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# **Institutional perspectives for tackling grand challenges:**

Studies on the agency of stakeholders and entrepreneurship in  
developing countries

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Ephraim Daka

## University of Turku

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Turku School of Economics  
Department of Marketing and International Business  
International Business  
Doctoral programme of Turku School of Economics

### Supervised by

---

Professor Niina Nummela  
Turku School of Economics  
University of Turku  
Finland

Associate Professor William Y. Degbey  
University of Vaasa, School of  
Management  
Finland

### Reviewed by

---

Professor, Amon Chizema  
Faculty of International Business  
Loughborough University,  
United Kingdom

Professor, Constant D. Beugre  
Faculty of Business Administration  
Delaware State University  
United States of America

### Opponent

---

Professor, Amon Chizema  
Faculty of International Business  
Loughborough University,  
United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

Grand Challenges (GCs), which include escalating public health crises, mounting food insecurity, and the growing threat of climate change, are global in nature and becoming increasingly complex and urgent. While no region is free of these challenges, developing countries are disproportionately affected, experiencing more severe and uneven consequences. This heightened vulnerability is attributed not only to limited resources but also to persistent institutional fragilities, fragmented responses, and historical disadvantages. In this context, the dissertation examines through an institutional lens how a wide range of stakeholders, including local and international businesses, governments, and civil society organisations, can collaborate to address GCs.

Employing sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) as the contextual lens, and building on the institutional perspective, the dissertation comprises three peer-reviewed studies that collectively examine the interplay between institutional reform, stakeholder collaboration, and business resilience. The first study investigates how national development plans and multi-actor engagement address poverty. The second explores how businesses navigate institutional fragility and adapt to evolving socio-economic conditions. The third integrates a literature review and empirical analysis to assess environmental governance, with a focus on renewable energy adoption, and its impact on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Together, these studies advance the discourse on institutional renewal, and the strategic role of business in tackling GCs.

This dissertation advances institutional theory by enhancing the understanding of agency and context-specific logics, emphasising the reciprocal relationship between interventions and their environment. The research illustrates the transformative potential of agency-driven approaches across macro, meso, and micro levels, with a particular focus on entrepreneurial actors. In fragile contexts, entrepreneurship emerges as a crucial mechanism to navigate institutional voids. Special attention is devoted to women entrepreneurs, whose resilience is often constrained by socio-cultural norms, yet who play a vital role in addressing governance deficits and fostering institutional renewal across SSA. The dissertation introduces a novel paradigm: purpose-driven enterprises, embedded in local contexts, as strategic agents of inclusive and systemic change. This paradigm is articulated through agency-oriented frameworks that integrate entrepreneurial engagement with the design and implementation of responses to GCs.

**KEYWORDS:** grand challenge; entrepreneurship; women entrepreneur; stakeholder collaboration; agency; institutional framework; wicked problem; sub-Saharan Africa

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## TIIVISTELMÄ

Globaalit haasteet, kuten pahenevat kansanterveydelliset kriisit, lisääntyvä ruokaturvattomuus ja ilmastonmuutoksen kasvava uhka, ovat maailmanlaajuisia ilmiöitä, jotka haastavat sekä tutkijat että yritykset. Haasteet ovat yhä monimutkaisempia ja vaativat nopeampaa toimintaa. Vaikka kaikki maat kohtaavat samat haasteet, erityisen vaikea tilanne on kehittyville maille. Seuraukset eivät jakaudu tasaisesti, kehittyvien maiden kuorma on selvästi raskaampi kuin kehittyneiden. Tämä haavoittuvuus johtuu sekä epätasaisista resursseista, institutionaalisista heikkouksista että historiasta juontuvista epäedullisista lähtökohdista. Tämä väitöskirja tarkastelee kuinka eri sidosryhmät – paikalliset ja kansainväliset yritykset, hallitukset ja kansalaisyhteiskunnan toimijat – voivat tehdä yhteistyötä globaalien haasteiden ratkaisemiseksi institutionaalisesta näkökulmasta.

Väitöskirjan kontekstina on Saharan eteläpuolinen Afrikka ja tutkimus rakentuu institutionaalisen teorian pohjalle. Se koostuu kolmesta vertaisarvioidusta tutkimuksesta, jotka käsittelevät institutionaalisten uudistusten, sidosryhmien yhteistyön ja yritysten resilienssin välistä vuorovaikutusta. Ensimmäinen tutkimus analysoi kuinka kansalliset kehityssuunnitelmat ja monitoimijainen osallistuminen pyrkivät vähentämään köyhyyttä. Toinen tutkimus tarkastelee kuinka yritykset navigoivat hauraassa institutionaalisessa ympäristössä ja sopeutuvat muuttuviin sosioekonomisiin olosuhteisiin. Kolmas tutkimus yhdistää kirjallisuuskatsauksen ja empiirisen analyysin arvioidessaan ympäristöhallintoa, keskittyen uusiutuvan energian käyttöönottoon ja sen vaikutukseen hiilidioksidipäästöihin. Yhdessä tutkimukset edistävät keskustelua institutionaalisesta uudistumisesta ja yritysten strategisesta roolista globaalien haasteiden ratkaisemisessa.

Väitöskirja kehittää institutionaalista teoriaa syventämällä ymmärrystä toimijuudesta ja kontekstisidonnaisista toimintalogiikasta, korostaen interventoiden ja niiden toimintaympäristöjen välistä vastavuoroista suhdetta. Tutkimus osoittaa toimijuuslähtöisten lähestymistapojen muutosvoiman makro-, meso- ja mikrotasolla. Hauraassa institutionaalisessa ympäristössä yrittäjyys näyttäytyy keskeisenä mekanismina institutionaalisten aukkojen ylittämässä. Tutkimus kiinnittää erityistä huomiota naisyrittäjiin, joita usein rajoittavat sosiaaliset ja kulttuuriset normit, mutta jotka ovat keskeisessä asemassa hallinnon puutteiden korjaamisessa ja institutionaalisen uudistumisen edistämässä Saharan eteläpuolisessa Afrikassa. Väitöskirja nostaa esiin uuden ajattelutavan:

missiolähtöiset, paikalliseen kontekstiin juurtuneet yritykset voivat olla strategisia toimijoita, jotka edistävät inklusiivista ja systeemistä muutosta. Ajattelutavan voi jäsentää toimijuuslähtöisten viitekehysten avulla, integroiden yrittäjyyden globaalien haasteiden ratkaisujen löytämiseen.

Avainsanat: globaalit haasteet; yrittäjyys; naisyrittäjyys; sidosryhmien yhteistyö; toimijuus; institutionaalinen viitekehys; ilkeät ongelmat; Saharan eteläpuolinen Afrikka

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This dissertation is influenced by a wide range of both professional and personal experiences. After relocating to Finland for family reasons, I pursued a master's degree in economics, which laid the foundation for my academic journey. I later joined the Finnish research institution VTT, where I worked under DSc Hannes Toivanen in the Innovation and Knowledge Economy department. As a novice researcher, I gained valuable experience in coordinating research tasks and participated in professional development programmes in research ethics and academic writing. My involvement in international consulting further enriched my perspective, allowing me to contribute to transnational development projects in various developing countries. These experiences led me to pursue doctoral research at the Turku School of Economics (TSE), University of Turku—a journey that has been intellectually stimulating and deeply rewarding.

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August 2025

*Ephraim Daka*

# Table of contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>List of Original Publications</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>12</b>
1.1 Background of the study.....	12
1.2 Aim of the study .....	16
1.3 Structure of the study.....	18
<b>2 Literature review</b> .....	<b>20</b>
2.1 Institutional and stakeholder perspectives on GCs .....	20
2.1.1 Institutional perspective .....	22
2.1.2 Institutional change .....	25
2.1.3 Stakeholder perspective.....	28
2.2 Institutional perspective in developing countries. ....	31
2.3 Understanding GCs in SSA .....	34
2.4 Micro and macro actor agency in GCs .....	36
2.5 Agency of entrepreneurs in GCs.....	39
2.6 Synthesis of prior research.....	41
<b>3 Methodology</b> .....	<b>43</b>
3.1 Research approach.....	43
3.2 Research process .....	46
3.2.1 Overview of the data collection .....	46
3.2.2 Systematic literature review (SLR) .....	48
3.2.3 Country-specific case studies: empirical studies in SSA .....	50
3.2.4 Field interview procedures.....	52
3.3 Analysis of the empirical data .....	54
3.4 Reflexivity .....	57
3.5 Evaluation of the empirical study .....	58
<b>4 Summary of the articles</b> .....	<b>62</b>
4.1 Article I: Conceptualising of wicked problems and the role of stakeholders.....	62
4.2 Article II: Discussion on entrepreneurial conditions and institutional void in fragile states.....	63
4.3 Article III: Quantitative analysis on environmental GCs.....	64
<b>5 Discussion and conclusions</b> .....	<b>66</b>
5.1 Discussion of the findings .....	67
5.2 Stakeholder collaboration .....	69
5.3 Agency of stakeholders and the institutional framework.....	71
5.4 Theoretical contributions.....	75
5.5 Practical implications.....	78
5.5.1 Policy implications .....	78
5.5.2 Management implications.....	79
5.6 Avenues for further research.....	80

<b>List of references.....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>Original publications.....</b>	<b>98</b>

## Tables

<b>Table 1.</b> Summary of the three publications.....	19
<b>Table 2</b> Micro actors .....	37
<b>Table 3.</b> Comparative criteria for data collection.....	51
<b>Table 4.</b> Summary of interviews conducted.....	53
<b>Table 5</b> Summary of coding stages and analytical procedures .....	56
<b>Table 6</b> Summary of the articles.....	65
<b>Table 7</b> Main concepts from the literature .....	77

## Figures

<b>Figure 1.</b> Theoretical positioning of the study.....	21
<b>Figure 2.</b> Institutional change framework, adapted from Mahoney et al. (2010) .....	27
<b>Figure 3.</b> Stakeholder identification for selected GC domains.....	30
<b>Figure 4.</b> Data collection process .....	47
<b>Figure 5.</b> Integrated framework for stakeholder agency and institutional dynamics in tackling grand challenges.....	73

# List of Original Publications

- I. Daka, Ephraim & Toivanen, Hannes (2014) Innovation, Informal Economy, and Development: Case of Zambia. *African Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development*, Vol. 6 (4): 243–251.
- II. Daka, Ephraim & Siad, Sadiyo A (2022) Entrepreneurship and the Innovation Ecosystem Policy: A Case Study in Post-Conflict Somalia. *Africa Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development*, Vol. 14 (2): 577–584.
- III. Daka, Ephraim (2023) Adopting Clean Technologies to Climate Change Adaptation Strategies in Africa: A Systematic Literature Review. *Environmental Management*, Vol. 71: 87–98.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background of the study

Grand Challenges (GCs) refer to large-scale, complex problems that threaten the stability and sustainability of societies worldwide (George, Howard-Grenville, et al., 2016). These include escalating public health crises, deepening food insecurity, and accelerating climate disruptions, not only global in scope but also intensifying in urgency and impact. Their interconnected nature defies simplistic solutions and demands coordinated cross-sectoral responses grounded in interdisciplinary inquiry. The seriousness of these challenges lies in their capacity to exacerbate inequality, destabilise institutions, and undermine long-term development. In response, scholars in International Business (IB), such as Buckley (2020), Fernhaber and Zou (2022), and Doh et al. (2019), have called for a paradigm shift that embraces multi-level, evidence-based analytical frameworks to better understand the strategic role of global business in addressing systemic threats.

However, despite growing calls for interdisciplinary and multi-level analytical frameworks to address GCs, the prevailing narratives in the literature continue to be dominated by perspectives from the Global North, often overlooking the institutional complexity and lived realities of the Global South (Buckley, 2025; Nachum et al., 2022; Zoogah, 2021). This oversight is particularly concerning given the disproportionate impact of GCs on developing regions, with sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) facing acute exposure to environmental shocks, institutional fragility, and entrenched socio-economic disparities. As the literature reveals, interventions led by transnational organisations have frequently been fragmented and misaligned with the region's unique institutional configurations and adaptive capacities (Kates & Dasgupta, 2007; Omisore, 2018). These efforts often reflect external priorities, neglecting embedded socio-political dynamics and indigenous resilience mechanisms, thereby limiting both their effectiveness and sustainability. To date,

academic engagement with these complex institutional realities in SSA remains limited, underscoring the need for more context-sensitive and inclusive approaches.

The limited scholarly engagement with SSA's institutional dynamics is not merely an academic oversight, it is a critical gap with real-world consequences (cf. Zoogah, 2025). The region's exposure to acute and compounding crises demands urgent attention. Water scarcity, particularly the lack of access to clean drinking water, affects over 300 million people, a figure projected to rise as climate-induced disruptions to rainfall patterns and agricultural systems become more frequent and severe (George, Corbishley, et al., 2016; Zhai et al., 2023). These environmental stressors do not exist in isolation; they intersect with rapid population growth, constrained resource bases, and uneven development trajectories. Such convergence amplifies the need for interventions that are not only technically sound but deeply embedded in local realities and responsive to the socio-institutional context.

Simultaneously, transnational threats such as pandemics have exposed the fragility of global interconnectedness. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerability of mobility, supply chains, and public health infrastructure around the world (Nummela et al., 2020). It has disrupted fragile systems, reversed development gains, especially in SSA, and highlighted the need to build resilient, locally adapted institutions that can withstand future shocks (cf. Bachtiar et al., 2023). The lessons of these crises are clear: resilience cannot be imported; it must be cultivated internally, through context-sensitive governance and inclusive institutional reform.

This vulnerability is neither accidental nor ahistorical; it is deeply entrenched in enduring structural inequities that stem from a colonial legacy. These legacy frameworks continue to shape exclusionary institutional structures in SSA, thereby perpetuating patterns of marginalization and stagnation (Odigbo et al., 2025). The lasting effects of colonial rule are evident in the persistent deficiencies in education, healthcare, land ownership, and public services, where political inertia often obstructs necessary reforms to address systemic inequities (Parashar & Schulz, 2021). This legacy of inequality has hindered the growth of human capital, the advancement of opportunities, and the development of physical capital, leading to

chronic underperformance across key sectors (Cappelen & Sorens, 2018; Chitonge, 2021).

In the health sector, for example, the challenges extend beyond infrastructural deficiencies to include a critical lack of locally trained medical professionals. This predicament leaves millions at risk and the region unprepared to tackle future pandemics and transnational crises (Oleribe et al., 2019). These are not just technical shortcomings but are indicative of systemic neglect, calling for a fundamental shift toward solutions that are equity-driven and locally empowered. Without such a transformation, efforts to tackle these and other major challenges will remain superficial, ill-aligned and unsustainable.

Although 29 of Africa's 54 nations have recently been classified as middle-income countries (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2023), this apparent progress conceals a more concerning truth: the persistent influence of colonial and post-colonial governance continues to skew development outcomes (see, Odigbo et al., 2025). This distortion is most evident in the extractive industry sector, where immense mineral wealth exists alongside entrenched inequality and systemic exclusion (Kouadio & Gakpa, 2022). Africa, rich in natural resources, possesses 30% of the world's mineral resources and over 40% of its gold (Wegenast & Beck, 2020). Yet, foreign corporations predominantly control mining ownership and operations, with minimal indigenous ownership and, crucially, limited community involvement in decisions impacting local livelihoods (Muhirwa et al., 2023). This imbalance is not accidental, but is sustained by opaque regulatory frameworks, governance failures, and entrenched corruption, which allow multinational companies to put profit over equitable development (Bezzola et al., 2022). The literature points to the failure of several resource-based economies to generate income, thus continuing cycles of dependency and dispossession (Domínguez-Gómez & González-Gómez, 2021; Dunbar et al., 2020). In this context, achieving transformative change requires a focus on shared management and partnership as a means of achieving change. The extractive industries thus point to a

broader conflict between exploitative global interests and the need for inclusive local development.

