

SUB-THEME 1: CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY AND GREEN INNOVATION

Corporate Social Responsibility and Community Based Sustainable Development in Rural Zimbabwe: Towards an Ubuntu Centered CSR Framework

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Abstract

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has emerged as a central mechanism for advancing sustainable development in sub-Saharan Africa, yet its deployment in rural contexts frequently reproduces the power asymmetries and cultural disconnects it nominally seeks to address. This study investigates how CSR initiatives in Zimbabwe's agribusiness, telecommunications, and energy sectors can authentically advance community-based sustainable development while generating shared value for corporations and local populations. Drawing on participatory action research (PAR) conducted across three Zimbabwean provinces Mashonaland East, Midlands, and Matabeleland South encompassing 19 community focus groups, 41 semi-structured interviews, and observation at seven CSR programme sites, the study documents the conditions under which CSR programmes succeed and fail. Four critical pathologies are identified: the authenticity gap between corporate rhetoric and measurable community impact; top-down governance architectures that exclude communities from substantive decision-making; systematic marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS); and input-oriented measurement frameworks that insulate CSR claims from accountability. The study's principal contribution is the Ubuntu-Centered CSR Framework (UCCF) a multi-actor, culturally grounded model that embeds African communal values into corporate sustainability strategy through five interlocking principles: relational accountability, indigenous knowledge integration, co-governance, outcome-based measurement, and adaptive cultural responsiveness. Findings demonstrate that UCCF-aligned programmes generate measurably superior outcomes in community trust, operational sustainability, and environmental stewardship including a 78% tree survival rate versus a 42% regional average and 94% irrigation system operational capacity four years post-establishment. The study connects its analysis to Zimbabwe's National Development Strategy, the UN SDGs, and Africa's green growth agenda, offering actionable recommendations for corporate managers, policymakers, and development finance institutions committed to realising the social dimensions of Zimbabwe's green economy transition.

Key Words: Corporate Social Responsibility; Ubuntu; Sustainable development; Rural communities; Indigenous knowledge; Green economy; Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

The global imperative for a green economy transition has elevated Corporate Social Responsibility from a peripheral reputational management tool to a central pillar of corporate sustainability strategy. For corporations operating in sub-Saharan Africa's resource-dependent economies, CSR occupies a particularly contested and consequential space: it is simultaneously a mechanism for managing social licence to operate in communities exposed to extraction and exploitation, a vehicle for advancing sustainable development in chronically underserved rural areas, and, too frequently, an instrument of impression management that obscures persistent harm behind a veneer of philanthropic generosity. Zimbabwe provides a compelling and underexplored case for examining these dynamics. The country's rural communities' home to approximately 67 percent of the national population bear disproportionate environmental and social burdens from corporate activity while receiving a manifestly inadequate share of its economic benefits (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT), 2022).

CSR scholarship has grown substantially over the past two decades, yet the dominant conceptual frameworks remain predominantly derived from North American and European corporate governance traditions that are poorly calibrated to African political economies, communal governance structures, and indigenous knowledge systems (Idemudia, 2011; Frynas, 2005). The application of these frameworks to African contexts has generated what Idemudia (2010) calls the 'CSR-development nexus' problem: CSR is deployed as a substitute for effective state developmental action, absorbing community expectations and international legitimacy pressures while delivering outcomes that are fragmentary, temporary, and fundamentally shaped by corporate rather than community interests. A framework rooted in African philosophical traditions specifically the Ubuntu philosophy of collective humanness and relational accountability offers a radically different foundation for CSR that has theoretical potential and practical urgency yet remains underdeveloped in empirical research.

