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DRIVERS AND BARRIERS TO ESG IMPLEMENTATION IN ORGANISATIONAL AND PROJECT-RELATED MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN EMERGING COUNTRIES

Abstract

This article examines the drivers and barriers to implementing Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) principles in organisational and project-related management practices in emerging countries. A systematic literature review based on the Scopus database was conducted using PRISMA logic and interpreted through institutional theory. The search identified 605 records, from which 40 peer-reviewed studies were included after screening and eligibility assessment. The findings show that ESG implementation is shaped by the interaction of regulatory pressure, organisational readiness, financial feasibility, stakeholder coordination and implementation capability. The main drivers include supportive regulation, stakeholder pressure and involvement, training, leadership commitment, governance arrangements and technological capability. The main barriers include high upfront costs, restricted finance, fragmented regulation, insufficient professional competence, low awareness, cultural resistance and weak stakeholder engagement. The results reveal an imbalanced distribution of attention across ESG dimensions. Governance emerges as the most visible, appearing in 62.5% of the reviewed sources. Environmental follows with 55.0%. Social receives the least attention, at only 32.5%. The article identifies a persistent translation failure between ESG adoption and its operational implementation across organisational and project-related contexts. The findings contribute to understanding ESG implementation as an institutionally conditioned and capability-dependent process and offer implications for project managers, organisations and policymakers.

Keywords: barriers; drivers; emerging countries; ESG; institutional theory; project management; systematic literature review.

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Introduction

ESG principles are increasingly important for organisations. They support sustainability performance, accountability, and long-term value creation.

In project management, ESG is particularly relevant. Project delivery translates sustainability commitments into practical decisions. For example, in the case of Nepal, the objectives of ensuring the sustainability of a water supply and sanitation project in rural areas were achieved through the coordination of stakeholders, the involvement of the local population, and the continuous refinement of management decisions throughout the project's implementation. These management practices helped translate the project's sustainability objectives into concrete outcomes, including improved sanitation, public health and gender equality [1].

ESG principles also produce measurable outcomes. This is visible in the Ghanaian construction context, where construction accounts for more than 40% of global energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, while green building technology adoption is shaped by government-related barriers, company-level drivers, regulation, incentives, and R&D support [2].

Formal ESG expectations often develop faster than the capacity needed for implementation. This problem is especially important in emerging and developing-country contexts. The Vietnamese

case provides direct evidence of this gap: although 80% of enterprises had committed to or planned ESG practices within the next two to four years, 71% had not planned ESG disclosure or had not considered its implications, and only 30% had taken action on ESG disclosure. This shows that formal ESG intention does not necessarily lead to practical disclosure or implementation action [3].

Other studies also link implementation difficulties to several factors. These include high investment costs and uncertain returns. Weak legislative support, training gaps, and employee awareness problems are also mentioned [4, 5].

The central argument advanced in this study is that emerging countries remain predominantly at the adoption stage of ESG. Organisations in these contexts recognise ESG expectations and encounter external pressure. Nevertheless, the translation of such commitments into operational practice across organisational and project-related contexts remains limited, selective, and inconsistent.

Existing systematic reviews address related but distinct areas of the literature. Daugaard [6] maps the development of ESG investing research, while Govindan and Hasanagic [7] examine circular-economy drivers, barriers and practices from a supply-chain perspective. Reviews of sustainable supply-chain management have also developed conceptual frameworks centred on supply-chain triggers and strategies [8]. In project-related research, Aarseth et al. [9] review project sustainability strategies, while Osei-Kyei et al. [10] focus specifically on net-zero-carbon procurement in construction projects. These reviews provide valuable insights, but their scopes remain concentrated on investment, particular sustainability models, supply chains, or specific project-related practices.

While most literature in this domain looks at a particular industry, a certain project implementation mechanism, or the determinants of either of these two variables, this study seeks to understand the link between the commitment to environmental, social, and governance issues and their corresponding implementations in terms of organisational and project management systems in emerging nations. Specifically, this study combines drivers, barriers, implementation mechanisms, environmental, social, and governance dimensions, institutional pressure and project management categories. Institutional theory explains why the adoption of a practice does not necessarily equate to the implementation of the same.

Three research questions were addressed:

1. What are the main drivers and barriers to implementing ESG principles in organisational and project-related management practices in emerging countries?
2. How is ESG implementation operationalised through concrete mechanisms such as tools, routines, systems and coordination arrangements?
3. How do emerging-country conditions shape the translation of ESG from organisational adoption to project-management practice?

The purpose of this study is to systematically review the factors facilitating and hindering the implementation of ESG principles in organisational and project-related management practices in emerging countries, and to interpret these patterns through institutional theory.

Materials and methods

A systematic literature review was conducted using PRISMA logic [10, 11, 12]. The Scopus database was selected because it provides broad coverage of peer-reviewed publications in business, management, sustainability and related fields [13]. The search was conducted in title, abstract and keyword fields and combined ESG/sustainability terms, implementation/adoption terms, driver/barrier terms and emerging/developing-country terms.

