The United Nations Global Compact Framework and Africa and ESG: Leveraging its Ten Principles Covering Human Rights, Environment, and Labour as a Baseline for Corporate Sustainability

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the ideal of corporate sustainability can be promoted in Africa. The paper observes that achieving corporate sustainability in Africa remains an elusive dream due to the negative impacts of corporate activities on human rights, the environment and labour. Consequently, the paper posits that promoting corporate sustainability in Africa is a key agenda in order to support the continent's progress towards Sustainable Development. In light of this agenda, the paper observes that the United Nations (UN) Global Compact Framework provides an effective baseline towards fostering corporate sustainability in Africa including through integrating Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) tenets in corporate activities. The paper suggests how the ten principles of the United Nations Global Compact can be leveraged as a baseline for effective and efficient corporate sustainability in Africa towards economic growth, social equity and environmental protection.

1.0 Introduction

Sustainability is an overarching global development ideal that seeks to forge harmony between humanity and nature for posterity. Sustainability entails creating and maintaining the conditions under which humanity and nature can exist in productive harmony to support both present and future generations[1]. In particular, it has been observed that sustainability entails the integration of environmental health, social equity and economic vitality in order to create thriving, healthy, diverse and resilient communities now and in the future[2]. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) observes that it has become increasingly vital to forge a new relationship between people and planet by fostering sustainability in light of mounting environmental, social, and economic challenges facing the world[3]. These problems include poverty, rising inequalities

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[1] United States Environmental Protection Agency., 'What is Sustainability.' Available at https://www.epa.gov/sustainability/learn-about-sustainability (Accessed on 18/09/2026)

[2] What is Sustainability?., Available at https://www.sustain.ucla.edu/what-is-sustainability/ (Accessed on 18/09/2026)

[3] United Nations Environment Programme., 'The Triple Planetary Crisis: Forging a New Relationship Between People and the Earth' Available at https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/speech/triple-planetary-crisis-forging-new-relationship-between-people-and-earth?gad_source=1&gclid=EAIaIQobChMI5Jf4zJXihwMVr6KDBx2jcx22EAAYASAAEgIqsfD_BwE (Accessed on 18/09/2026)

within and among nations, gender inequalities, unemployment, global health threats, conflicts, and more frequent and intense natural disasters[4].

In particular, it has been observed that environmental problems including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss undermine harmony between humanity and nature creating the need for new development models that take into account the needs of both people and planet[5]. Consequently, Sustainable Development has emerged as a global blueprint towards sustainability since this approach seeks to promote development that meets the needs of the present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs[6]. It has been observed that Sustainable Development aims to achieve the ideal of sustainability by promoting environmental protection and conservation, economic development and social progress[7].

Sustainability is a crosscutting theme that applies across all sectors including in both public and private spheres. For example, due to the vital role that corporations play in the modern global economy, promoting corporate sustainability is key towards ensuring that corporations are run effectively and efficiently towards supporting all facets of Sustainable Development including economic growth, social equity and environmental protection[8]. However, it has been observed that attaining corporate sustainability remains a global challenge due to the negative impacts of corporate activities on human rights and the environment[9]. Strengthening corporate sustainability is therefore a key agenda in the modern era in order to ensure that companies can support global progress towards Sustainable Development.

This paper discusses how the ideal of corporate sustainability can be promoted in Africa. The paper observes that achieving corporate sustainability in Africa remains an elusive dream due to the negative impacts of corporate activities on human rights, the environment and labour. Consequently, the paper posits that promoting corporate sustainability in Africa is a key agenda

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[4] United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Available at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf (Accessed on 18/09/2026)

[5] United Nations Climate Change., 'What is the Triple Planetary Crisis?' Available at https://unfccc.int/news/what-is-the-triple-planetary-crisis (Accessed on 18/09/2026)

[6] World Commission on Environment and Development., 'Our Common Future.' Oxford, (Oxford University Press, 1987)

[7] Fitzmaurice. M., 'The Principle of Sustainable Development in International Development Law.' *International Sustainable Development Law*., Vol 1

[8] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development., 'OECD Principles of Corporate Governance.' Available at https://www.oecd.org/daf/ca/Corporate-Governance-Principles-ENG.pdf (Accessed on 18/09/2026)

[9] Sozinova. A et al, 'Economic Environmental Activities of Russian Corporations' International Journal of Economics and Financial Issues, Volume 6, Issue 1, 2016, p. 52-56.

in order to support the continent's progress towards Sustainable Development. In light of this agenda, the paper observes that the United Nations (UN) Global Compact Framework provides an effective baseline towards fostering corporate sustainability in Africa including through integrating Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) tenets in corporate activities. The paper suggests how the ten principles of the United Nations Global Compact can be leveraged as a baseline for effective and efficient corporate sustainability in Africa towards economic growth, social equity and environmental protection.