Sub-Saharan African economies are rich in natural resources, including rare earth elements and high-revenue minerals (Muhirwa et al., 2023). However, the economic benefits of this sector have not led to equitable development in most countries (Besada & Golla, 2023). Factors such as ineffective leadership, structural challenges, and external issues as well as governance deficits and flawed mining profit models have been identified as contributors to economic and human hardship to the region. Instead of relying on large mining corporations to address these significant challenges, a quiet revolution is occurring at the grassroots level. Women entrepreneurs, for instance, are tackling food insecurity and malnutrition by starting agricultural businesses. Existing literature indicates that women led micro-enterprises serve not only as survival strategies but also as catalysts for transforming local economies (Lulaj et al., 2025; Welsh, 2016), thereby aiding in poverty alleviation. With female entrepreneurship rates now surpassing those in many advanced economies (Hughes et al., 2023), these women are reshaping the institutional landscape, fostering resilience, equity, and local solutions over extractive paradigms. These micro-entities are not peripheral players but are central to the continent's future development, challenging entrenched power structures and forging new paths to sustainable development.

Focusing on micro-level agency, the research positions women-led entrepreneurship as a counterforce to the prevailing extractive paradigm. It advocates for a more inclusive and context-sensitive understanding of sustainable development in the Global South, one that reclaims development from the margins and recognises the transformative capacity of local agency to reshape institutional landscapes. This view, increasingly echoed in contemporary scholarship, reinforces the urgency of rethinking development through locally grounded, agency-driven approaches (e.g., Ayala-Orozco et al., 2018; Doh et al., 2019; Ojediran & Anderson, 2020; Ricciardi et al., 2021). In this context, the following section will describe how this research will be conducted and organised.

## 1.2 Aim of the study

The aim of this study is *to examine the complex dynamics of collaboration between different stakeholders, including businesses, in addressing GCs from an institutional perspective*. The study is set in the context of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). As an article-based dissertation, the research comprises three primary objectives related to the three articles. First, to examine the collaborative efforts of various stakeholders, including micro level actors, working within established institutional frameworks to implement GC-focused initiatives in SSA. Second, to assess the role of the institutional framework in supporting entrepreneurial activities, societal elements, and institutional structures in the management of GCs. And third, to assess a wide range of strategies to address environmental GCs in SSA.

Through a comprehensive analysis of these interconnected dimensions, the study objective is divided into three sub-questions that address the complex ecosystem of actors and institutions to develop context-oriented strategies to overcome GCs:

- I. How can institutional frameworks facilitate collaboration between stakeholders with different interests?
- II. How do entrepreneurs operate in an unstable country without a formal institutional framework?
- III. How do institutional changes influence the effectiveness of strategies addressing grand environmental challenges?

Each of the above sub-questions is dealt with in separate articles, which are closely related and contribute to the achievement of the main objective of the dissertation. This thesis provides an in-depth analysis of the complex interplay between societal factor and institutional barrier that hinder the resolution of GCs, while suggesting strategies to address ongoing GCs. Given the complexity of GCs, tailored interventions, multi-actor collaboration, and context-specific adaptations are essential (George et al., 2016). Although this research focuses on a geographically

vast and heterogeneous region of SSA, it is important to note that societal GCs are inherently transnational, hence spanning national, economic, and societal boundaries (P. J. Buckley et al., 2017). Therefore, by considering this perspective holistically, this study presents a framework that can help organisations and small actors implement a methodological approach to solving GCs in various societal areas.

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine complex phenomena within their contextual frameworks by drawing on multiple data sources. Such a methodology enables the deconstruction and reconstruction of various phenomena and is thus particularly suitable for the study of GCs (Baxter & Jack, 2015). The analysis of GCs in the study employs an integrated approach based on three key dimensions: actor complexity, entrepreneurial perspective, and reconstruction. The concept of actor complexity highlights the multilayered nature of GCs, which arises from the different stakeholders involved and their complex interactions (Fernhaber & Zou, 2022). An entrepreneurial perspective recognises that while market inefficiencies contribute to GCs, they simultaneously promote opportunities for innovative solutions and novel business paradigms (Adomako et al., 2023; Pereira et al., 2023). For example, energy strategies have seen the emergence of clean energy, such as solar energy, which reduces carbon emissions. Hence, the idea of rebuilding through an integrated approach highlights the need for a holistic and synchronised effort to achieve the diverse and ambitious goals associated with GCs (George, Howard-Grenville, et al., 2016). To that end, this research strives to provide a comprehensive understanding of GCs and their viable solutions.

This approach recognises the complex interconnectedness of GCs and emphasises the importance of coordinated initiatives, while recognising the agency of actors operating at the micro level across disciplines and industries. Considering the information presented, the following section explains the organisational structure of this thesis and describes the research process.

### 1.3 Structure of the study

This dissertation is divided into five chapters and contains three original articles that provide an in-depth examination of GCs in IB in a specific geographical context. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the GCs, positions the study in its geographical framework, and explains the interrelationships among these challenges and their importance to IB. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical foundations, with a focus on institutional and stakeholder perspectives, and presents a critical analysis of relevant academic work. Chapter 3 explains the research methodology and describes a systematic approach that connects the three articles and represents a logical development of the research techniques. Chapter 4 provides a concise yet comprehensive overview of the articles and contextualises their content in relation to the objectives of the thesis. In Chapter 5, the empirical results are analysed and discussed, and the findings from the articles summarised, with supplementary data collected for validation purposes. The dissertation culminates in three original articles (listed in Table 1), which together advance the comprehensive exploration of the research topic.

**Table 1.** Summary of the three publications

	Article 1	Article 2	Article 3
<b>Title</b>	“Innovation, the Informal Economy, and Development: The Case of Zambia”	“Entrepreneurship and the Innovation Ecosystem Policy: A Case Study in Post-Conflict Somalia”	“Adopting Clean Technologies to Climate Change Adaptation Strategies in Africa: A Systematic Literature Review”
<b>Author(s)</b>	Daka & Toivanen	Daka & Sadiyo	Daka
<b>Objective(s)/ Research question(s)</b>	How can institutional frameworks facilitate collaboration between stakeholders with different interests?	How do entrepreneurs operate in an unstable country without a formal institutional framework?	How do institutional changes influence the effectiveness of strategies addressing grand environmental challenges?
<b>Methodology</b>	Qualitative	Qualitative case study	Systematic literature review
<b>Main contribution</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus of the stakeholder studies: stakeholder engagement in joint initiative; institutional functionality</li> <li>- Role of entrepreneurial activities in overcoming GCs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Analyses the institutional gap in the context of a fragile state, and the impact of entrepreneurial activities as a potential element for social and economic sustainability.</li> <li>- Describes the institutional conditions and obstacles to entrepreneurial growth.</li> </ul>	The concept of GC originates from this study, as it shows that overcoming effective policies and research in environmental science was critical to mitigation in developing countries.
<b>Journal</b>	<i>African Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development</i> , 2014; Vol. 6 (4): 243–251.	<i>African Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development</i> , 2022; Vol. 14 (2): 577–584	<i>Environmental Management</i> , 2023; Vol. 71: 87–98.

## 2 Literature review

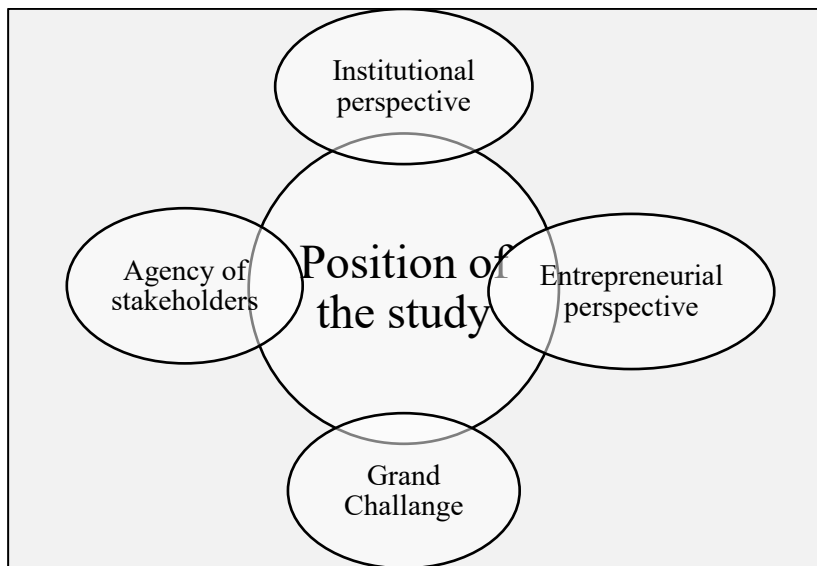
### 2.1 Institutional and stakeholder perspectives on GCs

This literature review synthesises key theoretical domains that underpin the present study, with particular emphasis on the institutional and stakeholder dimensions of grand challenges (GCs). The field of International Business (IB) is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing on a rich tapestry of social sciences, management theory, economics, and political analysis (Buckley et al., 2017; Paik, 2020). This study's theoretical framework is situated at the intersection of these disciplines, reflecting the multifaceted nature of GC problems that are not only complex and “*wicked*” but also deeply embedded in historical, structural, and institutional contexts (Pimentel et al., 2023). Buckley, 2025) argued that IB theory must transcend its conventional boundaries, embracing a kaleidoscopic lens capable of capturing the diversity of institutional arrangements and stakeholder interactions across global settings.

In confronting societal GCs, such as climate change, poverty, and institutional fragility, particularly within SSA, an interdisciplinary lens is not simply advantageous but indispensable. These challenges resist resolution through mono-disciplinary inquiry and demand integrative, context-sensitive approaches. Scholars have long advocated for IB research to adopt cross-disciplinary and functionally integrated frameworks that reflect the systemic nature of global problems (Roth et al., 2009). Zandee and Coghlan (2024) further underscored the urgency of impact-oriented scholarship, urging management researchers to move beyond descriptive theorising and engage in the pursuit of transformative, practice-relevant solutions. Buckley's (2025) endorsement of theoretical pluralism highlights the necessity of bringing underrepresented regions and voices to the forefront of IB inquiry.

Accordingly, this study adopts a tripartite conceptual foundation, integrating institutional theory, stakeholder agency theory, and entrepreneurial perspectives. These theoretical streams are not treated as discrete silos but interwoven lenses that illuminate how actors, particularly those operating within SSA, navigate institutional

voids, mobilise agency, and respond to various GC domains. This integrative framework provides the analytical scaffold for the dissertation's empirical contributions, as illustrated in Figure 1, and informs the structure and thematic coherence of Articles I, II, and III.



**Figure 1.** Theoretical positioning of the study

In the domain of IB, addressing GCs necessitates a synergistic framework that integrates institutional structures, stakeholder agency, and entrepreneurial dynamism (Eisenhardt, 1989; Mahoney et al., 2010; Ricciardi et al., 2021; Wijen, 2014). Institutional frameworks serve as the scaffolding for norms, rules, and logics that shape organisational and individual behaviour. However, these structures are not immutable; they are continuously navigated, contested, and reshaped by actors whose agency is pivotal in generating innovative and contextually relevant responses. Social entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs, and grassroots actors often operate

within institutional constraints, catalysing change from the margins (cf. Stephan et al., 2015).

In this context, entrepreneurship goes beyond its traditional role as a driver of economic growth and social stability. It emerges as a transformative force capable of reconfiguring institutional systems and addressing deeply entrenched societal challenges. This dynamic is particularly salient in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where institutional voids and fragility coexist with vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystems that respond creatively to the impact of GCs such as climate vulnerability, food insecurity, and governance deficits (Yami et al., 2019). Recent scholarship reflects a paradigmatic shift toward systems-oriented thinking, drawing on Ostrom's commons theory and broader systems frameworks to conceptualise GCs as multi-level, interdependent phenomena (Buckley, 2025; Gümüşay et al., 2020; McGinnis & Ostrom, 2014). This evolving paradigm is enriched by cross-disciplinary perspectives' embeddedness, stakeholder theory, institutional logics, effectuation, processual analysis, and design thinking which collectively offer a more nuanced and actionable understanding of how actors engage with complexity.

The present study contributes to this interdisciplinary dialogue by advocating for a holistic conceptualisation of GCs, one that acknowledges their historical depth, structural complexities, and the dynamic interplay between institutional, business, and stakeholder forces (Fernhaber and Zou, 2022). The following section builds on this foundation by examining the institutional theoretical landscape in greater detail, thereby laying the groundwork for a context-sensitive analysis of GCs within the SSA region.

### 2.1.1 Institutional perspective

Institutions, as defined by North (1986), are systems of formal and informal rules that structure social interactions and provide stability. Within the field of IB, the multidisciplinary nature of inquiry historically led to fragmented theoretical approaches (Melin, 1992). However, recent scholarship has increasingly embraced

the institutional perspective as a critical analytical lens (Gulden et al., 2020). This view has emerged as the third strategic pillar alongside the industry-based and resource-based perspectives, highlighting the significance of institutional contexts in shaping firm behaviour, innovation, and strategic decision-making.

On the other hand, institutional theory suggests that organisations are embedded in environments governed by prevailing norms, rules, and cognitive structures (Peng et al., 2008). Firms expanding across borders must navigate these institutional landscapes, which are particularly complex and volatile in emerging markets such as SSA (Adeleye et al., 2020). In this context, multinational companies, particularly those in the extractive industries, often have considerable influence and shape institutional arrangements to suit business interests (e.g., Zoogah et al., 2023). This dynamic has led to critical examination of the role of government compliance and institutional manipulation in facilitating or hindering sustainable development. The institution-based view has also been instrumental in examining the internationalisation of entrepreneurial ventures from emerging to developed economies (Henisz & Swaminathan, 2008). It underscores how regulatory frameworks, cultural norms, and cognitive schemas in the home country condition strategic choices and resource configurations. Yet, the dominance of foreign firms in developing markets reveals structural imbalances and raises questions about institutional efficacy and equity.

Beyond market entry, institutional theory offers insights into the adoption of sustainable practices. It suggests that legitimacy and social conformity often outweigh technical rationality in shaping organisational behaviour (Stephan et al., 2015). As societal expectations evolve, firms increasingly pursue environmental compliance to maintain stakeholder trust and reputational capital. However, in SSA, despite formal commitments to corporate governance standards (Rozenfeld & Scapens, 2021), governance deficits and fragile institutional enforcement often prevent the implementation of such practices. Nevertheless, legitimacy pressures may encourage non-compliant companies to comply with institutional expectations

(Dacin et al., 2002), reinforcing the emphasis of the theory on social rather than purely economic factors in organisational behaviour.

Multinational enterprises (MNEs) operating in SSA, particularly within extractive industries, often encounter institutional environments that differ markedly from those in their home country (Newenham-Kahindi & Stevens, 2018). In navigating those unfamiliar contexts, many MNEs replicate organisational practices from their home environment, leading to a phenomenon known as institutional isomorphism. This tendency is driven by coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures, reflecting efforts to conform to perceived expectations and reduce uncertainty (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983). While isomorphism can foster consensus and predictability, it offers limited explanatory power for the divergent responses of firms to shared institutional contexts. To address this limitation, scholars have turned to institutional logics, which provide a more nuanced lens for understanding how actors interpret, navigate, and reshape institutional structures (Friedland, 2012; Greenwood, 2008). Unlike isomorphism, which emphasises convergence, institutional logics highlight the coexistence of multiple, often competing, belief systems and practices within a given field. This perspective allows for greater insight into why firms may respond differently to similar institutional pressures, shaped not only by external constraints but also by internal values, identities, and strategic interests.

Institutional logics emphasise the dynamic interplay between structure and agency, acknowledging that organisations are embedded within evolving clusters of meaning and practice (Luiz et al., 2019; Reay & Hinings, 2009). This framework helps explain the persistence of diverse organisational behaviours, even within seemingly convergent institutional fields. In SSA, where institutional fragility is often pronounced, institutional logics offer a valuable lens for understanding how actors mobilise values, norms, and cognitive frames to enact change (Aguilera & Grøgaard, 2019; Rozenfeld & Scapens, 2021).