The final Scopus search string was:

(TITLE-ABS-KEY ((«ESG» OR «environmental, social, and governance» OR «sustainability» OR «sustainable development») AND («driver*» OR «barrier*» OR «challenge*» OR «enabler*» OR «success factor*» OR «factor*» OR «obstacle*»)) AND («implementation» OR «adoption») AND («emerging econom*» OR «emerging market*» OR «developing countr*»))) AND PUBYEAR

> 2015 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, «ar»)) OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, «re»)) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, «BUSI»)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, «English»))

The search was limited to English-language Scopus-indexed articles and reviews published between 2016 and 2025 in the Business, Management and Accounting area. The initial search produced 605 records. After removing 4 duplicates, 601 records were screened by title and abstract. At this stage, 535 records were excluded because they did not meet one or more of the inclusion criteria. The main reasons were the absence of a clear emerging- or developing-country context, the lack of a focus on ESG or sustainability implementation and adoption, a purely technical or engineering orientation, or the absence of a meaningful connection with organisational or project-related management practices.

The remaining 66 reports were assessed through full-text review. Of these, 24 were excluded because their relevance to the implementation focus of the study was indirect or only partial. A further 2 articles were excluded during final coding verification because the available evidence was insufficient for consistent inclusion in the analytical framework. As a result, 40 studies were included in the final review.

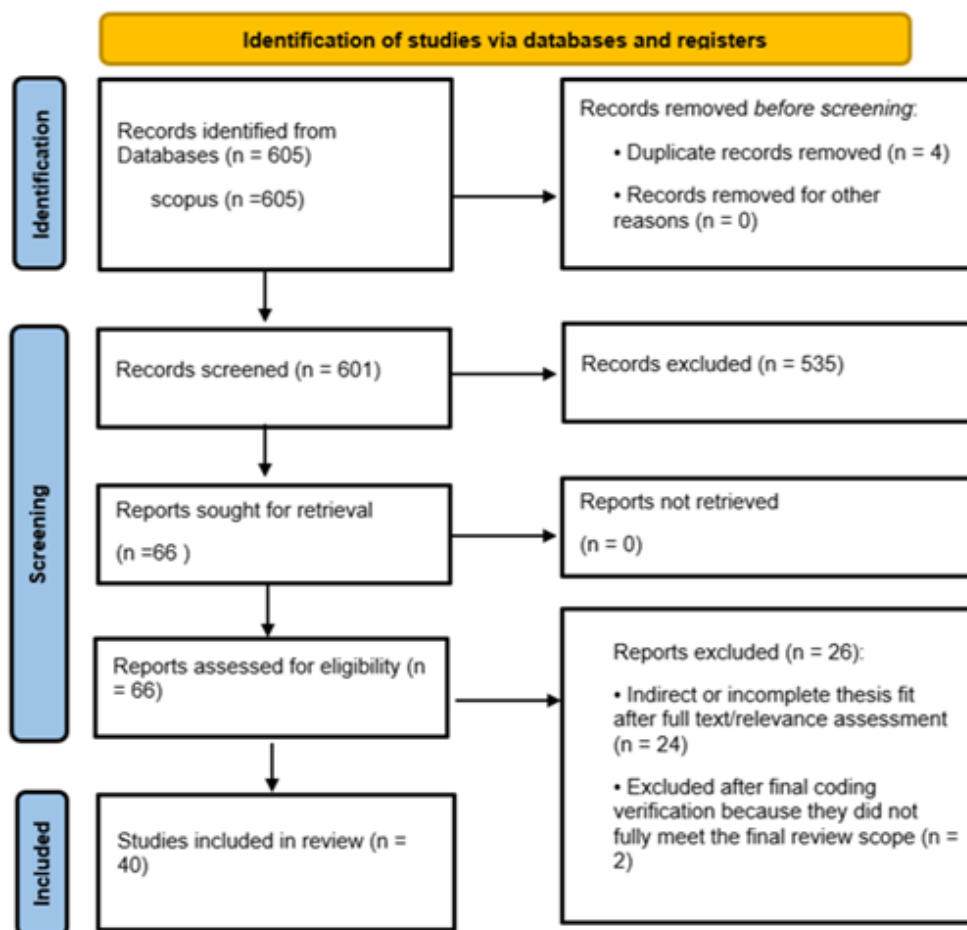


Figure 1 – PRISMA flow diagram of the study selection process

The inclusion criteria required studies to address ESG or sustainability issues; focus on implementation, adoption, drivers, barriers or related factors; examine emerging-market economies or developing countries; and relate to organisational or project-related management practices. Studies were excluded if they lacked practical relevance to implementation, focused primarily on technical or engineering aspects without a management-related dimension, or did not provide sufficiently clear evidence for inclusion in the coding framework.

Data from the 40 included articles were extracted into an Excel-based coding matrix. The analysis combined inductive coding of drivers, barriers and implementation approaches with deductive coding of ESG dimensions, institutional pressures, level of analysis, project type and project-management domains. Coding was applied conservatively; where evidence was insufficient, “No clear evidence” was recorded.

The review dimensions were developed through a combination of inductive and deductive logic. This approach is consistent with prior systematic review studies that classify literature through analytical categories, thematic synthesis and frequency-based interpretation of drivers and barriers [14]. Inductive and deductive dimensions were identified based on recurring patterns identified in the analysed studies. These dimensions capture the factors that facilitate, constrain, or operationalise ESG implementation. The deductive dimensions were used to connect the extracted evidence with the theoretical and project-management focus of the article. ESG dimensions were included to classify whether implementation was mainly related to environmental, social, governance, or combined ESG concerns. Institutional pressures were included to explain why organisations in emerging countries move toward ESG adoption. Finally, project type and PM domains were used as project-management-related lenses to assess where ESG implementation is located, whether the evidence refers to clearly bounded project contexts, and which areas of project management are most visible in the reviewed literature. This structure allowed the review to move beyond listing drivers and barriers and to analyse how ESG implementation is shaped by different conditions.