2.0 Examining the need for Effective Corporate Sustainability in Africa

Corporate sustainability is a key ideal whose attainment is necessary towards Sustainable Development both globally and in Africa. At its core, corporate sustainability involves balancing the desire for profitability in companies with societal Sustainable Development needs including long-term economic growth, environmental protection and social responsibility[10]. In addition, it has been observed that corporate sustainability is a business strategy that ensures that companies operate in an economically, socially, and environmentally responsible manner[11]. It has been observed that by adopting corporate sustainability strategies and practices, businesses can ensure long-term environmental, social, and economic health for the benefit of both present and future generations[12].

Corporate sustainability is therefore an effective business strategy that ensures that corporations support societal progress towards Sustainable Development. It has been observed that corporate sustainability differs from traditional business models of maximizing profits by requiring companies to ensure that business strategies and practices take into account the needs of various stakeholders including employees, customers, investors, the environment, local communities and the society at large[13]. In order to achieve this objective, corporate sustainability focuses on three key pillars: *environmental responsibility* which urges companies to be responsible stewards of the environment including through reducing their carbon footprint, minimizing waste, and conserving water and energy[14]; *social responsibility* including through promoting fair and equitable labour practices, embracing diversity in workplaces, and contributing to societal well-being through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices[15]; and *economic responsibility* which

[10] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development., 'Corporate Sustainability' Available at https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/corporate-sustainability.html (Accessed on 19/08/2026)

[11] What Is Corporate Sustainability? Why It Matters to Business., Available at https://www.amu.apus.edu/area-of-study/business-administration-and-management/resources/what-is-corporate-sustainability/ (Accessed on 19/09/2026)

[12] Corporate sustainability: Definition, importance and examples., Available at https://blog.se.com/sustainability/2022/09/06/corporate-sustainability-definition-importance-and-examples/ (Accessed on 19/09/2026)

[13] What Is Corporate Sustainability? Why It Matters to Business., Op Cit

[14] Corporate Sustainability (CSR): About., Available at https://libguides.nypl.org/corporate_sustainability-CSR (Accessed on 19/09/2026)

[15] Ibid

requires companies to pursue their economic objectives including profit maximization pursuant to the tenets of good governance including transparency, accountability, ethical business operation, human rights, and statutory compliance[16].

Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) has emerged as an effective practice and strategy that can enable both public and private companies to meet their corporate sustainability requirements. ESG has been described as a model of sustainable business practice that is based on responsible and positive attitude towards the environment, high social responsibility, and good governance[17]. This framework seeks to integrate Environmental, Social and Governance factors in both public and private decision-making processes in order to foster corporate sustainability[18]. ESG plays a fundamental role in the corporate sustainability discourse since it provides a framework that can enable companies to promote sustainable investments that generate long-term financial returns while also taking into account the social and environmental impacts of economic activities and promoting transparency and corporate responsibility[19]. Consequently, companies have been urged to integrate ESG factors into business operations and strategies in order to effectively balance economic growth with environmental/ecological stewardship and social responsibility[20]. For example, ESG can enable companies to adopt *Environmental* tenets such as climate action, biodiversity conservation, sustainable resource use and circularity, pollution control, sustainable waste management and energy efficiency[21]; *Social* factors such as diversity, equity and inclusion at work places, fair wages, human rights, health and safety, and community well-being[22]; and *Governance* tenets such as transparency, accountability, shareholder rights, and board diversity[23] towards achieving corporate sustainability across all its dimensions.