Such perspectives are particularly salient in addressing a variety of GC domains, such as climate change and food insecurity, as they illuminate the socio-

cognitive mechanisms through which stakeholders engage with complex, multi-level problems (Gümüşay et al., 2020). The coexistence of formal and informal institutions in SSA further complicates this landscape. In many rural contexts, informal norms and practices exert significant influence over entrepreneurial behaviour and community governance (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2018; Murithi et al., 2020). While this divergence from Western institutional models presents coordination and implementation challenges on several fronts, it simultaneously opens avenues to design inclusive, context-sensitive interventions that harness local knowledge and indigenous coordination mechanisms.

Taken together, institutional theory, and particularly its logical extension, provide a robust analytical framework for the examination of collaboration between stakeholders, entrepreneurial agency, and systemic change. By aligning institutional logic with GC goals, the study advances a deeper understanding of how SSA actors interpret their environment and mobilise change in a complex and pluralistic institutional environment.

### 2.1.2 Institutional change

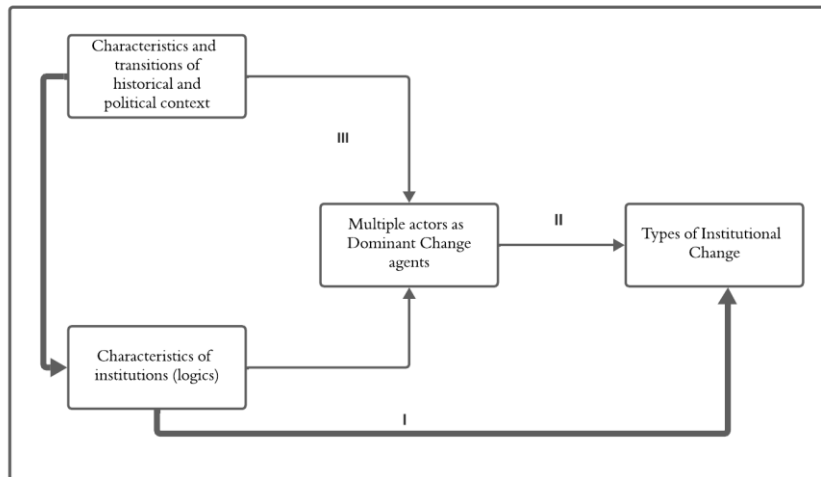
Institutional change is a fundamental element of institutional theory because it involves changing long-standing norms, rules, and procedures within organisations or systems (Bayaga, 2011; Mahoney et al., 2010). The change process is shaped by several factors, such as external pressures, internal dynamics, and interactions between different stakeholders and actors (Beunen & Patterson, 2019). A more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the approach to GCs in the SSA region is particularly necessary.

Institutions play a pivotal role in catalysing change and shaping societal dynamics across diverse contexts (Mahoney et al., 2010). These institutional entities undergo transformations in their characteristics and efficacy, which can influence human behaviour and sociopolitical outcomes (Dacin et al., 2002). However, if historical perspectives are not linked, the understanding of institutional change can

be considered incomplete, since their linkage contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of institutional structures and their development. The legacy of Western colonialism in Africa at the turn of the 20th century remains evident in the continent's institutional landscape, as approximately 90% of the region was under colonial control during that era (e.g., Seidler, 2018). Barnard et al. (2023) asserted that the consequences of colonialism continue to shape contemporary Africa, and it is imperative to acknowledge that the institutional foundation of modern Africa remains rooted in the structures established during colonial rule. Despite the persistent impact of colonial governance, which has been associated with the prevalence of multifaceted issues such as poverty and civil unrest, scholars and practitioners advocate for this historical lens as essential to analysing the circumstances in the SSA region (e.g., Zoogah, 2021).

A recent study by Boso et al. (2023) illustrated how cultural shifts, technological advancements, and globalisation had catalysed institutional change across SSA. Notably, the digital revolution has transformed the delivery of social services and reshaped regulatory frameworks. In this context, Eriksson et al. (2022) highlighted digitalisation as a strategic tool for enhancing the resilience of international organisations, a perspective that holds promise for scaling resilience among local entrepreneurs in SSA. Within African scholarship, the interaction between formal and informal institutions is recognised as a key driver of institutional transformation. Informal institutions, such as social norms and collective behaviours, influence formal structures by shaping public opinion and fostering consensus (Bratton, 2007). Conversely, formal institutions regulate behaviour through codified laws, rules, and sanctions. This dynamic interplay fosters institutional isomorphism, exerting pressure on organisations and societies to conform to prevailing norms and practices (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Such pressures manifest through coercive mechanisms imposed by state actors, mimetic adaptations of peer organisations, and normative influences within professional communities. Institutions embody broader socio-political arrangements tailored to specific contexts—arrangements that may not be easily replicated elsewhere.

Therefore, it is important to understand institutional work as a dynamic process rather than a static entity, as changes within institutions can take place over longer or shorter periods of time (Beunen & Patterson, 2019). As explained above, historical and political factors serve as a starting point to analyse the dynamics of institutional change, particularly in the context of SSA. The driving force behind institutional change in several countries across the continent can be attributed to individuals, activists, civil society, and traditional and political leaders, including grassroots activists. It is widely believed that people have the power to create change when they sense injustice and unfairness. These actors typically perform as dominant and effective agents of change on issues related to the well-being of the people and their environment. Accordingly, this perspective is investigated through the lens of an institutional change framework, as presented by Mahoney et al. (2010) (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Institutional change framework, adapted from Mahoney et al. (2010)

This framework highlights the methods that are feasible for actors to use to collaborate and to address the problems of more than one GC. Conversely, Dacin et al. (2002), and AhmadSimab and Chowdhury (2021), claimed that because businesses frequently deal with stakeholders who have varying interests and points

of view, institutional logic is susceptible to manipulation. Despite its limitations, institutional logic nevertheless offers several benefits. The limitations are due to institutional theory being poor at defining the short- and long-term effects of external actors.

Thus, institutional change can be promoted through different perspectives. Micro level players are considered key agents for change in implementing practical plans to address GCs. This strategy, combined with the recognition of successful leadership initiatives to integrate traditional values, provides a solid basis to understand institutional dynamics, the kind of understanding that will facilitate the development of strategies more suited to dealing with SSA's geographical neighbours, opening the door to more successful and culturally sensitive reforms. However, the importance of stakeholder perspective should be stressed, and the combination of these two ideas is significant in the analysis of institutional settings.

### 2.1.3 Stakeholder perspective

In addressing GCs, stakeholders emerge as crucial catalysts for action that strive to produce specific outcomes (Kujala et al., 2023). These GCs involve intricate interactions among stakeholders from various sectors: business, government, and society (Buckley, 2025). As a result, stakeholders occupy a central position in a complex equation that determines the effort needed to mitigate the scale of the daunting issues (Roulet & Bothello, 2022). The engagement and participation of stakeholders necessitate decision-making processes that are representative, inclusive, and reflective of diverse viewpoints and interests. This approach is founded on the principle that stakeholders, encompassing individuals and groups affected by the challenges, should have a meaningful role in shaping strategies and solutions (Freeman et al., 2020). The principle extends to initiatives aimed at addressing GCs, underscoring the importance of stakeholder involvement in tackling these formidable global problems.

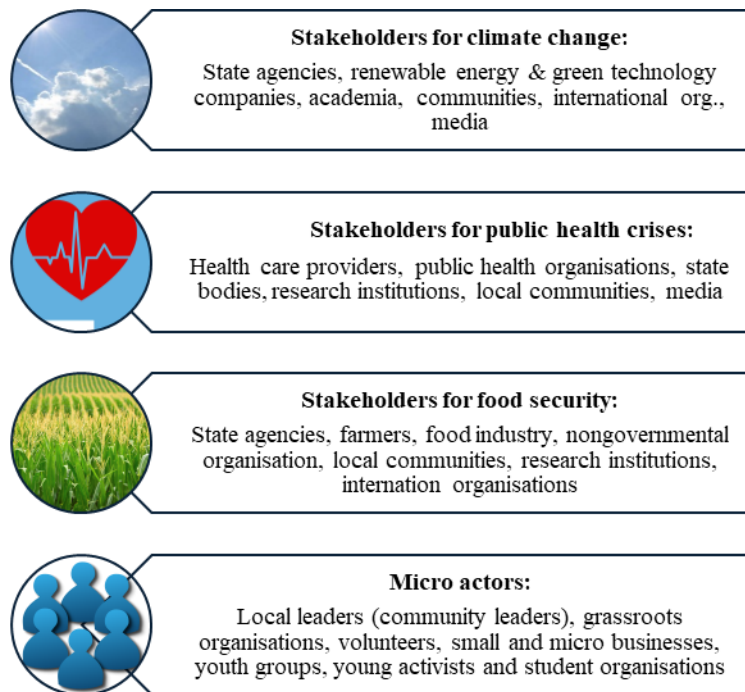
A salient dimension of stakeholder perspectives is the recognition of the dynamic interplay between society and business. Stakeholders, including firms, civil society actors, and public institutions, possess distinct insights, capabilities, and resources that can be mobilised to craft innovative and context-sensitive responses to GCs (Degbey et al., 2024; Fernhaber & Zou, 2022). However, unlocking this potential requires that value creation be embedded at the decision-making stage, where stakeholder concerns and aspirations are actively surfaced and integrated. Such early engagement not only fosters more equitable and sustainable outcomes but also cultivates a sense of ownership and shared responsibility among participants, who become invested in the success of collective problem-solving. This perspective underscores the critical role of collaboration and partnership across sectors. Trust-building, mutual accountability, and the co-creation of solutions are essential to harnessing the collective intelligence and resources of diverse actors in addressing complex societal challenges.

Building on earlier studies in this area, Freeman's (1984) seminal work was crucial in developing stakeholder models, frameworks, and theories. But, for the purposes of this study, we will use Clarkson's (1995) definition of stakeholders—organisations or people who own, have rights to, or an interest in a company's operations, whether past, present, or future. According to a thorough analysis of the existing research, the stakeholder theory is recognised as a key practical concept (e.g. Crane & Ruebottom, 2011; Phillips et al., 2003; Savage et al., 2010). The theoretical framework, first proposed in the 1980s, has grown considerably in the subsequent decade, largely owing to the work of prominent academics such as Rowley (1997), Donaldson and Preston (1995), and Clarkson (1995).

As fundamental categories, internal and external stakeholders are separated in the scientific literature (Hörisch et al., 2015). Accordingly, this study concentrates on stakeholders who are thought to be able to handle and contribute to tackling GCs in various ways. The detailed analysis foresees that these stakeholders are selected on the basis of their expertise, skills and experience in dealing with the GCs in the fields of public health, food security and climate change. The study, however, argues

against this idea, proposing that all stakeholders, including grass-roots actors, should be fairly involved under one umbrella and work together to address the issue. Ferraro et al. 2015), Gehman et al. (2023), and (Wang et al., 2019) are just some examples of scientists discussing these GC fields.

This stakeholder mapping has examined the groups based on their traditional involvement in contributing to interventions within specified global challenge domains, including public health emergencies, food security, and climate change, particularly in environments involving grassroots actors (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Stakeholder identification for selected GC domains

Collaboration, partner networks, and stakeholder silos, as illustrated in Figure 3, are underpinned by value creation, knowledge sharing, and trust. In the realm of the transnational GC of climate change, it is noteworthy that renewable energy companies play a role in pioneering solutions, a role equally crucial to that of research institutions in developing innovative solutions. The examination of disease

outbreaks and development of treatment and control strategies requires collaboration amongst research organisations, governmental bodies, and pertinent health agencies. In dealing with emerging health crises, health professionals use a variety of research-driven approaches. In a similar vein, initiatives on combating food insecurity have highlighted the importance of their value chains as a basis for action. Encourage cooperation among all key actors in the agricultural sector, including grass-roots farmers, and address the impact of climate change (Roulet and Bothello, 2022; Van Ittersum et al., 2016).

For stakeholder groups with expertise in addressing specific GCs, collaborating with macro-level actors to align with national policies is essential. Additionally, forming an alliance with the government is crucial for ensuring positive outcomes, as it can influence both beneficial and adverse results. In dealing with global health pandemics such as health crises, the media help raise public awareness, disseminate valuable information and advise communities to come together to tackle the emerging crisis. Micro-entities, on the other hand, are key, as they have shown resilience in dealing with GCs in given circumstances, which has been effective due to strong social cooperation at community level (Minato et al., 2010). In addressing significant challenges, it is crucial to emphasize the agency of marginalized communities and individuals at the micro level within stakeholder agencies. The following section looks more closely at the institutional perspective in developing countries.

## 2.2 Institutional perspective in developing countries.

Institutions are pivotal in shaping the norms and regulations that govern various aspects of social interaction. As North (1986) suggests, institutions operate across different levels of jurisdiction, ranging from the global system to the local interpersonal relationships that form the fabric of society. Dacin et al. (2002) and (Scott (2004) further characterize institutions as both behavioural and symbolic systems. These systems are governed not only by representative, constitutional, and

normative rules but also by regulatory mechanisms that establish a standardized system of meaning, facilitating the emergence of diverse actors and processes.

In contrast, Dieleman et al. (2022) asserted that institutions play a pivotal role in overcoming common impediments to action, thereby fostering functional market development. Luiz et al. (2019) on the other hand maintained that institutions are indispensable in facilitating the effective operation of markets and cultivating inclusive political and economic frameworks. Institutions continue to be the cornerstone of all nations, even though there is a great deal of variation in the conditions, traits, and institutional structures found in developing nations.

The institutional landscape of developing countries, particularly in Africa, stands in stark contrast to that of the Western world, where nations are governed by formal institutions, codified laws, bureaucratic systems, and standardised governance frameworks (Peng et al., 2008; Stephan et al., 2015). African societies operate within a more intricate and pluralistic institutional environment (Adeleye et al., 2020). Formal and informal institutions coexist, often in tension but also complementarity, reflecting multiple dominant logics shaped by history, culture, and lived experience (Bratton, 2007; Murithi et al., 2020). Formal institutions in Africa carry the deep imprint of colonial legacies, with legal systems, administrative structures, and educational models often transplanted from colonial powers and misaligned with indigenous realities (Benjamin & Aly Mbaye, 2014).

Informal institutions such as customary law, kinship networks, religious leadership, and community-based dispute resolution play a vital and often underappreciated role in maintaining social cohesion, facilitating economic exchange, and delivering public goods where formal systems fall short (Brandl et al., 2022; Ogbaharya, 2008). These informal mechanisms are not merely residual or backward; they are adaptive, resilient, and deeply embedded in local contexts. A comprehensive analysis of African institutional dynamics must therefore move beyond a formalist lens and engage with the historical, cultural, and structural interplay between formal and informal systems (e.g., Nachum et al., 2022). While it is essential that actors acknowledge the colonial legacy, efforts toward institutional

development must prioritise capacity-building that leverages the strengths of both institutional forms to overcome persistent barriers and foster inclusive progress.

In that respect, informal institutions, norms, and traditional systems of governance play an important role in shaping social functions in developing countries, particularly in rural communities where formal structures are often weak or non-existent (Ogbaharya, 2008; Saka-Helmhout et al., 2020). From the perspective of New Institutional Economics, these informal mechanisms are not merely remnants of pre-modern governance but adaptive responses to institutional voids and state fragility (North, 2016; Williamson, 2000). They govern resource management, facilitate social cohesion, and enable entrepreneurial activity even amid infrastructural deficits and political instability (Daka & Siad, 2022; Speakman & Rysova, 2015). Despite their pragmatic utility, informal institutions are frequently dismissed as incompatible with modern public administration or global governance norms. Buckley (2025) challenged this view, advocating for institutional diversity in IB scholarship and emphasising the embeddedness of informal systems in local contexts. The failure to integrate indigenous institutions into postcolonial governance frameworks has perpetuated economic and social challenges, particularly in resource-rich states plagued by weak accountability and ethical ambiguity (Bezzola et al., 2022; Bräutigam & Knack, 2004).