Table 1 – Review dimensions and categorisation framework

Methods	Structural dimensions	Analytical categories
Inductive	Drivers of ESG implementation	Regulatory support and policy incentives; Financial and economic benefits; Technological innovation; Stakeholder demand and pressure; Organisational commitment and strategic orientation
	Barriers to ESG implementation	Lack of regulatory frameworks; Financial constraints and high implementation costs; Technical and operational complexity; Lack of knowledge and expertise; Coordination and integration challenges; Site-specific and logistical constraints
	Implementation approaches	Technology-based approaches; Process-based approaches; Management and organisational approaches; Capability-building approaches
Deductive	ESG dimensions	Environmental; Social; Governance; combined ESG patterns
	Institutional pressures	Regulatory pressure; Normative pressure; Mimetic pressure; combined patterns
	Project type	Infrastructure; Building / construction; Green building; Energy; Public sector; No clearly bounded project type / organisational-level implementation context
	PM domains	Cost; Time; Resource; Risk; Procurement; Stakeholder; Integration
Source: compiled by the author based on the review framework and coded article data.		

The coded data were analysed through thematic synthesis and frequency analysis. Frequencies were counted only where clear evidence was available and were interpreted as recurring patterns in the reviewed literature, not as measures of causal strength [10, 14, 15]. The results of this synthesis are presented in the next section.

Results and discussion

Dominant drivers of ESG implementation

The inductive findings show that ESG implementation is supported by several interrelated conditions rather than by a single dominant factor.

Table 2 – Drivers of ESG implementation identified in the reviewed literature

Code	Drivers/success factors	Supporting references	% of 40 articles	Rank
D1	Supportive regulatory framework for ESG implementation	[2], [35], [4], [36], [16], [37], [25], [32]	20.0%	1
D2	Professional training provision for implementation practice	[1], [26], [38], [39], [40], [41], [32]	17.5%	2
D3	Strong external stakeholder pressure for ESG adoption	[16], [29], [21], [22], [42], [39]	15.0%	3
D4	Active stakeholder involvement in implementation processes	[1], [31], [38], [43], [44], [32]	15.0%	3
D5	Strategic leadership commitment to sustainability implementation	[3], [16], [29], [37], [22]	12.5%	4
D6	Technological capability for sustainability implementation	[17], [45], [41], [25], [46]	12.5%	4
D7	Strategic orientation toward long-term sustainability value	[19], [25], [46], [41], [37]	12.5%	4
D8	Effective governance architecture for implementation oversight	[3], [16], [46], [47]	10.0%	5
D9	Long-term cost efficiency of sustainability measures	[21], [22], [19], [37]	10.0%	5
D10	Practical knowledge base for ESG implementation	[3], [40], [43], [47]	10.0%	5
D11	Supportive organisational culture for sustainability practice	[38], [43], [40]	7.5%	6
D12	Risk-management capability in implementation processes	[17], [46]	5.0%	7
D13	Enabling institutional environment for implementation uptake	[16], [42]	5.0%	7
D14	Client demand for sustainable project solutions	[35], [4]	5.0%	7
D15	Favourable market environment for sustainable delivery	[35], [29]	5.0%	7
D16	Organisational monitoring systems for implementation progress	[1], [46]	5.0%	7

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive; frequencies indicate recurrence in the reviewed literature, not causal strength. Source: compiled by the author based on existing data.

The drivers in Table 2 cannot be read as separate and equal factors. They form an implementation chain. External pressure creates the reason for organisations to act. Internal governance determines how this pressure is interpreted. Practical capability then affects whether ESG-related commitments become part of organisational and project management routines. These three clusters were derived

inductively from frequency patterns in the reviewed literature. They reflect repeated groupings of favourable conditions within the framework of the reviewed studies.

Cluster 1: External institutional and stakeholder pressure. External pressure is the first reason organisations act. This pressure comes from institutions and stakeholders (D1, D3, D4, D13, D14, D15). For example, in Ghana’s mining sector regulatory compliance, voluntary compliance, and stakeholder demands encouraged multinational mining companies to adopt sustainability practices. Regulatory requirements had clear goals. They focused on environmental protection, impact mitigation, and post-closure land rehabilitation. This example illustrates a key point. External pressure can turn sustainability from a general corporate aspiration into formal organisational requirements [16].

Cluster 2: Internal governance and strategic commitment. This translates external expectations into organisational priorities and responsibilities (D7, D8, D11, D16). Amoah and Eweje (2023) show that sustainability implementation in Ghanaian mining companies was shaped by external institutional pressure and internal organisational features such as managerial cognition or organisational size [16]. This suggests that organisations do not simply react to ESG pressure. They interpret it through their own values, strategic interests, and other conditions.

Cluster 3: Practical implementation capability. This cluster reflects the capability-related drivers (D2, D6, D10, D12). Capability is the condition that allows ESG-related implementation to move beyond policy language. The I5.0 drones study in Nigeria supports this point. It shows that drone use can support cleaner production through specific operational tasks, such as reducing plant diseases and supporting more precise agricultural operations. The study also notes the need for awareness and knowledge transfer on the potential of I5.0 technologies in emerging economies. This means that technology alone is not enough. It must be supported by user knowledge and practical understanding of where it can improve implementation [17]. The RTP study in Nigeria and South Africa gives a similar operational example. It conceptualises returnable transport packaging as an environmental technology and resource, but also shows that effective use requires tracking, control systems and management capabilities [18]. Together, these studies show that implementation capability is the practical bridge between sustainability goals and operational change.