Promoting corporate sustainability is a key agenda in the pursuit of Sustainable Development in Africa. It has been observed that corporate sustainability in Africa focuses on ensuring that business strategies and practices integrate economic growth with social equity and environmental conservation in line with local development needs and priorities[24]. The need for

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[16] Ibid

[17] United Nations Development Programme., 'ESG: From Challenges to Opportunities' Available at https://www.undp.org/belarus/stories/esg-challenges-opportunities (Accessed on 19/09/2026)

[18] Ibid

[19] The 3 pillars of Sustainability: Environmental, Social and Economic., Available at https://www.enel.com/company/stories/articles/2023/06/three-pillars-sustainability (Accessed on 19/09/2026)

[20] Corporate Sustainability., Available at https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/business-and-management/corporate-sustainability (Accessed on 19/09/2026)

[21] United Nations Development Programme., 'ESG: From Challenges to Opportunities' Op Cit

[22] Ibid

[23] Ibid

[24] Adomako. S., Danso. A., & Boateng. A., 'Corporate Sustainability in Africa: Responsible Leadership, Opportunities, and Challenges' Available at https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-29273-6 (Accessed on 19/09/2026)

effective corporate sustainability in Africa is premised on several local needs and challenges including the continent's extreme vulnerability to climate change, the need to ensure inclusive growth and job creation especially due to high rates of youth unemployment in the continent, rise in global sustainability standards including ESG reporting, and increasing capital flows in the continent including through investments by Multinational Corporations (MNCs)[25]. There has been progress towards promoting corporate sustainability in Africa. For instance, it has been observed that the integration of ESG factors into decision-making processes in public and private entities in Africa is driving sustainable investments, bolstering climate action, strengthening human rights and supporting the shift towards more resilient, inclusive, fair and sustainable economies[26]. The widespread adoption of ESG is positioning Africa at the forefront of global Sustainable Development efforts by unlocking innovation that delivers both economic value and measurable social and environmental impact[27]. The African Union (AU) observes that the concept of ESG is increasingly become an important factor in determining the competitiveness of businesses in Africa as they serve the society in which they operate with a critical focus on the environmental, social and economic sustainability of their activities[28].

However, despite the progress made, several challenges undermine the pursuit of corporate sustainability in Africa. For example, it has been observed that unsustainable business practices in Africa are fuelling social concerns such as human rights abuses, unfair labour practives, conflicts and land injustices against indigenous and local communities and environment challenges including pollution, biodiversity loss and environmental degradation[29]. Consequently, it is necessary to inculcate corporate sustainability in Africa for development, peace and justice.

3.0 Leveraging the United Nations Global Compact Framework and its Ten Principles as a Baseline for Corporate Sustainability in Africa

The UN Global Compact has been developed as a non-binding pact that can enable businesses and firms all over the world to adopt sustainable and socially responsible business practices and initiatives in the pursuit of corporate sustainability[30]. The UN Global Compact has been described

[25] From Survival to Sustainability: The Business Shift Africa Can't Ignore., Available at https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/from-survival-sustainability-business-shift-africa-cant-ignore-svtcf/ (Accessed on 19/09/2026)

[26] Africa ESG, Impact Investing & Sustainable Finance., 'Advancing Inclusive Prosperity & Long-Term Resilience' Available at https://www.esg-impact.africa/ (Accessed on 19/09/2026)

[27] Ibid

[28] African Union., 'The Environmental, Social, and Governance: An African Private Sector Study.' Available at https://au.int/en/announcements/20230329/environmental-social-and-governance-african-private-sector-study (Accessed on 19/09/2026)

[29] Onweazu. O., 'Multinational Oil Corporations Corporate Integrity Ethics and Sustainable Development in Niger Delta, Nigeria.' *Journal of Sustainable Development*; Vol. 5, No. 10; 2012

[30] United Nations Global Compact., Available at https://unglobalcompact.org/what-is-gc (Accessed on 19/09/2026)

as the world's largest corporate sustainability initiative that urges corporations all over the globe to align business strategies and initiatives with universal standards and principles on human rights, fair labour practices, environmental protection, anti-corruption, and societal progress[31]. In particular, the UN Global Compact seeks to promote sustainable, ethical, responsive, transparent and socially-conscious business practices that align with its ten principles covering the protection of human rights, fair and effective labour practices, environmental protection and conservation, and good governance practices including transparency, accountability and anti-corruption measures[32].

