements in management behaviour. Workers who had joined their factory before Rana Plaza were more likely to report improvements in salary and benefits, health and safety conditions, opportunities for complaint, opportunities for training and promotion and timeliness of payments.

However, as Hossain (2019) shows the Rana Plaza disaster responses were mainly driven by fashion brands to reduce reputational risks. International brands and buyers rushed for actions as the link between cheap clothes and dead factory workers became clearer and pressure increased from NGOs, trade unions, consumers and governments in consumer markets (Bair et al., 2020). However, no legal action against international brands has been successful, and their stock market values took only a brief hit (Jacobs & Singhal, 2017). Furthermore, the Accord and Alliance are considered to consolidate the power of brands over their suppliers (Scheper, 2017). Fashion brands were pushed to contribute to the worker compensation scheme, and bore the cost of inspecting but not in fixing the factories, which was left to factory owners, forcing many smaller factory units to close. Since Rana Plaza, buyers have continued to push low prices down, and pay around 13% less for items sourced in Bangladesh compared to before Rana Plaza (Anner, 2018).

Bair et al. (2020) state that the Accord was more successful in pursuing its objectives than was the Bangladesh government in fulfilling its commitments under its own Compact initiative. As such, the private governance initiatives are not operating entirely because of a public governance deficit, even if public regulations are weak or unenforced. Bair et al. (2020) observe that private regimes such as Accord are layered over public ones but in this case were mainly substituting the state efforts and were not complementary. As such, global buyers push for improvements due to intensified private inspections, but bypassing the state backfired with the aim to achieve long-term transformations, such as labour governance reforms in Bangladesh. Because the Accord sets up a parallel private safety inspectorate, it was unlikely to push the Bangladeshi government to enforce its own labour laws. Nor was it likely to build state capacities that could outlast the initiative’s five years. Government officials, who see the garment manufacturing sector as vital for economic development, worked together with industry officials to undermine the Accord. In May 2018, the Bangladesh High Court issued a restraining order against the Accord.

Hence, where global clothing brands were uniquely vulnerable to reputational risk due to Rana Plaza, Bangladeshi factory owners were worried about losing orders, and the government of Bangladesh feared losing trade preferences that helped generate the country’s only significant source of export revenue. When it became clear that brands were placing more, not fewer, orders with Bangladeshi suppliers, and that the European Union would not withdraw trade preferences, the balance of forces shifted away from those seeking pro-labour reforms. This shows durability of certain drivers should be taken into account.

Annex 2. Selected articles for systematic review

A: Academic journals

Journal	Number of articles
Journal of Business Ethics	40
Business Strategy and the Environment	29
Business Strategy and Development	8
Business and Society	6
The Extractive Industries and Society	7
Resources Policy	6
Review of Managerial Science	4
International Journal of Business and Society	4
Business Ethics, the Environment, and Responsibility	3
Corporate social responsibility and environmental management	2
Journal of Financial Reporting and Accounting	2
Journal of International Business Studies	2
Journal of Management Studies	2
Journal of Sustainable Finance & Investment	2

Business Ethics, the Environment and Responsibility	1
Development and Change	1
European Journal of Management and Business Economics	1
Global Strategy Journal	1
International research review	1
Journal of business economics and management	1
Journal of Financial Reporting	1
Organization studies	1
Total	126

B: Full list of the 126 selected literature

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Annex 3: Assessment results

Market-based drivers

Table 1: Market-based drivers by subcategory

Market-Based Match	Total
Performance and Profitability	19
Reputation and Legitimacy	13
Value Chain Pressures	11
Consumer behavior	11
International Standards	10
Investor-led	8

Competition	6
Suma total	78

Table 2: Market-based drivers by country

Country - Match	Country	Total
Country specific	China	23
	India	6
	Brazil	6
	Pakistan	3
	Malaysia	2
	Malaysia	2
	Libya	2
	Indonesia	2
	US-based large firms (but about how they manage their supply chains)	1
	Uganda	1
	Tunisia	1
	Sri Lanka	1
	Morocco	1
	Ghana	1
	Colombia	1
	Bangladesh	1
Total Country specific		54

Non Specific	No specific	5
	Global	4
	No specific (global)	1
	Global (no specific)	1
	Global (mostly advanced economies but some LMICs)	1
Total Non Specific		12
Cross country	UK-based MNCs	3
	US-based MNCs	2
	Emerging economies	2
	Swedish MNC and Chinese local suppliers	1
	Global (24 countries)	1
	German based MNC with operations in 47 countries (mix of high and low income)	1
	Africa (oil-rich countries)	1
	37 countries (no specific)	1
Total Cross country		12
Suma total		78

Table 3: Market-based drivers by sector

Sector Classified	Sector Match	Total
No Specific	No Specific	41
Total No Specific		41
Sector Specific	Manufacturing	14

	Food	5
	Extractives	5
	Textiles	3
	Services	1
	Retail	1
	ICT	1
	Energy	1
	Agriculture	1
Total Sector Specific		32
Cross Sector	Various	5
Total Cross Sector		5
Suma total		78

Institutional-based drivers

Table 4: Institutional-based drivers by subcategory

Institutional Based Drivers	Total
Regulation	12
Institutional strength	11
Political	6
Government support	3
Government pressures	2
Institutional innovations	1
Suma total	35

Table 5: Institutional-based drivers by country

Country - Match	Country	Total
Country specific	China	9
	Tunisia	2
	Malaysia	2
	India	2
	Foreign MNCs operating in China	2
	UK-based MNCs	1
	Tanzania	1
	Malaysia	1
	Libya	1
	Jordan	1
	Brazil	1
Total Country specific		23
Cross country	Global (24 countries)	2
	China, India, Russia	2
	MNCs (US, Denmark, Indonesia, Nigeria, Ecuador)	1
	Germany, UK (included due to relevance for LMICs)	1
	China, Russia, OECD	1
Total Cross country		7
Non Specific	Global	4
	No specific	1
Total Non Specific		5