Overall, the driver findings indicate that ESG implementation is sequential rather than additive. External pressure may initiate adoption, but it does not by itself ensure operational change. Its effect depends on whether organisations translate expectations into governance arrangements, assign responsibilities and develop the skills, systems and technologies needed for implementation. This helps explain why similar regulatory or stakeholder pressures can lead to uneven outcomes across organisations. In emerging-country contexts, the decisive issue is therefore not the presence of an individual driver, but the alignment between external pressure, internal governance and practical capability.

Dominant barriers of ESG implementation

Table 3 – Barriers to ESG implementation identified in the reviewed literature

Code	Barriers	References	% of 40 articles	Rank
B1	High upfront cost burden of sustainability uptake	[35], [4], [5], [23], [29], [21], [22], [24], [18], [34], [32]	27.5%	1
B2	Restricted access to implementation finance	[48], [5], [19], [49], [24], [18], [37], [50]	20.0%	2
B3	Fragmented regulatory framework for sustainability uptake	[1], [2], [5], [23], [29], [21], [33], [32]	20.0%	2
B4	Insufficient professional competence for sustainability implementation	[35], [4], [21], [19], [26], [34], [33], [32]	20.0%	2

Continuation of table 3

B5	Low awareness of implementation benefits	[21], [49], [31], [39], [33], [32]	15.0%	3
B6	Inadequate digital readiness for ESG integration	[48], [5], [21], [34], [44]	12.5%	4
B7	Entrenched cultural resistance to sustainable practice	[1], [49], [31], [26], [33]	12.5%	4
B8	Weak stakeholder engagement in implementation processes	[5], [49], [31], [33], [32]	12.5%	4
B9	Thin practical knowledge base for ESG uptake	[22], [49], [51], [33]	10.0%	5
B10	Fragile executive commitment to sustainability goals	[48], [21], [26], [34]	10.0%	5
B11	Underdeveloped implementation infrastructure	[48], [24], [44], [33]	10.0%	5
B12	Insufficient workforce training for ESG practice	[4], [19], [26], [33]	10.0%	5
B13	Weak transition management during organisational change	[1], [35], [32]	7.5%	6
B14	Weak governance architecture for ESG oversight	[1], [48]	5.0%	7
B15	Constraining institutional environment for implementation	[24], [39]	5.0%	7
B16	Unfavourable market conditions for sustainable delivery	[24], [44]	5.0%	7
Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive; frequencies indicate recurrence in the reviewed literature, not causal strength. Source: compiled by the author based on existing data.				

The barrier findings suggest that ESG-related implementation in emerging-country contexts is constrained by interacting financial, institutional and capability-related conditions. This pattern indicates that financial limits, weak institutional support and capability gaps often reinforce one another rather than operating as isolated obstacles.

Financial feasibility is the first major barrier cluster (B1, B2). ESG-related implementation often requires investment in technologies, reporting procedures and training. Under conditions of limited resources, these requirements can constrain implementation even where organisations are willing to adopt sustainability-related practices. It is visible in the Thai manufacturing sector [19]. This study found that environmental sustainability approaches were commonly used, but implementation remained moderate. Full implementation required large investment capacity and proper training and knowledge, which were among the weakest elements of the firms studied. This suggests that financial barriers are not only about cost. They also restrict the organisational capacity needed to build implementation routines.

The second cluster concerns external and market-environment barriers (B3, B15, B16). Fragmented regulation and unfavourable market conditions refer to external conditions that make ESG implementation harder. They include unclear rules or ambiguous rules, weak monitoring, limited external support and challenging market conditions. Organisations face uncertainty about what is required and lack the external pressure needed to sustain implementation after formal ESG commitments are made [16]. In emerging-country contexts, this institutional uncertainty is particularly significant because it can leave organisations without clear guidance or monitoring mechanisms. Even in resource-rich contexts such as Kazakhstan, the implementation of ESG faces structural constraints. Akhmedov et al. [20] show that the transition to renewable energy is hindered by economic, financial, institutional, technical and regulatory barriers, including investment risks and

the need for regulatory and institutional improvements. This suggests that institutional uncertainty is not limited to low-income developing countries but extends to emerging economies with significant resource endowments, where structural dependencies on existing industries can delay sustainability transitions regardless of financial capacity.

The third cluster concerns organisational capability (B4, B5, B6, B9, B12). Low awareness, weak training and limited technical readiness affect whether sustainability goals can be translated into operational practice. A clear example comes from Pakistan's automobile industry [21]. The main barriers to circular-economy implementation were unawareness, high costs, financial constraints. The study also shows that firms lacked the technical expertise needed to convert waste materials into useful remanufactured products. This evidence supports the interpretation that implementation depends not only on willingness, but also on knowledge, technical competence and learning capacity.

A similar capability problem appears in service and supply-chain contexts. Local managers in Malawi's hospitality sector lacked knowledge about sustainability practices and how these practices could be integrated into business operations [22]. Some also viewed sustainability as a cost burden because they did not clearly understand its business benefits. Similarly, evidence from Pakistan's textile sector shows that sectoral-economic, managerial and supplier-related hindrances influence the adoption of sustainable supply-chain management practices [23]. These findings suggest that ESG-related implementation depends on both internal readiness and coordination across organisational and supply-chain actors.