A transformative institutional approach is therefore needed to address the critical areas of the GCs in developing countries, in particular SSA. One that not only recognises the legitimacy of non-institutional institutions but also focuses on the lived experience and voices of micro-level stakeholders. By embracing institutional pluralism and promoting local agency, development can be reimagined as a collaborative, community-based endeavour that puts shared values, mutual support, and inclusive progress at the centre.

## 2.3 Understanding GCs in SSA

Grand Challenges (GCs), as introduced in the opening chapter of this dissertation, exert a profound influence on the demographic, economic, and institutional landscape of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The study focuses on three interrelated GCs, namely climate change, public health crises, institutional fragility and food insecurity, each of which is a persistent and complex problem not easily addressed by conventional policy mechanisms (Berrone et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2019). These GCs are not only urgent and impactful on societies worldwide but are also deeply woven into the historical and institutional fabric of SSA.

Extensive research conducted over several decades on the continent has consistently identified poverty as one of its most enduring and intricate challenges (Addae-Korankye, 2014; Kamgnia & Houré, 2023; Kates & Dasgupta, 2007), thereby classifying it as a wicked problem (Pradilla et al., 2022). However, this study does not treat *poverty* as an independent GC domain. Instead, it is framed as a compounded consequence of interlinked systemic crises. Climate change disrupts agricultural productivity, exacerbating food security issues and fueling hunger and malnutrition. Concurrently, public health crises expose deep-seated deficiencies in healthcare infrastructure and societal well-being. Furthermore, institutional fragility contributes to social instability, terrorism, and destabilization, thereby threatening national cohesion. In light of this scenario, a strategically collective approach to addressing these factors is fundamental in combating poverty. Typically, these societal grand challenges converge and reinforce one another, amplifying vulnerability and perpetuating poverty, particularly among marginalized communities.

Importantly, the complexity and persistence of these challenges are inextricably linked to sub-Saharan Africa's colonial legacy. Since the 1960s, when most countries achieved self-government, the institutional structures inherited from colonial rule have continued to shape governance structures, economic policies, and social dynamics (Parashar & Schulz, 2021). Colonial powers imposed artificial

borders, disregarded ethnic and tribal affiliations, and entrenched systems of exclusion and inequality (Bertocchi & Canova, 2002; Oloruntoba et al., 2020; Seidler, 2018). These colonial legacies have not only contributed to fragmented national identities, persistent ethnic tensions, and uneven regional development, but as Odigbo, Okeke and Odigbo (2025) affirmed, continue to shape socio-economic disparities and fuel intra-state conflicts rooted in arbitrarily imposed borders and exclusionary governance structures.

Building on this foundation, the dissertation's theoretical framework integrates institutional theory and the concept of wicked problems to interrogate how entrenched historical structures and ongoing governance challenges perpetuate GCs. Article I of the thesis provides a longitudinal analysis of the changes in national strategies and policy frameworks, revealing how institutional inertia and fragmented short-term interventions have consistently undermined inclusive development. The enduring influence of colonial era systems, particularly indirect rule and elite capture, continues to constrain inclusive governance and diminish stakeholder agency, disproportionately affecting marginalised rural communities (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2020).

The study identifies climate change, public health crises, and food insecurity as significant and interconnected factors contributing to human distress in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). It seeks to explore the structural causes of poverty rather than merely addressing its superficial manifestations. This strategic focus echoes urgent scholarly demands for sweeping reforms in institutional frameworks, governance systems, and social structures to dismantle the entrenched legacies of colonialism (Adeleye et al., 2020; Nachum et al., 2022; D. B. Zoogah, 2018).

Therefore, to effectively address these GCs on the continent, a system-oriented approach that is sensitive to historical contexts is essential. This approach should thoroughly recognize the varied developmental paths within the region and promote interventions that are transformative, driven by agency, and involve multiple stakeholders.

## 2.4 Micro and macro actor agency in GCs

The concept of agency is fundamental to the analysis of GCs in sub-Saharan Africa. As explained by Martin (2003) and (Hitlin and Elder, 2007), agency encompasses the capacity of individuals and groups to make informed decisions and initiate change, even within the constraints imposed by structural conditions. In the context of Sub-Saharan Africa, where environmental degradation, food insecurity, public health crises, and climate vulnerability intersect, agency transcends theoretical abstraction and becomes a practical necessity. Actors must not only address urgent challenges but also actively construct identities and relationships to maintain their roles within evolving institutional and structural frameworks.

The dynamic interplay between structure and agency is especially pronounced in the context of tackling GCs, where actors must navigate complex constraints while striving to enact meaningful change. Within this landscape, agency manifests across multiple scales from grassroots initiatives to institutional interventions, highlighting the distinct yet interconnected roles of micro and macro actors.

Micro-level actors, which include individuals, both informal entrepreneurs, and civil society organizations, are often deeply rooted in their communities. As a result, they play a crucial role in tackling GCs (Berrone et al., 2016). Working outside formal institutional channels, these actors mobilise local knowledge, networks, and resources to shape adaptive strategies and support resilience. Acknowledging their contribution is vital for a thorough comprehension of the dynamics of GC, as they possess a unique proximity to the issue. Informal institutions, including social norms, community practices, and networks that operate beyond the state, play a critical role in this regard. These institutions foster an environment that empowers micro actors to assert their agency, frequently bridging the gaps left by formal governance structures. Their interventions are not merely reactive; they are also generative, challenging the inertia of established institutions and providing solutions that are sensitive to the local context.

Table 2 highlights the various contributions of micro-entities and their crucial role in the broader governance ecosystem of the geographical area. These actors, who range from local communities and entrepreneurs to civil society groups and volunteers, show how agencies at grass-roots level can catalyse meaningful change. Their efforts are often context-sensitive, drawing on local knowledge, trust networks and adaptive capacities which formal institutions may overlook or underestimate.

**Table 2** Micro actors

Type of micro actor	Description
Local community	Locals in a particular area come together to resolve a challenge
Social/women entrepreneurs	Individuals and small businesses create innovative solutions
Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)	Local, small NGOs work locally to implement solutions to a specific problem
Civil society groups	Groups of people raising awareness
Volunteers	Committed people who do good for society

Micro level actors not only act as implementers but are key catalysts of change, impacting their immediate environment and sometimes wider institutional landscapes. Understanding their agency requires a nuanced examination of their mechanisms, constraints, and potential for generative action.

Theorists such as Giddens (1984) emphasise the duality of structure and agency, arguing that individuals must be empowered to act both within and against prevailing systems. This lens is especially relevant in SSA, where structural limitations coexist with vibrant local initiatives. For example, collaborative responses to climate change illustrate the power of interagency coordination—linking individuals, government agencies, civil society, and community actors in co-creating context-sensitive solutions (Fetterman et al., 2014; Ryan & Schneider,

2003). Such partnerships not only enhance problem-solving capacity but also legitimise informal institutions as vital components of GC governance.

This recognition of bottom-up agency aligns with broader scholarly efforts to reframe Africa's role in the global development discourse. Tieku's (2013) conceptualisation of African agency challenged the portrayal of the continent as a passive recipient of external influence, instead positioning it as an active architect of its own future. Building on this perspective, scholars such as Nachum et al. (2022) and Zoogah (2021) emphasised the complex and evolving relationship between African institutions and transnational corporations (TNCs), thus highlighting the constraints imposed by external dependency and the lingering effects of colonial legacies. While TNCs do not exert control over every aspect of African development, it is equally misleading to assume they exercise full autonomy. The reality is more nuanced: a negotiated space shaped by power asymmetries, resource limitations, and strategic collaboration, where African agency is both constrained and exercised.

Trust is emerging as a key enabler of African agency, particularly in interactions between diverse actors engaged in development processes (e.g., Amoako, 2019). At the micro level, this agency—embodied by households, small businesses, and individual consumers—thus challenges top-down narratives and reframes development as a participatory and locally driven endeavour. Women entrepreneurs, especially in the agricultural sector, exemplify this shift through their resilience and contributions to food security and social welfare (Adeyanju et al., 2023; Gad & Leone, 2024).

Building on this insight, the study expands the concept of agency to include individual entrepreneurs, particularly women as micro-level change agents within governance frameworks aimed at addressing societal GCs. Throughout this dissertation, the terms "women entrepreneurs" and "female entrepreneurs" are used interchangeably. The forthcoming section provides a more detailed examination of their contributions, emphasizing their roles as strategic actors in locally grounded responses to systemic crises.

## 2.5 Agency of entrepreneurs in GCs

Building on the recognition of women entrepreneurs as strategic micro-level change agents, this section explores the broader role of individual entrepreneurs in navigating GCs. The integration of micro-enterprises and sole proprietors into the wider business ecosystem is pivotal to fostering collaborative, locally grounded responses to both regional and global crises. A substantial body of literature highlights the capacity of small-scale ventures to devise innovative, context-sensitive solutions to complex problems (Doh et al., 2019; Duchek, 2018; Fernhaber & Zou, 2022). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in SSA, where micro-entrepreneurs—many of them women engaged in social entrepreneurship—constitute a significant share of the economic landscape. Empirical studies affirm their contributions to poverty alleviation and community resilience across diverse SSA contexts (Amine & Staub, 2009; Ojong et al., 2021), positioning them as indispensable actors in the governance of GCs.

Women entrepreneurs in SSA play a crucial role in transforming the business landscape and addressing global challenges. The GEM 2022/23 Women's Entrepreneurship Report highlighted a significant gender and economic disparity in entrepreneurial intentions: globally, 16.7% of women plan to start a business, but this figure increases to 28.2% in low-income SSA countries, compared to a mere 11% in high-income nations (Fieve & Chrysostome, 2024; Hughes et al., 2023). This heightened entrepreneurial spirit in SSA is not coincidental; it is a response to systemic challenges such as limited formal employment opportunities, gender-based economic exclusion, and the necessity for informal survival strategies. Women's entrepreneurial endeavours are integral to community resilience and social innovation, often intersecting with vital sectors such as food security, health care, and education (Adom, 2015; Kimeu Muindi et al., 2020). For example, women-led nutrition businesses have diversified local food systems, improved nutritional intake, and boosted household incomes. In the health care sector, women entrepreneurs manage mobile clinics and produce affordable personal care products, effectively

addressing deficiencies in the public health infrastructure. These efforts are further strengthened by women's extensive social networks, which promote job creation, knowledge sharing, and the development of resilient business partnerships (Ojediran and Anderson, 2020).

Importantly, the nature of women's entrepreneurship varies across economic contexts. In low-income countries, women are more likely to engage in subsistence-level micro-enterprises, often as a means of survival, while in middle-income and transitional economies, their ventures are increasingly growth-oriented (Irene, 2017; Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2022). This divergence underlines the need to see female entrepreneurship not only as an economic activity but also a systemic response to structural inequalities and institutional voids. Women entrepreneurs in SSA therefore become essential players in addressing GCs, using their local context embedding to promote inclusive and long-lasting change.

Despite their significant contributions, female entrepreneurs are often less recognised than their male counterparts in enterprise policy and discourse (Ahmetaj et al., 2023; Mashapure et al., 2023). Yet, the impact of their efforts is undeniable. As Fayokemi and Epetimehin (2020) argued, female entrepreneurs play a pivotal role in alleviating poverty by channelling their passion and creativity into enterprises that enhance societal well-being. Their businesses frequently provide essential goods and services, stimulate economic participation among female family members, and leverage kinship networks to sustain market presence (Ojong et al., 2021).

Viewed through the lens of institutional entrepreneurship (Rosen & Olsson, 2013), these women are not merely adapting to structural constraints but actively reshaping them. Their agency extends beyond economic survival to institutional innovation, particularly within informal sectors where formal support mechanisms are limited. Women entrepreneurs in SSA demonstrate a strong commitment to building sustainable livelihoods and fostering inclusive development. Their social networks facilitate not only local resilience but also transnational support for women-led enterprises (Barkema et al., 2024; Nevi et al., 2025).

This support does not diminish the role of male entrepreneurs but underlines the need to increase and institutionalise the contribution of women as strategic players in the governance of GCs.

Building on these insights, this dissertation introduces the paradigm of purpose-driven enterprise, an approach that positions locally embedded businesses as intentional agents of systemic change. These enterprises are not solely motivated by profit but guided by a profound sense of purpose rooted in community needs, cultural values, and social equity. Women-led ventures in SSA exemplify this paradigm: they mobilise situated knowledge, cultivate trust, and engage marginalised voices to reconfigure entrenched structures of exclusion. Their work illustrates how entrepreneurial agency, when aligned with purpose and place, can catalyse institutional renewal and inclusive governance in the face of GCs.

## 2.6 Synthesis of prior research

Research on GC has consistently highlighted the critical role of strong institutional frameworks, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and collaborative governance mechanisms (Gehman et al., 2022; George, Howard-Grenville, et al., 2016; Gümüşay et al., 2020). Although these studies offer valuable macro-level perspectives on collaboration and systemic responses, they frequently fail to capture the nuanced agency of small-scale actors. This gap is particularly significant in the context of SSA, where many women entrepreneurs, who largely belong to this category, navigate and often challenge structurally weak institutional environments.

Institutional scholarship reveals persistent deficiencies across SSA, including political instability, low regulatory quality, corruption, and limited civic voice (Adeleye et al., 2020; Ado & Wanjiru, 2018; Saka-Helmhout et al., 2020). These systemic weaknesses are not merely contemporary challenges but deeply embedded in colonial legacies that deliberately marginalised indigenous populations from access to resources and institutional representation (Parashar & Schulz, 2021; Parker, 2007). The resulting institutional inertia has entrenched structural

inequalities, reduced entrepreneurial dynamism, and exacerbated generational differences. In this context, women entrepreneurs in SSA exemplify a form of agency-based self-navigation, challenging and re-organising institutional voids through adaptive and often informal strategies.

In response, grassroots actors, especially women, have emerged as key agents for change, particularly in the business sector. Their entrepreneurial activities not only address immediate household needs but also contribute to broader community resilience and institutional evolution (Nevi et al., 2025; Welsh, 2016). Studies highlight how women's economic initiatives, such as the smoked fish industry in Nigeria, generate employment, reduce poverty, and enhance national income through taxation (Fayokemi and Epetimehin, 2020). This aligns with broader findings that underscore women's commitment to social welfare and community empowerment (Adom, 2015; Lambert & Orkaido, 2023). Despite the persistence of gender biases that limit the contribution of women (Brush et al., 2009, 2020), recent institutional reforms, such as increased peaceful democratic transition and better governance in some regions (Boso et al., 2023), have indicated a shift toward a more inclusive framework. These developments provide new opportunities for the agencies involved, but meaningful progress remains dependent on the continued guidance and cooperation of a multi-level approach.

Thus, this synthesis bridges the macro-level analysis of institutions and the micro level of entrepreneurial activity, revealing a dynamic interaction between structural constraints and local innovation. It positions women entrepreneurs not only as economic actors but also agents of institutional change whose local efforts contribute to the cooperative solution of GCs in SSA and beyond.

## 3 Methodology

This chapter explores methodological aspects that are not extensively covered in the three articles, offering a comprehensive perspective on the research methodology, process, and overall trustworthiness. It examines essential elements, such as the rationale behind the chosen research approach, the theoretical foundations, and the alignment with the research objectives. The chapter provides a thorough overview of the entire research process, highlighting the interconnections between the three articles and the chronological development of the study. Moreover, the study's trustworthiness is assessed through the criteria of credibility, transferability, reliability, reflexivity and confirmability. Additionally, this chapter addresses the methodological challenges encountered, the strategies employed to overcome these challenges, and the ethical considerations that were integrated throughout the study.

