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**B Corp Certification in Africa:
Motivations, opportunities and challenges in
promoting socially and environmentally responsible
management practices**

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Abstract

African businesses are increasingly recognising the importance of balancing profit with social and environmental responsibility, aligning with the global trend toward sustainable practices. B Corp certification, a globally recognised standard and associated certification system, offers businesses a formal pathway to commit to these values. However, despite its international prominence, the adoption of B Corp certification in Africa remains limited. African businesses face unique challenges such as limited resources, complex regulatory environments, and varying levels of awareness about sustainability. There is limited insight into the specific motivations, challenges, and contextual factors that shape how African businesses navigate and implement the certification process.

This suggests a significant gap in understanding the unique motivations, challenges, and contextual factors that influence how African businesses navigate and implement the certification process. This study contributes to addressing this gap by using purposive sampling of 12 participants and employed thematic coding to analyse qualitative data. The interviews were conducted with key stakeholders such as representatives from certified B Corps in Africa, sustainability experts and members of B Lab. The findings show that African businesses pursue B Corp certification to tackle specific social and environmental challenges while boosting their brand reputation locally and globally. The certification provides external validation that builds trust with stakeholders, including consumers, partners, and investors. It is also seen as a strategic asset for attracting socially conscious audiences and aligning business operations with international sustainability standards.

The study identifies several challenges that hinder the adoption of B Corp certification in Africa. Smaller companies, in particular, find the financial burden of certification challenging. Moreover, a lack of awareness and understanding of B Corp standards, which are often not fully adapted to local contexts, further complicates the process. The study contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable business practices in Africa by offering valuable insights into how B Corp certification can drive social and environmental change on the continent.

Keywords: B Corp certification, Sustainability, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Africa, Motivations, Challenges, Stakeholder engagement, Sustainable business practices

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

B Corp certification is a voluntary designation that recognises companies meeting high standards of social and environmental impact. This is especially relevant in the face of numerous interconnected global issues emerging and intensifying in recent years (Adey et al., 2021). Among those interconnected global problems are climate change and human rights violations taking the form of discrimination, persecution, violence and systemic injustices (Mishra, 2023; Anabaraonye et al., 2022). For example, in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, miners work under dangerous conditions for extremely low wages, reflecting the exploitative nature of global supply chains (Faber et al., 2017). This issue extends beyond mining; in China's Xinjiang region, reports of forced labour in electronics factories further underscore the systemic exploitation pervasive in the industry (Murphy et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, extreme environmental disasters—such as heat waves and wildfires in Southern Europe and North America—disproportionately affect rural and low-income communities, compounding the hardships faced by vulnerable populations (Global Risks Report, 2024). These events demonstrate the intersection between environmental crises and social vulnerability, as marginalised groups often bear the greatest burden during times of crisis, further emphasising the interconnectedness of global challenges like labour exploitation and environmental injustice (Ngcamu, 2023).

Businesses have historically contributed to and exacerbated many global challenges, such as environmental degradation, resource exploitation, and social inequalities, often through unsustainable practices and profit-driven operations (Bocken & Short, 2021). Businesses have the capacity to become influential drivers of positive change by embracing more inclusive and sustainable practices. By prioritising social equity, minimising their environmental impact, and upholding ethical labour standards, they can actively contribute to resolving the very challenges they have historically played a role in creating (Rodríguez-Espíndola et al., 2022). The interconnected nature of environmental, social, and economic challenges makes it clear that businesses must take comprehensive, proactive measures that align with global sustainability goals (Van Zanten & Van Tulder, 2018). In doing so, they not only try to rectify social injustice

and contribute to environmental conservation but also help ensure long-term economic resilience and stability.

The shift toward corporate responsibility and sustainable development is not just a moral imperative but a strategic necessity in addressing the complexities of today's global crises. Institutions, both public and private, play a critical role in shaping how global challenges are addressed (Mazzucato, 2023). International frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement provide guidelines that aim to foster a global response to environmental and social issues (Tosun & Leininger, 2017). These standards serve as a blueprint for governments, businesses, and civil society, encouraging cooperation and harmonised efforts across borders (Augenstein et al., 2018). Multilateral organisations such as the World Bank and the International Labour Organization (ILO) further reinforce these frameworks by promoting policies that tackle inequality, enhance labour rights, and ensure environmental protection (Silva, 2022).

Organisations and businesses play a pivotal role in addressing global challenges (Kourula et al., 2019). While businesses can contribute to these challenges through their operations and practices, they also have the potential to act as powerful agents of positive change (Schaltegger et al., 2016). One way to do so is for companies to recognise and promote standards through the B Corp certification.

Increasingly, businesses are recognising the need to align their operations with principles that focus not only on economic growth but also on environmental and social justice. This alignment is critical, as unsustainable practices in sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and resource extraction have led to significant environmental damage and exacerbated social inequalities (Velenturf & Purnell, 2021). In response to these growing concerns, the business landscape is undergoing a shift toward more responsible and sustainable practices. The shift towards responsible and sustainable business practices is crucial for addressing the interconnected global issues we face today (Horrigan, 2010). As consumer demands and government pressures rise, businesses are increasingly acknowledging the significance of transparency in disclosing their environmental and social impacts. This transparency fosters accountability and allows consumers and stakeholders to make informed choices (Jackson & Jackson, 2017).

This notion aligns with the principles underlying that standards and certification systems are important tools to promote responsible business practices. B-Corp certification is one example where businesses voluntarily commit to meeting high standards of ecological and social performance, accountability, and transparency (Carvalho et al., 2022). Standards are established guidelines, benchmarks, or criteria designed to measure and evaluate performance in specific areas (Brunsson et al., 2012). In the realm of business sustainability, these standards act as crucial tools to ensure companies meet targeted environmental, social, and governance goals (Eccles et al., 2014).

Sustainability standards can be global or industry-specific, and they may also operate at local or regional levels. Global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNDP, 2024) and B Corp certification provide broad sustainability benchmarks applicable across various industries and sectors (Carvalho et al., 2022). Meanwhile, ISO 14001, a globally recognised environmental management system standard, specifically addresses industry-level environmental performance and accountability (Boiral, 2007).

These standards, whether generic or tailored to particular industries, help businesses navigate these complexities by offering structured criteria to measure their social, environmental, and governance practices, fostering more responsible and transparent operations (Nadvi & Wältring, 2002). By adhering to these standards, businesses commit to maintaining consistent, measurable, and transparent practices that foster ethical behaviour and promote sustainable practices. Compliance with such standards also provides a level of assurance to stakeholders that a business is operating responsibly, aligning its practices with broader societal expectations.

Among the numerous standards at which companies are measured, B Corp certification has gained global recognition for its rigorous approach to measuring social and environmental performance (Bringas-Fernández et al., 2024). What sets B Corp apart is its comprehensive evaluation, which holds businesses accountable to higher levels of responsibility across their entire operation, from governance to employee relations and environmental impact (Malenkov, 2024). While thousands of sustainability standards exist, B Corp certification has seen increasing adoption because of its holistic framework and the credibility it lends to businesses striving for ethical practices. At its core, sustainability in the business context refers to the ability of companies to operate in a manner that ensures long-term environmental, social, and economic health (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002). It involves the integration of sustainable practices

into business operations, such as reducing carbon footprints, promoting fair trade, and ensuring ethical sourcing.

However, despite its global traction, there is limited understanding of the motivations and challenges that African businesses face in pursuing B Corp certification. Most existing studies focus on developed markets such as North America and Europe (Gehman et al., 2019), leaving a significant gap in understanding how B Corp certification is adopted and implemented in Africa. African businesses operate in unique environments characterised by different economic, social, and regulatory landscapes (Asongu & Odhiambo, 2020), yet the factors driving them to seek certification—whether for market opportunities, social responsibility, or alignment with global trends—are not well-explored.

Moreover, the challenges faced by African businesses in obtaining B Corp certification—such as resource constraints, lack of awareness, and market-specific obstacles—are under-researched (Diez-Busto et al., 2021). While challenges such as high certification costs and administrative burdens are well-documented in other regions (Durrani et al., 2024), there is less understanding of how African businesses navigate these hurdles. Furthermore, research on the impact of B Corp certification in emerging economies is limited (Tabares, 2021), particularly in terms of how it influences governance structures, stakeholder relationships, and sustainable practices. This gap presents an opportunity to explore how B Corp certification can contribute to more inclusive and sustainable business practices within the African context.

Given these gaps in the literature, this research specifically focuses on the motivations and challenges faced by African businesses in pursuing B Corp certification. The decision to explore these factors is driven by the growing interest among African companies in aligning with global sustainability standards, despite the distinct economic, social, and regulatory hurdles they must navigate.

B Lab, founded in the U.S. in 2006 (Marquis & Lee, 2015), extended its reach to the African continent by establishing B Lab Africa in 2017 (Muiru, 2019). Since then, B Lab Africa has played a critical role in fostering the B Corp movement on the continent, helping approximately 50 companies across 14 African countries—including Benin, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ghana, and South Africa—achieve certification (B Lab Global, 2022). In addition, over 3,000 African businesses are using tools like the B Impact Assessment and SDG Action Manager to better

understand and improve their social and environmental impact, reflecting the increasing interest in global standards and their measurement over the past decade (B Lab Global, 2022).

This study aims to address the existing knowledge gap by examining the motivations, challenges, and opportunities African businesses face in pursuing B Corp certification. It seeks to contribute to the broader literature on sustainable business practices in emerging markets, focusing on why African companies strive to overcome these obstacles and the strategies they employ to achieve certification. Furthermore, the research offers practical recommendations for business leaders, policymakers, and sustainability advocates, aiming to encourage the broader adoption of B Corp standards across Africa. By doing so, it hopes to enhance the potential for responsible and sustainable business practices on the continent, further aligning African businesses with global sustainability trends.

1.2. Rationale for the Study and Theoretical Contribution

As African businesses increasingly seek to align with global standards, understanding the unique motivations and challenges they face becomes critical. Despite growing interest, the adoption of certifications like B Corp remains limited on the continent. The continent's complex economic, social, and environmental landscape adds layers of difficulty when applying global certification criteria, raising important questions about the relevance and adaptability of such systems in diverse contexts. This research seeks to fill a gap in the literature by examining how African businesses navigate these standards, and what drives or hinders them from pursuing certification.

1.2.1. Africa's Growing Need for Sustainable Business Models

Africa is home to some of the fastest-growing companies globally, yet many business models have not fully integrated values that could bolster global investment confidence and empower future generations (Craig, 2019). Despite the continent's immense talent, there are gaps in institutional support and business structures that could more effectively incorporate sustainability principles. Africa's demographic profile further amplifies the need for sustainable practices; with 60% of the population under the age of 25 and 41% under the age of 15 (Craig, 2019). Younger generations are more inclined to consider environmental and ethical principles, and thus, are more likely to support, work for, and invest in businesses that prioritise global standards and purpose-driven missions.

Global investors, too, are recognising the value of companies with long-term sustainable strategies, offering these firms access to better talent, increased investment, and greater market share. These dynamics suggest that businesses with strong, sustainable foundations are more likely to succeed in Africa's evolving markets, as well as globally (Craig, 2019).

1.2.2. Challenges Faced by African Businesses

While African businesses are increasingly embracing inclusivity, fair labour practices, and community engagement (AfriBlocks Network, 2023), they continue to face significant challenges. These include limited access to financial resources, varying levels of awareness, and inconsistent enforcement of regulations aimed at addressing scandals and community grievances. These obstacles hinder businesses from fully committing to sustainability initiatives and pursuing certifications like B Corp, despite the potential benefits.

1.2.3. B Corp Certification and the African Context

B Corp certification, which demands rigorous standards of social and environmental performance, has yet to see widespread adoption across Africa. This study addresses this gap by examining the motivations, challenges, and opportunities that African businesses face in pursuing B Corp certification. Given Africa's diverse economies and regulatory environments, the straightforward application of global certification systems such as B Corp is often complicated. The relevance of such certification frameworks in this context warrants deeper investigation to understand their role in driving sustainable business practices on the continent.

1.2.4. Theoretical Contribution

This study makes important theoretical contributions by investigating how African businesses navigate the dual objectives of profitability and social responsibility within contexts where financial resources and institutional support for environmental and social governance are often limited. It examines how businesses interact with regulatory, economic, and socio-cultural institutions that influence the uptake of voluntary certification systems such as B Corp. The analysis underscores the influence of institutional pressures—both coercive and normative—as well as enabling mechanisms, such as partnerships and access to international networks, in shaping decisions related to responsible business conduct.

Moreover, the research explores certification systems as structured tools for assessing and guiding environmental and social performance. By situating the study within the African context, it adds a regionally grounded perspective to the literature on corporate responsibility in emerging markets. It also contributes to understanding how global standards are interpreted and adapted within local business ecosystems, where formal infrastructures may be less developed but informal norms and community accountability can play significant roles (Sinkovics et al., 2021; Jamali & Karam, 2018).

By examining the motivations and strategies that drive African enterprises to pursue B Corp certification, this study not only addresses a gap in current research on responsible management practices in the Global South but also offers practical insights. These include recommendations for business leaders, policymakers, and advocacy groups seeking to promote inclusive and accountable business models across Africa.

1.3. Research Aims, Objectives and Research Questions

This study explores the motivations, opportunities, and challenges African businesses face in pursuing B Corp certification, a globally recognised standard for socially and environmentally responsible management practices.

The study addresses a central research question: *What motivates African businesses to pursue B Corp certification and what challenges and opportunities do they face when implementing the B Corp standards?*

This main question is further broken down into the following sub-questions:

1. What motivates businesses in Africa to adopt B Corp standards?

This question focuses on the internal and external drivers that encourage African businesses to engage with B Corp certification. It looks into factors such as market demand, alignment with social and environmental values, or external pressure from stakeholders and investors.

2. What challenges do African businesses face in implementing B Corp standards?

This question examines the barriers businesses encounter during the certification process, such as resource constraints, regulatory misalignment, or lack of local support systems.

3. *What are the opportunities and advantages of achieving B Corp certification for African businesses?*

This question explores the benefits of certification, including opportunities for market positioning, enhanced stakeholder engagement, and potential social and environmental contributions. It also assesses how these opportunities can offset the challenges faced during implementation.

To achieve this, the study is guided by several specific objectives. First, it analyses the key motivations driving African businesses to pursue B Corp certification, considering both internal factors, such as ethical commitments and organisational values, and external factors, including market opportunities and stakeholder expectations. Secondly, the research looks into B Corp certification in Africa by examining the initial considerations businesses must address, the broader challenges they face—beyond just the implementation of the standards—and the support mechanisms available throughout the process. This includes investigating economic, social, and institutional barriers that can arise at any stage, from deciding to pursue certification to maintaining compliance. Additionally, the study explores how various forms of assistance, such as local partnerships, regulatory frameworks, and global networks, can help businesses overcome these challenges.

The study also explores the benefits that arise from implementing B Corp standards, focusing on how these standards influence governance structures, operational practices, and stakeholder relationships. Additionally, it analyses the advantages of achieving B Corp certification, such as improved market positioning, enhanced social impact, and strengthened credibility. While analysing potential benefits, the research also addresses potential challenges, including the resource-intensive nature of the certification process and the ongoing effort required to maintain compliance. This comprehensive approach helps to provide a nuanced understanding of both the positive outcomes and the obstacles businesses may face when adopting B Corp standards.