Overall, the barrier findings show that ESG-related implementation in emerging countries is financially constrained, institutionally uncertain and capability-dependent. High upfront costs limit investment in systems and technologies. Weak institutions reduce enforcement and accountability. Capability gaps then make it difficult to convert sustainability expectations into operational routines. Therefore, the main finding is not simply that some barriers appear more often than others. The deeper point is that these barriers interact and create a translation failure between ESG-related adoption and practical implementation.

The driver and barrier findings point to a common pattern: ESG implementation is less a question of formal commitment than of organisational translation. The same factor can operate differently depending on context. Regulation is a clear example. Coherent standards, monitoring and policy incentives support implementation, whereas fragmented rules and weak enforcement increase uncertainty and reduce accountability. Financial constraints have a similar multiplier effect: they limit not only investment in technologies but also training, monitoring and coordination capacity.

This pattern creates a risk of decoupling between adoption and practice. Organisations may respond to external pressure by adopting ESG language, policies or reporting commitments, while implementation remains selective and uneven. The findings therefore suggest that the central challenge in emerging-country contexts is not simply to increase ESG awareness, but to build the institutional and organisational conditions that allow commitments to become stable routines.

Implementation approaches through which ESG is operationalised

This subsection examines how ESG-related principles are operationalised. The focus is on the reviewed literature. To avoid duplication with drivers and barriers, implementation approaches are interpreted in different ways. They are considered as practical mechanisms. Such mechanisms include tools and methods of coordination.

Table 4 shows that the implementation of ESG principles depends on an organisation's ability to put its sustainability goals into practice.

Technology-based approaches (IA1) show that technology can support implementation when it improves operational control. For instance, a case study of a sub-Saharan African firm operating in the agricultural industry shows that digital technologies can support operational optimisation and more efficient resource use [24]. However, the same study also shows that technology alone is insufficient. Wider adoption was constrained by limited government support and access to foreign markets, as well as economic, technological and cultural barriers. This means that technology-based implementation depends on whether firms operate in conditions that allow these tools to be used effectively.

Table 4 – Implementation approaches and mechanisms through which ESG is operationalised

Code	Broad implementation approach	Representative mechanisms	References	% of 40 articles
IA1	Technology-based approaches	Digital tools; drones; KPI/carbon monitoring	[35], [17], [24], [25]	10.0%
IA2	Process-based approaches	Environmental management routines; ISO 14001/PDCA routines; circular-economy practices; recycling; reverse logistics;	[4], [5], [19], [51], [18], [27], [30]	17.5%
IA3	Management and organisational approaches	Local facilitation; coordination; supplier partnerships; monitoring systems; carbon management accounting;	[1], [29], [49], [31], [38], [46], [30]	17.5%
IA4	Capability-building approaches	Training; organisational learning; CSR communication	[1], [29], [40], [26], [38], [43], [39]	17.5%

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive; frequencies indicate recurrence in the reviewed literature, not causal strength. Source: compiled by the author based on existing data.

Process-based approaches (IA2) show that implementation depends on repeatable practice, not only on formal sustainability goals. For example, 70.9% of firms in Nigeria and South Africa had adopted RTP, but only 4.3% of non-adopters were certain that they would implement it in the future [18]. This suggests that process-based mechanisms can make sustainability practical, but their diffusion may remain disparate in developing-country contexts.

Management and organisational approaches (IA3) indicate that implementation hinges on how organisations allocate responsibilities and coordinate internal decisions. Evidence from the hotel sector across Africa and Asia suggests that sustainability practices gain traction when technological advancement, organisational commitment, and environmental standards are aligned [25]. The issue is not the introduction of a single tool. Rather, it lies in connecting technology, internal policies, and external standards into a functioning system. In the absence of such alignment, sustainability commitments tend to remain formal declarations rather than operational realities.

Capability-building approaches (IA4) show that training and learning do not automatically produce implementation. For example, in Brazilian public universities environmental training was viewed as useful, but it produced limited accomplishments [26]. This suggests that capability-building is not only about providing training. It requires internal conditions that allow learning to change practice.

The implementation-approach findings suggest that operationalising ESG is not merely a technical challenge. Process routines, stakeholder coordination, and capacity-building appear more often in the reviewed literature than technology-centric tools. This distinction is important: it moves the question away from which technologies an organisation adopts and toward whether it has the organisational preconditions to use them well.

In emerging-country contexts, limited resources, weak institutional support and infrastructure constraints mean that even well-designed mechanisms may be applied unevenly. The gap between formally adopting an implementation approach and embedding it into routine practice reflects the same translation failure identified in the driver and barrier findings. External commitments, on their own, do not automatically translate into operational change.

ESG dimensions

The ESG-dimension findings show that ESG implementation in the reviewed literature is not presented as an equal balance of environmental, social and governance concerns. The distribution is not consistent: Governance dominates, Environmental follows closely, while Social appears in a smaller share of articles.