In order to promote corporate sustainability, the UN Global Compact Framework is guided by ten fundamental principles. The first two principles focus on human rights and urge corporations to support and respect the protection of internationally proclaimed human rights, and make sure that they are not complicit in human rights abuses[33]. Principles 3-6 of the UN Global Compact Framework focus on fair and equitable labour practices. They urge businesses to respect and uphold the freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining, to eliminate all forms of forced and compulsory labour, to abolish child labour, and to eliminate discrimination in respect of employment and occupation[34]. In addition, principles 7-9 of the UN Global Compact Framework seek to promote corporate sustainability through environmental sustainability. These principles require corporations to support a precautionary approach to environmental challenges, embrace initiatives that promote greater environmental responsibility, and encourage the development and diffusion of environmentally friendly technologies in order to bolster environmental protection and conservation[35]. Principle 10 of the UN Global Compact Framework focuses on good corporate governance with emphasis on anti-corruption. This principle requires companies to address corruption in all its forms, including extortion and bribery[36].

The UN Global Compact therefore provides an effective framework that can enable companies both globally and in Africa to strengthen their corporate sustainability policies and practices. In particular, it has been observed that the ten principles of the UN Global Compact Framework are derived from key international human and environmental rights instruments and standards including the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*[37], the *International Labour Organization's*

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[31] Ibid
[32] Ibid
[33] United Nations Global Compact., 'The Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact' Available at https://unglobalcompact.org/what-is-gc/mission/principles (Accessed on 19/09/2026)
[34] Ibid
[35] Ibid
[36] Ibid
[37] United Nations General Assembly. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). New York: United Nations General Assembly, 1948

Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work[38], the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*[39], and the *United Nations Convention Against Corruption*[40] thus providing an approach to corporate sustainability that is anchored in universal standards on human rights, environmental conservation, fair labour practices and anti-corruption. By complying with the ten principles of the UN Global Compact, businesses can promote ethical, responsive and sustainable practices that contribute to broader societal goals including the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It has been correctly pointed out that by incorporating the ten principles of the UN Global Compact Framework into business strategies, policies and procedures, and establishing a culture of integrity, companies are not only upholding their basic responsibilities to people and planet, but also setting the stage for long-term economic success[41].

Companies in Africa can therefore leverage on the ten principles of the UN Global Compact Framework as a baseline for corporate sustainability. In particular, it has been observed that the ten principles of the UN Global Compact Framework are anchored in ESG standards providing an approach that can enable companies to effectively integrate Environmental, Social and Governance tenets into business practices towards corporate sustainability[42]. One of the key challenges affecting the profitability and sustainability of African businesses is aligning with their practices with international ESG standards and reporting requirements, which are critical for accessing global markets and securing green financing[43]. Consequently, it has been observed that the UN Global Compact Framework offers a roadmap for African businesses especially Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) to meet global ESG demands while fostering innovation and resilience[44]. It has been observed that development of the UN Global Compact has led to the rise of ESG considerations with companies acknowledging the need to align their policies and operations with broader environmental, societal and governance goals[45]. Consequently, due to corporate sustainability challenges that face companies in Africa, it is imperative to leverage the ten principles of the UN Global Compact Framework in order to promote sustainable, responsive, ethical and socially-conscious corporate activities that align with ESG tenets.

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[38] International Labour Organization (ILO), *ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work*, June 1988,

[39] United Nations General Assembly., 'Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development: Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.' A/CONF. 151/26 (Vol.1)

[40] United Nations General Assembly, *United Nations Convention Against Corruption*, A/58/422, 31 October 2003

[41] United Nations Global Compact., 'The Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact' Op Cit

[42] United Nations Global Compact., 'Sustainable Growth in Africa: Leveraging ESG Standards and Tech for Market Readiness' Available at https://africa.unglobalcompact.org/sustainable-growth-in-africa-leveraging-esg-standards-and-tech-for-market-readiness (Accessed on 19/09/2026)

[43] Ibid

[44] Ibid

[45] Navigating the Path to Sustainable Business: The Evolution of UNGC Principles and the Rise of ESG., Available at https://globalcompact.in/navigating-the-path-to-sustainable-business-the-evolution-of-ungc-principles-and-the-rise-of-esg/ (Accessed on 19/09/2026)

4.0 Conclusion

Corporate sustainability is a key agenda for Africa towards ensuring that both public and private companies can contribute to broader environmental, social and economic goals. In light of current challenges, there is need for corporations in Africa to leverage on the ten principles of the UN Global Compact Framework covering human rights, environment, labour and good governance as a baseline for corporate sustainability[46]. In particular, by integrating the ten principles of the UN Global Compact Framework into corporate initiatives, companies in Africa can effectively promote corporate sustainability through ensuring that business practices align with universal ESG standards and requirements.

[46] United Nations Global Compact., 'The Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact' Op Cit

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