### 3.1 Research approach

The research methodology used in this study combines critical realism and pragmatism and incorporates a phenomenon-oriented, problem-oriented philosophical approach. This framework, with its emphasis on impacts, is particularly well-suited to the examination of the interplay of various factors related to GCs (Wegener et al., 2024; Wicks & Freeman, 1998). The pragmatic approach to impact conceptualises it as an iterative and interconnected process and departs from the traditional view of impact as a discrete one-way event (Ferraro et al., 2015). This perspective emphasises the ongoing nature of impact in addressing complex societal challenges and fostering collaborative innovation. Hence, pragmatist thinking enables interdisciplinary research (Pimentel et al., 2023), and a situated, distributed, and procedural method of problem-solving.

The synthesis of critical realism and pragmatism provides a solid philosophical foundation that recognises the existence of an objective reality while recognising the importance of practical consequences and human experiences in

shaping our understanding of that reality (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Wicks & Freeman, 1998). Based on the pragmatic approach, researchers recognise that knowledge is provisional and arises from a transaction between the agent and the environment (Wegener et al., 2024). Among the salient aspects of the research approach is a philosophical foundation based on critical realism and pragmatism. This methodology emphasises real-world phenomena and complex problems and integrates multiple disciplines and levels of analysis using inductive reasoning. This multifaceted approach allows researchers to explain the nuanced and complex nature of GCs, which often transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries and require holistic solutions.

The growing body of research on GCs emphasises the need for organisations to adopt pragmatic approaches when confronting complex, real-world problems (Ferraro et al., 2015). This scholarship provides a valuable lens for understanding how organisations in SSA navigate multifaceted institutional environments while responding to systemic issues such as poverty and climate vulnerability. Grounding research in empirical realities ensures that insights are not only theoretically robust but also relevant capable of driving meaningful change. To unpack the intricacies of GCs, it is essential to examine these challenges within their actual contexts, where diverse actors, institutions, and historical legacies intersect. Addressing such complexity requires a methodology that spans multiple disciplines and levels of analysis (Buckley et al., 2017). An interdisciplinary approach enables researchers to draw on varied perspectives, theories, and methods enriching their understanding of the interconnected forces at play. By analysing phenomena across individual, organisational, and societal levels, scholars can identify actionable entry points for intervention and craft more effective, context-sensitive responses to GCs.

The inductive approach was used to develop a robust research framework for addressing GCs affecting the agency of micro-level actors from an institutional perspective (Eisenhardt et al., 2016). This methodology allowed me to begin with specific observations, identify patterns, formulate tentative hypotheses, and develop broader generalisations and theories. The inductive approach is particularly valuable

in this context because it facilitates the emergence of new knowledge and theories that may not be apparent through deductive reasoning alone. From in-depth research to more general conclusions, it has helped this researcher to uncover surprising connections and develop new strategies for solving complex problems. Using this approach, this study draws conclusions that can be applied to a broader geographical context to increase the relevance and impact of the research. The ability to generalise findings is critical to addressing GCs, which often have global implications. Thus, identifying patterns and principles that can be applied in different contexts, researchers can develop scalable solutions and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of these complex problems.

The research philosophy and approach chosen is therefore ideal to address the complex and multilayer issues arising from the social and economic impact of GCs (see, Kroeger et al., 2022; Wegener et al., 2024). They provide a comprehensive understanding of the problem under study and incorporate different perspectives and methodologies to develop effective solutions. This approach recognises the interconnectedness of GCs and the need for interdisciplinary collaboration to address them effectively. Furthermore, integrating critical realism and pragmatism allows researchers to balance the demands of rigorous scientific inquiry with the practical considerations of implementing solutions in real-world contexts. This balance is critical when tackling GCs, as it ensures that research findings can be translated into actionable strategies and policies that have a significant impact on society.

The research strategy implemented in this study acknowledges the dynamic and evolving characteristics of GCs. An inductive methodology was adopted to remain open to emerging patterns, novel insights, and changing contextual realities. This methodological flexibility is vital when dealing with complex, long-term issues that defy static solutions and require iterative adaptation. It facilitated the evolution of strategies in response to new information and shifting conditions, ensuring analytical responsiveness and relevance throughout the investigation.

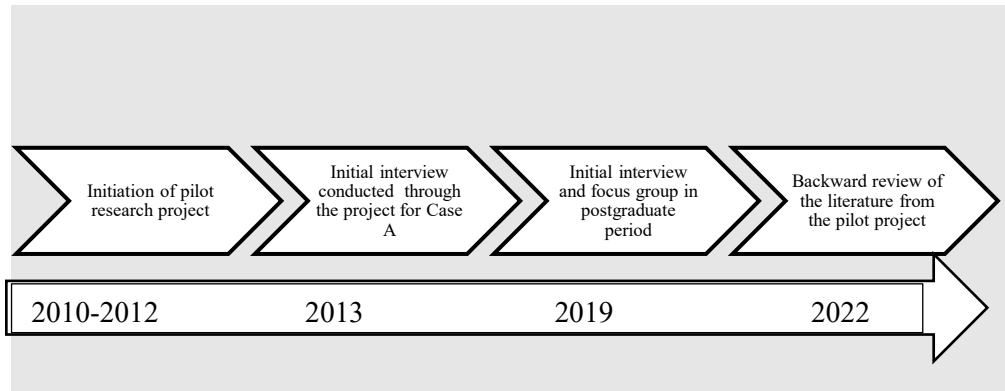
The selected research methodology offers a robust and flexible framework for engaging with geographical communities. By integrating pragmatism and critical

realism, it foregrounds real-world phenomena, embraces interdisciplinary perspectives, and employs inductive reasoning to uncover nuanced, context-specific insights. This methodological synergy has proven effective in generating impactful solutions and enriching the understanding of complex, systemic challenges. Its dual capacity for generalisation and adaptability enhances the potential of this research to make a substantive contribution to addressing GC.

## 3.2 Research process

### 3.2.1 Overview of the data collection

The launch of a two-year pilot project marked the initiation of the data collection phase, a crucial element of the methodology outlined in this dissertation. The pilot study was designed to clarify the evolution of innovative frameworks as tools for enabling the implementation of interventions aimed at addressing the societal and economic issues faced by African nations. Consequently, my research concentrated on the specific case of Zambia. The Finnish VTT Technical Research Centre played a pivotal role in facilitating the pilot project's execution. This initial phase led to the publication of the first qualitative case study in 2014, referred to as Country Study A (Article I). In the context of the 2019 doctoral research, a structured interview protocol was crafted to explore fragile states in Country Study B (Article II). The empirical framework integrated findings from research conducted in two countries, culminating in a comprehensive analysis of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Scholars examining Grand Challenges (GCs) are advised to clearly articulate their methodological approach and present data in a manner that enhances the reader's comprehension of the evidence (Eisenhardt et al., 2016). In accordance with this, the primary phases of the research methodology are illustrated in **Figure 4**.



**Figure 4.** Data collection process

As a doctoral student, I initiated a second qualitative case study in 2019 using a methodology akin to the first. Another nation in a precarious situation hosted the second qualitative case study, which looked at business resilience. The data collection process included qualitative questionnaires and interviews with business owners and public servants. In 2021, a research article based on this study was published. Comparative analysis was made easier, and the results were more broadly applicable by choosing to re-conduct the study in a different geographic location. Both case studies used inductive approaches, which form the basis of this research topic, and produced important and relevant insights.

Subsequently, the examination of the two case studies highlighted the need for a more nuanced contextual understanding of the elements inherent in this area of research. Given that the case studies drew on critical input from two different nations, it became clear that a more comprehensive investigation incorporating global perspectives on the SSA region was needed to gain a comprehensive understanding of GCs. To fulfil this requirement and consider the results of both studies, a systematic literature review (SLR) was started.

By reviewing and combining the literature on environmental GCs, the SLR expanded the geographic focus from a single-country study to a continental study. In the context of this work, this is supplemented by the numerous purposes of an SLR. It ensures that the researcher is informed about current findings and areas

requiring further research by providing a thorough analysis of previous scientific findings relevant to the research topic. In this process, the idea of GCs emerged as a comprehensive framework that contextualises the corpus of existing literature.

### 3.2.2 Systematic literature review (SLR)

A systematic literature review (SLR) is a rigorous and transparent method for synthesising existing research to address a specific question, reduce bias, and expand the body of knowledge (Williams et al., 2021). In the context of international business and development, identifying research gaps and deepening understanding of regional complexities is essential (Buckley et al., 2017; Paul & Criado, 2020). This review was conducted with a tailored strategy that reflects the unique and diverse environment of SSA.

Unlike traditional reviews initiated at the outset of a study, this SLR was formulated during the final stages of research, drawing insights from the first two articles of this dissertation. These findings served as a foundation to identify and conceptualise the core idea of “*Grand Challenges*” (GCs). The SLR was initiated in 2020 to explore and expand knowledge on mitigation strategies for GCs, particularly those arising from climate change in SSA. While the concept of “grand challenges” has gained traction as an umbrella term for persistent and complex problems, this study moves beyond generalities to focus on specific, high-impact issues. In SSA, GCs are not only deeply entrenched but also exacerbated by institutional deficits and fragmented interventions. These challenges demand coordinated, multi-stakeholder responses and innovative strategies.

Building on this, it was a deliberate choice to focus on climate change, public health emergencies, and food insecurity, without explicitly covering poverty. These GCs are deeply intertwined with the structural conditions that sustain poverty in the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Rather than treating poverty as an isolated problem, the study treats it as a cumulative result of these systemic crises. By

addressing drivers of poverty amplification, research is expected to contribute to more sustainable and transformative development strategies.

This literature review delves into the progression of grand challenges within academic discourse, emphasizing the growing preference for the term “*challenges*” over “*problems*.” This change signifies a conceptual shift towards embracing complexity and uncertainty, including the concept of “*wicked problems*” (Kaldewey, 2018; Pradilla et al., 2022). This semantic and analytical transition underscores the imperative for deeper contextual inquiry, especially in regions such as SSA, where systemic constraints intensify the difficulty of identifying viable solutions. Leading scholars (Buckley et al., 2017; Ferraro et al., 2015; George, Howard-Grenville, et al., 2016; Gümüşay et al., 2020; Kistruck & Slade Shantz, 2022; Kroeger et al., 2022) have advanced the GC literature by highlighting their persistence and advocating for transdisciplinary and transnational methodologies. Building on these foundational insights, this dissertation contributes a targeted exploration of GCs through the lenses of institutional dynamics, business ecosystems, and environmental sustainability, with particular emphasis on SSA’s unique socio-economic and governance contexts.

Article I investigates targeted interventions in areas such as poverty reduction and institutional reform, with a particular emphasis on stakeholder collaboration. Article II complements this by exploring methodological approaches to GCs from an IB perspective, focusing on the role of institutional dynamics. Together, these studies form the foundation of the systematic literature review (SLR), which fulfils two key objectives. First, it synthesises insights from the dissertation’s articles to sharpen conceptual clarity and construct a robust institutional framework for analysing stakeholder agency. Second, it offers critical methodological guidance for the empirical components of the research, drawing on lessons learned from prior fieldwork and scholarly engagement.

The challenges and gaps identified in these earlier studies directly informed the design and execution of the empirical investigation—ensuring that the research

is both contextually grounded and strategically aligned with the broader goals of addressing GCs in sub-Saharan Africa.

### 3.2.3 Country-specific case studies: empirical studies in SSA

The utilisation of the case study approach represents a valuable research methodology when investigating GCs (Rashid et al., 2019), as it yields empirically based results. A qualitative case study is a research methodology that facilitates the examination of a phenomenon within its context using multiple data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2015). Significantly, the approach guided the development of the central research question for this dissertation. It is noteworthy that, in case study research, a real-time phenomenon is explored within its naturally occurring context, with the consideration that context will create a difference (Rashid et al., 2019). This methodological choice allowed me to collect substantial evidence across multiple settings suitable for investigating GC phenomena.

The selection of specific national case studies to examine the factors impeding the enhancement of societal well-being was predicated on several critical criteria. The decision to focus on two cases was partially motivated by the desire to present contrasting institutional conditions in stable and unstable states. Consequently, key aspects also offered a comparative perspective. The initial pilot case for this research was conducted in Country A (Zambia), with Country B (Somalia) subsequently selected as the second case, both within SSA as the focal region of this study. The comparative criteria encompassed key aspects ranging from political, institutional, and economic characteristics to social cohesion factors. This approach ensures consistency with the research questions and objectives, while incorporating contextual variability from two distinct countries. These comparative criteria of governed and fragile states guided the narrative of these discrete cases, as illustrated in **Table 3**.

**Table 3.** Comparative criteria for data collection

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Country A (governed state)</b>	<b>Country B (fragile state)</b>
Political stability	Stable political conditions and government	Disputed leadership, political unrest, and instability
Institutional framework	Formalised institutional framework	Lack of institutional framework, institutional void
Education and health care systems	Access to health and education services	Inadequate health care and restricted access to quality education
Entrepreneurial environment	Stable, policy-driven entrepreneurial growth	Unstable, lack of policy, entrepreneurial resilience
International relations	Solid international agreements and partnerships	Reliance on humanitarian and weak international relations
Infrastructure	Basic infrastructure, including transport, energy, and communication	Poor infrastructure
Social cohesion	High social cohesion	Ethnic tensions and a lack of social cohesiveness

Priority was given to selecting cases that provided significant comparative value to deepen analytical insights, while data availability was assessed to ensure the feasibility of the study (Baxter & Jack, 2015). The selection method for these cases was based on the problem orientation of the first article. The aim of this methodology was to provide a holistic view of GCs while examining the role of institutional frameworks that included both the involvement of formal private sector organisations and informal economic actors in addressing societal challenges. The selection also considered regional factors, particularly the institutional inadequacies, heterogeneity, and dimensions characteristics of the SSA region. This thorough approach to case selection was the problem driver that led to the formulation of the research investigation. To this end, a concise description of the country context of the studies for countries A and B follows.

In the area of developing countries, Country A faced significant hurdles in setting up an effective national innovation ecosystem. In this case, the problem lay in the ineffective performance of various actors within a national framework. In

addition, the limited integration of the informal sector into national development initiatives proved problematic, as pressing issues, such as poverty alleviation, were not adequately addressed. As a result, the research focused on implementing scientific and innovative approaches to address these issues within their respective contexts. In contrast, Country B, located in the Horn of Africa, was chosen to provide a comparative perspective between a stable government and a fragile or conflict-affected state. After decades of ethnic discord as a failed state, it had experienced political instability, armed conflict, and economic difficulties since independence in 1960. International organisations have contributed by sending peacekeepers and providing financial and technical assistance (Glawion et al., 2019; Jama et al., 2020). In addition to reliance on humanitarian aid, remittances from diaspora communities also played a role in the nation's progress toward stability and progress. At the same time, the business community faced challenges stemming from institutional gaps and the lack of a functioning government. This context served as the basis for developing a research case study.

### 3.2.4 Field interview procedures

The choice to utilize qualitative research interviews as the main method for data collection in this study is well-founded and suitably aligns with the research's aim of exploring institutional conditions and landscapes in the context of addressing GCs (Berrone et al., 2016; Gümüşay et al., 2020). This is because the method facilitates an in-depth exploration of complex challenges, such as the efficacy or inadequacy of the collaboration of different actors (Article 1). The interviews included leaders and representatives from government organisations, non-governmental organisations, civil society, and entrepreneurs who had extensive expertise and insights into their sectors. The interviews encompassed questions regarding national objectives delineated in science and technology policies, including the GC of poverty alleviation in evaluating implementation achievements.