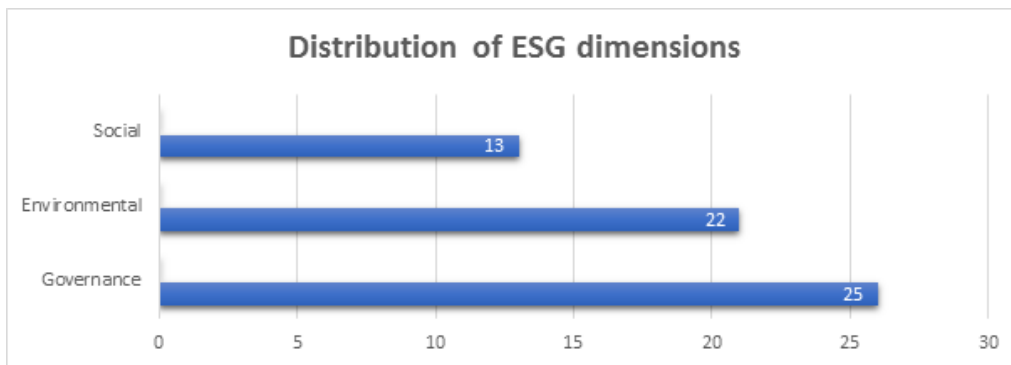


Figure 2 – Distribution of ESG dimensions

The ESG-dimension findings reveal an imbalanced distribution of attention across the three pillars that warrants critical interpretation rather than simple description. Governance emerges as the most visible dimension, appearing in 62.5% of the reviewed sources, followed by Environmental at 55.0%, while Social receives the least attention at only 32.5%.

This hierarchy is not arbitrary. It reflects a structural feature of how ESG translates into observable organisational practice. Governance and environmental concerns are more readily codified: they produce measurable artefacts such as board-level policies, environmental management systems, carbon accounting routines and ISO-certified procedures. These artefacts are easier to study, report and verify, which means they are more likely to appear in peer-reviewed implementation research. The dominance of governance in the findings therefore reflects not its greater practical importance, but its greater institutional visibility. This is consistent with Lucas et al. [25], who show that sustainability practices in the hospitality sector cluster around technological, organisational and environmental conditions, precisely the dimensions that lend themselves to formal measurement and compliance reporting.

The underrepresentation of the social dimension is more consequential than a bibliometric curiosity. Social concerns such as worker welfare, community impact, health and safety, gender equity, stakeholder participation are harder to standardise, harder to measure and more politically contested than environmental or governance metrics. As Esfahbodi et al. [27] note, direct social measures remain less developed in sustainable supply chain management research. In emerging-country contexts, this gap has practical implications: if social concerns are less visible in the literature, they are also less likely to be integrated into implementation frameworks, monitoring systems or project-level decision-making. The result is an ESG model that, in practice, skews toward the dimensions that are easiest to report rather than those that may matter most to affected communities. Future research and practice should treat this imbalance as a substantive problem, not a measurement gap to be corrected at some later stage.

Institutional pressures

The institutional-pressure findings explain the external conditions shaping ESG implementation in the reviewed literature [28].

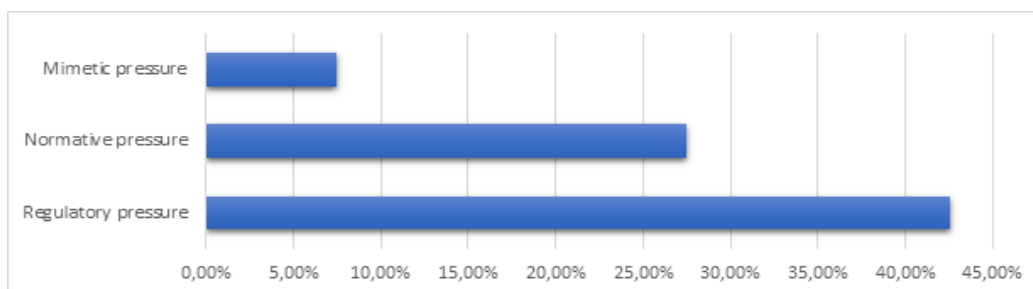


Figure 3 – Institutional pressure pattern

Regulatory pressure is the most visible institutional pattern in the coding results. This indicates that ESG implementation in emerging-country contexts is often explained through compliance with various requirements. Manufacturing firms in emerging markets provide relevant evidence. Regulatory tightening and international legislation can drive the adoption of SSCM [27].

Normative pressure is visible when organisations respond to external expectations. These expectations concern responsible and legitimate behaviour. In Malawi's hospitality sector, local societal expectations and the pursuit of community legitimacy shaped sustainability practices; firms faced pressure to contribute to social well-being [22]. This suggests that ESG-related adoption may be shaped by formal regulation and legitimacy concerns.

In the reviewed literature, mimetic pressure does not emerge as consistently. This does not mean that organisations do not imitate one another. It means that imitation requires clear examples to follow. In many emerging economies, the adoption of ESG practices remains constrained by weak regulation and limited organisational capacity. These conditions can hinder the development of robust practices at the sectoral level. However, mimetic pressure may still arise when suppliers compete for contracts or employees [29]. Therefore, mimetic pressure is best viewed as a conditional factor. Taken together, these findings show that ESG implementation is externally encouraged and internally determined. Governance capacity, resources and coordination determine whether external pressure becomes embedded practice.

The findings also distinguish stakeholder pressure from stakeholder involvement. Stakeholder pressure may push organisations toward ESG adoption, but implementation requires practical coordination, dialogue, partnership and participation. Customer and stakeholder expectations can create adoption pressure, while supplier partnerships, community engagement, collaborative work and knowledge transfer help turn ESG expectations into implementation mechanisms [30].

This distinction matters especially in emerging-country contexts. Where formal institutions are weak or enforcement is limited, stakeholder involvement becomes a practical substitute for missing regulatory support [31, 32]. Implementation therefore depends not only on whether stakeholders demand ESG, but on whether they are actively integrated into implementation processes.

