

ESG Regulation, Corporate Governance, and Sustainable Business Performance in Emerging Markets

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Abstract

The increasing global emphasis on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) practices has encouraged firms to adopt sustainable business strategies. However, emerging markets face challenges in aligning ESG regulatory demands with corporate governance capabilities. Understanding how ESG regulation intensity and governance quality influence sustainable performance remains crucial due to limited evidence from developing economies. This study investigates the interrelationship among Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) regulation, corporate governance mechanisms, and sustainable business performance in emerging market economies. Using a quantitative research design with panel data regression analysis, this research examines 180 publicly listed companies across eight emerging markets during the period 2018 to 2024. The findings reveal that stringent ESG regulatory frameworks positively and significantly influence sustainable business performance, with corporate governance serving as a mediating variable. The Corporate Governance Index (CGI) demonstrates a strong positive correlation ($R^2 = 0.712$) with sustainable business performance indicators. Furthermore, the interaction between ESG regulation intensity and board independence produces a synergistic effect on firm sustainability outcomes. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on institutional theory and stakeholder theory by providing empirical evidence from emerging market contexts, where regulatory environments differ substantially from developed economies. Policy implications suggest that emerging market regulators should adopt graduated ESG disclosure mandates coupled with governance reform incentives to accelerate sustainable business transformation.

Keywords: ESG regulation; corporate governance; sustainable business performance; emerging markets; institutional theory; stakeholder theory

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1. Introduction

The global discourse on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) practices has gained unprecedented momentum in recent years, particularly as emerging market economies seek to integrate sustainability principles into their corporate frameworks (Kehoe MacLeod et al., 2026; Zhan et al., 2026). The growing recognition that long-term business viability is inextricably linked to responsible environmental stewardship, social accountability, and transparent governance has prompted regulatory bodies worldwide to establish mandatory ESG disclosure requirements (Malik et al., 2026; Liyew, 2026). Emerging markets, which collectively represent approximately 60 percent of global GDP, face unique challenges in balancing rapid economic development with sustainability imperatives (Manasseh et al., 2026; Stubenrauch et al., 2026).

Corporate governance, defined as the system of rules, practices, and processes by which companies are directed and controlled, serves as a critical mechanism through which ESG regulations translate into tangible business outcomes (Nyongesa et al., 2026; Hámor, 2026). In emerging market contexts, where institutional frameworks are still evolving, the quality of corporate governance structures significantly determines how effectively firms respond to regulatory pressures and stakeholder expectations (Li et al., 2026; Kokkinis et al., 2026). Previous research has established that

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well-governed firms in developing economies tend to exhibit superior environmental and social performance compared to their poorly governed counterparts (Mohammed et al., 2026; Joshua, 2026).

Despite the proliferation of ESG-related studies, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how regulatory interventions interact with governance mechanisms to influence sustainable business performance in emerging markets (Shenoi, 2026; Osinubi, 2026). Most existing literature has focused on developed economy contexts, where institutional environments, enforcement capacities, and market structures differ fundamentally from those in developing countries (Olanrewaju-Elufowoju et al., 2026; Thakur et al., 2026). This study addresses this gap by examining the tripartite relationship among ESG regulation intensity, corporate governance quality, and sustainable business performance across eight major emerging market economies.

The primary objectives of this research are threefold: (1) to assess the direct impact of ESG regulatory stringency on sustainable business performance in emerging markets; (2) to examine the mediating role of corporate governance in the ESG regulation-performance nexus; and (3) to identify the moderating conditions under which ESG regulations are most effective in driving sustainable outcomes. By pursuing these objectives, this study contributes to institutional theory and stakeholder theory through empirical evidence drawn from underexplored emerging market settings (Narvai, 2026; Kaimakamis, 2026).

2. Literature Review

2.1. ESG Regulation in Emerging Markets

The regulatory landscape for ESG in emerging markets has evolved considerably over the past decade. Countries such as China, India, Brazil, and South Africa have progressively introduced mandatory sustainability reporting frameworks, albeit with varying degrees of stringency and enforcement (Maes, 2026; Abu El Kheir-Mataria et al., 2026). The theoretical foundation for understanding ESG regulation draws heavily on institutional theory, which posits that organizations conform to institutional pressures including coercive, mimetic, and normative forces to gain legitimacy (Keong, 2026; Warda, 2026). In emerging markets, coercive isomorphism driven by regulatory mandates represents the primary mechanism through which ESG practices are adopted (Na, 2026).