The methodology used during the field mission was structured and categorised into meetings. For these meetings, the authors prepared questions to initiate the procedure into a systematic data collection process. These investigations were conducted on site through face-to-face interactions, allowing for in-depth discussions and potentially uncovering unexpected insights. As mentioned, the data collection for the first case came from a pilot project that I worked on between 2012 and 2013. This initial dataset was incorporated into the first qualitative work (2014), which was incorporated into this dissertation. In the subsequent phase, I commenced postgraduate studies. **Table 4** presents a summary of the interviews. The country studies are referred to as cases A and B. The table lists the titles of the people serving as data sources and the names of the sectors, along with the interviewees/meetings and the corresponding topics. Due to the large variation in the duration of each meeting and the frequent informal conversations that followed, it was difficult to record the exact duration it took. However, it was a maximum of two hours.

**Table 4.** Summary of interviews conducted

<b>Date</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Interviewee/ meetings (number)</b>	<b>Themes</b>
July 2012	Pilot project commenced	Monitoring project implementation	Social and economic development
July 2013	Case A	Deputy Minister - Ministry of Science and Technology (5)	Stakeholder collaboration
August 2013	Case A	Director, National Institute for Scientific and Industrial Research (2)	Institutional framework & international network
August 2013	Case A	Director & team, National Business Centre (5)	Entrepreneurial capability
September 2013	Case A	Civil society representatives (5)	Institutional framework
Post graduate studies (2018)			
March 2019	Case B	Deputy Minister of Commerce	Entrepreneurial & institutional framework
May 2019	Case B	Programme manager, private sector: EU Delegation to Somalia (2)	Grand challenges
May 2019	Case B	Team Leader, World Bank (1)	Grand challenges
May 2019	Case B	Project Manager, UNDP (1)	Grand challenges: climate change
June 2019	Case B	Representatives, civil society, business associations & vocational training centres (15)	Institutional framework & wicked problems

The research for Case A incorporated interviews with high-ranking government officials, including a deputy minister, who offered substantiated insights into stakeholder collaboration dynamics and policy frameworks (Daka & Toivanen, 2014). Throughout the interview process, careful consideration was given to the selection of participants to ensure that each interviewee possessed verified expertise in their respective domains. Since the process was conducted in official institutions, the legitimacy of the participants was assured, along with official documentation.

Therefore, qualitative approaches, including interviews, can provide valuable insights into the intricate interconnections within a national innovation system that may not be discernible through quantitative methods alone (Baxter & Jack, 2015; Creswell, 2007). To further strengthen the methodological approach, I supplemented the interview data with document analysis and secondary data sources to enhance validity. In this regard, triangulation is a validity procedure in which researchers look for convergence between multiple sources of information (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This was accomplished by ensuring that a diverse range of stakeholders were included to capture various perspectives within the innovation system; by developing a semi-structured interview guide to maintain consistency while allowing flexibility in exploring emerging themes; by employing rigorous qualitative data analysis techniques, such as thematic analysis or grounded theory, to identify patterns and themes in the interview data; and by addressing ethical considerations throughout the research process.

Thus, the comprehensive data collection method enabled a detailed analysis of the complex elements examined and provided insightful information on how stakeholder dynamics, business resilience and international approaches to GCs interact.

### 3.3 Analysis of the empirical data

This qualitative study began with a rigorous data preparation process, including the transcription of interviews conducted in both English and local vernaculars to

preserve contextual nuances and meanings (Halme et al., 2024). The subsequent phase involved organising and categorising the interview data and incorporating complementary document analysis—primarily policy documents supplemented with field data to create a comprehensive analytical dataset. The methodology employed for country-specific analyses in Articles I and II followed a qualitative approach, utilising thematic analysis.

The study employed thematic analysis as its principal analytical methodology to identify and classify salient themes emerging from the interview data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The coding process followed an inductive approach, beginning with open coding to capture recurring patterns and concepts across transcripts. These initial codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories through axial coding, allowing for the identification of relationships between stakeholder roles, institutional dynamics, and GC-related interventions. NVivo 10 software was used to manage and annotate the data, enabling systematic comparison across cases. To enhance analytical rigour, the coding was aligned with stakeholder groups such as ministerial bodies, civil society organisations and private sector actors and triangulated with document analysis and field notes. Measures to ensure validity and reliability included peer debriefing, member checking with departmental colleagues and contextual cross-referencing. This multi-step coding strategy facilitated a nuanced understanding of stakeholder agency and institutional constraints in SSA.

To enhance the credibility of the analysis, a multi-step coding framework was implemented, as summarised in **Table 5**.

**Table 5** Summary of coding stages and analytical procedures

<b>Coding stages</b>	<b>Description</b>
Axial coding	Categorised codes according to themes and investigated connections.
Stakeholder alignment	Codes mapped to stakeholder groups for benchmarking
Triangulation	verified against policy documents and field notes.
Validity measures	Peer debriefing, member verification, contextual cross-referencing

This analytical framework was complemented by strict adherence to ethical guidelines. The study complied with the principles set forth by the National Board on Research Integrity TENK (2023), including informed consent, participant privacy, and risk mitigation. Rigorous confidentiality measures were employed across all qualitative data collection sites, which included marginalised individuals and employees from both public and private sectors. Ethical implications of the findings were carefully considered, particularly in sensitive contexts such as Case B, which involved a conflict-affected environment. In lieu of direct interview quotations, findings were rephrased to preserve anonymity while accurately representing participants' perspectives. Visual representations, such as network diagrams, were constructed to facilitate comprehension of the research context and stakeholder relationships.

It is crucial to think about the researcher's positionality and how it affects the analytical process in addition to ethical issues. The positionality of the researcher shapes reflexivity in qualitative research, especially when the researcher shares lived experiences with participants and is embedded in the context being studied. This can affect how the data are interpreted and how the participants interact with the data (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002). My prior experience working on development projects throughout sub-Saharan Africa gave me access to important stakeholders and contextual knowledge. Although this insider viewpoint enhanced the investigation, it also necessitated deliberate reflection to reduce any potential bias. I maintained analytical rigor throughout the study by using techniques like transparent coding and peer debriefing. While upholding scholarly objectivity, this dual role allowed for a nuanced understanding of institutional complexity and stakeholder agency.

### 3.4 Reflexivity

In qualitative research, reflexivity is shaped by the researcher's positionality, particularly when the researcher shares lived experiences with participants and is immersed in the context under study (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002). This can influence how data is interpreted and handled.

My research practice is profoundly shaped by my professional experience with development projects in Sub-Saharan African countries (Daka & Siad, 2022; Daka & Toivanen, 2014). Having faced significant challenges while working on international development projects, I have developed a holistic analytical perspective on these grand challenges. Being physically present in the areas where these phenomena occur has fueled my ability to contribute effectively to grand challenge research in the context of the global south. Consequently, the peer-reviewed articles included in this dissertation are closely linked to the insights I have gained through my development work. This role has endowed me with valuable contextual knowledge, access to key stakeholders, and an insider's perspective on institutional dynamics. While this experience has greatly enriched my research and facilitated

meaningful connections with field participants, I remain keenly aware of the potential for interpretative bias. To mitigate this concern, I have consistently employed reflective practices throughout the study, such as peer review, triangulation, and maintaining transparency in coding decisions, to ensure analytical rigor and uphold ethical standards.

Assuming the dual capacities of researcher and practitioner has enabled a sophisticated understanding of stakeholder agency and the intricacies of institutional frameworks, all while preserving a steadfast dedication to academic impartiality.

### 3.5 Evaluation of the empirical study

The qualitative paradigm posits that individuals interpret reality through a social lens (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Articles I and II embrace this perspective, recognising its importance in accurately capturing participants lived experiences. A critical component of qualitative research involves the evaluation of empirical data, which showcases the researcher's ability to critically examine and integrate existing scholarly literature (Baxter & Jack, 2015). This process highlights several key factors that impact the study's methodological rigour, reliability, and adherence to established research protocols.

Based on a well-developed methodological framework to guide the investigation, *methodological rigour* was applied, beginning with the initial stage of the pilot study that set off the first research paper. This approach was considered crucial to ensuring the quality of important components, including the research design, data collection methods and analytical strategies used in both study settings. For this reason, it was essential to ascertain whether the chosen techniques were in line with the goals of the study and satisfied recognised qualitative research standards to facilitate a thorough evaluation of qualitative case studies (Feagin et al., 2016). I therefore critically analysed the reasons for the methodological rigour undertaken, given that it had direct implications for the study results.

This research demanded a comprehensive analysis of the employed sampling strategies, given that the data were collected from both public and private sector participants. Each case study typically utilised a targeted sampling approach to effectively address the research objectives. The selection of participants for the initial study was based on the specific context under examination, following a pilot investigation in Zambia. The data collection process incorporated stakeholders from formal and informal sectors, including civil society organisations engaged in governmental national strategies. The subsequent case study, focused on Somalia, explored entrepreneurial development in relation to the institutional environment as an enabling factor and involved actors who were both participants in and affected by these activities.

The appropriateness and effectiveness of various *data collection techniques*, including focus groups, interviews and observations, must be carefully considered (Yin & Campbell, 2009). In this regard, the process of gathering qualitative data directly aligned with the research topic and questions, and I applied due diligence considering both societal and economic factors pertinent at the time. Consequently, the methods used for gathering data included a review of the information's richness and depth and its alignment with the study's goals. Researchers must critically assess each data collection method's advantages and disadvantages, along with its capacity to capture the complexities of the phenomenon being studied. I made sure that all target populations' raw data were thoroughly extracted using qualitative case methods. However, it is worth noting that secondary data were also complemented with raw data. Strict scrutiny was also applied to the calibre of the observation procedures, interviews, and other data-gathering instruments.

The evaluation of the suitability and comprehensiveness of the analytical methodologies employed in research studies depends heavily on data analysis techniques (Paula et al., 2021). To align the case studies and primarily integrate the results, the data analysis for this study was conducted independently and in silos. First, choosing suitable analytical techniques was carefully thought out to evaluate how well they would respond to the research questions and produce insightful

information. A thorough analysis of the accuracy of several analytical techniques, such as analysis and the interpretation process, was conducted for the qualitative studies in this dissertation. During the qualitative portion of the study, thematic analysis proved to be the most popular method because pertinent individuals from the public, private and civil society sectors were interviewed. Along with potential researcher biases that might affect how the results would be interpreted, the transparency and consistency of the analysis procedures were examined, as is customary in all academic fields. This component of the study functioned in two ways: as a crucial component of the evaluation procedure as well as the methodology.

*Credibility and dependability* are crucial in the research tradition. In qualitative research, determining credibility and trustworthiness is crucial, especially when assessing the techniques employed to guarantee the validity and reliability of the findings (Golafshani, 2003; Krefting, 1997). Researchers in the field of qualitative research contend that it is fundamentally incorrect to apply the same performance or value metrics to both quantitative and qualitative approaches because they differ in their natures and objectives. In contrast, a qualitative study's credibility is evaluated based on the researcher's face-to-face interaction with interviewees and informants, as well as observation throughout the field data collection process. Notably, in the current study, peer debriefing, member checking and triangulation all contributed to the results' increased credibility. Throughout all data collection processes, I was also assessed for identity verification. Furthermore, recognising the importance of reflexivity significantly improved the study's credibility. Contextual considerations will be given priority in the future on this research topic. In the tradition of research, credibility and reliability are essential.

The complexity and breadth of research pertaining to the theme of GCs and institutional conditions necessitate a thorough understanding of contextual factors. As a result, this encourages the application of a critical evaluation methodology to determine the extent to which relevant contextual factors that may influence research findings are integrated and taken into consideration in the research. Examining how

the researchers address the social, cultural, historical, and political contexts of the studies should be part of this evaluation. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon, the impact of these contextual factors on the procedures of data collection, analysis and interpretation must be critically assessed.

Understanding the conceptual contributions of the research requires comparing theoretical foundations with empirical findings, which is how I assessed the theoretical framework. For scholars, evaluating how well studies advance theoretical development in the field or integrate existing theories is essential. Theoretical rigour and coherence must be ensured by critically examining the coherence of the research design, theoretical framework, and result interpretation.

A critical dimension in evaluating qualitative research is the reflexivity and positionality of the researcher, as outlined earlier in Section 3.4. This study actively engaged with these principles by acknowledging and reflecting on the researcher's own attitudes, assumptions, and potential biases throughout the inquiry. While generalisability is not the primary aim of qualitative research, the concepts of transferability and applicability remain essential. To support these, the study provides rich contextual detail and transparent methodological documentation, enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to their own settings. The potential applications and implications of the research are discussed in depth, offering insights into how the findings may inform diverse GCs mitigation strategies across varying institutional contexts (Kistruck & Slade Shantz, 2022).

The depth, scope, and significance of the findings are further enhanced by the integration of multiple critical perspectives and the commitment to methodological rigor. The article-based structure and peer-review process contribute to the credibility and scholarly legitimacy of the research. The following section presents summaries of the dissertation's core articles, each of which builds on the empirical foundation established here and advances the broader inquiry into institutional responses to GCs.

## 4 Summary of the articles

### 4.1 Article I: Conceptualising of wicked problems and the role of stakeholders

This article investigates how institutional frameworks can facilitate collaboration among diverse stakeholders in addressing wicked problems specifically poverty—within a national innovation context. The study was conducted in Zambia using a qualitative case study approach. It examines how science, technology and innovation (STI) serve as strategic levers to improve performance in both the public and private sectors. The study started as a pilot exercise and developed into a full analysis based on a comprehensive review of literature from stakeholders which revealed a significant gap in the research. The study answered the following research question: *how can institutional frameworks facilitate cooperation between stakeholders with diverging interests?*

Findings underscore the critical importance of stakeholder alignment, trust-building, and governance efficiency in tackling complex societal challenges. While advanced economies often leverage STI to address multifaceted issues, the study reveals that in the examined context, weak institutional support and fragmented stakeholder engagement impede progress. Notably, the informal sector emerges as a fertile ground for grassroots innovation, offering untapped potential for locally grounded solutions. Analytical methods encompassed content analysis of innovation policies and an examination of questionnaire responses, focusing on themes aligned with the central research inquiry.

Through interviews and policy analysis, the study contributes to the conceptualisation of “*wicked problems*” by highlighting the need for adaptive, inclusive, and networked approaches. It advances the discourse on stakeholder theory by demonstrating how collaborative governance and innovation ecosystems can be mobilised to address systemic development challenges particularly in geographically defined and resource-constrained communities.

## 4.2 Article II: Discussion on entrepreneurial conditions and institutional void in fragile states

This article examines entrepreneurial activity within the context of fragile and conflict-affected states, using Somalia as a focal case. Against a backdrop of prolonged political instability, environmental crises, and contested governance since 1991, the study explores how entrepreneurs navigate institutional voids and operate in the absence of formal institutional support structures. The central research question: *How do entrepreneurs operate in an unstable country without a formal institutional framework?* This guides the inquiry into adaptive strategies and resilience mechanisms.

Employing a qualitative methodology, the study draws on surveys, interviews, and stakeholder workshops to capture entrepreneurial experiences in urban Somalia. Findings reveal that entrepreneurs face significant structural challenges yet demonstrate notable ingenuity and perseverance. Gendered dimensions of institutional absence are also evident, with women entrepreneurs reporting heightened vulnerability to bias and exclusion.

The study contributes to institutional theory by illustrating how entrepreneurial resilience enables agency to persist despite systemic dysfunction. It also advances the discourse on Grand Challenges by positioning peacebuilding and economic inclusion as interlinked objectives. Entrepreneurs in fragile states are shown to play a pivotal role in fostering social cohesion and laying the groundwork for sustainable development, even in environments marked by volatility and uncertainty.

### 4.3 Article III: Quantitative analysis on environmental GCs

This article provides a systematic and empirical review of scholarly contributions addressing environmental GCs, with a particular focus on climate change mitigation and adaptation in Africa. As climate change represents one of the most urgent and globally recognised GCs impacting ecosystems, livelihoods, and socio-economic stability, the study seeks to understand how institutional change influences the effectiveness of strategies aimed at environmental resilience. The guiding research question is: *How do institutional changes influence the effectiveness of strategies to address grand environmental challenges?*

The climate is not only the background to human activity, but also the basic resource that sustains agriculture, public health, economic systems, and life in general. In SSA, persistent droughts, rainfall variability, and environmental degradation have intensified poverty cycles and exposed the fragility of existing institutional responses. Despite global efforts to promote clean energy technologies, their uptake across SSA remains limited, with structural barriers impeding meaningful impact.