By addressing these research questions, the study offers a comprehensive insight into the key factors that drive, hinder, and shape the adoption of B Corp certification in Africa, contributing to a deeper understanding of its potential and challenges within the unique African business context.

1.4. Section Summary

In addressing the growing global challenges of climate change, human rights violations, and labour exploitation, businesses are positioned as both contributors to and potential solutions for these issues. As businesses increasingly recognise the need to integrate sustainable practices, they align themselves not only with social responsibility but also with long-term economic resilience. Global standards, such as B Corp certification, offer a structured framework for measuring and improving corporate social and environmental performance. While these standards are gaining traction globally, their adoption in Africa is less understood, particularly in terms of the motivations driving businesses to pursue them and the obstacles they face.

This research addresses a notable gap by examining the motivations, challenges, and opportunities associated with B Corp certification among African businesses. It explores how companies on the continent balance commercial objectives with broader social and environmental commitments, particularly within settings where institutional infrastructure and awareness of responsible business standards may be uneven. By analyzing how global certification frameworks—such as B Corp—are interpreted and implemented in diverse African contexts, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on corporate responsibility in emerging markets (Jamali & Sidani, 2012; Doh et al., 2017).

Understanding these dynamics provides insight into how responsible business practices can evolve in ways that align with international expectations while remaining sensitive to local economic, cultural, and regulatory conditions. In doing so, the study offers a contextually grounded perspective that may inform future initiatives aimed at promoting inclusive and accountable business conduct across similarly situated regions.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The preceding chapter discussed the increasing relevance of sustainability in business, particularly through frameworks like Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and ethical certifications. This chapter deepens the theoretical and conceptual grounding of these themes by examining: (1) CSR and its competing paradigms, (2) standards and certification systems as instruments of governance, and (3) the emergence of B Corps as a specific case of sustainability certification. These sections collectively inform the motivations, processes, transformations, and outcomes associated with B Corp certification, with a special focus on the African context.

2.1. Corporate Social Responsibility

CSR is central to understanding how businesses integrate ethical, social, and environmental concerns into their operations. This section traces the conceptual evolution of CSR, contrasting its dominant models and examining the institutional pressures that shape CSR adoption. These theoretical distinctions provide the foundation for later analysis of certification systems and B Corps.

2.1.1. Context: The Evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility

Historically, the purpose of business has been framed around shareholder primacy (Ferrarini, 2020). However, the social fallout from unregulated capitalism—rising inequality, environmental crises, and corporate scandals—has prompted calls for a broader, stakeholder-oriented approach (Schneider & Scherer, 2015). Since the 2008 financial crisis, corporations have faced increasing pressure from civil society, regulators, and consumers to operate more ethically and transparently (Fleming et al., 2013; Muiru, 2019).

This shift has spurred interest in CSR as a strategic response to these demands. It marks a transition from reactive compliance to more proactive, values-driven engagement with social and environmental issues (Villela et al., 2019; Rosca & Taylor, 2023).

Increasing evidence suggests that embracing CSR requires a comprehensive approach, addressing both internal factors—focused on employees—and external impacts, such as those affecting communities, consumers, and the environment (Rosca & Taylor, 2023). This movement has been reinforced by global organisations such as the United Nations as well as

sustainability efforts contributing to the ethical business movement such as the FTSE4Good and the UN Global Compact initiative (Villela et al., 2019). Rasche and Waddock (2014) emphasise that reaching a consensus on the significance, measurement, and impact of these initiatives continues to be a complex challenge.

2.1.2. Theoretical Foundations of Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is commonly defined as a business's commitment to contribute to sustainable economic development by working with employees, their families, the local community, and broader society to improve quality of life (Dahlsrud, 2008). This commitment is frequently framed through the “Triple Bottom Line” framework—profit, people, and planet—which emphasises the need to balance financial success with social and environmental responsibility (Stobierski, 2023).

CSR strategies are typically structured to facilitate positive societal and environmental impact, functioning as a form of corporate self-regulation. These strategies are often aligned with broader organisational goals and communicated to internal and external stakeholders through CSR reports (Beal & Neesham, 2016). While definitions of “socially responsible” practices vary across organisations, many are guided by the triple bottom line principle, which asserts that business performance should be assessed not solely on profitability but also on social and environmental impact.

However, the application of CSR in practice reveals a fundamental tension: is corporate responsibility a reactive obligation driven by external compliance, or a proactive, co-created value proposition? Lund-Thomsen and Lindgreen (2014) articulate this tension through a comparative analysis of two competing CSR paradigms: Compliance-Based CSR and Cooperation-Based CSR.

The Compliance-Based CSR paradigm focuses on adherence to externally imposed standards, typically through corporate codes of conduct and third-party auditing. This model dominated CSR practice in global supply chains throughout the 1990s and 2000s, relying on certification systems such as SA8000 to enforce labour and environmental standards (Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014; Santos et al., 2018). SA8000, for instance, is an international standard designed to ensure ethical labour practices and safe working environments (Santos et al., 2018).

However, the effectiveness of compliance-based approaches has come under scrutiny. Factory disasters such as the Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh (2013), which killed over 1,100 workers, and the Baldia factory fire in Pakistan (2012), which claimed at least 255 lives, exposed critical weaknesses in these systems (Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014; Shahab, 2021; Siddiqui et al., 2020). Despite holding certifications, these facilities suffered from structural negligence and inadequate emergency protocols. These incidents underscore how certification alone does not guarantee worker safety, particularly in environments plagued by auditing fraud, superficial evaluations, or weak enforcement (Santos et al., 2018; Siddiqui et al., 2020). While standards like SA8000 can help mitigate risks, their success ultimately depends on rigorous implementation, genuine stakeholder engagement, and systemic integrity.

In contrast, the Cooperation-Based CSR paradigm emphasises long-term, trust-based relationships between firms and stakeholders—including NGOs, trade unions, and local communities—to jointly develop sustainable solutions (Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014). This approach moves beyond top-down regulation, focusing instead on capacity building and mutual accountability. International buyers are encouraged to support local suppliers not just by setting standards, but also by providing incentives such as stable orders, fair pricing, and technical assistance. Furthermore, the model promotes participatory social auditing, which involves closer collaboration with local actors to ensure that labour and environmental standards are genuinely upheld (Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014).

This shift from compliance to cooperation reflects a broader understanding that nearly every managerial decision—whether technical, operational, or social—has implications for the environment and society, often in ways that companies may not fully anticipate (Pinto, 2017). The complexity of these impacts contributes to the absence of a universally agreed-upon definition of environmental responsibility, further complicating CSR implementation.

Understanding the motivations and mechanisms behind CSR efforts is crucial to explaining why firms pursue sustainability initiatives. Businesses often support social or environmental causes that extend beyond their immediate operations, driven by both ethical considerations and strategic interests (Jamali, 2008). In the context of B Corp Certification, this balance between purpose and profit is especially salient. For businesses in Africa, B Corp Certification requires integrating social and environmental impact into the core of business operations, often in challenging contexts that demand both innovation and commitment (B Lab, 2023a).

2.1.3. Institutional Theory: Driving Forces Behind CSR Adoption

Following the exploration of the theoretical foundations of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), it is essential to consider the external factors that drive businesses to adopt these practices. Campbell (2007) and Risi et al. (2023) describe that institutional theory provides valuable insights into how organisations respond to societal expectations and pressures and how they shape their CSR strategies.

Velte (2023) and Fortwengel et al. (2023) explain that it suggests that businesses conform to formal rules, regulations, and societal norms to gain legitimacy and align with stakeholder expectations. This section will examine how institutional pressures, such as industry standards, government regulations, and cultural values influence corporate behaviour and contribute to the widespread adoption of CSR initiatives.

Building on the idea that businesses adopt CSR to meet societal expectations, institutional theory offers a deeper understanding of how organisations conform to the rules, norms, and values within their environments (Wang et al., 2014; Risi et al., 2023; Yin & Zhang, 2012).

For example, laws and regulations in some countries require stringent environmental protections, while societal norms may emphasise transparency, fairness, and inclusivity (Marano & Kostova, 2016). Institutional theory-based research emphasises that companies modify their CSR strategies to gain legitimacy and meet these societal demands.

2.2. Standards and Certification Systems

While CSR provides the normative basis for ethical business, standards and certification systems operationalise these values. They make CSR measurable, auditable, and comparable. This section explores how such systems function as forms of private governance and the practical and political tensions they embody.

Building on CSR principles, standards and certification systems translate broad ethical commitments into concrete, enforceable actions. While CSR outlines the moral obligations businesses have toward people and the planet, these systems offer structured mechanisms to monitor, assess, and communicate corporate performance (Waddock, 2008). By defining criteria and benchmarks, they help ensure that CSR is not merely rhetorical but embedded into daily operations and subject to external scrutiny.

These systems serve several purposes. First, they provide a basis for accountability by making social and environmental performance transparent and verifiable. Second, they help firms demonstrate credibility to stakeholders—consumers, investors, regulators, and communities—who increasingly expect businesses to prove their commitment to sustainability. This is particularly relevant in emerging markets, such as those in Africa, where institutional frameworks for enforcement may be weaker, and certification can serve as a proxy for trust (Waddock, 2008).

In the context of this study, understanding how certification systems work is crucial to evaluating their role in enabling or constraining the implementation of sustainable business practices. They are not neutral tools; they reflect and reinforce specific values, priorities, and power dynamics. As forms of private governance, they raise important questions about who sets the standards, who benefits from them, and how effectively they address the complex realities of social and environmental challenges.

2.2.1. The Role of Global Standards in Shaping Sustainable Business Practices

In the context of globalisation, the proliferation of standards has sought to address transnational challenges related to labour conditions, environmental degradation, and governance deficits (Nadvi & Wältring, 2002). Examples include ISO standards, SA8000, Fair Trade, and sector-specific certifications. While these standards are often presented as neutral instruments for promoting responsible business practices, they are shaped by the agendas and interests of powerful actors—predominantly in the Global North—reflecting uneven power dynamics within global supply chains (Bartley, 2007).

These certification systems are best understood as forms of private governance—institutional mechanisms that emerge outside traditional state structures but exert regulatory authority over firms and production processes. As Cashore (2002) argues, these are *non-state market-driven (NSMD)* governance arrangements that either supplement or substitute public regulation. By leveraging consumer and investor preferences, they promote voluntary compliance with social and environmental standards through market incentives rather than legal enforcement. In doing so, they represent a shift from state-centred regulation toward market-based governance, especially in domains where public institutions lack capacity, legitimacy, or global reach.

However, private governance introduces its own set of tensions. Certification systems, while potentially enhancing transparency and accountability, often impose uniform standards without regard to local contexts or capacities. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in developing countries frequently lack the technical knowledge or financial resources needed to comply, leading to exclusion from high-value markets (Ponte, 2008). This raises concerns about equity, representation, and accessibility—particularly when the governance of such systems lies beyond the influence of the very stakeholders who are most affected by them.

Global standards are often promoted by a wide range of actors—including NGOs, multinational buyers, international organisations, and consumers in developed countries—with varied motivations. Some seek to improve human rights and environmental protection, while others pursue economic efficiency, risk management, or brand differentiation (Bartley, 2007; Nadvi & Wältring, 2002). Despite these diverse aims, a common criticism is that such standards frequently prioritise compliance over cooperation, reinforcing a top-down approach to governance.

This mirrors the broader tension within CSR practice between compliance-based and cooperation-based models (Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014). The compliance model, which aligns with the logic of private certification, focuses on meeting predefined standards through audits and third-party verification. It relies on measurable indicators and often assumes that behavioural change will result from external pressure and monitoring. In contrast, the cooperation model promotes inclusive, participatory approaches that foster long-term partnerships between firms, suppliers, trade unions, and local communities. Rather than enforcing standards, it seeks to co-create them, building local capacity and encouraging mutual accountability.

In this light, certification systems can be seen as part of a broader governance typology that includes both public and private forms of regulation, and both compliance- and cooperation-oriented logics. Public governance relies on state institutions, legislation, and formal enforcement mechanisms. Private governance, by contrast, emerges through voluntary codes, corporate initiatives, and transnational standards. The interplay between these modes of governance—often described as hybrid governance—raises important questions about legitimacy, effectiveness, and the balance of power in shaping global norms.

For developing countries, particularly in Africa, this dynamic has significant implications. While certification can offer access to global markets and signal trustworthiness to stakeholders, it also risks deepening asymmetries between firms with and without the capacity to engage in such systems. As Nadvi and Wältring (2002) note, governments and businesses in these contexts often have little influence over the creation of standards, even as they are compelled to comply with them. This lack of agency has made global standards a focal point in debates over the future of the global economy, underscoring the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive forms of governance.

2.2.2. The Impact and Challenges of Certification Systems in Sustainable Business

Certification systems are intended to verify that firms meet established social, environmental, or labour standards through independent, third-party audits (DQS, 2024). Positioned as instruments of transparency and accountability, these systems can reduce information asymmetry, enhance stakeholder trust, and support responsible business conduct (Waddock, 2008). In theory, they offer a structured mechanism for aligning corporate practices with sustainability goals. In practice, however, their effectiveness remains contested.

As forms of private governance, certification systems represent institutional arrangements that operate outside the direct control of state actors, yet exert regulatory influence (Cashore, 2002). They exemplify non-state market-driven (NSMD) governance, where market actors—such as consumers, investors, and certifiers—define and enforce standards. This governance mode relies on voluntary participation and reputational incentives rather than legal compulsion, offering a way to supplement or even substitute for public regulation in the global economy.

Despite their promise, certification systems face substantial limitations. High-profile industrial disasters—such as the Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh and the Baldia factory fire in Pakistan—exposed critical gaps between certification and on-the-ground realities (Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014). In both cases, factories that had passed audits under respected certification schemes were found to have ignored basic safety protocols. These failures point not to flaws in the idea of certification itself, but to weaknesses in implementation, such as superficial auditing, limited enforcement power, and potential conflicts of interest in audit relationships.

Certification also risks becoming a tool of symbolic compliance. Firms may treat certification as a reputational asset rather than a vehicle for substantive change—what critics label “greenwashing” (Bowen & Aragon-Correa, 2014). As with CSR more broadly, the question is not only whether certifications are adopted, but how they function in real business contexts: are they part of a meaningful shift in operations, or simply instruments of risk management and brand positioning?

This distinction closely mirrors the tension between compliance-based and cooperation-based CSR models. Certification systems are typically aligned with the compliance paradigm, which emphasises adherence to externally imposed standards, often enforced through social auditing. However, this top-down model has been criticised for marginalising local voices and failing to build the trust or capacity required for long-term change. In contrast, a cooperation-based model would emphasise participatory auditing, local engagement, and collaborative standard-setting—approaches that remain underdeveloped in most certification schemes (Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014).

In the African context, certification can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, it enables firms to access international markets and signal alignment with global sustainability norms (Amaeshi et al., 2008). On the other, the financial and technical demands of certification create barriers for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which often lack the infrastructure or resources to meet rigorous audit requirements. This raises concerns about inclusivity, particularly in economies where regulatory capacity is limited and firms operate under severe resource constraints.