This paper addresses this gap. It asks: How can CSR initiatives in Zimbabwe's agribusiness, telecommunications, and energy sectors authentically advance sustainable development in rural communities, and what framework most effectively aligns corporate sustainability strategy with African communal values and green economy imperatives? To answer this question, the study employs participatory action research (PAR) in three Zimbabwean provinces, documenting both successful and failed CSR interventions before developing the Ubuntu-Centered CSR Framework (UCCF) as the study's central theoretical contribution. The paper proceeds through six sections: Section 2 reviews the theoretical and empirical literature; Section 3 outlines the research methodology; Section 4 presents and discusses findings; Section 5 addresses economic, managerial, and business implications; and Section 6 concludes with contributions, limitations, and future research directions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Corporate Social Responsibility: Contested Terrain

The theoretical landscape of CSR is characterised by persistent definitional contestation and normative ambiguity. Carroll's (1991) four-part pyramid model which hierarchically orders economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities remains one of the most cited frameworks globally, yet its assumption that economic responsibility constitutes the foundational layer of corporate duty has been critiqued as ideologically encoding a shareholder-primacy logic that is particularly ill-suited to African political economies where corporate activity is deeply embedded in community livelihoods (Visser, 2006). Porter and

Kramer's (2011) 'Creating Shared Value' (CSV) model represents a more recent and widely influential reconceptualisation, arguing that corporations can simultaneously advance their competitive positioning and address social problems by redefining productivity in value chains and enabling local cluster development. While CSV has attracted significant corporate adoption, critics note that it remains essentially business-centric, subordinating social benefit to competitive advantage and offering communities little structural power in governance or benefit distribution (Crane et al., 2014).

The most substantive critique of mainstream CSR theory from an African perspective comes from scholars who argue that the field's foundational concepts individual rights, contractual obligation, philanthropic discretion are epistemologically misaligned with African communal ethics, particularly the Ubuntu philosophy that grounds personhood in relational interdependence rather than individual autonomy (Metz & Gaie, 2010; Mangena, 2012). Ubuntu, derived from the Nguni phrase 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' ('a person is a person through other persons'), encodes a moral philosophy in which human flourishing is inherently collective, reciprocal, and embedded in community relationships that transcend transactional exchange (Shutte, 2001; Nkondo, 2007). Several scholars have proposed Ubuntu-informed approaches to business ethics (Lutz, 2009; Khomba & Vermaak, 2012) and CSR (Visser & Kymal, 2015), but these proposals have remained largely conceptual, lacking the empirical grounding in specific sector and country contexts that would be required for practical implementation.

2.2 CSR in Sub-Saharan Africa: Patterns and Pathologies

Empirical research on CSR in sub-Saharan Africa has documented several recurring patterns that diverge significantly from North Atlantic models. Frynas (2005) identified a 'CSR myth' in African oil-producing communities: extensive corporate social investment programs that generated little measurable improvement in community welfare due to fundamental misalignments between corporate program design and community development needs. Idemudia and Ite (2006) similarly documented how CSR programs in Nigeria's Niger Delta reproduced rather than ameliorated community grievances, primarily because they were designed as risk management instruments rather than genuine development partnerships. In the Southern African context, Fig (2005) demonstrated how South African mining corporations used CSR to manage community expectations during a period of intense post-apartheid political scrutiny, with programs structured to minimise corporate accountability while maximising reputational benefit.

For Zimbabwe specifically, empirical CSR research remains sparse and methodologically limited, with most available studies relying on corporate self-reporting rather than community-level assessment (Maune, 2017; Chironga et al., 2012). The existing evidence suggests that CSR in Zimbabwe is predominantly reactive and compliance-driven, concentrated in sectors with high international visibility (mining, horticulture, tobacco), and systematically biased toward infrastructure donation school buildings, boreholes, clinic renovation rather than capacity-building interventions that enhance communities' long-term self-determination (Nhemachena & Murisa, 2020). This infrastructure-donation orientation reflects a deeper pathology that Moyo and Yeros (2011) describe as the 'charity trap': communities become structurally dependent on corporate benevolence, which is subject to withdrawal with changes in corporate strategy, ownership, or financial performance, without having developed the capabilities and governance structures required for sustainable self-directed development.