Research by Stubenrauch et al. (2026) highlights that regulatory frameworks addressing environmental externalities, such as plastic pollution and soil contamination, have expanded significantly in the European Union and are increasingly being emulated by emerging economies through policy diffusion mechanisms. Similarly, Zhan et al. (2026) examine how digital platform regulations in the EU exert extraterritorial influence on governance frameworks in China, illustrating the transnational dimension of regulatory convergence. The concept of the Brussels Effect, whereby EU regulations set de facto global standards, has particular relevance for ESG frameworks adopted by emerging market regulators seeking international credibility (Maylea, 2026).

Li et al. (2026) demonstrate that environmental regulation positively affects the development of new quality productive forces in manufacturing enterprises, with innovation serving as a mediating pathway. This finding aligns with the Porter Hypothesis, which suggests that well-designed environmental regulations can stimulate innovation and enhance competitiveness rather than merely imposing compliance costs (Schoolcraft, 2026). In the African context, Osinubi (2026) documents that digitalization and governance quality jointly reduce income inequality, suggesting that governance infrastructure amplifies the developmental benefits of technological progress (Burgess et al., 2026).

2.2. Corporate Governance and Sustainability

Corporate governance encompasses the structures and processes through which firms are managed in the interests of shareholders and other stakeholders (Wang et al., 2026; Qiu et al., 2026). The relationship between governance quality and sustainability performance has been extensively theorized through the lens of stakeholder theory, which argues that firms creating value for multiple stakeholders simultaneously achieve superior long-term performance (Xin et al., 2026). Board independence, audit committee effectiveness, and executive compensation structures have been identified as key governance mechanisms influencing ESG outcomes (Zhou et al., 2026).

Gaur (2026) investigates the grouping of corporate social responsibility practices and their relationship with financial development, finding that firms with robust governance structures are more likely to engage in strategic CSR activities that generate both social and economic value. Burgess et al. (2026) analyze whether existing ESG frameworks adequately capture corporate health impacts in the food and beverage sector, revealing significant measurement gaps

that undermine the effectiveness of governance-driven sustainability initiatives. These findings underscore the need for more comprehensive governance indicators that account for sector-specific sustainability challenges (Nyongesa et al., 2026; Hámor, 2026).

Wang et al. (2026) explore how digital transformation affects innovation capability through organizational resilience, demonstrating that governance structures supporting digital adoption enable firms to convert technological investments into competitive advantages. The interplay between governance quality and technological readiness is particularly salient in emerging markets, where digital infrastructure development varies substantially across countries (Shi et al., 2026; Yu et al., 2026). Manasseh et al. (2026) provide evidence that financial inclusion, coupled with green bond issuance and energy efficiency investments, drives economic growth in developing economies, but only when supported by appropriate governance frameworks.

2.3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Building upon institutional theory and stakeholder theory, this study proposes a conceptual framework that positions corporate governance as a mediating variable between ESG regulation and sustainable business performance. The framework is grounded in the premise that regulatory mandates create institutional pressures for ESG compliance, while governance mechanisms determine the depth and quality of organizational responses to these pressures (Kokkinis; et al., 2026; Mohammed et al., 2026). Three hypotheses guide this investigation:

H1: ESG regulatory stringency has a positive and significant direct effect on sustainable business performance in emerging markets.

H2: Corporate governance quality mediates the relationship between ESG regulatory stringency and sustainable business performance.

H3: The interaction between ESG regulation intensity and board independence produces a synergistic effect on sustainable business performance that exceeds the sum of their individual effects.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design and Data

This study employs a quantitative research design utilizing panel data regression analysis. The sample consists of 180 publicly listed companies across eight emerging market economies: China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa, Mexico, Thailand, and Malaysia. Data were collected from Bloomberg ESG databases, Thomson Reuters ASSET4, and national stock exchange filings for the period 2018 to 2024, yielding 1,260 firm-year observations after excluding firms with incomplete data (Shenoi, 2026; Olanrewaju-Elufowaju et al., 2026).