Moreover, the dominance of certification systems designed by actors in the Global North means that firms in Africa must conform to standards over which they have little influence. This reinforces asymmetrical power relations in global value chains, where Northern buyers set the terms of market entry and Southern producers bear the costs of compliance (Ponte, 2008). Without meaningful mechanisms for local input and contextual adaptation, certification risks deepening rather than alleviating inequality in global production networks.

Ultimately, while certification systems play a valuable role in promoting responsible business conduct, they cannot be relied upon as standalone solutions. Their impact depends on credible auditing, stakeholder engagement, and integration into broader systems of governance—both public and private. For certification to support transformative change, especially in developing

regions, it must move beyond checkbox compliance and embrace more inclusive, context-sensitive, and cooperative forms of governance.

2.3. The Emergence and Impact of B Corps in Sustainable Business

B Corps represent a distinctive form of certification that embeds stakeholder-oriented values into a company's operations and legal identity. This section analyses B Lab, the certifying body; the certification process; and the relevance and challenges of B Corps globally and in Africa.

2.3.1. B Lab and B Corp Certification: A Brief Overview

B Lab, a US-based non-profit established in 2006, plays a central role in promoting a reimagined form of capitalism rooted in stakeholder value (Marquis & Lee, 2015). Through its B Corp certification, it seeks to redefine business success by embedding social and environmental performance into core business operations. Unlike traditional corporate models prioritising shareholder returns, B Corp certification requires companies to consider the impact of their decisions on workers, communities, the environment, and customers (B Lab, 2023c).

The certification process is structured around the B Impact Assessment (BIA), supported by documentation review, periodic recertification, and random audits. Crucially, certified firms must also amend their legal governing documents to formalise their commitment to stakeholder governance. In doing so, B Corps shift their fiduciary obligations from shareholder primacy toward broader societal accountability.

As a private certification regime, B Corp exemplifies a form of non-state market-driven (NSMD) governance (Cashore, 2002). It operates independently of state regulation, yet wields significant normative influence by establishing voluntary standards that shape firm behaviour. This model reflects a cooperative CSR approach, in contrast to more common compliance-driven schemes. Rather than mandating a fixed checklist of outcomes, B Lab encourages firms to continuously improve through a holistic assessment of impact, tailored by sector and size (Stubbs, 2017).

However, B Lab's ideal of inclusive capitalism faces practical limitations. Access to certification is uneven: the process can be time-consuming, resource-intensive, and administratively complex, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and

firms in the Global South. Although B Lab has introduced differentiated pathways and impact business models to improve accessibility, concerns remain about the underlying assumptions embedded in its standards—most of which reflect Global North priorities and norms (Stubbs, 2017; Schilch, 2022).

These tensions reveal broader challenges in private governance systems: even voluntary and value-driven models like B Lab’s can reproduce structural inequities if they fail to adapt to local contexts or account for resource constraints. The B Corp movement’s focus on legal reform and stakeholder alignment represents a promising evolution in CSR thinking, yet its transformative potential may be limited unless its frameworks become more context-sensitive, particularly in emerging markets such as those in Africa.

2.3.2. B Corps in Africa: Contextual Adaptation

The B Corp model is gaining visibility across Africa, supported by initiatives such as B Lab East Africa. Early adopters—including firms like Daproim Africa and Eco2Librium—illustrate the potential for certification to align with local development goals, such as employment creation, community empowerment, and environmental stewardship (Muiru, 2019). However, the broader applicability of B Corp certification across the continent faces significant structural and contextual hurdles.

African firms operate in environments often marked by weak regulatory enforcement, unreliable infrastructure, and limited access to the technical support required to navigate complex certification processes (Daouas, 2001; Tabares, 2021). These constraints challenge the assumption that private governance mechanisms—such as B Corp certification—can serve as effective substitutes for public regulation (Cashore, 2002). Without adequate capacity-building, firms risk exclusion from emerging sustainable markets or falling into superficial compliance without meaningful transformation.

While B Corps are legally required to integrate stakeholder interests into their governance frameworks, the ability to maintain this balance in practice—especially in resource-constrained settings—remains an open question. Scholars such as Stubbs (2017) and Smith (2024) highlight the tension between maintaining social and environmental commitments and responding to market or investor pressure, particularly as companies grow. This is especially salient in Africa,

where economic volatility, limited institutional support, and a dominance of informal markets complicate long-term planning and consistent adherence to high-impact standards.

The B Corp model's cooperative, stakeholder-driven approach to CSR represents a progressive alternative to compliance-based models. Yet its global application risks reproducing inequities if certification frameworks do not adapt to local realities. Many of the standards and assumptions embedded in the B Impact Assessment reflect Global North perspectives, which may not always translate meaningfully into African contexts. As Liute and De Giacomo (2022) argue, the model's transformative potential hinges on both flexibility and inclusiveness.

Ultimately, B Corp certification in Africa illustrates the broader dilemma facing private governance regimes: while they may offer tools to fill governance gaps and promote responsible business, their effectiveness is conditional. It depends on the extent to which they build local capacity, accommodate diverse contexts, and foster accountability not just through performance metrics but through meaningful stakeholder engagement. Without such adaptation, certification risks becoming another barrier—rather than a bridge—to equitable, sustainable business.

2.3.3. Critiques and Limitations of B Corps

While the B Corp model has emerged as a leading example of values-driven capitalism, it is not without significant critiques that question its inclusivity, impact, and scalability—especially in developing regions. One of the most prominent concerns centres on the accessibility of certification. The legal and administrative requirements, coupled with the costs of assessment and recertification, may disproportionately burden smaller enterprises or those operating in less supportive regulatory environments (Stubbs, 2017; Tabares, 2021). Though B Corps span diverse sectors and geographies, the uniformity of the B Impact Assessment (BIA) has been criticised for its “one-size-fits-all” approach, which may inadequately reflect local business conditions, particularly in the Global South (Fonseca et al., 2022).

This raises deeper questions about the kind of corporate social responsibility (CSR) the B Corp framework embodies. B Corp certification tends to rely on a cooperative model of CSR, which encourages companies to voluntarily integrate social and environmental considerations into core decision-making processes (Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014). However, critics argue that without stronger enforcement mechanisms, this model may lack the necessary

accountability to ensure lasting impact, especially when compared to compliance-based CSR models, which are legally mandated and externally enforced. In this context, the B Corp model represents a softer form of corporate regulation—one that is aspirational rather than binding. The governance logic behind B Corp certification further reveals its structural limitations. Certification systems such as B Corps reflect forms of private governance that supplement or substitute public regulation (Cashore, 2002). B Lab, the non-governmental body that administers B Corp certification, functions as a standard-setting organisation, granting legitimacy to firms that meet its prescribed social and environmental metrics. This positions B Corps within the broader typology of transnational private governance—an increasingly influential mechanism in the regulation of corporate conduct in the absence of, or in parallel with, formal state intervention.

However, such private governance mechanisms remain vulnerable to mission drift. As B Corps scale and encounter intensified market competition, there is a risk that financial imperatives will override social or environmental objectives (Stubbs, 2017; Villela et al., 2019). While the certification requires companies to embed stakeholder interests into their legal frameworks, the long-term effectiveness of such structural commitments remains contested. Scholars warn that without external enforcement, companies may revert to profit-driven behaviours, especially under shareholder pressure or during periods of economic instability (Richardson & O'Higgins, 2019).

This concern is particularly salient in emerging markets like Africa, where structural inequalities, fragmented regulatory systems, and limited institutional support challenge the practical application of global standards (Tabares, 2021). Although African B Corps such as Daprom Africa and Eco2Librium offer encouraging examples of impact at the Bottom of the Pyramid, their successes may not be easily replicable in broader contexts without systemic support. Moreover, the expansion of B Corps into diverse economic landscapes raises concerns about whether their global proliferation prioritises reputational branding over genuine transformation. Critics caution that firms may adopt certification as a form of greenwashing, capitalising on the halo effect of ethical branding without undergoing substantive change (Bowen & Aragon-Correa, 2014).

The current momentum behind the B Corp movement reflects a growing global demand for business models that align profit with purpose. Yet this rapid growth also calls for scrutiny. As

the number of certified companies increases, the B Corp label risks becoming diluted unless the certification process evolves to account for regional disparities, firm size, and sector-specific challenges. To ensure meaningful impact, future iterations of the model must strike a more deliberate balance between accessibility and rigour, while also clarifying its position within the broader CSR and governance landscape.

In sum, while B Corps offer a valuable framework for reimagining business purpose through private governance, their long-term legitimacy and transformative potential depend on addressing fundamental questions about equity, accountability, and governance design. Incorporating a more pluralistic understanding of CSR and critically engaging with the limitations of voluntary certification schemes will be key to ensuring that the B Corp model delivers on its ambitious promise.

2.4. *Prior Studies Aligned with Research Sub-Questions*

Sub-Question	Relevant Literature
1. What prompts businesses in Africa to adopt B Corp standards?	Jamali (2008); Rosca & Taylor (2023); Villela et al. (2019); Muiru (2019)
2. How is the process of obtaining B Corp certification undertaken in Africa?	B Lab (2023c); Stubbs (2017); Schilch (2022); Tabares (2021)
3. What transformations are initiated by the implementation of these standards?	Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen (2014); Pinto (2017); Stubbs (2017)
4. What are the outcomes, encompassing both advantages and disadvantages, of achieving B Corp certification?	Amaeshi et al. (2008); Bowen & Aragon-Correa (2014); Richardson & O'Higgins (2019)

2.5. *Conclusion*

This literature review has traced the evolution of corporate social responsibility (CSR) from a shareholder-centric approach to a broader stakeholder model, highlighting how environmental, social, and governance (ESG) concerns have become integral to contemporary conceptions of responsible business. The discussion has engaged critically with theoretical frameworks—including institutional theory and governance typologies—to better understand how firms

respond to external pressures such as societal expectations, regulatory constraints, and certification standards (Risi et al., 2023).

Particular attention has been given to the role of certification systems, which operationalise CSR principles through formalised frameworks. Standards like SA8000 and B Corp offer mechanisms for demonstrating accountability and legitimacy in a global economy where public governance alone often fails to ensure corporate responsibility. As such, these frameworks represent forms of private governance that increasingly *supplement or substitute public regulation* (Cashore, 2002). Yet their efficacy depends not only on rigorous metrics but also on context-specific adaptability—especially in regions where institutional capacity and regulatory enforcement are weak.

Within this broader governance landscape, the B Corp model has emerged as a prominent example of voluntary, cooperative CSR. It encourages firms to integrate stakeholder interests and social purpose into their legal and operational structures, while offering a third-party certification as a marker of commitment. However, as this review has shown, the model remains contested. Its cooperative, values-driven approach contrasts with compliance-based CSR, raising questions about enforcement, accountability, and long-term impact. The B Impact Assessment provides a structured entry point for firms seeking certification, but concerns remain around its applicability across diverse economies and firm sizes, particularly in the Global South.

The limitations of the B Corp model also illuminate broader tensions in private governance: between accessibility and credibility, growth and integrity, voluntary adoption and enforceable standards. As such, while B Corps hold potential for catalysing change—particularly in under-resourced contexts where sustainable development is urgent—their transformative promise hinges on overcoming structural barriers such as high certification costs, legal hurdles, and mission drift in competitive markets.

Ultimately, this review positions B Corp certification not simply as a tool for corporate accountability, but as a site of negotiation between competing CSR models and governance regimes. It raises critical questions about how legitimacy is constructed in global sustainability transitions, and whose interests are prioritised in these processes. These insights frame the empirical inquiry that follows, which examines how African firms adopt, navigate, and interpret the B Corp framework in practice. The study contributes to broader debates on how

voluntary standards can evolve to become more inclusive, context-sensitive, and genuinely transformative in diverse global settings.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the research design, methodological approach, data collection methods, sampling strategy, and data analysis techniques used in this study. The aim is to provide a transparent and detailed account of how the research was conducted, in line with the interpretivist orientation of the study. While adopting an interpretivist stance, the term “objectivity” here refers not to positivist detachment, but to the transparency, traceability, and auditability of the analytical process, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative embedded case study design to explore the motivations, challenges, and opportunities associated with B Corp certification in Africa. A case study approach is particularly suited to examining complex, contemporary phenomena within their real-life contexts—especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its environment are fluid or indistinct (Yin, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The embedded structure allows for the analysis of multiple units, namely: (1) African businesses that are certified or actively pursuing B Corp certification, and (2) ecosystem stakeholders such as B Lab representatives and affiliated intermediaries. This enables a context-sensitive and comparative exploration across diverse institutional environments and organisational experiences.

Given Africa’s heterogeneous regulatory systems, developmental priorities, and business resource constraints, a single-case design would be insufficient. The embedded case design permits both intra-case depth and cross-case comparison, revealing how the B Corp model is navigated differently across African regions. It aligns with the research objective of understanding how firms within varied African contexts engage with global sustainability standards and governance frameworks.

The research is grounded in an interpretivist epistemological stance, recognising that knowledge is co-constructed through the meanings, perceptions, and values of actors. This orientation is appropriate given the study’s focus on how organisational actors interpret and implement B Corp principles. While the research acknowledges the inherent subjectivity of qualitative inquiry, it also upholds the principles of analytical rigour, transparency, and

traceability. In this study, objectivity refers not to detached neutrality but to methodological robustness, ensured through researcher reflexivity, systematic coding, and triangulation (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

3.2. Research strategy and approach

Building on the case study design, this research makes use of a qualitative approach, distinguished by its diverse methods and interpretive, naturalistic perspective. This approach is particularly well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena within real-world contexts, as it enables the study of phenomena in their natural settings, emphasising the meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data collection methods typically include interviews, focus groups, observations, and content analysis, which allow for an in-depth investigation of social realities (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Qualitative research begins with assumptions and theoretical frameworks that guide the examination of research problems, focusing on how individuals and groups interpret social or human issues (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The interpretive nature of qualitative research prioritises understanding processes and subjective experiences, rather than merely focusing on outcomes. It involves a collaborative creation of knowledge between researchers and participants, delving into how individuals interpret their experiences and the societal frameworks that influence their perspectives (Aspers & Corte, 2019). This process-driven approach enables researchers to uncover layers of meaning that shape human experiences within specific contexts.

Moreover, qualitative research is inherently descriptive, offering rich, detailed portrayals of phenomena. It is flexible, allowing research questions and methods to evolve as new insights emerge during the study (Siegle, 2019). This adaptability is a key strength, providing a responsive and iterative exploration of social issues, particularly when new patterns or themes arise.

In the context of this study, qualitative research is ideal for capturing the complexities, motivations, and challenges businesses face. The diverse socio-economic environments of African countries require an in-depth exploration. This approach allows for a deep understanding of the unique perspectives and context-specific factors that shape how African businesses engage with the B Corp certification.

Qualitative methods—such as interviews—help uncover the motivations driving African businesses to pursue B Corp certification. These motivations are embedded in the cultural, social, and economic contexts of each business. Through qualitative research, the underlying values, beliefs, and aspirations that inspire African businesses to adopt socially and environmentally responsible practices can be revealed, along with the specific benefits they hope to achieve through certification.