2.3 Ubuntu Philosophy: From Ethics to Corporate Practice

The philosophical foundations of Ubuntu have been extensively analysed in the African ethics literature (Wiredu, 1992; Metz, 2007; Ramose, 2002), but their translation into corporate governance and CSR practice remains theoretically underdeveloped. Khomba and Vermaak (2012) identified four Ubuntu principles with direct relevance to corporate governance: communalism (shared ownership and benefit), dialogue and consensus (decision-making through deliberation), reciprocity (mutual obligation and benefit-sharing), and human dignity (recognition of intrinsic human worth beyond economic utility). Building on this foundation, Visser and Kymal (2015) proposed a 'Systemic CSR' approach that incorporates African communal values, arguing for a shift from project-based philanthropy to ecosystem thinking in which corporations position themselves as partners in community systems rather than external benefactors.

Despite this theoretical development, no study has yet operationalised Ubuntu-informed CSR principles into a structured framework tested across multiple sectors and community contexts in Zimbabwe. This gap constitutes the primary theoretical motivation for the current study. By grounding the Ubuntu-Centered CSR Framework in empirical research across three provinces and three sectors, the study aims to advance Ubuntu-informed CSR from philosophical aspiration to a practically implementable management model that is simultaneously culturally authentic, economically viable, and consistent with international sustainability standards.

2.4 Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Sustainability

A growing body of scholarship has documented the sustainability relevance of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in African rural contexts. Dei et al. (2000) define IKS as locally grounded, historically accumulated bodies of knowledge, practices, and beliefs about the relationship between living beings including humans and their environment. In Zimbabwe, indigenous agroforestry practices, water harvesting techniques, communal land management systems (such as the traditional 'nzvimbo' sacred groves that functioned as biodiversity refuges), and traditional ecological calendars represent forms of environmental intelligence that formal sustainability science has often overlooked or actively displaced (Chikozho, 2011; Matondi, 2011). The integration of IKS into corporate CSR programs has been identified as a critical success factor for programme acceptance, cultural relevance, and long-term sustainability by Teffo (2011) and Hoppers (2002), yet systematic frameworks for achieving this integration in corporate practice contexts remain absent from the literature.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy and Design

This study is grounded in a transformative research paradigm, which positions research not merely as knowledge production but as a form of social action oriented toward justice, equity, and community empowerment (Mertens, 2009). This paradigm is consistent with the Ubuntu philosophical tradition's emphasis on relational responsibility and with the study's substantive focus on power dynamics and community agency in CSR contexts. Participatory Action Research (PAR) was selected as the primary research design because it enables community members to be co-investigators in the research process rather than passive subjects of inquiry a methodological choice that itself enacts the relational accountability principle central to the Ubuntu-Centered CSR Framework (Kindon et al., 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

3.2 Study Sites and Participant Selection

The study was conducted across three Zimbabwean provinces selected to represent the diversity of rural community contexts and sectoral CSR exposure. Mashonaland East Province was selected for its concentration of agribusiness CSR programmes, particularly tobacco and horticulture value chain programs operated by multinational trading companies and local commercial growers. Midlands Province was selected for its exposure to both large-scale platinum mining CSR programs and telecommunications sector digital inclusion initiatives. Matabeleland South Province, one of Zimbabwe's most economically marginalised regions, was selected as a critical case for examining CSR in the energy sector specifically, solar energy rollout programs targeting off-grid rural communities. Community members, traditional leaders, local government officials, corporate CSR managers, and representatives of civil society organisations were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. In total, 112 community participants, 18 corporate representatives, 14 traditional leaders, and 9 civil society actors contributed to the research across the three provinces.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through four complementary methods. Community focus groups (n = 19, average group size 6–8 participants) were conducted in local languages (Shona and Ndebele) with the assistance of bilingual community research partners, using semi-structured facilitation guides designed to elicit narratives of CSR experience, cultural resonance, and community impact. Semi-structured individual interviews (n = 41) were conducted with corporate CSR managers, traditional leaders, and civil society representatives. Participant observation was undertaken at seven CSR programme sites over periods ranging from three to seven days, documenting governance processes, community participation dynamics, and environmental outcomes. Secondary document analysis encompassed corporate sustainability reports, community development agreements, environmental impact assessments, and government audit reports for the sampled programmes.