Drawing from a comprehensive review of 792 articles, 34 were selected for in-depth analysis. Findings reveal that while international organisations have advanced clean energy initiatives, their implementation in SSA lacks sufficient institutional support and local integration. Notably, half of the studies emphasise adaptation strategies rooted in indigenous knowledge, particularly in rural communities. The continued reliance on wood-based fuels further complicates mitigation efforts, underscoring the need for context-sensitive energy transitions.

This article contributes to both the GCs discourse and the field of International Business (IB) by examining how international technology transfer facilitates collaborative networks between global industry actors and local stakeholders. It underscores the strategic role of IB in enabling cross-border innovation diffusion, particularly in regions facing acute environmental disruption. By highlighting the

importance of institutional reform, stakeholder engagement, and knowledge co-production, the study advances a context-sensitive understanding of how IB mechanisms can support climate resilience and sustainable development in vulnerable geographies.

Accordingly, Table 6 presents a consolidated summary of all three articles, structured around their respective research questions to highlight their individual contributions to the overarching dissertation theme.

**Table 6** Summary of the articles

Article	Key findings linked to research questions
Article I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Poor communication hindered stakeholder collaboration between public and private sector institutions.</li> <li>▪ Inadequate policy framework and limited resources exist for addressing wicked problems.</li> <li>▪ Although adapting science and technology is crucial to poverty alleviation, policy implementation is inadequate.</li> </ul>
Article II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In fragile states, social order and business processes are affected by the weakness or lack of an institutional framework.</li> <li>▪ Entrepreneurial activities tend to overcome institutional voids through resilience strategies to do business at any cost.</li> <li>▪ Entrepreneurial activities contribute to social cohesion and conflict resolution.</li> </ul>
Article III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Due to institutional inadequacies, strategies adapted to the impacts of climate change have been more numerous in Africa than the adoption of technology.</li> <li>▪ Weak empirical and real-world evidence can be found on the effectiveness of using clean technologies to mitigate climate change in Africa.</li> </ul>

These findings serve as foundational pillars for this research, informing its strategic orientation toward enhancing stakeholder agency through institutional reform and entrepreneurial engagement.

## 5 Discussion and conclusions

Tackling the intricate Grand Challenges (GCs) such as food insecurity, public health crises, institutional fragility, and climate change necessitates solutions that are just as complex and involve a diverse range of stakeholders. This study explores the potential of leveraging stakeholder agency, with a particular focus on businesses, to enhance the effectiveness of responses to these wicked problems, especially when supported by strong institutional frameworks. By adopting a comprehensive perspective, the research underscores the significance of inclusive collaboration, emphasizing the empowerment of local actors who are frequently underrepresented in formal interventions. By clarifying the role of the business sector and identifying gaps in stakeholder engagement, the study deepens our understanding of how strategic partnerships can be mobilized to address GCs.

The central goal of this dissertation is to devise strategic methods that enhance stakeholder engagement and collaboration, fostering a mindset that supports both collective and individual efforts to address GCs across diverse contexts in the SSA region and on a global scale. To emphasize the broader implications of these findings, it is important to recognize that many of the institutional and stakeholder dynamics identified such as fragmented interventions, resource constraints, and uneven public-private sector participation are also prevalent in other regions of the Global South. For example, similar patterns can be observed in the informal economies of Latin America (Khanna & Palepu, 2010; Soto, 2000) and the development sectors of Southeast Asia (Carney et al., 2011; Kim & Aguilera, 2016), where local entrepreneurship and hybrid institutional arrangements are pivotal in combating corruption. These similarities suggest that the findings from the SSA could offer transferable lessons and frameworks applicable to the wider Global South.

In conclusion, this dissertation highlights the pivotal role of stakeholder agency and collaboration in addressing GCs. By examining institutional dynamics, entrepreneurial behaviour, and gendered engagement, the study demonstrates that

inclusive, context-sensitive strategies are vital for systemic transformation. These insights not only contribute to theoretical advancement but also inform practical approaches to sustainable development. With this foundation established, the following section turns to a detailed discussion of the empirical findings, focusing on the specific challenges and stakeholder dynamics within sub-Saharan Africa.

## 5.1 Discussion of the findings

This study presents key empirical insights into the dynamics of Grand Challenges (GCs) and critically examines the limitations of current stakeholder initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The findings reveal persistent structural obstacles including fragmented organisational cooperation, resource-constrained partnerships, and weak public–private sector alignment that hinder effective responses to GCs. These challenges underscore the urgent need for more integrated and inclusive stakeholder engagement strategies. By corroborating and extending existing scholarship on the role of multi-actor collaboration in addressing complex societal challenges (Buckley, 2020; Ferraro et al., 2015; George, Howard-Grenville, et al., 2016; Gümüşay et al., 2022), this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how institutional and organisational dynamics shape the effectiveness of GC interventions in SSA.

Building on the broader challenges of fragmented stakeholder engagement in SSA (see, Babalola and Jegede, 2020; Mwangi et al., 2022), the mining industry provides a strong lens through which these dynamics can be viewed. Given the economic centrality of extractive industries in many regional economies, mining companies are frequently evaluated based on their contributions to societal GCs, including employment generation and fiscal revenues (Ayuk & Klege, 2017). However, despite their substantial resource capacity, the findings indicate that corporate engagement with GCs remains confined to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes. While these initiatives are designed to promote social good, they often lack the strategic depth and accountability necessary for

transformative impact. This aligns with existing scholarship suggesting that CSR in the extractive sector tends to prioritise reputational management over genuine, systemic change (Bezzola et al., 2022; García-Rodríguez et al., 2013; Reddy & Hamann, 2018; Wiig & Kolstad, 2010).

In stark contrast to the limited and often superficial engagement of extractive industries with GCs, this study uncovers robust empirical evidence of the transformative role played by small and micro-enterprises particularly those led by women entrepreneurs in advancing poverty alleviation and food security (Adom, 2015; Kimeu Muindi et al., 2020; Lingappa et al., 2023; Ojong et al., 2021; Woldesenbet Beta et al., 2024). Operating with deeply embedded social purpose, these actors demonstrate remarkable adaptive resilience within fragile institutional environments. Their contributions are not peripheral; they are central to community well-being, especially in regions where formal systems falter. The findings call for stronger regional coordination, more equitable global–local partnerships, and targeted policy incentives to amplify the impact of these grassroots efforts. While institutional deficits remain a persistent challenge, they do not uniformly inhibit collective action. Rather, they highlight the need for institutional recalibration, one that supports inclusive collaboration and recognises the legitimacy of micro-level agency. In doing so, this study contributes to the evolving discourse on GCs by reframing institutional theory through the lens of local innovation and entrepreneurial activism (Brandl et al., 2022; Mahoney et al., 2010; Zoogah, 2018).

Tackling GCs demands a decisive shift from symbolic gestures to transparent, participatory, and systemically embedded approaches. Corporate strategies particularly in high-turnover, globally dominant sectors must be critically re-evaluated to ensure they move beyond reputational management and toward genuine social impact. Where necessary, robust regulatory frameworks should be instituted to hold firms accountable and foster equitable engagement. Crucially, women entrepreneurs must be recognised not just as participants but as game changers bringing fresh perspectives, community-rooted innovation, and inclusive leadership to the forefront of sustainable development. These measures are not merely technical

fixes; they are foundational to building a mutually beneficial relationship between business and society one that aligns corporate responsibility with the lived realities of affected communities and champions the transformative potential of women-led enterprise.

The following section explores how collaborative approaches among diverse stakeholders such as organisations, institutions, and individuals can be negotiated and operationalised to address these GCs more effectively.

## 5.2 Stakeholder collaboration

Stakeholder collaboration is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone in tackling GCs, particularly in contexts marked by institutional fragility and resource constraints. Traditional stakeholder theory emphasizes the balance between internal and external actors (Crane & Ruebottom, 2011; Freeman et al., 2020), but this study takes a more holistic view, emphasising the role of stakeholders and their collective capacity to deliver value in response to complex societal challenges. In domains such as food insecurity, public health crises, and climate change, effective solutions require coordinated action across diverse stakeholder groups. Building on the stakeholder identification process outlined in Chapter 2, this research adopted an inclusive lens that incorporates both formal and informal actors, including those whose contributions are often marginalised. Recognising the interdependence of stakeholders and the systemic nature of the GC, the study places collaboration and the role of stakeholders not as an after-thought strategy but as a key mechanism for transformative change.

In SSA countries, collaborations between stakeholders takes place in two different paradigms for urban and rural populations. In urban settings, collaboration tends to be governed by formal, government-led frameworks in which structured partnerships between public institutions, non-governmental organisations and private businesses dominate. These arrangements often reflect centralised management and institutionalised mechanisms for coordination. On the other hand,

collaboration between rural stakeholders is deeply rooted in the indigenous knowledge systems and social networks. Here, communal action is driven by ethnic or village cohesion, church groups, and informal movements, creating a decentralised model that emphasises community ownership, adaptive resilience, and long-term sustainability. These contrasting paradigms underline the importance of tailoring strategies for the involvement of stakeholders to the socio-cultural and institutional realities of each context.

While stakeholder collaboration holds significant promise, the disparities in infrastructure, funding, and institutional support between urban and rural regions pose substantial challenges to its effectiveness. A key obstacle in addressing certain grand challenges is the limited accessibility and the considerable distances from decision-making hubs. Rural communities often grapple with resource limitations and restricted access to formal support systems, particularly in the context of climate-related interventions. However, the presence of informal systems within these communities offers a robust foundation for grassroots initiatives, where effective leadership and governance are essential for managing complexity. Thus, addressing grand challenges requires the engagement of a diverse array of stakeholders, encompassing not only those directly impacted but also individuals driven by ethical, social, or voluntary commitments.

As emphasised in Article I, successful initiatives depend on the collective contributions of diverse actors. However, weak collaboration especially between public and private sector actors undermines policy coherence (cf. Carodenuto, 2019). A lack of trust and poor communication between national authorities and citizens often leads to fragmented implementation, which echoes the concerns expressed in the existing literature (George et al., 2024; Kroeger et al., 2022). These challenges are compounded by fragile economic and political conditions, which hinder strategic alignment.

To foster coherent and inclusive collaboration, the discussion now turns to the role of the stakeholder agency and institutional frameworks as crucial facilitators of voluntary participation and the co-creation of solutions to shared challenges.

## 5.3 Agency of stakeholders and the institutional framework

In SSA, the role of stakeholders must be seen in the context of deeply rooted social structures that, as highlighted by Glatzer et al. (2015), prioritise collective well-being. These structures shape individual behaviour through common norms, expectations, and institutional arrangements. Two key mechanisms, networking and stakeholder embedding, play a central role in enabling stakeholders to act in a coherent way in a constrained environment. As Maier and Simsa, (2021) show, institutions do not merely restrict or facilitate action; they actively shape actors by providing them with development pathways and behavioural patterns. This study builds on this insight by highlighting the interaction between individual and collective action, particularly in fragile contexts where micro-level players such as households, entrepreneurs and community leaders are often at the heart of transformative activities. These actors, often overlooked in national programmes, have the potential to foster innovative cross-sectoral cooperation and to catalyse systemic change.

As global governance becomes more complex, scholarship has moved to understand institutional interactions through the lens of multifaceted agency. While philosophical discussions of agency about (Ahearn, 2001) continue, this study highlights the dynamic interaction of individual and collective agency in the driving force of change. In SSA, collective action is particularly important to address various domains of GCs, where micro-level actors such as households, entrepreneurs and community leaders are often neglected in national programmes have untapped potential for cross-sectoral innovation.

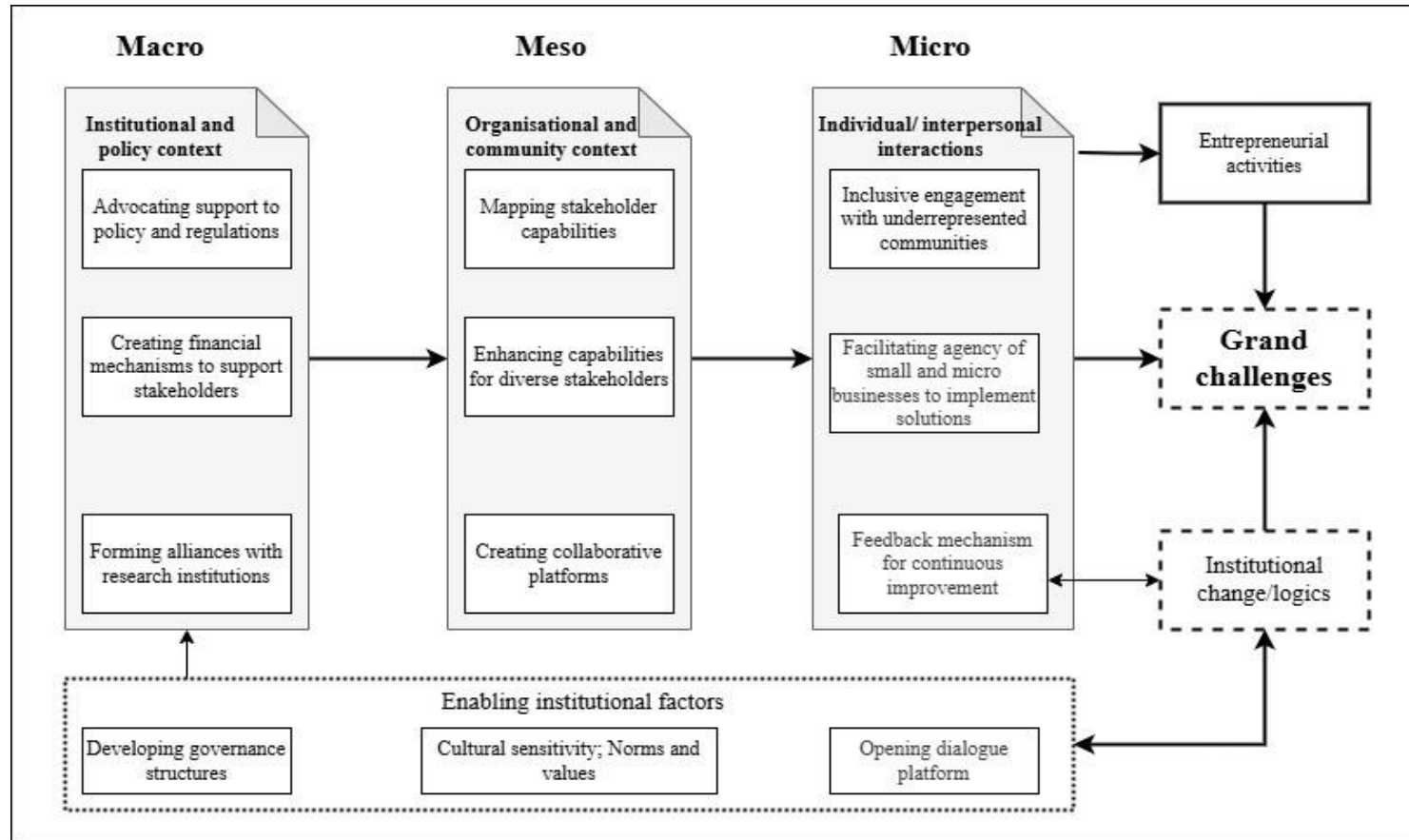
The literature emphasises the systemic nature of the GCs and the need for inclusive stakeholder involvement (Babalola & Jegede, 2020; Roulet & Bothello, 2022). Furthermore, the findings of the study show that micro-enterprises run by

women are particularly focused on social networking and community goals. Their activities improve household welfare and contribute to wider socio-economic resilience, even if gender and institutional barriers persist. Empowering these women through targeted support and an inclusive framework is a prerequisite for sustainable development.