Project-management domains and level of analysis

This section examines the project-management relevance of ESG implementation through two indicators: PM domains and project type. PM domains show which project-management concerns are most visible among studies. Project type clarifies whether the evidence is based on clearly bounded projects or broader organisational and sectoral settings. Together these factors shift the focus from the question of why organisations adopt ESG principles to where and how they are put into practice in project management.

Table 5 – PM domains associated with ESG implementation in the reviewed literature

Code	PM domain	Supporting references	Rank	% of 40 articles
PM1	Stakeholder	[1], [4], [5], [3], [16], [29], [21], [22], [19], [49], [31], [38], [43], [44], [39], [33], [32]	1	42.5%
PM2	Cost	[35], [5], [23], [21], [22], [19], [49], [37], [34], [33], [32]	2	27.5%
PM3	Integration	[3], [16], [23], [34], [25], [52], [30], [47]	3	20.0%
PM4	Resource	[1], [35], [3], [40], [41], [34], [33], [52]	3	20.0%
PM5	Procurement	[27], [30], [33], [32]	5	10.0%
PM6	Time	[33], [32]	6	5.0%
PM7	Risk	[32]	7	2.5%

Note: PM domains are deductive categories. Categories are not mutually exclusive; frequencies indicate recurrence, not causal strength. Source: compiled by the author based on existing data.

The PM-domain findings show that ESG implementation is most often connected to Stakeholder, Cost, Integration and Resource domains. These domains are not equally represented. The reviewed literature is more concerned with whether ESG implementation is feasible than with how it is controlled once underway. ESG therefore appears more often through coordination, budgeting and organisational alignment than through detailed project-control routines.

An example from Nigerian construction helps clarify this gap. Prevention through design is linked to risk control, procurement, project cost and project time [33]. It also depends on coordination with stakeholders. This shows that safety-related ESG concerns become project-management practice when they are built into design decisions, assigned responsibilities and construction-phase activities.

Procurement, time, and risk appear less often in the coding results. That does not imply these domains lack importance. Instead, direct evidence at the project level tends to cluster contexts, construction safety being one example. ESG is more commonly tied to general managerial concerns than to concrete project tools like schedules, risk registers, or site monitoring [34].

Table 6 – Project type in the reviewed literature

Code	Project type	References	Rank	%
PT1	Organisational-level context / no clearly bounded project	[48], [35], [4], [36], [3], [16], [23], [29], [21], [22], [19], [49], [40], [51], [17], [24], [45], [18], [27], [41], [37], [43], [34], [44], [25], [42], [39], [52], [46], [50], [30], [47]	1	80.0%
PT2	Building / construction	[31], [38], [39], [32]	2	10.0%
PT3	Energy	[5]	3	2.5%
PT4	Green building	[2]	3	2.5%
PT5	Infrastructure	[1]	3	2.5%
PT6	Public sector	[26]	3	2.5%

Note: PT are deductive categories. Categories are not mutually exclusive; frequencies indicate recurrence, not causal strength. Source: compiled by the author based on existing data.

The project-type findings strengthen this interpretation. Most reviewed articles examine ESG implementation at organisational or sectoral level rather than within clearly bounded projects. Project-specific evidence exists, particularly in construction, green building and infrastructure contexts, but it is less dominant. The project-management relevance of the evidence base is therefore mixed: the literature identifies the conditions that influence ESG implementation more clearly than the mechanisms through which ESG is embedded in project delivery.

This imbalance is also visible in the PM-domain findings. Stakeholder, cost, integration and resource concerns appear more frequently than time, risk and procurement. The pattern suggests that ESG is still discussed mainly through feasibility, coordination and organisational alignment, rather than through detailed project-control routines. The low visibility of schedules, risk registers, procurement criteria and site-level monitoring should not be read as evidence that these tools are unimportant. Instead, it indicates that the existing literature provides limited direct evidence on how ESG commitments are converted into project-specific artefacts and decisions.

The predominance of organisational-level studies is therefore not only a limitation of this review; it is also a substantive finding. In emerging-country contexts, ESG appears to be more developed as a strategic and institutional agenda than as a consistently embedded project-delivery practice. Future empirical research should examine how organisational commitments are translated into responsibilities, monitoring arrangements and decision points across specific project phases.

Conclusion

This study examined the drivers and barriers to implementing ESG principles in organisational and project-related management practices in emerging countries through a systematic literature review. The findings show that ESG implementation is a multi-dimensional and institutionally conditioned process rather than the result of isolated factors. The main drivers include supportive regulation, stakeholder pressure and involvement, governance arrangements, training, leadership commitment and implementation capability. The main barriers include high upfront costs, restricted finance, fragmented regulation, insufficient competence, low awareness, cultural resistance and uneven organisational readiness.

The study contributes to the literature by synthesising fragmented evidence across ESG, sustainability, circular economy, supply-chain management, construction, reporting and organisational implementation studies. It also contributes theoretically by applying institutional theory to explain why regulatory, normative and legitimacy pressures may encourage ESG adoption but remain insufficient without governance capacity, resources, skills and coordination mechanisms.

Practically, the findings suggest that ESG implementation should not be treated as a late-stage compliance activity. Project managers and organisations need to integrate ESG into feasibility assessment, budgeting, procurement planning, stakeholder engagement, monitoring, resource allocation and implementation routines. For policymakers, the findings highlight the importance of coherent regulation, policy support and enabling institutional environments.