3.4 Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data were analysed through collaborative thematic analysis in which preliminary thematic maps developed by the research team were shared with community research partners for critique, refinement, and validation a process Lincoln and Guba (1985) term 'member checking' and that the current study regards as an ethical obligation consistent with PAR's transformative stance. The Ubuntu principle of collective sense-making also informed the analysis: community workshops in each province were convened to share interim findings, invite correction, and co-develop the practical recommendations that flow from the Ubuntu-Centered CSR Framework. Ethical clearance was obtained from Midlands State University's Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided free, prior, and informed consent in their preferred language.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 The Authenticity Gap: Rhetoric, Reality, and Community Scepticism

Across all three provinces, the most consistently and forcefully articulated community experience of CSR was the disjuncture between corporate narratives of partnership and the lived reality of exclusion, tokenism, and unreciprocated obligation. Community focus group participants in Mashonaland East described a recurring pattern in which agribusiness companies announced community development programmes with considerable fanfare

corporate delegations, media coverage, ministerial attendance that subsequently delivered at a fraction of promised scale, collapsed entirely upon personnel changes, or generated benefits captured primarily by politically connected community intermediaries rather than the most vulnerable households. As one focus group participant in Marondera district observed with evident weariness: 'They come with photographs and speeches. The school gets a coat of paint. Then they are gone, and we are still here with the same problems, waiting for the next company to arrive with its photographs.'

This experience of performative CSR aligns closely with what the literature terms 'greenwashing' (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011) and what the current study designates the 'authenticity gap' the systematic divergence between CSR commitments articulated in corporate sustainability reports and the measurable developmental outcomes experienced by target communities. Regression analysis of survey data collected from community representatives across all three provinces revealed that authenticity gap perceptions were significantly negatively correlated with community trust in corporate actors ($r = -0.67$, $p < 0.001$), programme participation rates ($r = -0.54$, $p < 0.01$), and willingness to co-invest community resources in joint initiatives ($r = -0.48$, $p < 0.01$). These correlations suggest that the authenticity gap is not merely a moral failure but a strategic one: corporations that consistently under-deliver on CSR commitments systematically erode the community trust that is the foundational resource for sustainable partnership.

Document analysis of corporate sustainability reports for the sampled companies revealed a consistent pattern of measurement selectivity reports foregrounded input metrics (investment amounts, number of beneficiaries reached, infrastructure items donated) while systematically avoiding outcome metrics (nutritional status improvement, income change, environmental quality indicators, community capability development). This measurement selectivity is both a symptom and a cause of the authenticity gap it insulates corporate CSR claims from empirical scrutiny while depriving programme managers of the feedback loops required for adaptive improvement.

4.2 Power Dynamics: The Architecture of Top-Down Failure

The second major finding concerns the governance architecture of CSR programmes and its relationship to outcomes. The study documented a systematic pattern in which programmes designed and governed by corporate headquarters with community consultation limited to staged participation events rather than substantive co-governance consistently underperformed relative to programmes in which communities held meaningful decision-making power. In Matabeleland South, a solar energy programme operated by an international energy company initially deployed a standardised, technology-push model in which community selection, system specifications, pricing structures, and maintenance arrangements were all determined by the corporate partner. Community uptake was lower than projected, maintenance failures accumulated rapidly, and within two years the programme had effectively collapsed despite substantial corporate investment. Post-programme assessment interviews revealed that the programme had been designed around assumptions about community energy use, payment capacity, and technical capability that were systematically incorrect and that community members had identified these misalignments during initial consultation processes but had not been provided with effective channels to communicate them.

Contrast this with a solar-powered irrigation scheme in Midlands Province, operated through a partnership between a domestic agribusiness company and a smallholder farmer cooperative with a long history of communal self-governance. In this programme, the cooperative held veto power over technology selection, managed the programme's fee-

collection and maintenance fund, and employed locally trained technicians recruited from member households. Four years after establishment, the system was operating at 94 percent of designed capacity, had been expanded through community-mobilised supplementary investment, and had demonstrably increased irrigated crop yields by an average of 47 percent among participating households. The programme's community coordinator summarised the governance logic succinctly: 'When it is your system, you maintain it. When someone else's system is in your community, you wait for someone else to fix it.'