Suma total		35

Table 6: Institutional-based drivers by sector

Sector Classified	Sector Match	Total
Cross Sector	Various	4
	Manufacturing (multiple)	1
Total Cross Sector		5
No Specific	No Specific	15
	Food	1
Total No Specific		16
Sector Specific	Manufacturing	4
	Extractives	3
	Energy	2
	Textiles	1
	Pharmaceuticals	1
	Manufacturing (SMEs)	1
	Food (SMEs)	1
	Environment & Innovation	1
Total Sector Specific		14
Suma total		35

Civil society drivers

Table 7: Civil society drivers by subcategory

Civil Society Drivers	Total

General public pressure	10
CSO mobilization	7
Suma total	17

Table 8: Civil society drivers by country

Country - Match	Country	Total
Country specific	China	3
	Peru	2
	Uganda	1
	Russia	1
	Morocco	1
	Brazil	1
	Bangladesh	1
Total Country specific		10
Non Specific	Global	5
Total Non Specific		5
Cross country	China, India, Russia	1
	Argentina, Chile	1
Total Cross country		2
Suma total		17

Table 9: Civil society drivers by sector

Sector type	Sector	Total

Sector Specific	Mining	6
	Paper	2
	Textiles	1
	Retail	1
	Petrochemical, textiles, beverage	1
	Oil	1
	Extractives (Oil and gas)	1
Total Sector Specific		13
No Specific	No specific	2
Total No Specific		2
Cross Sector	Computers, Tobacco, food processing	2
Total Cross Sector		2
Suma total		17

Cultural drivers

Table 10: Cultural drivers by subcategory

Cultural Drivers	Total
Social structure	2
Religion	2
Social trust	1
Respect for authority	1
Suma total	6

Table 11: Cultural drivers by country

Country - Match	Country	Total
Country specific	China	2
	Ethiopia	1
Total Country specific		3
Cross country	Chinese companies abroad	2
Total Cross country		2
Non Specific	Global	1
Total Non Specific		1
Suma total		6

Table 12: Cultural drivers by sector

Sector Type	Sector	Total
No Specific	No specific	5
Total No Specific		5
Sector Specific	Mining	1
Total Sector Specific		1
Suma total		6

Knowledge and Innovations drivers

Table 13: Knowledge and innovation drivers by subcategory

Knowledge and Innovation Drivers	Total
Technology Acquisition	3

Technology Development	**1**
Suma total	**4**

Table 14: Knowledge and innovation drivers by country

Income Clasification	Country	Total
Upper-Middle	China	3
Total Upper-Middle		3
High	Germany, UK (included due to relevance for LMICs)	1
Total High		1
Suma total		4

Table 15: Knowledge and innovation drivers by sector

Sector Type	Sector	Total
Sector Specific	Pharmaceuticals	1
	Oil and gas	1
Total Sector Specific		2
Cross Sector	Manufacturing. High tech only.	1
	Manufacturing (multiple)	1
Total Cross Sector		2
Suma total		4

Annex 4. List of literature for sector analysis

Mining, Oil and Gas:
Literature coded from REA (15): Adams, D., Adams, K., Attah-Boakye, R., Ullah, S., Rodgers, W., and Kimani, D. (2022). Social and environmental practices and corporate financial performance of multinational corporations in emerging markets: Evidence from 20 oil-rich African countries. *Resources Policy*, Volume 78, 102756. **https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2022.102756** Alshbili, I., & Elamer, A. A. (2019). The influence of institutional context on corporate social responsibility disclosure: a case of a developing country. *Journal of Sustainable Finance & Investment*, Volume *10, Issue* 3: 269–293. **https://doi.org/10.1080/20430795.2019.1677440** Bekele M.G. and Muthuri J.N. and Ayele M.B. (2024). The influence of national culture on corporate social responsibility in the Ethiopian mining sector. *Resources Policy*, Volume 88, 104209. **https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2023.104209** Dinçer, H., Yüksel, S., Hacioglu, U., Yilmaz, M.K., and Delen, D. (2023). Development of a sustainable corporate social responsibility index for performance evaluation of the energy industry: A hybrid decision-making methodology. *Resources Policy*, Volume 85, Part A, 103940. **https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2023.103940** Ghalib, A. K., and Agupusi, P. (2014). Business strategy and corporate responsibility: perception and practice in the oil industry and the role of non-governmental organisations. *Journal of Business Economics and Management*, *15*(5), 951–963. **https://doi.org/10.3846/16111699.2012.720591** Haslam, P.A. and Godfrid, J. (2023). The social determinants of CSR practice: Between headquarters policy and local mobilization. *The Extractive Industries and Society*, Volume 15, 101306. **https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2023.101306** Ho, S.S.H, Oh, C.H. and Shapiro, D. (2022). Can Corporate Social Responsibility Lead to Social License? A Sentiment and Emotion Analysis. Journal of Management Studies, Volume 61, Issue 2, The Management of Socio-Political Issues and Environments: Organizational and Strategic Perspectives: 445-476. **https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12863** Kumar, A., Gupta, J., and Das, N. (2022). Community resilience, Corporate Social Responsibility and local economic development: The case of coal mining in India. *The Extractive Industries and Society*, Volume 11, 101120. **https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2022.101120** Mehahad, M.S. and Bounar, A. (2020). Phosphate mining, corporate social responsibility and community development in the Gantour Basin, Morocco. *The Extractive Industries and Society*, Volume 7, Issue 1: 170-180. **https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2019.11.016**

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