Furthermore, the challenges of implementing B Corp standards in Africa are complex and context-dependent, involving factors such as resource access and local perceptions of sustainability (Adams et al., 2012). Qualitative research's emphasis on process and context is well-suited to exploring these challenges in detail.

The flexibility of qualitative research is another advantage in this study, allowing the research to adapt as new challenges or motivations are uncovered. This iterative process is essential for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the B Corp experience in Africa, ensuring the research captures the full complexity of the certification process and its implications.

Additionally, qualitative research emphasises the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and participants. By engaging directly with African business leaders, employees, and other stakeholders, this study incorporates their voices and perspectives, enhancing the validity of the research and producing a more meaningful and contextually relevant analysis of the motivations and challenges associated with B Corp certification in Africa.

To ensure the quality and trustworthiness of the research, criteria such as transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity were rigorously addressed. Transferability was strengthened by providing detailed contextual information, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings (Clarke & Jack, 1998). Dependability was ensured by transparently reporting the research process, allowing other researchers to replicate the study. Confirmability was established through an audit trail documenting the decisions and actions taken throughout the research. Authenticity was upheld by accurately representing participants' perspectives without distortion (Clarke & Jack, 1998).

The selection of a qualitative research approach aligns with the study's objective to delineate and understand the intricate aspects of B Corp certification in Africa. This methodological choice allows for the exploration of the certification process within its broader contextual framework (Andeobu et al., 2021). By focusing on the experiences of research participants, the

study provides a nuanced understanding of the subject. Additionally, the qualitative approach allows for iterative refinement of the research question as the study unfolds (Barakso et al., 2014). The exploratory nature of the study seeks to uncover the underlying factors influencing African businesses' decisions to pursue B Corp certification, as well as the challenges they face in the process.

3.3. Data collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with two key respondent groups: Representatives from African B Corps (both certified and pursuing certification), and key stakeholders such as B Lab Africa representatives, consultants, and affiliated intermediaries.

The interview guide was shaped by the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter 2, drawing particularly on institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008) and contrasting compliance- versus cooperation-based CSR paradigms (Garriga & Melé, 2004; Matten & Moon, 2008). Questions probed firms' certification motivations, perceptions of legitimacy, institutional pressures, and experiences navigating the B Corp process within their local context.

Interviews were transcribed and coded using a thematic analysis approach. Coding themes were initially informed by institutional theory and CSR paradigms outlined in Chapter 2, and subsequently refined through an iterative process based on emergent patterns in the data.

Figure 1. Data Collection Activities



Figure Source: Creswell & Poth (2018).

This figure provides a structured overview of the data gathering process, aligning with the research's qualitative methodology. This figure underscores the essential steps in conducting ethical and thorough research, from initially identifying relevant participants and sites to purposefully sampling and securely storing collected data. The sequential layout emphasises the importance of rapport-building and purposeful selection, which is vital in understanding the motivations, challenges, and unique contextual factors faced by African businesses in adopting B Corp standards.

3.3.1. Document analysis

Document analysis played an essential role in this study by providing contextual depth and enabling the triangulation of interview findings. While semi-structured interviews captured the

experiences and perspectives of individuals directly involved in B Corp certification, document analysis complemented these insights by offering a procedural, institutional, and discursive foundation for understanding how certification unfolds across African contexts. This dual-method approach strengthened the credibility of the findings by allowing for cross-validation between data sources.

The documents reviewed in this study included a range of materials relevant to the B Corp ecosystem in Africa. These comprised public and internal reports produced by B Lab Africa and B Lab Global, including annual reviews, strategic plans, and ecosystem progress updates. Certification-related records were also analysed, such as regional directories listing certified companies, firm-level certification timelines, and public B Impact Assessment (BIA) scores. In addition, the study examined internal guidance documents and communication materials produced by B Lab Africa and affiliated intermediaries, which provided insight into the certification process and support structures available to African firms.

To understand how certified businesses positioned themselves publicly, company-level documents such as sustainability reports, mission statements, and website communications were included in the analysis. These sources offered information on firms' stated values, social and environmental goals, and how they framed their B Corp status. Policy briefs and third-party publications commenting on sustainable business practices and certification systems in Africa were also reviewed, helping to contextualise the broader governance landscape in which B Corp certification operates.

These documents were selected to fulfil three primary functions within the study. First, they provided critical contextual information, situating participant narratives within the broader institutional, regulatory, and organisational environment. Second, they served as a means of triangulating key interview themes. For instance, when participants discussed challenges such as limited access to certification resources or capacity-building tools, these claims were cross-checked with references in B Lab Africa reports that described similar regional constraints. Likewise, motivations such as improving stakeholder credibility or measuring impact were verified against firms' public BIA profiles and value statements.

Third, document analysis helped trace the evolution and regional uptake of B Corp certification over time. This enabled the researcher to identify patterns in certification distribution across countries and sectors, as well as to highlight discrepancies between formal institutional

narratives and the lived experiences of businesses. For example, while some organisations publicly emphasised the aspirational dimensions of certification, interviewees from those same firms also reported pragmatic concerns about costs and administrative burdens—concerns that were often absent from formal communications.

The integration of document and interview data allowed for a more robust and nuanced interpretation of how B Corp standards are implemented in Africa. Rather than treating documents as neutral or purely factual sources, the analysis approached them as situated texts that reflect institutional norms, strategic positioning, and broader power dynamics within the certification ecosystem. This interpretive reading helped to uncover not only consistencies but also silences and tensions between discourse and practice. Overall, document analysis contributed significantly to the depth, validity, and analytical rigour of the study by reinforcing or complicating findings derived from participant interviews and revealing how B Corp certification is constructed, communicated, and contested across African contexts.

3.3.2. Sampling strategy and participant selection criteria

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy to select participants for the interviews. Purposive sampling involves deliberately selecting participants based on specific characteristics, knowledge, or experiences that are relevant to the research objectives (Ncsc, 2022). Purposive sampling refers to a group of non-probability sampling techniques in which units are selected because they have characteristics that you need in your sample. In other words, units are selected “on purpose” in purposive sampling (Nikolopoulou, 2023).

In this study, participants were selected based on their direct involvement with B Corp in Africa or their expertise in sustainability and CSR practices within the region. The participant selection criteria for this study were carefully designed to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and experiences.

The participant selection criteria included individuals who directly engaged with the B Corp standards within the African context. The stakeholders included individuals working in African businesses that have successfully achieved B Corp certification (see Table 1). Furthermore, representatives from the organisation responsible for administering B Corp certification. To capture the diversity of the African continent, the study focused on ten organisations with B Corp certifications operating in various countries and industries (see Table 1). This approach

aimed to ensure that regional differences in economic, social, and regulatory environments were adequately represented in the findings. Moreover, members of B Lab were included in the study (see Table 1). These participants were involved in the certification process and provided support to businesses in Africa. Their insights were crucial in understanding the main aspects to the certification, the standards businesses must meet, and the support mechanisms available to companies pursuing B Corp certification in the region.

This sampling strategy ensured that the study captured a diverse range of perspectives, including insights from businesses of varying sizes, industries, and geographical locations within Africa. By engaging with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, the research was able to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing B Corp certification in Africa.

The selection criteria were developed to ensure that the study reflects a broad spectrum of experiences related to African B Corps. One of the primary criteria was the inclusion of individuals who are directly engaged in B Corp certification. This includes representatives from key organisations such as B Lab Africa and B Lab Spain/Europe, as well as from businesses that have successfully obtained or are in the process of obtaining B Corp certification. By involving these stakeholders, the study gained direct insights from those who have firsthand experience with the certification process.

Diversity was another crucial consideration in the participant selection process. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of B Corp certification in Africa, it was important to include individuals with varied backgrounds, experiences, and roles. This meant seeking participants from a range of industries, company sizes, and professional roles. For example, one B Corp interviewed is a Registered UK Charity focusing on two sectors in Ghana—Catering and Industrial Waste Management—that exists for public benefit, supporting SMEs to adopt future-friendly practices, address growth challenges, and create jobs by using supply chains as a tool for development (see Table 1 for an overview).

Similarly, another B Corp interviewed for this research, established in 2018, is a pioneering company committed to increasing energy inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa by deploying and operating mini-grids. Their innovative, sustainable business model aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals, creating jobs, enhancing education, and empowering women.

Lastly, another B Corp in Africa interviewed for this research focuses on the development of a long-lasting mosquito repellent soap and an ointment in the fight against malaria, primarily operating in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Togo.

Geographical diversity was also a key focus, recognizing that the experiences and challenges associated with B Corp certification may differ across different regions of Africa. To capture these potential regional variations, participants were selected from various countries within the continent. Additionally, the study aimed to include both multinational corporations and SMEs, given that organisational size might influence the certification process and the motivations and challenges behind pursuing B Corp status. Furthermore, practical considerations, such as the accessibility and availability of potential participants, were also factored into the selection process. While striving for diversity, the study sought to avoid an over-reliance on any single type of participant, ensuring a balanced representation across different categories (see Table 1).

Given that the study aims to explore the motivations, challenges, and opportunities of B Corp certification in Africa, the interview structure and questions were carefully designed to ensure they effectively addressed the research question and its sub-questions. The interview framework included both opening and closing queries, intended to gather not only the key information needed to answer the research question but also to provide deeper insights into each firm, the participants, and their experiences with the B Corp certification.

The interview questions were thoughtfully organised into sections that corresponded to different aspects of the B Corp certification. This structure facilitated a detailed exploration of the participants' motivations for pursuing certification, the challenges they encountered during the process, and their perceptions of the outcomes after certification. Each section of the interviews was carefully crafted to address these key themes, ensuring that the conversations were both comprehensive and insightful, shedding light on both the theoretical frameworks and the practical realities of implementing B Corp standards within the diverse African business landscape.

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study because they allowed the interviews to adapt to the natural flow of conversation. This flexibility enabled the researcher to delve deeper into unexpected insights or follow up on new topics that emerged based on participants' responses.

This dynamic approach made the interviews more engaging, encouraging richer discussions that captured the complexity and variability of experiences across different African businesses.

Additionally, the adaptability of the interview process allowed for consideration of the unique backgrounds and expertise of each participant. This flexibility enriched the data collected, enabling participants to share their experiences and perspectives in a way that was most relevant to their specific roles and contexts. As a result, the study offered a well-rounded and nuanced understanding of the B Corp certification, reflecting the diverse realities faced by businesses across Africa.

3.3.3. Description of Interview Partner

The interviewed companies—referred to as B Corp 1, B Corp 2, B Corp 3, and so forth—operate across various industries throughout Africa, offering diverse perspectives on sustainability and social impact. Each business navigates unique challenges and opportunities in its pursuit of B Corp certification. Additionally, interviews were conducted with representatives from B Lab Africa and B Lab Spain to gain insights into the certification process from a regional and global perspective.

The participating B Corps represent a wide range of sectors, including renewable energy, consulting services, retail, and personal care products. While their primary operations are based in Africa, some also maintain business activities in Europe and beyond, highlighting their role in the broader global B Corp movement. Throughout their certification journey, these businesses have encountered obstacles such as financial constraints, administrative complexities, and limited market awareness of B Corp principles. At the same time, certification has provided opportunities to strengthen their market positioning, enhance credibility, and foster collaboration within the B Corp community (see Table 1 for an overview of the interview participants included in this study).

3.3.4. Conducting the interviews

The interviews were conducted against the backdrop of the unique regulatory environments of African countries, where businesses often face resource limitations, bureaucracy, and a lack of awareness about global certification systems. This study also considers how these constraints shape the implementation of B Corp standards, making the findings particularly relevant for businesses and policymakers aiming to foster sustainability in emerging markets.

The interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams as well as Google Meet, both of which are video conferencing platforms that facilitated both the recording and transcription of the sessions. Each interview lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes, providing sufficient time for in-depth discussions. The use of these video conferencing platforms enabled the collection of observational data, particularly from participants who had their cameras on and those who shared additional visual information using the screen-sharing tool. This added layer of data collection provided further context to the verbal responses, enriching the overall analysis.

Before each interview, participants received a brief introduction to the research, an agenda outlining the topics to be covered, a preview of the questions, and a consent form via email. This preparation allowed participants to familiarise themselves with the research objectives and to consider their responses in advance. The interview schedule and questionnaires were piloted before the actual interviews to ensure clarity and relevance of the questions, as well as to confirm that they would elicit meaningful data.

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher provided a brief introduction, explained the research purpose again, and reviewed the consent guidelines to ensure that participants were still willing to proceed with the recording. During the interviews, while the structured schedule was followed, the researcher remained flexible, allowing the conversation to flow naturally. When new ideas emerged, additional questions were asked, and relevant areas of interest were explored further.

Occasionally, participants anticipated certain questions and provided answers before they were formally asked, which led to adjustments in the interview process. All consent forms, interview recordings, and transcriptions were securely stored on cloud storage, with backups in place to ensure that no data was lost.

3.4. Data analysis

This research employed a thematic coding approach, a method widely used in qualitative analysis to identify, analyse, and report patterns or themes across a data set. Thematic coding involves systematically reviewing the interview transcripts to uncover recurring themes and concepts that are relevant to the research questions. This process begins with the initial coding

of the data, where segments of the text are labelled with codes that represent key ideas or topics (Jnanathapaswi, 2021).

As the coding progresses, these initial codes are grouped into broader categories or themes that capture the essence of the participants' experiences and insights. Thematic coding not only helps in organising the data but also enables the researcher to interpret the underlying meanings and relationships between different themes (Naeem et al., 2023). This method is particularly valuable for exploring complex, context-specific phenomena like B Corp certification in Africa, as it allows for a deep, nuanced analysis of the data while remaining flexible to new themes that may emerge during the process (Levitt et al., 2018).

By employing thematic coding, the research was able to systematically distil the rich qualitative data into coherent themes that reflect the motivations, challenges, and opportunities associated with B Corp certification in the diverse African business environment. This approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives, ensuring that the analysis was both thorough and insightful.

3.4.1. Data organisation and preparation

The data preparation process involved meticulously transcribing the interviews from the recorded sessions. This critical step ensured that all verbal information was accurately captured for analysis. After the initial transcription, each transcript was carefully reviewed and cross-referenced with the original recordings to verify accuracy. This double-checking process was essential for confirming that every detail, nuance, and participant expression was correctly transcribed, preserving the integrity of the data. By ensuring the accuracy of the transcriptions, the research established a solid foundation for the subsequent thematic analysis, allowing for a more reliable and comprehensive exploration of the insights shared by the participants.

3.4.2. Data review and reflection

The researcher conducted a systematic and iterative review of the interview transcripts, employing a reflexive approach to data interpretation. This process began with an initial close reading of each transcript to familiarise with the content, followed by a more detailed coding process in which explicit responses and underlying meanings were carefully examined. Emerging themes, patterns, and discrepancies across different interviews were captured and analysed. Additionally, the researcher engaged in constant comparison, cross-referencing data

points to ensure consistency and depth in interpretation. This methodological reflection allowed for a nuanced understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences, ensuring that the analysis was both rigorous and contextually grounded.