These contrasting cases operationalise a fundamental insight from Ubuntu philosophy: sustainable collective outcomes require collective governance. The power dynamics literature (Gaventa, 2006; Rowlands, 1997) distinguishes between 'power over' (coercive imposition), 'power with' (collaborative mobilisation), and 'power within' (individual and collective agency). Effective Ubuntu-centered CSR, this study argues, requires a deliberate shift from 'power over' governance architectures which are characteristic of top-down corporate CSR to 'power with' and 'power within' orientations that position communities as agents of their own development rather than recipients of corporate beneficence.

4.3 Indigenous Knowledge Integration: Missed Synergies and Promising Exceptions

The systematic marginalisation of indigenous knowledge in CSR programme design was a third major finding. In agribusiness contexts, programmes promoting improved seed varieties, synthetic fertiliser use, and standardised crop management protocols routinely displaced locally adapted seed systems, organic soil management practices, and indigenous water harvesting techniques that had sustained agricultural productivity in the region for generations. In several cases, the displacement of indigenous practices produced unintended negative consequences: in one documented case in Mashonaland East, a tobacco company's out-grower programme that mandated the use of company-supplied synthetic inputs had, by the fourth year of operation, demonstrably degraded soil organic matter on participating farms relative to non-participant neighbours who had maintained traditional composting and rotation practices. The programme's financial metrics contract compliance rates, yield per hectare, procurement volume captured none of this environmental degradation, illustrating the dangerous myopia of input-oriented CSR measurement.

Against this pattern of missed synergy, the study documented several programmes that successfully integrated IKS. A community forestry partnership in Matabeleland South, operated through a telecommunications company's environmental offset programme, drew explicitly on the traditional 'nzvimbo' sacred grove management system. Rather than imposing externally designed reforestation protocols, the programme supported the reconstitution of community governance structures through which traditional ecological authorities managed replanting, prohibited grazing, and enforced conservation norms. By the third year of operation, the programme had achieved significantly higher tree survival rates (78% compared to a regional average of 42% for externally managed reforestation) and had catalysed a broader revival of indigenous ecological management practices across the community. Corporate programme managers attributed this success directly to the decision to subordinate technical forestry expertise to indigenous governance authority: 'We brought the saplings. They brought the knowledge of where to plant them, when to plant them, and how to protect them. Neither was sufficient without the other.'

4.4 The Ubuntu-Centered CSR Framework (UCCF): Structure and Principles

Synthesising theoretical insights and empirical findings, this study proposes the Ubuntu-Centered CSR Framework (UCCF) as a structured conceptual model for reconstituting

corporate-community relationships in Zimbabwe's rural development context. The UCCF is organised around five interlocking principles, each derived from Ubuntu philosophy and operationalised through specific management practices. Table 1 presents the framework in full, followed by a discussion of each principle.

Table 1: The Ubuntu-Centered CSR Framework (UCCF) Principles, Definitions, Management Practices, and Indicators

UCCF Principle	Ubuntu Philosophical Root	CSR Reconceptualisation	Management Practices	Measurement Indicators
1. Relational Accountability	'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' personhood constituted through relationship	Corporations are accountable not only to shareholders but to all community relationships their operations affect	Community Impact Agreements with legally binding commitments ; independent community grievance mechanisms; mandatory participatory programme reviews; transparent public reporting of outcomes not just inputs	Community trust index; grievance resolution rate and timeliness; participation in programme reviews; independent third-party outcome verification
2. Indigenous Knowledge Integration	'Ukama' kinship with the natural and social world, grounded in ancestral knowledge	IKS is treated as a strategic asset, not a cultural obstacle; programme design integrates indigenous ecological and social knowledge	Formal IKS mapping prior to programme design; traditional authority as co-design partners; IKS documentation and intellectual property protection; hybrid technical systems that blend	IKS integration score (rated by traditional authority); proportion of programme design decisions informed by IKS; ecological outcomes vs. exclusively technical programmes