The study has several limitations. Its findings depend on the selected Scopus-based evidence base rather than primary field data. Some dimensions, especially implementation approaches and level-of-analysis patterns, required interpretive synthesis. The coding was conducted conservatively, but it was not independently checked by a second coder. In addition, much of the reviewed evidence focuses on organisational, sectoral or supply-chain contexts rather than clearly bounded projects. This limits direct conclusions about project-specific artefacts such as schedule control, site-level risk management or project team dynamics, but it also reveals an important research gap: ESG implementation in emerging countries is still studied more at strategic and organisational levels than at project-delivery level.

Future research should examine the social dimension of ESG more directly, especially worker welfare, health and safety, community impact, stakeholder participation and social equity. More project-level empirical studies are also needed to explain how ESG principles are translated into procurement criteria, schedules, reporting systems, monitoring routines and site-level decision-making across different emerging-country contexts.

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ДАМУШЫ ЕЛДЕРДЕГІ ЖОБАЛАРДЫ БАСҚАРУ ТӘЖІРИБЕСІНЕ ESG ҚАҒИДАТТАРЫН ЕНГІЗУГЕ ЫҚПАЛ ЕТЕТІН ЖӘНЕ КЕДЕРГІ КЕЛТІРЕТІН ФАКТОРЛАР

Аңдатпа

Мақала дамушы елдердегі жобаларды басқару тәжірибесінде Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) қағидастарын енгізудің негізгі қозғаушы күштері мен кедергілерін қарастырады. Зерттеу Scopus дерекқоры негізінде PRISMA логикасына сәйкес жүргізілген жүйелі әдеби шолуға сүйенеді, ал нәтижелер институционалдық теория тұрғысынан түсіндіріледі. Іздеу барысында 605 жазба анықталып, скрининг пен сәйкестікті бағалаудан кейін 40 рецензияланған зерттеу талдауға енгізілді. Нәтижелер ESG қағидастарын енгізу реттеуші қысымның, ұйымдық дайындықтың, қаржылық мүмкіндіктің, мүдделі тараптарды үйлестірудің және іске асыру әлеуетінің өзара байланысы арқылы қалыптасатынын көрсетеді.

Негізгі драйверлерге қолдаушы реттеу, мүдделі тараптардың қысымы мен қатысуы, оқыту, басшылықтың қолдауы, басқару тетіктері және технологиялық мүмкіндіктер жатады. Негізгі кедергілер ретінде жоғары бастапқы шығындар, қаржыландырудың шектеулі болуы, реттеудің фрагменттелуі, кәсіби құзыреттіліктің жеткіліксіздігі, хабардарлықтың төмендігі, мәдени қарсылық және мүдделі тараптардың әлсіз қатысуы анықталды. Нәтижелер ESG өлшемдері арасында назардың біркелкі бөлінбегенін көрсетеді. Басқару өлшемі ең көп кездеседі – 62,5%. Экологиялық өлшем одан кейін 55,0%. Әлеуметтік өлшем ең аз назарға ие – тек 32,5%. Мақалада ESG енгізу мен жобалық деңгейдегі нақты операциялық тәжірибелер арасындағы тұрақты алшақтық атап өтіледі. Нәтижелер ESG енгізуді институционалдық жағдайлар мен ұйымдық әлеуетке тәуелді процесс ретінде түсінуге үлес қосады, сондай-ақ жоба менеджерлері, ұйымдар және саясаткерлер үшін практикалық ұсынымдар ұсынады.

Түйін сөздер: ESG, дамушы елдер, жобаларды басқару, жүйелі әдеби шолу институционалдық теория, кедергілер, қозғаушы күштер.

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ФАКТОРЫ, СПОСОБСТВУЮЩИЕ И ПРЕПЯТСТВУЮЩИЕ ВНЕДРЕНИЮ ESG-ПРИНЦИПОВ В ПРАКТИКЕ УПРАВЛЕНИЯ ПРОЕКТАМИ В РАЗВИВАЮЩИХСЯ СТРАНАХ

Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются движущие силы и барьеры внедрения экологических, социальных принципов и принципов управления (ESG) в практику управления проектами в развивающихся странах. Проведен систематический обзор литературы на основе базы Scopus с использованием логики PRISMA и интерпретацией через институциональную теорию. Поиск выявил 605 записей, из которых после скрининга и оценки приемлемости были включены 40 рецензируемых исследований. Результаты показывают, что внедрение ESG формируется взаимодействием регуляторного давления, организационной готовности, финансовой осуществимости, координации заинтересованных сторон и способности к реализации. Основными драйверами являются поддерживающее регулирование, давление и вовлечение стейкхолдеров, обучение, приверженность руководства, механизмы управления и технологические возможности. Основными барьерами являются высокие первоначальные затраты, ограниченное финансирование, фрагментарное регулирование, недостаточная профессиональная компетентность, низкая осведомленность, культурное сопротивление и слабое взаимодействие с заинтересованными сторонами. Результаты обнаруживают неравномерное распределение внимания между измерениями ESG. Управленческое измерение наиболее заметно – 62,5% проанализированных источников. Экологическое измерение следует за ним с 55,0%. Социальное измерение получает наименьшее внимание – лишь 32,5%. Статья выявляет устойчивый разрыв перевода между принятием ESG и операционной практикой на уровне проектов. Результаты способствуют пониманию внедрения ESG как институционально обусловленного и зависящего от организационных возможностей процесса и содержат выводы для руководителей проектов, организаций и политиков.

Ключевые слова: ESG, барьеры, движущие силы, институциональная теория, развивающиеся страны, систематический обзор литературы, управление проектами.