3.4.3. Coding data

The coding process began with the systematic segmentation of transcribed interview data into meaningful analytical units. These segments were carefully examined to identify recurring ideas, patterns, or expressions that reflected participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the B Corp certification process in Africa. Each segment was assigned a code—a representative label that captured the core idea embedded in the response.

Importantly, the development of these codes was not purely inductive. Coding themes were initially informed by the institutional theory and CSR paradigms outlined in Chapter 2, particularly the distinction between compliance-based and cooperation-based models of corporate responsibility (Garriga & Melé, 2004; Matten & Moon, 2008), as well as institutional logics and pressures described in the work of DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Scott (2008). These theoretical frameworks provided a conceptual lens through which the data were first approached and helped shape the initial structure of the interview guide. For example, questions about stakeholder expectations, perceived legitimacy, and internal versus external motivations were directly derived from prior literature on institutional isomorphism and CSR typologies.

As the coding progressed, new themes also emerged inductively from the data. The process was iterative and reflexive, allowing for the refinement and expansion of the initial code list in response to unanticipated but recurring concepts. Codes were revised and grouped into broader thematic categories that reflected both theoretically grounded constructs and context-specific insights derived from the African certification experience.

This hybrid approach to coding—combining deductive structures from existing theory with inductive sensitivity to empirical detail—ensured both conceptual depth and responsiveness to the data. The resulting thematic framework provided the basis for in-depth analysis of how African firms interpret, negotiate, and implement the principles of B Corp certification in diverse institutional contexts (see Appendix for codebook and examples).

3.4.4. Generating description and themes

The coding process was instrumental in developing detailed descriptions and organising the data into coherent categories and themes for analysis. Through careful examination and classification of the coded segments, a set of significant themes was identified, each representing a key aspect of the research findings. These themes were not only comprehensive but also supported by a diverse array of quotations and evidence drawn directly from the interviews, ensuring that the analysis was deeply rooted in the participants' own words and experiences.

By linking the coded data to broader thematic categories, it was possible to construct a narrative that highlighted the most important and recurring concepts across the interviews. This approach allowed for the emergence of a small number of significant themes that encapsulated the core insights of the study. These themes were robustly supported by the qualitative evidence, ensuring that they were reflective of the varied perspectives and experiences of the participants, and providing a solid foundation for the final analysis and discussion of the research findings.

3.4.5. Representation of description and themes

The last step involved determining the most effective way to represent the detailed descriptions and themes within the qualitative narrative. This required thoughtful consideration of how to best convey the complexity and richness of the data in a clear and coherent manner. To achieve this, an overarching coding framework was developed, which served as a visual representation of the relationships between the various themes and categories identified during the analysis.

This coding framework, or figure, provided a structured overview of the key themes, illustrating how they interconnected and contributed to the overall findings of the study. By mapping out these connections, the framework helped to organise the qualitative narrative, ensuring that the presentation of the themes was both logical and accessible to the reader. This approach allowed the narrative to flow seamlessly, guiding the reader through the intricacies of the data while highlighting the most significant insights and their relevance to the research question. The use of this visual representation not only clarified the analysis but also reinforced the depth and coherence of the qualitative findings.

In conclusion, during the interview process, notes were taken to capture significant points, highlight early findings, and guide follow-up questions. Each interview was recorded and

transcribed to ensure accuracy. The transcripts were carefully reviewed against the recordings to verify that all information and quotes were faithfully captured, preserving the integrity of the data. An initial pre-coding stage involved reviewing each transcript to identify key points, which laid the groundwork for a more detailed analysis. Major themes were then systematically categorised and organised into a master coding table, providing a comprehensive overview of the insights. Finally, the data was interpreted to create an overall coding figure, visually representing the key concepts and themes. All coding and analysis were conducted manually, allowing for a thorough and nuanced engagement with the qualitative data.

3.5. Research criteria

To ensure that this proposed research met the necessary academic standards, significant emphasis was placed on both reliability and validity. Reliability was addressed by designing a methodology that is thorough, replicable, and easy to follow, thereby ensuring that the methods used could consistently yield similar results if repeated in future studies. This approach underscores the research's commitment to producing dependable and consistent outcomes.

In parallel, the research focused on validity by carefully selecting the most appropriate approach for investigating the research questions, ensuring that the findings accurately reflect the phenomena under study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Validity was not treated in isolation but was closely integrated with the concept of 'trustworthiness,' which is essential in qualitative research (Noble & Smith, 2015). Trustworthiness encompasses several critical criteria, including credibility, authenticity, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Noble & Smith, 2015). Each of these criteria was thoroughly considered and applied within the context of this study.

Credibility was ensured by accurately representing the participants' experiences and perspectives. Authenticity was maintained by faithfully capturing the voices of the participants without distortion. Dependability was achieved through a transparent and documented research process, allowing for future replication. Confirmability was reinforced by establishing an audit trail, which provides evidence that the findings are grounded in the data rather than researcher bias. Finally, transferability was addressed by providing rich, detailed descriptions of the research context, enabling others to assess the applicability of the findings to different settings. Each of these aspects contributes to the overall rigour and trustworthiness of the research.

3.6. Research limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. One key limitation is the sample size, which, while sufficient for qualitative research, restricts the generalisability of the results. Although efforts were made to include a diverse range of participants, the findings may not fully capture the experiences of all businesses across Africa. Additionally, the study relies on self-reported data, which is subject to potential biases such as social desirability bias and recall bias. Participants may have provided responses they believed to be socially acceptable or may have struggled to accurately recall past events, affecting the reliability of the data. Another limitation arises from the diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts across African countries, which may have influenced the findings. While the study sought to account for regional differences by including participants from various locations, contextual factors specific to certain areas may still have shaped the results. Furthermore, practical constraints limited access to certain key stakeholders, particularly those from smaller or less accessible businesses. This may have resulted in an incomplete representation of the full range of experiences associated with the B Corp certification process in Africa. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities businesses face when pursuing B Corp certification. The rigorous application of qualitative methods, combined with careful ethical and methodological considerations, ensures that the findings remain credible and meaningful. The study contributes to the broader discourse on sustainability and corporate responsibility in Africa by offering a deeper understanding of the motivations, barriers, and structural factors influencing businesses in this space.

3.7. *Research ethics*

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were rigorously observed to uphold the highest standards of academic integrity. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Cape Town's Research Ethics Committee (REC), ensuring that the study complied with all necessary ethical guidelines. The primary ethical considerations for this research included informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity, all of which were carefully managed to protect the rights and well-being of the participants.

3.7.1. Informed consent

Informed consent was a cornerstone of this research. Consent was obtained from each participant before any interviews or data collection took place. Verbal consent was reaffirmed at the start of each interview before any recordings began, ensuring that participants were fully informed and continued to consent to their participation throughout the process.

3.7.2. Voluntary participation

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. Individuals were given the freedom to decide whether to participate based on their interest, availability, and willingness. They were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any obligation or consequences. This assurance was clearly communicated in the initial contact with participants, emphasising that their participation was based solely on their free will.

3.7.3. Confidentiality and anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained to protect the privacy of the participants and the information they shared. The identities of participants were safeguarded by not revealing their names, and their positions within their organisations were described in general terms. These measures were implemented to ensure that sensitive information remained confidential and that the identities of participants and organisations were protected throughout the research process.

Moreover, the study adhered to ethical guidelines by ensuring transparency in the research process and accuracy in reporting the findings. This approach was designed to avoid any bias or misrepresentation, ensuring that the research conclusions were based on truthful and accurate reflections of the participants' contributions. By maintaining these rigorous ethical standards, the research upheld its commitment to protecting the rights and integrity of all participants involved.

3.8. Section Summary

The Methodology section of this study outlines the qualitative research design, data collection methods, sampling strategy, and analytical approach employed to investigate the motivations, challenges, and opportunities associated with B Corp certification in Africa. A multiple

embedded case study design was adopted to enable in-depth exploration of diverse African businesses and key stakeholders—including B Lab representatives and affiliated intermediaries—who are involved in or influencing the certification process. This design allowed for the examination of both intra-case dynamics and cross-case variation, offering a nuanced understanding of how firms engage with global sustainability standards in varied African contexts.

The study is grounded in an interpretivist epistemological stance, which recognises that knowledge is socially constructed through actors' meanings, perceptions, and situated experiences. Within this interpretivist orientation, however, the term objectivity is used not to imply detached neutrality, but rather to indicate the transparency, traceability, and auditability of the analytical process. Efforts to uphold methodological rigour included detailed documentation of coding procedures, researcher reflexivity, and triangulation of data sources.

Data collection involved two primary methods: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of certified B Corps and certification ecosystem actors across different African regions and industries. This approach enabled the inclusion of a wide range of perspectives and contextual realities. Semi-structured interviews were guided by themes derived from the literature, particularly institutional theory and CSR paradigms discussed in Chapter 2. Questions focused on institutional pressures, stakeholder dynamics, legitimacy-seeking behaviour, and internal motivations for certification.

The document analysis component played a central role in both contextualising and triangulating interview data. Sources included public and internal reports from B Lab Africa and B Lab Global, B Impact Assessment profiles, certification directories, company sustainability reports, mission statements, and policy briefs related to sustainable enterprise. These documents were used to verify trends identified in interviews, trace the regional evolution of certification, and assess consistency between organisational narratives and actual practices. A detailed account of the document types and their role in analysis is provided in Section 3.3.1.

Data were analysed using thematic coding. Coding themes were initially informed by institutional theory and CSR paradigms outlined in Chapter 2, ensuring that the analysis was theoretically grounded. As coding progressed, the framework was refined inductively to accommodate emergent patterns and context-specific insights. This iterative process allowed

for the development of a thematic structure that captured both anticipated and unexpected dimensions of the certification experience in Africa.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the research process. All participants gave informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines. The study's methodological approach—emphasising reflexivity, triangulation, and conceptual grounding—aimed to ensure the credibility, dependability, and transferability of the findings.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the research findings, analysis, and discussion, structured around the main research question and sub-questions outlined in Chapter 1. Building on the literature review in Chapter 2 and the research methodology detailed in Chapter 3, this section aims to uncover the motivations, challenges, and opportunities for African businesses pursuing B Corp certification. The aim of this chapter is to, firstly, provide an understanding of the research and regional context, laying a foundation for the subsequent analysis of the data. It explores the economic, social, and environmental factors unique to the African continent that shape businesses' engagement with B Corp standards. For example, environmental factors include the impact of climate change on agriculture-dependent economies, such as prolonged droughts in East Africa and rising sea levels threatening coastal cities like Lagos (Ndimele et al., 2024).

Secondly, it investigates the motivations behind African businesses' pursuit of B Corp certification, analysing the key factors that prompt them to seek this globally recognised standard. The chapter also examines the unique challenges these businesses encounter, both in obtaining and maintaining the certification. Lastly, the data highlights several opportunities for African B Corps, offering insights into resource allocation, market positioning, and long-term sustainability strategies. The findings aim to enhance understanding of the dynamics shaping B Corp certification in Africa.

The research was conducted across African regions, engaging with businesses that are either B Corp certified or actively working towards certification. Africa, as a diverse continent, faces distinct challenges and opportunities that impact the adoption of global standards like B Corp. Many African countries grapple with economic instability, resource constraints, and varying levels of regulatory oversight, which can complicate the process of adhering to international sustainability standards (Simbanegavi, 2019). At the same time, the continent is also characterised by rapid economic growth in certain regions, an emerging middle class, and increasing demand for socially and environmentally responsible business practices (Sanders, 2017). This creates a fertile ground for businesses to adopt B Corp standards, particularly in response to growing local and international pressures for sustainability and ethical governance.

Table 1. Interview Partner Overview

This figure provides an overview of the B Corps interviewed for this study:

Interview	Interview Partner	Position of Interviewee	Location (HQ)	Operates in	Company Size	Industry	B Corp Certified Since	Time
1	B Lab Spain	Managing Director	Barcelona, Catalunya	Spain	11-50 employees, 45 associated members	Think Tanks	Founded in 2017	30-45min
2	B Lab Africa	Communications and Engagement In Charge - Africa Region	Nairobi, Kenya	Africa	2-10 employees, 16 associated members	Non-profit Organisations	Founded in January 2017	30-45min
3	B Corp 1	B Corp Programme Manager	Accra, Greater Accra	Ghana	11-50 employees, 26 associated members	Think Tanks	Jan-18	30min
4	B Corp 2	Impact and Public Affairs Director	Antananarivo Province, Madagascar	Madagascar, Mali	51-200 employees, 77 associated members	Solar panel installation	Jan-23	30min
5	B Corp 3	Market Builder and B Leader - Southern Africa	Cape Town, South Africa	South Africa	2-10 employees	Business Consulting and Services	not B Corp but sustainable business consultancy	30-45min
6	B Corp 4	Owner & Financial Director	Khomas Region, Namibia	Botswana, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe	11-50 employees, 19 associated members	Other personal services	Jul-24	30min

7	B Corp 5	Marketing & Communications Officer	Western Cape, South Africa	Australia, Cyprus, Malawi, Mauritius, South Africa, Uganda, United Kingdom	51-200 employees, 59 associated members	Management consultant - nonprofits	May-17	30min
8	B Corp 6	Co-founder / President	Kadiogo Province, Burkina Faso	Burkina Faso	2-10 employees, 9 associated members	Personal care products	Jun-20	30-45min
9	B Corp 7	Senior Economic Consultant	Western Cape, South Africa	Australia, Cyprus, Malawi, Mauritius, South Africa, Uganda, United Kingdom	51-200 employees, 59 associated members	Management consultant - nonprofits	May-17	30min
10	B Corp 8	CEO of B Corp 8	Western Cape, South Africa	South Africa	51-200 employees, 67 associated members	General retail via Internet	Nov-21	20min
11	B Corp 9	COO of B Corp 9	North Holland, Netherlands	Netherlands, Lesotho, Uganda, Kenya and Cambodia	201-500 employees, 154 associated members	Renewable Energy Semiconductor Manufacturing	Feb-18	20min
12	B Corp 10	Policy Analysis Consultant	South West, United Kingdom	United Kingdom, advising and facilitating capital into sub-Saharan Africa	-	Management consultant - for-profits	Jan-22	30-45min

4.1. Discussion of main themes

The coding and analysis of interview data resulted in the emergence of three main aggregate dimensions: *Motivations, Challenges, and Opportunities*. These aggregate dimensions encapsulate the overarching themes that shape the experiences of African B Corps and are further broken down into second-order themes. Each of these second-order themes is supported by direct quotes from interview participants, representing the first-order concepts that illustrate the lived experiences and perspectives of the businesses involved.

The figure visually represents these dimensions and themes, with the leftmost column highlighting direct quotes that serve as initial codes. These quotes, drawn directly from interview transcripts, were grouped into more abstract concepts (second-order themes), such as the need for external validation, financial barriers to certification, and the impact of B Corp status on brand reputation. Finally, these second-order themes coalesced into broader aggregate dimensions, which provided a framework for understanding the strategic motivations, operational challenges, and the collaborative benefits associated with B Corp certification in Africa. The analysis presented here will unpack these themes in greater detail using participant quotes to demonstrate how each dimension affects businesses' decision-making processes.