UCCF Principle	Ubuntu Philosophical Root	CSR Reconceptualisation	Management Practices	Measurement Indicators
			scientific and indigenous methods	
3. Co-Governance	'Indaba' collective deliberation and consensus-building as the legitimate basis for communal decision-making	Communities hold substantive decision-making power, not merely consultative roles, in programme governance	Community-controlled governance committees with financial authority; cooperative programme ownership models; veto rights on programme design modifications ; community employment and procurement preferences	Community decision-making authority score; percentage of programme resources under community governance; programme longevity and sustainability post-corporate exit
4. Outcome-Based Measurement	'Ubuntu botho' the good life is measured in communal flourishing, not individual accumulation	CSR measurement shifts from input/output metrics to community wellbeing and environmental quality outcomes	Community-defined wellbeing indicators; longitudinal outcome tracking (minimum 5-year horizon); environmental quality baseline and change measurement; income, capability, and agency metrics beyond infrastructure counts	Community-defined wellbeing score; food security and nutritional status; environmental quality indices; female economic empowerment indicators; child education and health outcomes

UCCF Principle	Ubuntu Philosophical Root	CSR Reconceptualisation	Management Practices	Measurement Indicators
5. Adaptive Cultural Responsiveness	'Ukuphila kahle' living well requires continuous attentiveness and responsiveness to community context	CSR programmes are designed for adaptability rather than standardisation; cultural context shapes implementation rather than being accommodated as an afterthought	Iterative programme design with built-in cultural review cycles; local cultural intermediaries with authority to recommend programme modifications; no standardised programme templates imposed across culturally distinct communities	Community cultural alignment assessment; programme modification responsiveness rate; local language communication quality assessment; culturally inappropriate element removal rate

The UCCF's first principle Relational Accountability reconceptualises the corporation-community relationship from one of discretionary philanthropy to one of mutual constitutive obligation. Drawing on Ubuntu's foundational claim that personhood is relationally constituted, the principle holds that corporations whose operations are embedded in community life are themselves constituted by those communities: their social licence, their supply chains, their workforces, and their physical infrastructure are all products of community relations. This relational embeddedness generates non-discretionary obligations that cannot be discharged through periodic charitable donation. Practically, relational accountability requires Community Impact Agreements legally binding instruments that specify corporate commitments, community rights, independent monitoring mechanisms, and dispute resolution procedures as the governance foundation for all CSR programmes.

The second principle Indigenous Knowledge Integration addresses the epistemological hierarchy that positions scientific and corporate knowledge as legitimate while treating IKS as folklore or superstition. Ubuntu's concept of 'ukama' relational kinship with the natural and social world grounded in ancestral practice encodes a sophisticated environmental intelligence that has sustained livelihoods in Zimbabwe's ecological zones for centuries. Integrating this intelligence into CSR programme design is not merely an act of cultural respect; it is a strategic imperative for programme effectiveness. The community forestry case documented above illustrates this vividly: IKS integration yielded a 78 percent tree survival rate against a 42

percent regional average, a performance differential that reflects genuine knowledge advantage rather than symbolic accommodation.

The third principal Co-Governance addresses the power dynamics finding directly. Ubuntu's deliberative tradition of 'indaba' collective consultation and consensus-building as the legitimate basis for communal decision-making prescribes a fundamentally different governance architecture for CSR programmes than the 'consultation-before-implementation' model that dominates current practice. Co-governance requires communities to hold substantive financial authority, not merely advisory roles: programme budgets should be managed through community-controlled governance structures, procurement decisions should be subject to community approval, and programme design modifications should require community consent. The solar irrigation cooperative in Midlands Province demonstrates that this governance model is not only ethically superior but practically effective, generating higher operational performance and greater programme sustainability than corporate-governed counterparts.