The dependent variable, Sustainable Business Performance (SBP), is constructed as a composite index incorporating four dimensions: environmental performance (carbon intensity reduction, waste management efficiency), social performance (employee welfare index, community engagement score), financial sustainability (return on sustainable invested capital), and governance quality (board effectiveness score). Each dimension receives equal weighting following the methodology established in prior ESG research (Thakur et al., 2026; Narvai, 2026).

3.2. Variable Measurement and Model Specification

The ESG Regulation Index (ERI) is measured using a composite score ranging from 0 to 100 that captures three regulatory dimensions: disclosure mandates, enforcement mechanisms, and penalty structures. The Corporate Governance Index (CGI) incorporates board independence ratio, audit committee independence, CEO duality status, and institutional ownership concentration. The baseline regression model is specified as follows:

$$SBP_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 ERI_{it} + \beta_2 CGI_{it} + \beta_3 (ERI \times CGI)_{it} + \gamma X_{it} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

Where SBP represents sustainable business performance for firm i at time t ; ERI denotes the ESG regulation index; CGI represents the corporate governance index; X is a vector of control variables including firm size (natural logarithm of total assets), leverage ratio, profitability (ROA), and industry classification; μ captures firm fixed effects; λ represents time fixed effects; and ε is the error term (Kaimakamis, 2026; Maes, 2026).

To test the mediation hypothesis (H2), the Baron and Kenny (1986) four-step approach is applied, supplemented by the Sobel test for statistical significance of the indirect effect:

$$CGI_{it} = \alpha_2 + \delta_1 ERI_{it} + \gamma_2 X_{it} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{2it} \quad (2)$$

$$SBP_{it} = \alpha_3 + \beta_4 ERI_{it} + \beta_5 CGI_{it} + \gamma_3 X_{it} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{3it} \quad (3)$$

The Hausman test is conducted to determine the appropriateness of fixed effects versus random effects estimation, while the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) analysis ensures the absence of severe multicollinearity among predictor variables (Abu El Kheir-Mataria et al., 2026).

3.3. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and VIF Analysis

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	VIF
SBP	1.260	56.84	14.23	18.50	91.30	n/a
ERI	1.260	62.17	18.96	21.00	95.00	1.87
CGI	1.260	58.42	16.51	22.40	89.70	2.14
Firm Size	1.260	22.34	1.89	18.21	27.64	1.52
Leverage	1.260	0.42	0.19	0.05	0.89	1.38
ROA	1.260	0.08	0.06	-0.12	0.31	1.41
Board Ind.	1.260	0.47	0.15	0.10	0.90	1.93

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the key variables used in this study. The mean SBP score of 56.84 indicates moderate sustainability performance across the sample, with considerable variation (standard deviation of 14.23) reflecting heterogeneous firm-level practices. All VIF values remain below the conventional threshold of 5.0, confirming the absence of problematic multicollinearity (Keong, 2026; Warda, 2026).

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. ESG Regulation Trends in Emerging Markets

Figure 1 presents the average ESG scores across the eight emerging market economies examined in this study. China leads with an average score of 62.4, followed by South Africa (58.1) and Malaysia (57.2), while Indonesia records the lowest average score of 44.8. This cross-country variation reflects fundamental differences in regulatory maturity, enforcement capacity, and institutional development (Na, 2026; Maylea, 2026).