Figure 2. Coding Figure Illustrating Aggregate Theoretical Dimensions

Figure 2a: Strategic Motivation and Impact

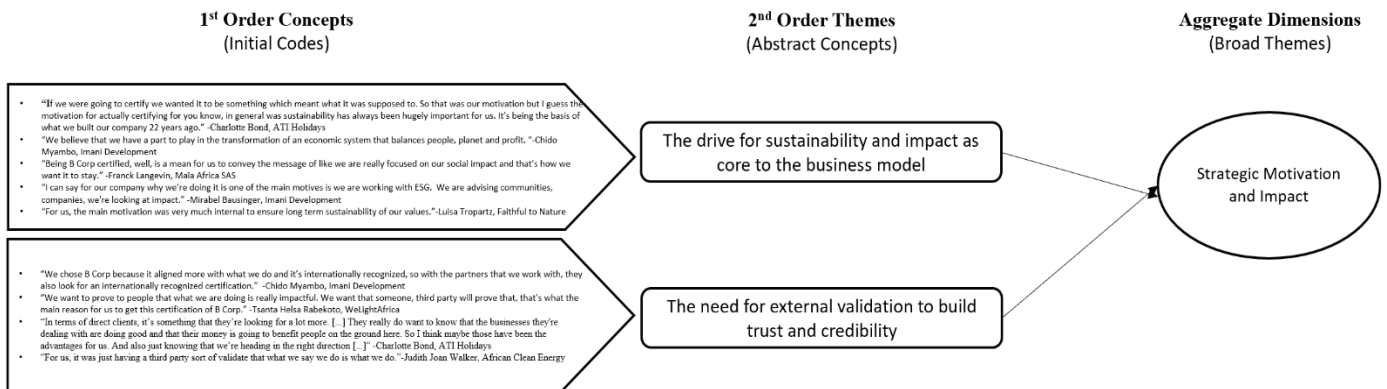


Figure 2b: Operational Challenges and Strategic Barriers

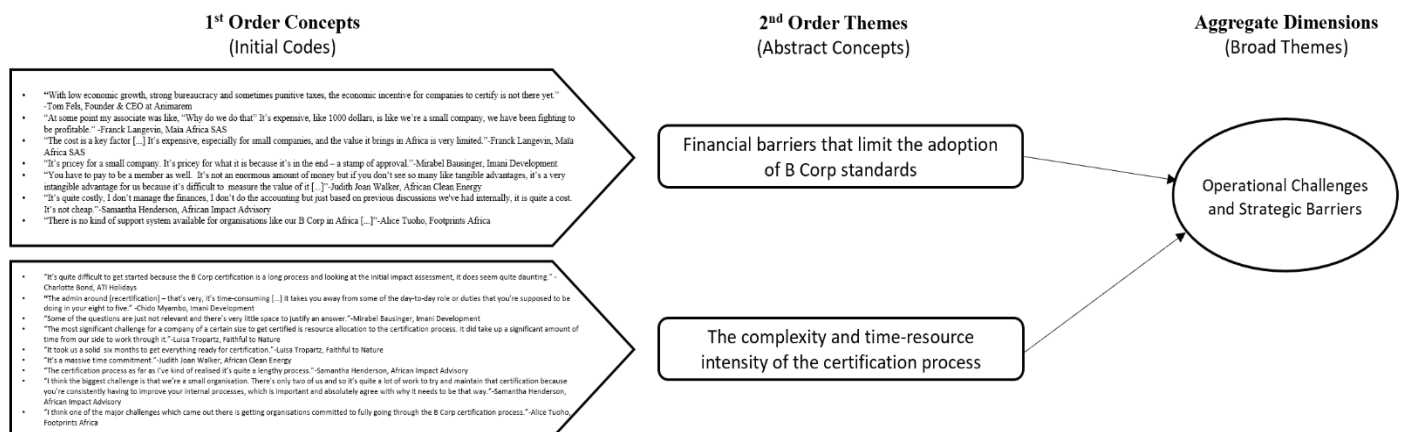
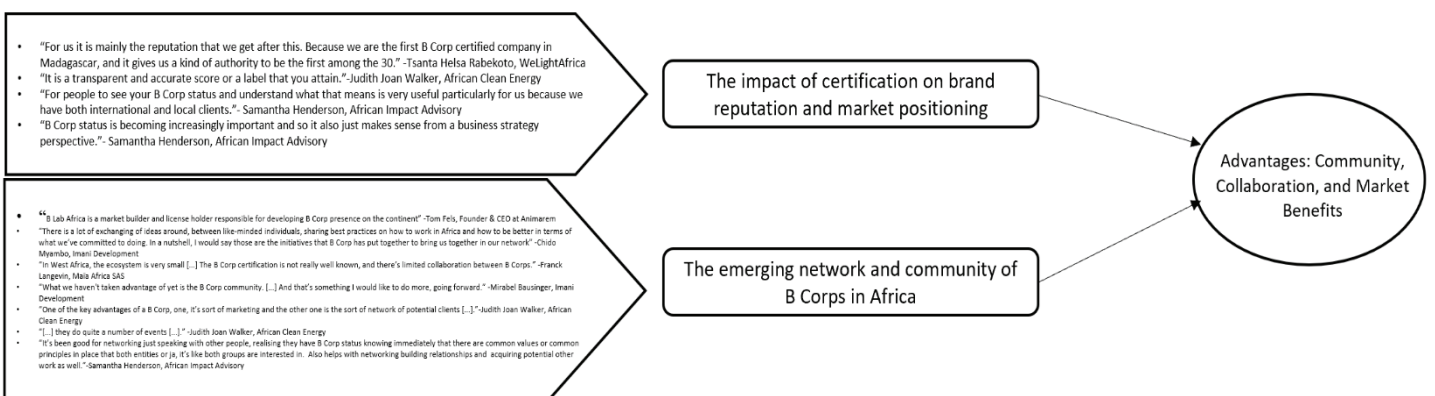


Figure 2c: Advantages: Community, Collaboration and Market Benefits



4.1.1. First Theme: Strategic Motivation and Impact

A central theme that emerged from the interviews is the strategic motivation underlying African businesses' pursuit of B Corp certification. Rather than viewing certification as a superficial branding exercise, most participants articulated a values-driven rationale, positioning certification as a formalisation of already embedded commitments to social and environmental justice. As B Corp 5 expressed:

“We believe that we have a part to play in the transformation of an economic system that balances people, planet and profit.”

This statement exemplifies the stewardship and ethical CSR models, where companies are motivated not by external compliance pressures but by intrinsic values and moral obligations. The B Corp framework, in this view, is not a top-down imposition but a codification of purpose-driven practices already in motion. This counters the traditional compliance-based CSR paradigm, which assumes that firms adopt responsible practices primarily in response to regulatory or reputational risk.

At the same time, participants acknowledged the instrumental benefits of third-party validation. In environments where weak regulatory enforcement allows for greenwashing and inconsistent CSR reporting, certification serves as a tool for legitimacy-building. As B Corp 2 noted:

“We want to prove to people that what we are doing is really impactful. We want a third party to confirm that what we say we do is what we actually do.”

This aligns with institutional theory, particularly the notion that organisations seek legitimacy by aligning with internationally recognised standards (Scott, 2008). Yet in the African context, this legitimacy-building extends beyond international investors to include local consumers, governments, and informal community structures. The perceived credibility of B Corp certification thus helps firms navigate weak institutional environments while leveraging global norms to bolster local trust.

Additionally, certification is framed as a strategic market differentiator, particularly in sectors where ESG priorities are reshaping consumer and investor behaviour. As B Corp 4 observed:

“They really do want to know that the businesses they're dealing with are doing good and that their money is going to benefit people on the ground here.”

This statement illustrates a key feature of signaling theory within CSR (Marquis & Toffel, 2012): certification serves as a credible signal of a firm's social performance to ethically motivated stakeholders. In emerging African markets, where formal sustainability standards are still nascent, such signals help firms stand out and build competitive advantage among both global and regional actors.

From a strategic standpoint, participants also emphasized the role of certification in broadening access to impact-oriented investors, NGO partnerships, and cross-sectoral collaborations. As B Corp 10 stated:

“B Corp status is becoming increasingly important, and so it also just makes sense from a business strategy perspective.”

Here, certification is not merely symbolic but instrumental in reshaping organisational ecosystems, attracting partners whose mandates align with inclusive and sustainable development goals. This reflects a shift from CSR as peripheral to core strategy—a reconfiguration especially significant in African markets where public service delivery gaps create openings for private sector engagement in development-oriented initiatives.

These findings are broadly consistent with CSR literature that frames certification as a reputational asset and signaling mechanism (Marquis & Toffel, 2012). However, the African context introduces important inflections. Unlike firms in the Global North, which often pursue certification to gain legitimacy in highly regulated environments, African firms often seek it to compensate for regulatory voids and build multi-level legitimacy—local, regional, and international. Furthermore, where CSR in Western contexts is often reactive (e.g., to consumer boycotts or compliance pressures), African firms here are proactively aligning certification with their own normative visions of sustainable development, community upliftment, and ethical leadership.

The interplay between institutional pressures and intrinsic motivations also appears more fluid in the African case. Firms are not simply reacting to external demands but are actively co-constructing norms of responsible business suited to their environments. In this sense, B Corp certification becomes a form of private governance that supplements—and, at times, substitutes—public oversight (Cashore, 2002), especially in sectors where state capacity is limited or contested.

While the strategic motivations identified above reflect both value-driven and pragmatic imperatives, they also raise questions about the fit and adaptability of the B Corp model in African contexts. Several tensions emerge, including the risk of normative misalignment between globally standardised certification metrics and local business practices, especially in informal economies. Moreover, the resource intensiveness of certification may limit access for smaller enterprises, even those with strong social missions. These challenges suggest that while B Corp presents significant opportunities for strategic positioning and value alignment, its effective implementation in Africa may require contextual adaptation, tiered models of participation, or partnerships that bridge formal and informal governance structures.

4.1.2. Second Theme: Operational Challenges and Strategic Barriers

A prominent theme across interviews concerns the operational and strategic hurdles African businesses face when pursuing B Corp certification. While interviewees consistently acknowledged the reputational and structural benefits of certification, they simultaneously emphasized its resource intensity and contextual misalignment. These challenges are particularly pronounced for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which constitute a large proportion of Africa's private sector (refer to Figure 2).

The cost of certification emerged as a significant deterrent. For many businesses operating under tight margins, the fees associated with B Corp certification were seen as disproportionate to short-term benefits. As B Corp 6 reflected:

“At some point my associate was like, ‘Why do we do that?’ It’s expensive—\$1,000. [...] We’re a small company, and we have been fighting to be profitable.”

Similarly, B Corp 7 remarked:

“It’s pricey for a small company. It’s pricey for what it is—because it’s, in the end, a stamp of approval.”

These perspectives reveal that certification is often perceived less as an operational necessity and more as a symbolic gesture that risks diverting scarce resources. This supports critiques of certification schemes that assume a one-size-fits-all model, ignoring structural inequalities between economies (Gilbert et al., 2011). The burden of proving social responsibility paradoxically falls most heavily on those least equipped to do so.

In terms of CSR frameworks, these constraints challenge the applicability of compliance-based models, which presume access to formal infrastructure and surplus capacity for auditing and reporting. In contrast, many African businesses operate within a stewardship ethos, prioritising community ties and long-term resilience but lacking the resources to formalise these commitments through certification.

Alongside financial strain, the administrative demands of certification were repeatedly cited as a substantial barrier. B Corp 8 explained:

“It took us a solid six months to get everything ready for certification. So, I would say that is the biggest challenge [...]”

B Corp 5 similarly pointed out:

“The admin around [recertification] is time-consuming, and it takes you away from some of the day-to-day duties that you’re supposed to be doing in your eight to five.”

These testimonies underscore a structural misfit between certification demands and the operational realities of African SMEs. Unlike large corporations with compliance departments, many African B Corps operate with lean teams, where diverting time to lengthy assessments risks undermining business continuity.

This dynamic reflects what institutional theory would classify as "institutional misfit" (Djelic & Quack, 2003)—the imposition of global norms without local adaptation. Certification processes, while aiming to ensure rigour and credibility, may inadvertently penalise those operating outside institutionalised economies with robust support systems (refer to Figure 2).

Perhaps the most striking challenge raised by interviewees was the misalignment between global B Corp standards and local African realities. Several businesses argued that the scoring system privileges conditions found predominantly in the Global North. As B Corp 3 noted:

“Contextually, it is very difficult for African businesses to certify. [...] For example, electricity in the Nordics is almost 100% grid renewables. In many local countries it is under 10%. Hence, local companies would not earn ‘passive’ scoring points in that section.”

This highlights a key limitation: the certification’s quantitative nature tends to reward businesses that operate in contexts with pre-existing infrastructure for sustainability. In regions where such infrastructure is underdeveloped or prohibitively expensive, businesses are effectively penalised for systemic conditions beyond their control.

Similar misalignments were noted in labour standards and governance expectations. The assumption of robust state oversight and formal employee contracts clashes with the reality of informal labour markets and limited regulatory enforcement. While these standards are normatively desirable, enforcing them without adaptation risks excluding businesses that otherwise operate with strong local legitimacy and ethical intent.

These critiques echo concerns in the literature about the “Northern bias” in global certification regimes (Ponte, 2019). CSR initiatives developed in one institutional context may not travel well across borders—especially when they embed assumptions about infrastructure, legality, and formalisation. This also calls into question the universal applicability of third-party audit-based CSR models.

The absence of region-specific guidance compounds these challenges. B Corp 1 articulated the issue clearly:

“There is no kind of support system available for organisations like our B Corp in Africa.”

This lack of contextualised resources—such as tailored guidance materials, local consultants, or regional capacity-building—places African businesses at a disadvantage compared to their Global North counterparts. Without clear roadmaps or support structures, navigating certification can be an isolating process, deterring businesses that might otherwise be strong candidates.

This problem also reflects a deeper tension in private governance: while systems like B Corp aim to democratise accountability, they may reinforce existing global hierarchies by failing to invest in global South infrastructure (Cashore, 2002). The promise of inclusive capitalism through certification remains hollow if the mechanisms for participation are unevenly distributed (refer to Figure 2).

These findings diverge from dominant narratives in B Corp literature, which often emphasise the standard's accessibility and flexibility (Waddock & McIntosh, 2011). While flexibility may exist in theory, in practice African businesses experience substantial friction in aligning with B Lab's expectations—due to contextual mismatches, capacity gaps, and regulatory dissonance.

Moreover, while existing CSR literature recognises the role of certification in legitimacy-building (Marquis & Toffel, 2012), this case underscores the layered nature of legitimacy in the African context. Certification must not only secure trust from international stakeholders, but also function amid informal norms, fragmented state institutions, and local value systems—realities poorly captured by formalised global metrics.