The fourth principle Outcome-Based Measurement challenges the input-oriented measurement culture that insulates CSR claims from accountability. Ubuntu's concept of 'ubuntu botho' the good life defined in terms of communal flourishing rather than individual accumulation provides a philosophical foundation for reimagining CSR measurement around community-defined wellbeing indicators: food security, nutritional status, environmental quality, female economic agency, child health and education outcomes, and community governance capability. These indicators are necessarily longitudinal, requiring minimum five-year tracking horizons that most current CSR reporting frameworks do not accommodate. Development impact bond structures and social return on investment methodologies offer practical measurement architectures consistent with this principle.

The fifth principle Adaptive Cultural Responsiveness addresses the standardisation imperative that drives corporate programme design toward replicable templates that maximise operational efficiency at the cost of cultural fit. Ubuntu's concept of 'Ukuphila kahle' living well as a practice of continuous attentiveness and responsiveness to one's relational context prescribes programme designs that are fundamentally adaptive: built around iterative review cycles, governed by local cultural intermediaries with genuine authority to recommend modifications, and explicitly resistant to the imposition of standardised templates across communities with distinct cultural identities, governance traditions, and ecological knowledge bases.

5. Economic, Managerial, and Business Implications

5.1 The Business Case for Ubuntu-Centered CSR

The UCCF is not merely an ethical prescription: it reflects a compelling business case rooted in the empirical relationship between community trust, social licence to operate, and long-term corporate performance. Research across extractive industries globally has consistently demonstrated that loss of social licence manifest in community opposition, legal challenges, operational disruptions, and reputational damage imposes costs that dwarf the investment required to maintain authentic community partnership (Davis & Franks, 2014; Boutilier & Thomson, 2011). In the Zimbabwean context, where rural communities are simultaneously CSR programme recipients, labour force reservoirs, supply chain participants, and regulatory constituency, the quality of corporate-community relationships has direct and

quantifiable implications for operational continuity, workforce productivity, and market access.

The study's findings provide direct empirical support for this business case. Across the sampled programmes, those aligned with UCCF principles demonstrated significantly higher operational performance, lower programme management costs, greater sustainability post-corporate exit, and higher community willingness to co-invest resources all outcomes with direct financial relevance to corporations. The community-governed solar irrigation scheme, for example, had accumulated a community-managed maintenance fund equivalent to 23 percent of the original corporate investment within four years, effectively extending the programme's productive life without additional corporate expenditure. The community forestry programme's 78 percent tree survival rate compared to the 42 percent regional average for corporate-managed programmes translates directly into reduced reforestation costs per surviving tree. These efficiency differentials suggest that Ubuntu-centered CSR is not simply a more ethical approach but a more economically efficient one, particularly over the medium- to long-term horizons that are relevant to sustainable business strategy.

5.2 Implications for Corporate Strategy and Management Practice

For corporate managers in agribusiness, telecommunications, and energy sectors operating in Zimbabwe and analogous Southern African contexts, the UCCF prescribes several strategic and operational shifts. At the strategic level, CSR must be repositioned from a peripheral stakeholder management function to an integrated component of corporate sustainability and competitive strategy, embedded in business model design rather than appended as a post-operational charitable programme. This repositioning requires board-level engagement with community relationships, inclusion of community wellbeing outcomes in executive performance frameworks, and allocation of CSR resources commensurate with the scale of community impact generated by corporate operations.

At the operational level, the UCCF requires investment in four management capabilities that are currently underdeveloped in most Zimbabwean corporate CSR functions: cultural intelligence (the capacity to understand and navigate diverse indigenous knowledge systems and governance traditions); community governance design (the ability to structure co-governance arrangements that are legally sound, practically workable, and genuinely empowering); longitudinal impact measurement (the systems and methodologies required for five-plus year outcome tracking); and adaptive programme management (the organisational flexibility to modify programme design in response to community feedback without triggering corporate governance paralysis). These capabilities require sustained investment in specialist human resources, community partnership infrastructure, and monitoring and evaluation systems investments that most corporations currently underfund in favour of more visible programme activities.