As global governance becomes more complex, scholarship has moved to understand institutional interactions through the lens of multilateral agencies. While philosophical discussions about free will (Ahearn, 2001) continue, this study highlights the dynamic interaction of individual and collective agency in driving transformative change. In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), collective action is particularly important to address GCs, where micro-level players such as households, entrepreneurs, and community leaders—often neglected in national programmes—have untapped potential for cross-sectoral innovation. Literature emphasises the systemic nature of the GCs and the need for inclusive involvement of stakeholders. The findings of this study show that micro-enterprises run by women are particularly focused on social networking and community objectives. Their activities improve the well-being of households and contribute to wider socio-economic resilience, even if gender and institutional barriers remain.

Thus, entrepreneurship especially female-led emerges as a strategic lever for addressing GC domains that exacerbate poverty and inequality. To optimise stakeholder contributions, institutional frameworks must precede GC interventions. These should promote gender equity, resource access, and cross-sector collaboration. However, scaling such strategies across SSA requires navigating cultural norms, resource constraints, and uneven institutional support. In the climate change domain, however, Article III offers a systematic review of environmental research in SSA, laying a foundation for future inquiry and emphasising climate change's developmental implications.

Building on these insights, the conceptual framework below outlines a strategic, three-tiered model comprising macro, meso, and micro that integrates institutional support with micro-level agency to address GCs holistically (**Figure 5**).



**Figure 5.** Integrated framework for stakeholder agency and institutional dynamics in tackling grand challenges

The diagrammatic conceptual framework above encapsulates the strategic dimensions essential for addressing the societal and environmental impacts of GCs in the SSA region and beyond. It underscores how the individual and collective agency of entrepreneurs, particularly women, can drive systemic change when supported by conducive institutional settings. In this context, entrepreneurial activities serve as a crucial mechanism for tackling significant challenges through innovative, purpose-driven approaches. These activities represent a paradigm shift towards companies that integrate social and environmental goals into their core strategies, rather than being solely profit-driven. Entrepreneurs act as agents of institutional change, mobilizing resources, fostering cross-sectoral cooperation, and challenging established norms to create sustainable value and drive systemic change.

The framework delineates a three-level structure—*macro*, *meso*, and *micro* levels (van Wijk et al., 2019), each representing a distinct yet interconnected area of stakeholder involvement. At the micro level, local innovation is propelled by individual actors, particularly entrepreneurs and local stakeholders. The meso level emphasizes collaboration networks and organizational partnerships to bridge institutional divides. The macro level encompasses policy dynamics and global governance structures that shape the broader enabling environment. These layers are embedded within a robust institutional framework that facilitates capacity building, resource mobilization, and compliance with regulations.

Crucially, the framework incorporates a feedback mechanism that enables continuous learning and adaptive responses at all levels. This dynamic integration reflects the complexity of systemic challenges and highlights the need for iterative, context-sensitive interventions. By linking stakeholder actions to institutional support and governance structures, the framework provides a pragmatic foundation for future research and policy development. Its goal is to foster an inclusive and sustainable transformation while contributing to the broader discourse on entrepreneurial agency within the international business domain, particularly in relation to GC research.

## 5.4 Theoretical contributions

This dissertation makes three core theoretical contributions to the study of *Grand Challenges (GCs)*, stakeholder agency, and institutional dynamics in the context of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

First, the study deepens the understanding of stakeholder agency in addressing GCs by investigating the roles of diverse actors, such as individuals, entrepreneurs, institutions, and international corporations, in initiating actions and shaping outcomes within environments limited by structural constraints. It emphasizes stakeholders' capacity for intentional and adaptable action, offering a nuanced view of agency as both contextually aware and transformative. Building on Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, the study demonstrates how stakeholder agency operates not only within institutional frameworks but also through intentional and adaptive practices, illustrating that actors actively modify constraints. By incorporating insights from Hitlin & Elder (2007), the research portrays agency as a relational and evolving force, attuned to changing institutional contexts and capable of driving structural transformation.

Second, this study contributes to the theoretical discourse on institutional barriers by exploring how systemic constraints, stemming from colonial legacies and governance failures, play a pivotal role in limiting resources and disempowering local actors in their efforts to address societal grand challenges. By integrating institutional theory, the study develops a dynamic model that clarifies the interaction between institutional structures and stakeholder agency. This model responds to critiques of the GC concept (Eisenhardt et al., 2016; Seelos et al., 2023), moving beyond fragmented empirical references to propose a principles-based framework for effective stakeholder collaboration and institutional transformation. Buckley (2025) endorses this approach by advocating for a kaleidoscopic perspective of IB theory, which incorporates institutional plurality and contextual nuance. His call for theoretical inclusivity aligns with this study's focus on SSA, where informal institutions and local agency are essential in navigating societal grand challenges.

Third, it enriches IB and entrepreneurship theory by emphasizing the role of individual entrepreneurs, particularly women, as catalysts for institutional change within the GC context. As demonstrated in Article II, it explores how entrepreneurial identity, strategic behaviour, and resilience manifest in fragile institutional environments (Fernhaber & Zou, 2022). Women entrepreneurs in SSA not only adapt to institutional voids but also actively address them with innovative and contextually relevant practices (Amine & Staub, 2009; Fayokemi Eunice & M. Epetimehin, 2020; Irene, 2017; Nevi et al., 2025). This challenges traditional IB assumptions that view institutional barriers as fixed and external constraints on firm behaviour (Nachum et al., 2022). Instead, the study repositions women-led businesses as dynamic institutional actors capable of reshaping the very structures that constrain them. By showing how women entrepreneurs engage in strategic and identity-based practices to navigate and transform institutional blind spots, the research supports the more agentic and evolutionary perspective of institutions in the theory of the IB. This is in line with structuralist views (Giddens, 1984) which emphasise the recursive relationship between agency and structure, and which places women entrepreneurs not only as respondents to the context but also as co-creators of institutional change.

This thesis collectively advances a more comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates institutional theory, stakeholder agency, and gender entrepreneurship. By investigating how women entrepreneurs navigate and transform institutional bottlenecks, the study challenges traditional IB assumptions that perceive institutional barriers as static (Gamber, 1994; Nachum et al., 2022), instead placing female-led enterprises at the forefront of structural change. This extends existing institutional business models by illustrating how resilience enables business activity to flourish in fragile states (Teyi et al., 2023) and emphasizes the transformative potential of female entrepreneurs to tackle complex issues in GC domains.

Incorporating Buckley's extensive viewpoint, the dissertation champions a transformation in IB scholarship, advocating for increased attention to

underrepresented regions, diverse institutional logics, and the intricate agency of actors within GC domains. These insights not only enhance academic discourse but also guide inclusive development strategies and systemic change across sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. As a result, after a detailed examination of a wide range of literature, **Table 7** offers summaries of the primary constructs utilized in this study.

**Table 7** Main concepts from the literature

<b>Area of contribution</b>	<b>Extant literature</b>	<b>Insights from our research</b>
<b>Grand challenges</b>	Characterised as complex systemic issues, impact society and demand coordinated, cross-sectoral responses	The discourse tends to neglect micro-level actors such as individual entrepreneurs and community actors, which the study takes as micro-entrepreneurs
<b>Institutional framework</b>	Explores formal rules, informal norms, and organisational structures shape social behaviour; emphasises strength or fragility in enabling economic and social outcomes.	Deficiencies stem from a complex interplay of economic, political, and social factors, including the enduring legacy of colonial rule by Western powers.
<b>Institutional change</b>	Focuses on, institutions evolving over time, examining the drivers of transformations and impacts on societies and organisations.	To affect institutional change, actors must adapt to the evolving problem loads and learn from the experiences of others.
<b>Agency</b>	Recognises that people can act within a system. Actors are involved in the formulation and application of regulations. Collaborative approaches have been less discussed.	This study proposes collaborative interventions to promote a systems-level problem-solving approach, the engagement of diverse stakeholders and the potential of micro-level actors.
<b>Institutional void</b>	In the context of fragile states, the literature on institutional voids explains how formal institutions are either inadequate or non-existent.	Entrepreneurs navigate institutional gaps by using informal mechanisms, demonstrating resilience and adaptability in the absence of effective formal structures.
<b>Women entrepreneurship</b>	Discusses persistent gender inequality but pays limited attention to the specific barriers women face in accessing entrepreneurial education.	Women entrepreneurs are recognised as powerful change makers, committed to improving well-being, families, and communities.

In Table 7 above, this study utilizes four central theoretical constructs—global challenges, institutional voids, stakeholder agency, and gendered entrepreneurship—to develop a comprehensive framework for examining complex societal transformations. It combines empirical data from Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) with a range of theoretical perspectives, including institutional theory and structuration theory (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Scott, 2004). The dissertation examined how entrepreneurial actors, particularly women, navigate and transform fragile institutional environments, thereby initiating grassroots-level institutional change. This integrated approach was necessary to highlight the transformative potential of inclusive and context-sensitive entrepreneurship in under-represented regions and to fill the gap in IB scholarship, which often relies on static presumptions. To reinforce this view, the following section discusses consequential effects.

## 5.5 Practical implications

### 5.5.1 Policy implications

This study emphasises the necessity of a more advanced strategy to deal with GCs, given that most of today's policy frameworks usually treat these GCs as distinct problems and ignore the complex relationships between them. The thesis urges policymakers to consider the intricate web of social, environmental, and economic factors that underpin these GCs, and suggests a systems-oriented perspective. Recognising the interdependence of global issues, embracing comprehensive decision-making, and comprehending the relationships between societal dynamics, GCs and wider societal concerns are all important components of policy development, as included in Article I. Based on this, policymakers can develop increasingly complex and potent answers to several significant problems. This comprehensive approach facilitates the development of coherent, sustainable, and adaptable policies by recognising the interdependence of diverse issues. In the end,

this systemic approach can create stronger and more impactful policies that successfully handle the complex nature of transnational GCs.

The results of this study have significant policy implications for addressing major challenges. Policymakers should prioritise the development of institutional structures that promote engagement among diverse stakeholders, with a particular focus on empowering small-scale actors, particularly women entrepreneurs. Such efforts may include implementing tailored empowerment mechanisms, such as skills-building workshops for women in business, which can boost the sustainability of their businesses. In addition, policies should aim to reduce barriers, such as biased lending practices or unequal access to professional networks and resources, that disproportionately hinder women entrepreneurs. Government authorities and international organisations should consider gender-sensitive aspects when strengthening cooperation with local actors. Recognising and leveraging the twin economic and social drivers of female entrepreneurs, policymakers can therefore develop a more integrated approach to economic development that addresses both gender mainstreaming and sustainable growth. Further work is needed in future research to advance this route further.

### 5.5.2 Management implications

In the realm of business, GCs represent multifaceted, extensive issues with profound societal and economic consequences. The resolution of these challenges can yield wide-ranging effects across diverse business sectors. These complex problems often serve as catalysts for innovation, prompting enterprises to conceive and develop groundbreaking technologies, products, or services. Successfully addressing GCs may lead to the emergence of new markets or the expansion of existing ones, thus presenting opportunities for growth. Businesses that successfully address these problems stand to benefit from early-mover advantages, improved corporate reputation and the acquisition of intellectual property.

The complex nature of these GCs often necessitates interdisciplinary collaboration, thereby fostering innovative partnerships among commercial enterprises, academic institutions, and governmental bodies. Consequently, the development of groundbreaking innovations to address GCs frequently relies on the private sector for technological advancement. Given that substantial investments in research and development are required, which may yield significant returns for businesses, companies that engage with these critical issues may find themselves better positioned to attract and retain top talent motivated by meaningful endeavours.

The emergence of GCs frequently catalyses regulatory shifts and policy modifications, compelling businesses to recalibrate their operational paradigms and strategic frameworks. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the context of global problems, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change (see, Nummela et al., 2020; Qamar & Child, 2021). The confrontation of these challenges may subject corporations to unprecedented risks, necessitating the adoption of comprehensive risk evaluation and mitigation frameworks. Simultaneously, addressing societal GCs has the potential to enhance an organisation's reputation and demonstrate its commitment to CSR and strengthen its public legitimacy.

Ultimately, addressing GCs is not just a moral imperative but also a strategic opportunity. Companies that proactively tackle these challenges can bolster their long-term resilience, adaptability, and competitive edge in an increasingly volatile global environment. By aligning their business strategies with societal needs, organizations not only contribute to inclusive development but also secure sustainable growth. .

## 5.6 Avenues for further research

The exploration of academic productivity in SSA offers a wealth of potential research directions. Comparative analyses among various countries in the region could reveal regional disparities and identify best practices. Longitudinal studies are essential for tracing the evolution of scientific achievements, thereby uncovering

progress and new trends. Investigating the correlation between resource distribution and research capacity could guide the development of enhancement strategies. Additionally, a comprehensive study of how linguistic diversity and cultural influences affect research collaborations and priorities is necessary.

Thus, exploring patterns of collaboration both within Africa and internationally can yield valuable insights into the dynamics of knowledge exchange. It is essential to evaluate the balance between addressing local challenges and ensuring the global impact of African research contributions. The creation of alternative assessment metrics tailored to SSA context could result in more suitable evaluation methodologies. Investigating the effects of national and institutional policies on academic performance could inform future policy development. It is crucial to investigate the role of innovation and technology in enhancing research capabilities in resource-constrained settings. Examining innovative methods for knowledge dissemination specific to the African context could amplify the impact of research. Finally, analysing the prevalence and influence of interdisciplinary research within SSA institutions could reveal new pathways for academic advancement.

From a business perspective, addressing societal GCs requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates both psychological insights and commercial strategies (Martí, 2018). Such integration enables a deeper understanding of how businesses can contribute meaningfully to complex social issues. In particular, examining how companies implement sustainable development initiatives provides valuable insight into the types of business practices and institutional reforms needed to enhance their societal impact. However, in developing countries, this process is complicated by institutional voids, unequal power relations, and resource constraints, which limit the effectiveness of corporate engagement. These contextual barriers underscore the need for further research into how firms operating in fragile environments can navigate these challenges and more effectively advance societal goals.

Research within the sub-Saharan African (SSA) context offers valuable insights but is constrained by limitations and contextual factors that may restrict its broader applicability. This is particularly pertinent when addressing critical issues such as the impact of climate change on Africa's diverse societies. To generate more meaningful and sustainable knowledge, future research should adopt a more holistic, context-sensitive approach that accounts for the continent's heterogeneity and complexity. Scholars must consider the varying resources and research infrastructures across African countries, as these variables significantly influence study outcomes.

Subsequent research should investigate how communities confronting social and environmental GCs can actively shape research agendas, particularly by integrating indigenous knowledge systems that have historically guided the continent's development. Modern science must not only acknowledge these systems but also collaborate with them, integrating them into a new, inclusive research framework that reflects Africa's lived realities. To enhance the impact of corporate CSR efforts, this study recommends rethinking these initiatives to not only support community development but also involve academic researchers. Together, they can generate evidence-based solutions that directly address GC domains.

The future of research in SSA is not solely about expanding scale but also about delving into deeper complexities. It is not about change for its own sake, but about fostering meaningful connections, acknowledging neglected voices, and recognizing that genuine transformation often originates from the periphery. By embracing this mindset, future research can produce insights that are not only more relevant but also more influential, anchored in context, driven by purpose, and shaped by those who experience it.

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## **Original publications**

**Article I**      Innovation, informal economy, and development  
Daka, Ephraim and Toivanen, Hannes  
*African Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and  
Development*, Vol. 6 (4): 243–251

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**Article II** Entrepreneurship and the innovation ecosystem policy  
Daka, Ephraim & Siad, Sadiyo A  
*Africa Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development*,  
Vol. 14 (2): 577–584

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**Article III** Adopting clean technologies to climate change adaptation strategies

Daka, Ephraim

*Environmental Management*, Vol. 71: 87–98

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