4.1.3. Third Theme: Collaborative Advantages and Market Positioning Opportunities

The third major theme emerging from the interviews concerns the collaborative benefits and market positioning opportunities that African businesses perceive following B Corp certification. Despite the financial and administrative hurdles outlined previously, many interviewees stressed that certification ultimately opened doors to valuable networks, knowledge exchange, and reputation-enhancing advantages. These findings suggest that B Corp certification not only serves as a compliance mechanism but functions as a community-oriented governance tool with normative and mimetic institutional dimensions.

A dominant narrative across the interviews was the sense of solidarity and collaborative learning cultivated within the global B Corp community. This collective identity plays an important legitimising and reinforcing role for African businesses operating in uncertain institutional environments, where formal support structures are limited.

As B Corp 5 reflected:

"There is a lot of exchanging of ideas between like-minded individuals sharing best practices on how to work in Africa and how to be better in terms of what we've committed to doing."

This echoes what institutional theorists describe as “normative pressure” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), whereby shared professional norms and networks influence organisational behaviour. In this context, B Corp certification facilitates a form of transnational norm diffusion, where

African firms are exposed to and adopt sustainability practices not only for strategic positioning, but also to gain legitimacy in an emerging moral field (Maguire et al., 2004).

Platforms such as regional meetups, webinars, and online forums allow businesses to participate in real-time, peer-driven problem-solving. These learning spaces often transcend technical compliance and instead emphasise shared purpose and values. In the African context—where resource constraints and institutional voids make formal CSR mechanisms harder to sustain (Amaeshi et al., 2006)—such informal, relational networks are particularly valuable. The community aspect may also play a compensatory role, supporting firms in the absence of robust national sustainability infrastructures.

These findings align with research by Stubbs (2017) and Baele et al. (2021), who argue that B Corp certification fosters “relational accountability” and “identity-based trust” within the certified network. This is particularly relevant in Africa, where informal institutions and relational ethics frequently shape business norms (Zoogah et al., 2015). However, unlike Western contexts where B Corps may rely on mature sustainability ecosystems, African firms appear to use the certification as a substitute for weak domestic institutional frameworks, reaffirming Cashore’s (2002) observation that private certification schemes often step in where public governance is limited.

Participants also highlighted the networking and co-branding advantages of certification. B Corp 10 noted:

"It’s been good for networking [...] speaking with other people, realising they have B Corp status, knowing immediately that there are common values or principles in place."

This form of implicit trust reduces the costs and risks of collaboration, facilitating what Porter and Kramer (2011) term “shared value” creation—where firms collaborate on initiatives that generate both economic and social benefit. In African markets characterised by fragmented value chains and uncertain contracting environments, this reputational trust network is not only desirable but often necessary.

These inter-firm relationships frequently extend beyond idea-sharing into joint ventures, co-marketing campaigns, or coordinated community projects. Such partnerships reflect a shift from competitive to cooperative CSR logics, which aligns with the cooperative model of CSR that emphasises long-term stakeholder value and collective impact (Moon, 2007; Matten &

Moon, 2008). For African businesses, this mode of strategic cooperation is not just normative—it can also be operationally necessary to offset resource deficits.

While B Corp networks globally encourage collective action, the African context underscores their structural function in filling institutional voids. These insights diverge from studies such as Wilburn and Wilburn (2015), which highlight reputational benefits as the main driver of participation in B Corp certification in North America. In contrast, African firms appear to leverage the B Corp community not only for legitimacy but also for material knowledge and capacity support, reflecting the “institutional bricolage” approach discussed by Battilana and Lee (2014) in resource-constrained settings.

Beyond collaboration, businesses consistently cited enhanced market positioning and credibility as central motivators for certification. B Corp 9 explained:

"For us, it was just having a third-party sort of validate that what we say we do is what we do."

This form of third-party verification operates as both a signalling and a trust-building mechanism in markets where “greenwashing” and superficial CSR commitments are increasingly under scrutiny. Certification thus functions as a mechanism of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), reinforcing a firm’s credibility without requiring embedded local legitimacy. In African contexts—where social trust may be fragile and regulatory enforcement weak—such external validation becomes a powerful substitute for local institutional guarantees.

Businesses also emphasised that certification allows them to attract socially conscious consumers and investors who demand accountability and transparency. B Corp 4 highlighted:

"[Clients] really do want to know that the businesses they’re dealing with are doing good and that their money is going to benefit people on the ground here."

This growing pressure reflects the rise of “impact investing” and consumer activism in emerging markets (Elhauge, 2005). Certification helps meet these demands, reinforcing mimetic isomorphism by aligning with global CSR norms and practices. In this way, the B Corp label can help businesses navigate dual legitimacy demands: one based on local realities and another based on global standards.

These findings align with Lyon and Maxwell's (2008) concept of "credible commitment" in CSR, where certification offers a mechanism for firms to communicate the authenticity of their ethical claims. However, in Africa, this credibility is not just about consumer perception—it is often necessary for basic market access, especially in international or donor-funded contexts. In this sense, B Corp certification becomes a form of "market passport," enabling African businesses to compete globally despite local structural disadvantages.

While the advantages of certification are notable, they also reveal underlying tensions in how the B Corp model translates into the African context. The benefits described—community learning, shared value partnerships, reputational signalling—are often realised *in spite of*, rather than because of, the institutional structures embedded in the B Corp framework.

Firstly, the collaborative networks and community support cited by participants have largely emerged organically, rather than through formal support mechanisms from B Lab. This suggests a gap between the certification's intended design and its practical function in the Global South, where businesses often self-organise to fill institutional voids. While this adaptability is commendable, it raises concerns about the sustainability and scalability of such efforts without intentional, context-sensitive facilitation.

Secondly, the emphasis on global legitimacy through third-party validation risks reinforcing dependency on external recognition. This can marginalise local knowledge systems and CSR traditions—such as Ubuntu or communal reciprocity—unless the certification framework evolves to recognise and validate these practices. The current model, built largely on Global North assumptions about what constitutes 'responsible business,' risks overshadowing contextually appropriate alternatives.

Finally, the market differentiation benefits, while valuable, highlight a deeper equity issue: only businesses with sufficient capacity and international outlook are currently able to leverage B Corp certification fully. This risks reproducing elite circles within the impact economy, rather than democratising access to responsible business certification.

In sum, the collaborative and reputational benefits of B Corp certification hold real value for African firms. Yet these advantages reveal the need for a more localised and inclusive approach—one that goes beyond a one-size-fits-all global standard and engages more deeply with the structural realities of doing business in Africa. Without such adaptations, B Corp risks

becoming a well-meaning but exclusionary tool, accessible only to a select few rather than a broader movement for systemic change.

4.2. Contextualizing B Corp Certification in African Markets

Although this study is anchored in the African context, its findings contribute to broader debates on the localisation of global sustainability standards in emerging markets. As sustainability certification systems such as B Corp expand beyond their Global North origins, they encounter complex and uneven institutional terrains, revealing both new motivations and systemic tensions. This section interprets the strategic adoption of B Corp certification by African businesses through the lens of institutional theory and CSR frameworks, highlighting both convergences and contextual departures from existing literature.

The data gathered in this study suggests that while African businesses pursue B Corp certification partly for international legitimacy—similar to firms in Western contexts—they are equally, if not more, driven by local developmental concerns. Interviewees frequently framed certification not only as a reputational asset but as a practical mechanism for addressing persistent social and environmental issues, particularly those inadequately addressed by the state. This finding extends the literature on CSR in emerging economies, which often highlights “compensatory CSR” (Visser, 2008) — where businesses take on roles traditionally assigned to governments, such as poverty alleviation or infrastructure provision.

Unlike conventional CSR models rooted in philanthropic or compliance-based approaches, the B Corp framework ostensibly promotes a cooperative logic—encouraging firms to embed social impact into their core strategy. In practice, however, African businesses appear to hybridise these models. They utilise B Corp certification as both a *cooperative* identity signal and a *compliance* tool to demonstrate accountability to external stakeholders. This hybrid usage supports institutional theory’s notion of “strategic isomorphism” (Greenwood et al., 2011), where firms selectively conform to external norms for legitimacy while adapting them to fit internal or contextual constraints.

From a legitimacy-seeking perspective, certification provides a bridge between African businesses and transnational audiences—whether impact investors, donors, or conscious consumers—who increasingly demand verifiable proof of ethical business conduct. This aligns with DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) concept of mimetic pressure: in the face of institutional

uncertainty and resource scarcity, firms emulate globally recognised standards to gain acceptance and reduce perceived risk. Yet, in Africa, legitimacy must also be earned within local communities. This dual imperative creates a more complex landscape than in Western contexts, where legitimacy is often equated with regulatory compliance or brand transparency alone.

A key insight from this study is that African businesses regard B Corp certification as a trust-building tool not only for global stakeholders but also for local constituencies—customers, employees, and communities—who have historically been underserved or marginalised. This reframes certification as both a governance mechanism and a moral claim. As B Corp 4 explained, clients “want to know that their money is going to benefit people on the ground here.” This reflects a broader shift toward what some scholars call “inclusive CSR” (Amaeshi et al., 2006), where business legitimacy depends on demonstrating locally relevant impact rather than abstract ESG metrics.

This emphasis on local legitimacy diverges from much of the B Corp literature in Global North settings, which often foregrounds strategic benefits like brand positioning or investor appeal (Honeyman & Jana, 2019; Kim et al., 2022). While these factors remain relevant in Africa, they are often secondary to more immediate concerns of societal trust and social value creation. The findings therefore challenge the universality of dominant CSR narratives and support calls for a more context-sensitive approach to sustainability governance in the Global South (Blowfield & Frynas, 2005).

In sum, the African adoption of B Corp certification reflects a dual logic: one aimed at securing international legitimacy and market access, and another grounded in responding to urgent local needs. Certification serves as both a symbolic and operational tool, enabling businesses to negotiate complex legitimacy demands in settings marked by institutional fragility, socio-economic inequality, and governance gaps. This contextual complexity must be acknowledged if B Corp—or similar certification systems—are to meaningfully contribute to sustainability transitions in Africa and other emerging markets.

4.3. Unique Constraints and the Research Gap

The findings of this study reveal that African businesses face distinct structural, financial, and institutional constraints in pursuing and maintaining B Corp certification. These challenges

underscore a critical research gap in the global sustainability certification literature, which often under-theorises the realities of implementation in emerging markets. While existing studies acknowledge the high resource intensity of certification processes (Delmas & Montes-Sancho, 2011), they tend to assume baseline institutional functionality, digital infrastructure, and human capital—conditions that are often absent or fragmented in many African contexts.

This study finds that the financial burden of certification is particularly acute for African small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which constitute a significant share of the continent’s business landscape. B Corp certification, though aspirationally inclusive, presupposes access to financial and technical resources that are unevenly distributed. In resource-constrained environments, firms are often forced to make difficult trade-offs between investing in certification and meeting immediate operational needs. This dilemma is compounded by weak support ecosystems: limited availability of local consultants, gaps in data systems required for impact reporting, and low institutional familiarity with international sustainability frameworks.

These observations reinforce the argument advanced by Strambach and Surmeier (2018), who contend that globally standardised sustainability governance regimes—while designed to be universally applicable—can reproduce inequalities when transplanted into structurally divergent settings. In the African context, the pursuit of B Corp certification can become a paradox: firms most in need of visibility, legitimacy, and community support are often those least equipped to meet the rigid reporting and documentation requirements embedded in the process.

From the perspective of institutional theory, these barriers can be viewed as a form of *institutional misfit*—a misalignment between external normative expectations and internal organisational capabilities (Kostova, 1999). While certification systems like B Corp are meant to signal conformity to global norms, they may inadvertently impose institutional logics that are difficult to reconcile with local realities. This misfit leads to what some scholars describe as “decoupling” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), where firms symbolically adopt global standards for legitimacy while lacking the material or procedural capacity to fully implement them. In the African case, such partial compliance risks undermining the credibility of certification and limiting its transformative potential.

These constraints also interact with broader CSR frameworks. In the African setting—where many businesses already adopt informal or community-driven CSR approaches out of

necessity—B Corp’s structured and technocratic model may appear rigid or detached from the social relationality that characterises much local practice. While the certification framework aspires to integrate social purpose into business models, it remains embedded in Western epistemologies of measurement, verification, and auditability. This contrasts with more embedded, trust-based practices common in African community economies, where social legitimacy is earned relationally rather than bureaucratically (Amaeshi et al., 2016).

These findings diverge from studies conducted in Global North contexts, where B Corp certification is often adopted as a proactive branding or strategic CSR move (Honeyman & Jana, 2019; Haigh & Hoffman, 2014). In contrast, African businesses frequently perceive certification as an aspirational, externally imposed standard that remains difficult to access without significant support or adaptation. This highlights the importance of understanding sustainability governance not as a one-size-fits-all solution, but as a negotiated process shaped by local structural constraints, institutional capacities, and socio-economic conditions.

In sum, this study calls for a more differentiated and inclusive approach to certification standards. Without mechanisms that recognise and respond to the realities of businesses operating in under-resourced settings, certification schemes like B Corp risk entrenching exclusion rather than enabling transformation. By foregrounding these constraints, this research contributes to a growing body of literature urging sustainability standards to evolve beyond rigid global templates and toward adaptive, context-sensitive models of responsible business.

4.4. Addressing the Research Gap Through Adaptation and Accessibility

The findings reveal that while B Corp certification holds clear potential for African enterprises, the current framework is often ill-suited to local realities. This points to an urgent need for more adaptive and inclusive models of sustainability certification. Despite its global ambitions, the B Corp framework remains anchored in Western institutional logics—relying on robust regulatory systems, readily available impact data, and access to specialised consulting support. For many African businesses, these prerequisites are not readily met, creating substantial barriers to entry and raising questions about structural equity in global sustainability governance.

One key insight from the findings is the value of modularity and flexibility in certification. Participants advocated for incremental or tiered certification models that allow businesses to demonstrate progress over time. This aligns with recent literature arguing for more graduated approaches to sustainability standards that accommodate varying levels of institutional maturity (Loconto & Fueilleux, 2014). These flexible pathways can enable businesses in low-capacity environments to engage meaningfully without being excluded outright, thus broadening participation while maintaining integrity.

A compelling precedent is the development of KenyaGAP, a local adaptation of the GlobalGAP agricultural standard. This initiative emerged precisely to overcome the inaccessibility of the original framework and allowed smallholders to retain market access without compromising basic quality standards (Graffham et al., 2007). Similarly, the B Corp model could benefit from regional “light-touch” adaptations that preserve core principles while reducing administrative and financial burdens. Such adaptations may involve trade-offs in global branding consistency but can significantly enhance local legitimacy and uptake—a trade-off that may be necessary to ensure equity and relevance in structurally diverse markets.

This also raises the broader question of governance legitimacy in transnational certification schemes. As Cashore (2002) notes, certification systems represent a form of private governance that supplements or substitutes for state regulation. However, their legitimacy depends not only on procedural rigor but also on perceived fairness and contextual fit. A certification scheme that systematically excludes businesses in the Global South—either by design or by default—risks undermining its normative authority and long-term impact. Thus, the adaptation of B Corp to African conditions is not only a technical issue, but a governance imperative.