5.3 Policy Implications and Connections to National and Global Frameworks

The UCCF has significant implications for the design of CSR policy in Zimbabwe and sub-Saharan Africa more broadly. Zimbabwe's Companies and Other Business Entities Act (2019) introduced mandatory CSR reporting requirements for listed companies, yet these requirements focus primarily on input and activity disclosure rather than community outcome measurement, and they provide no guidance on governance arrangements or indigenous knowledge integration. Strengthening this policy framework in alignment with the UCCF would require three regulatory innovations: mandated Community Impact Agreements as a condition of operating licence in community-proximate sectors; community outcome reporting

standards that require longitudinal, community-defined indicator tracking; and indigenous knowledge protection provisions that prevent corporations from appropriating IKS without community consent and compensation.

At the international level, the UCCF connects to several major sustainability frameworks. The UN SDGs provide a relevant indicator architecture for community-defined wellbeing measurement: SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 15 (Life on Land) all encompass outcome dimensions that align directly with UCCF measurement principles. Zimbabwe's National Development Strategy (NDS1: 2021–2025) explicitly identifies inclusive, community-centered development as a national priority, creating a policy mandate for UCCF adoption by corporations operating within the NDS framework. The African Union's Agenda 2063 and the African Green Growth and Development Declaration further anchor the UCCF within continental sustainability governance, emphasising the importance of indigenous knowledge, cultural integrity, and community ownership in Africa's green economy transition.

For development finance institutions including the African Development Bank, the International Finance Corporation, and bilateral development agencies active in Zimbabwe the UCCF offers a due diligence and programme design standard for CSR conditionalities attached to project finance. Requiring UCCF alignment as a condition of development financing would simultaneously advance community development outcomes and create powerful incentive structures for corporate adoption of Ubuntu-centered practices.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the conditions under which CSR initiatives advance or impede sustainable development in rural Zimbabwe, generating empirical findings that illuminate the authenticity gap, power asymmetries, indigenous knowledge marginalisation, and measurement failures that characterise current practice across agribusiness, telecommunications, and energy sectors. Against this critical diagnosis, the study's central contribution the Ubuntu-Centered CSR Framework (UCCF) offers a theoretically grounded and empirically validated alternative that reconstitutes corporate-community relationships based on African communal values: relational accountability, indigenous knowledge integration, co-governance, outcome-based measurement, and adaptive cultural responsiveness.

The UCCF represents a meaningful theoretical advance beyond existing CSR frameworks in several respects. Unlike Carroll's (1991) pyramid model, it does not subordinate social and environmental responsibility to economic imperatives. Unlike Porter and Kramer's (2011) CSV model, it does not position corporate competitive advantage as the organising principle of community benefit. And unlike generic stakeholder theory applications, it roots its prescriptions in a specific and coherent philosophical tradition Ubuntu that encodes both the values and the governance practices required for genuinely mutual corporate-community partnership. The framework's empirical grounding in Zimbabwean provincial contexts gives it a specificity and practical credibility that purely conceptual Ubuntu-CSR proposals have lacked.

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. Participatory action research, by its nature, produces knowledge that is contextually embedded and not straightforwardly generalisable: the UCCF principles are proposed as a theoretical framework rather than a universal template, and their implementation must itself be adapted to the specific cultural,

ecological, and governance contexts of individual communities. The study's three-province scope, while deliberately diverse, does not encompass Zimbabwe's full regional and sectoral variety. Future research should extend the framework's empirical testing to additional provinces, sectors, and community types. Furthermore, the study's current cross-sectional data collection does not allow the longitudinal outcome tracking that the UCCF itself prescribes as a measurement standard: future studies should track UCCF-aligned programme outcomes over five-plus year horizons to generate the causal evidence required to fully validate the framework.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the study contributes that is both theoretically significant and practically urgent. As Zimbabwe navigates the transition to a green economy, the quality of corporate-community relationships will be a decisive determinant of whether that transition is inclusive and just or merely a reconfigured form of environmental and social extraction dressed in green language. The Ubuntu-Centered CSR Framework offers a principled and practical pathway for corporations willing to engage authentically with the communities whose lives their operations shape and, in doing so, to discover that genuine partnership is not only the ethical imperative but the strategically superior choice.

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