These findings align with the growing body of research that critiques the assumption that global certification models can be universally applied without modification (Overdevest & Zeitlin, 2014; Ponte, 2014). They suggest that inclusion, legitimacy, and long-term sustainability require a shift from compliance-based uniformity to context-sensitive pluralism in certification practice.

4.5. Section Summary

The thematic analysis surfaced three interconnected patterns—Motivations, Challenges, and Collaborative Opportunities—each of which reveals how African businesses interact with the

B Corp framework in ways that both mirror and diverge from global trends. This section reflects critically on each theme by integrating them into broader CSR models, institutional theory, and comparative insights.

The first theme affirms that African businesses pursuing B Corp certification are often driven by intrinsic values and a desire to institutionalise social impact, rather than merely seeking market access or reputational gains. Certification is viewed as a strategic tool for embedding accountability, sustainability, and stakeholder inclusivity into business operations. This supports cooperative CSR models, in which firms are motivated by long-term relational legitimacy rather than short-term instrumental gains (Gond et al., 2011).

In the African context—where distrust in public institutions and corporate actors can be high—certification provides a reputational bridge, enabling firms to communicate trustworthiness to both local communities and international partners. However, this pursuit of legitimacy also reflects normative institutional pressures: firms adapt to global standards to gain moral authority and symbolic validation (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Importantly, legitimacy in Africa is not merely about alignment with international benchmarks but about demonstrable contributions to local well-being—such as community upliftment, fair employment, or social entrepreneurship.

These findings partially align with existing research that frames B Corp certification as a tool for competitive differentiation and investor attraction (Haigh & Hoffman, 2014). However, they diverge in emphasising social embeddedness as a key motivator, suggesting that in African markets, B Corp functions less as a competitive strategy and more as a signal of ethical commitment and social value creation.

The second theme documents a wide range of barriers—from financial costs to institutional mismatches—that hinder African firms' ability to obtain and sustain certification. These barriers are not merely logistical; they point to structural inequalities embedded within the certification framework itself. Many firms struggle to meet documentation and reporting requirements due to underdeveloped data systems, while others lack access to advisory networks that can guide them through the process.

From an institutional perspective, these issues illustrate a disconnect between institutional logics: global certification models presuppose organisational capabilities and regulatory environments that are not widely available in African settings (Kostova & Roth, 2002).

Consequently, firms may engage in symbolic adoption or decoupling, attempting to meet the formal requirements of certification without being able to embed its principles in practice.

This also highlights a tension between compliance-based and cooperative CSR logics. The B Corp model, though normatively framed as values-driven, still relies on formalised metrics, audits, and verification—characteristics more typical of compliance-based regimes. For African businesses operating informally or relationally, this technocratic rigidity may feel alien or unworkable.

These findings echo critiques in the literature that challenge the equity and applicability of global standards in low-capacity environments (Strambach & Surmeier, 2018; Loconto & Fouilleux, 2014). They add further weight to calls for regional calibration and institutional scaffolding to enable meaningful participation by firms in emerging markets.

The final theme underscores the value of being embedded in the B Corp network—not just for reputational gains, but for peer support, knowledge exchange, and collective problem-solving. For African firms, the community aspect of B Corp certification provides rare access to global visibility, funding channels, and values-aligned partners.

This reflects an emerging form of networked governance, where businesses co-create sustainability norms through transnational engagement (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012). The certification becomes more than a signal; it becomes a relational platform for innovation and collective impact. These findings reinforce the potential for B Corp to function as a field-level institution—one that shapes organisational behaviour not through coercion, but through shared aspirations and community norms.

However, this benefit is not equally distributed. The firms most likely to leverage B Corp networks are often those with prior access to international markets, donors, or accelerators—again pointing to an inclusion gap within the ecosystem.

These findings align with studies that describe B Corp as a community-driven certification that fosters value alignment and legitimacy (Honeyman & Jana, 2019). However, they also raise questions about who is excluded from that community, and whether B Corp's model of market integration is sufficient for businesses rooted in local, community-based economies.

In conclusion, this chapter demonstrates that while B Corp certification holds transformative potential, its impact in African markets is shaped by a complex interplay of local motivations, structural constraints, and global governance logics. The certification offers legitimacy and collaborative value, but it also reproduces certain institutional biases and technical barriers. Addressing these tensions requires moving beyond standardised frameworks toward adaptive, pluralistic models of certification that reflect the diversity of business realities across regions.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The preceding chapter identified three interlinked themes—strategic motivations, operational challenges, and collaborative advantages—that shape African businesses’ engagement with B Corp certification. These themes underscore a dual reality: on the one hand, African enterprises exhibit a strong values-driven commitment to ethical and sustainable business practices; on the other, they confront significant structural barriers embedded in the certification model. The tension between aspiration and accessibility forms the analytical bridge into this final chapter, where the implications of these findings are critically unpacked. This chapter revisits the research questions in light of the empirical evidence, draws out theoretical and practical contributions, and proposes directions for future research and policy reform.

5.1. Revisiting the Research Questions: Key Findings and Contributions

This study set out to answer the central research question: *What are the motivations, opportunities, and challenges associated with B Corp certification for African businesses, and what do these reveal about the adaptability of global sustainability standards in emerging markets?*

This was addressed through three sub-questions:

“What motivates African businesses to pursue B Corp certification?”

African firms are primarily driven by a desire to institutionalise their social and environmental values, enhance stakeholder trust, and differentiate themselves in increasingly impact-conscious markets. Certification is not merely a branding tool but a strategic expression of cooperative CSR logic—embedding purpose, ethics, and accountability into the firm’s core identity. In an environment where public trust and regulatory oversight may be weak, B Corp offers reputational legitimacy and moral validation, both locally and internationally.

These motivations extend the literature on CSR in emerging markets by highlighting the role of normative and mimetic institutional pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), where certification serves both as a signal of legitimacy and as a mechanism for internalising global standards.

While Haigh and Hoffman (2014) identify certification as a route to market advantage in Western contexts, this study reveals a stronger emphasis on value alignment and community legitimacy in African settings.

“What are the key operational and strategic barriers to certification?”

Firms face multiple, often interdependent challenges: high financial costs, complex assessment processes, documentation burdens, and a disconnect between global standards and local contexts. These barriers are particularly acute for small and medium-sized enterprises. The B Corp model implicitly assumes institutional infrastructure, formal business processes, and access to impact metrics—assumptions that do not hold uniformly across the continent.

These findings support and extend critiques of compliance-based governance frameworks (Strambach & Surmeier, 2018), reinforcing calls for certification schemes to adopt graduated, locally embedded models that acknowledge contextual asymmetries.

Echoing Loconto and Fouilleux (2014), the study shows that one-size-fits-all certification regimes risk marginalising precisely those firms most in need of visibility and ethical validation.

“What opportunities and benefits does B Corp certification offer African firms?”

B Corp membership provides reputational enhancement, new market access, peer learning, and strategic collaboration. Importantly, certification embeds businesses within a global community of purpose, where knowledge-sharing and impact-driven alliances can generate innovation. These benefits reflect networked governance dynamics (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012), where firms are co-creators of standards rather than passive adopters.

The findings advance an understanding of certification as social infrastructure, especially in under-resourced contexts where formal institutional support is limited.

While benefits such as investor attraction are consistent with global findings (Honeyman & Jana, 2019), the African experience reveals the community logic of B Corp to be particularly vital—offering moral support, credibility, and shared learning.

Together, the findings reveal that B Corp certification has the potential to amplify socially responsible enterprise in Africa—but only if its framework becomes more responsive to

structural inequalities and contextual realities. Without adaptation, certification risks becoming an exclusionary tool, reinforcing the Global North's dominance in sustainability discourse. This research thus calls for a paradigm shift—from standardisation to contextualisation—in how global certification regimes are designed and implemented.

5.2. Key Contributions and Practical Implications

This study offers significant contributions to both academic scholarship and the practical discourse surrounding sustainable business practices in emerging markets. By centering the African context—where institutional structures, regulatory systems, and socio-economic dynamics differ markedly from those in the Global North—it reveals how global certification standards such as B Corp are interpreted, implemented, and at times resisted in ways that challenge their presumed universality. In doing so, the study not only addresses a notable gap in the literature on sustainability certification but also foregrounds the agency of African businesses in negotiating the terms of ethical business practice.

Academically, this research contributes to several key theoretical frameworks. First, it expands the understanding of corporate social responsibility (CSR) by showing how African firms often pursue B Corp certification not solely to attract investors or enhance branding—as much of the existing Western literature suggests—but as a strategic extension of long-standing commitments to community engagement, inclusive employment, and social transformation. In this way, the findings align more closely with cooperative models of CSR, in which firms pursue ethical goals as part of their embedded identity and social purpose, rather than compliance-driven frameworks shaped by external accountability alone. Second, from an institutional theory perspective, the study reveals how African firms respond to normative and mimetic pressures in environments where formal regulation may be weak or uneven. Certification becomes a mechanism for gaining legitimacy not only in global markets but within local communities, where social trust and informal accountability often matter more than regulatory conformity. Third, this research engages with the literature on private transnational governance by situating B Corp certification within broader critiques of standard-setting systems that function as substitutes for public regulation. Following Cashore (2002), the study illustrates how such frameworks carry both opportunities and risks: they may fill governance gaps in contexts where state capacity is limited, but they also risk reinforcing Northern-centric priorities unless deliberately adapted to local realities.

Practically, the findings offer concrete insights for certification bodies like B Lab. The research indicates that the current one-size-fits-all model of B Corp certification poses significant accessibility challenges for African businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises operating in resource-constrained settings. To remain relevant and inclusive, B Lab must consider structural reforms to its certification framework. These could include developing regionally adapted criteria that better reflect local socio-economic and environmental priorities, offering simplified or phased certification pathways, and subsidising fees for qualifying enterprises. Moreover, establishing regional partnerships with African universities, incubators, and business networks would enable context-sensitive support and peer learning throughout the certification journey. Such measures would not dilute the credibility of the certification but rather enhance its legitimacy by aligning it more closely with the lived realities of African entrepreneurs. Without such reforms, the risk remains that certification will become a symbol of exclusion rather than inclusion—accessible only to a small, well-resourced subset of businesses and thus unrepresentative of the broader African private sector.

The study also carries clear implications for policymakers and development institutions across the continent. Governments can play an enabling role by integrating ethical certification into broader economic development strategies. Public procurement policies could prioritise certified firms, while tax incentives or grant programs could be designed to reward businesses that demonstrably contribute to social and environmental goals. National and regional institutions should also invest in impact measurement infrastructure to assist firms in tracking and communicating their progress, thus supporting a culture of continuous improvement in responsible business conduct. Further, legal recognition of hybrid business models—such as benefit corporations or social enterprises—would help bridge the regulatory gap between for-profit and non-profit classifications, offering clearer guidance and legitimacy for purpose-driven firms. Such institutional alignment is essential if certification is to evolve from a niche practice into a systemic driver of inclusive economic transformation.

In parallel, the findings offer strategic insights for African businesses themselves and the ecosystem actors that support them. Certification can serve not only as a reputational asset but as a governance tool that formalises internal accountability, enhances stakeholder dialogue, and attracts aligned forms of capital. Entrepreneur networks and business associations have an opportunity to collectively advocate for more equitable standards, share best practices, and co-develop capacity-building resources tailored to the African context. Collaboration among

certified and aspiring B Corps on the continent could serve as a powerful lever for bottom-up reform of the certification system itself, ensuring that African voices and priorities are not peripheral but central to the evolution of global sustainability norms.

In sum, this study contributes to a more contextually grounded, equity-conscious understanding of how sustainability certification operates in emerging markets. It enriches academic theory, informs institutional reform, and offers practical pathways for inclusive growth. Ultimately, the success of B Corp certification in Africa will depend on its ability to evolve—not by compromising its principles, but by reimagining the routes through which diverse businesses can achieve them. By acknowledging local realities and supporting regionally adapted implementation, certification can become a more effective tool for catalysing sustainable development and responsible enterprise across the African continent.

5.3. Limitations and Assumptions

This study acknowledges several limitations that may influence the findings and their generalisability. While the research focuses on African businesses and businesses operating in Africa that have pursued or are pursuing B Corp certification, this focus is intentional and central to the study's scope, not a limitation. However, the study does not engage with businesses that may aspire to certification but face barriers such as resource constraints. Consequently, the findings may not fully capture the experiences of a broader range of businesses across the continent, including those that have not engaged with B Corp certification or other similar sustainability initiatives.

Furthermore, this cross-sectional study was conducted over a limited period of a few months within this year, providing only a snapshot in time. This temporal limitation indicates that the findings reflect the context, challenges, and opportunities as they existed during the research period. Given the rapidly evolving nature of sustainability practices and business environments, these dynamics may change, potentially diminishing the relevance of the findings as the business landscape develops. In this context, the concept of the business landscape encompasses various factors such as market trends, consumer behaviour, policies, and societal values that influence how companies operate. A comprehensive understanding of these elements is crucial for businesses aiming to navigate and succeed in dynamic environments (Yunus, 2023). Furthermore, the research is constrained by the availability of resources and

access to participants. The sample size and the diversity of industries and regions represented in the study may be limited, potentially affecting the breadth of insights gained.

5.4. Directions for Future Research

Despite these limitations, the study aims to provide a meaningful contribution to the understanding of B Corp certification in Africa and offers valuable insights that can inform future research and practice. The study opens several avenues for further research. Longitudinal studies could examine the impact of B Corp certification over time, assessing how certified African businesses evolve, sustain their commitments, and address challenges as they grow. Future research could also explore the role of government policies, local partnerships, and industry-specific adaptations in supporting sustainability certification in Africa. Expanding the scope to include a wider range of businesses, particularly those outside the certification ecosystem, would offer a more comprehensive view of the barriers and incentives associated with sustainable practices in African markets.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of B Corp certification in Africa and highlights the potential for globally recognised standards to foster responsible business practices in emerging economies. The insights gained here encourage a more inclusive and adaptable approach to sustainability certification, one that considers the unique constraints and opportunities within diverse business environments. By supporting businesses in Africa and similar regions, certification bodies and policymakers can drive a more globally equitable shift toward sustainable business practices, ensuring that the benefits of ethical certification are accessible and impactful across economic divides.

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Appendix

Interview questions

General:

1. What are currently the main motivators for companies to pursue B Corp certification?
2. What advantages have businesses reported since achieving B Corp certification?
3. Have there been any challenges or disadvantages associated with maintaining B Corp certification?
4. Are there any significant challenges encountered during the adoption process, and how are they addressed?
5. What are the main obstacles faced by companies before pursuing the B Corp certification?

More detailed questions:

6. How do local policies and regulations in African countries affect the process of B Corp certification? Are there any regulatory changes that could facilitate or hinder the adoption of B Corp standards?
7. What specific support or resources does B Lab Africa provide to companies during the certification process? Are there any planned initiatives to enhance this support?
8. How aware are African consumers of the B Corp certification, and how does this awareness impact the market for B Corps in Africa?
9. How does B Lab Africa facilitate collaboration among B Corps in the region, and what are some notable outcomes of these collaborations?
10. How do the motivations, challenges, and opportunities of the African B Corps compare with those in other regions of the world?

Disclaimer: For some interview partner the questions were elaborated on or the answers went beyond the question.