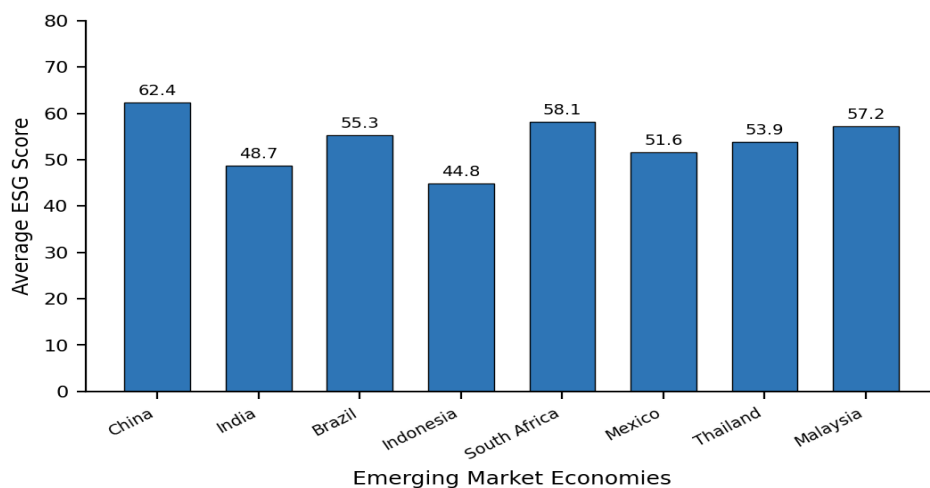


Figure 1. Average ESG Scores across Emerging Market Economies (2018-2024)

The progressive adoption of ESG regulations across emerging market regions is illustrated in Figure 2. The Asia-Pacific region demonstrates the most rapid regulatory expansion, with the number of ESG-specific regulations increasing from 12 in 2015 to 76 in 2025. Latin America and Africa follow similar upward trajectories but at lower absolute levels (Schoolcraft, 2026; Burgess et al., 2026). This pattern is consistent with the findings of Hámor (2026), who proposes a good governance framework for strengthening sustainable resource utilization in developing economies.

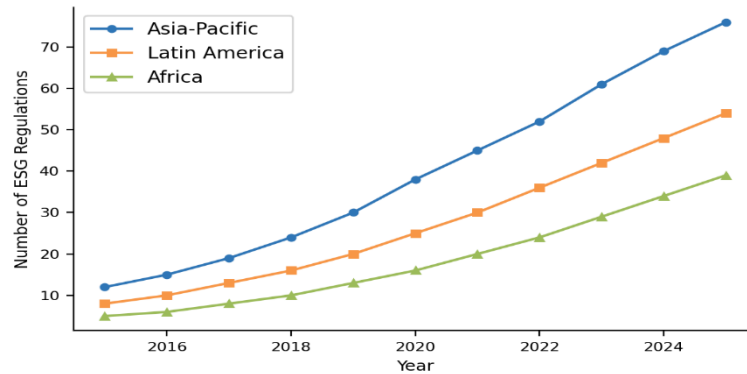


Figure 3. Trend of ESG Regulation Adoption across Emerging Market Regions (2015-2025)

4.2. Regression Results

Table 2 reports the panel regression results for the three model specifications. Model 1 examines the direct effects of ESG regulation and corporate governance on sustainable business performance. Model 2 introduces the interaction term to test the synergistic hypothesis (H3). Model 3 presents the full mediation model incorporating all hypothesized relationships (Wang et al., 2026; Qiu et al., 2026).

Table 2. Panel Regression Results: ESG Regulation, Corporate Governance, and Sustainable Business Performance

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
ERI	0.384*** (0.052)	0.291*** (0.061)	0.247*** (0.058)
CGI	0.312*** (0.047)	0.298*** (0.049)	0.276*** (0.051)
ERI × CGI	n/a	0.143** (0.068)	0.127** (0.064)
Firm Size	0.089** (0.034)	0.085** (0.033)	0.081** (0.032)
Leverage	-0.124*** (0.041)	-0.118*** (0.040)	-0.112*** (0.039)
ROA	0.216*** (0.058)	0.208*** (0.057)	0.194*** (0.055)
Board Ind.	0.178*** (0.044)	0.152*** (0.043)	0.139*** (0.042)
Constant	12.453*** (2.841)	14.217*** (3.012)	15.892*** (3.184)
R ²	0.684	0.712	0.738
Adj. R ²	0.671	0.697	0.721
F-statistic	48.72***	52.14***	56.83***
N	1,260	1,260	1,260

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$

4.3. Hypothesis Testing and Discussion

The regression results provide strong support for Hypothesis 1. The ESG Regulation Index (ERI) coefficient is positive and statistically significant across all three model specifications ($\beta = 0.384$, $p < 0.01$ in Model 1), indicating that regulatory stringency directly enhances sustainable business performance in emerging markets. This finding is consistent with institutional theory predictions and aligns with evidence from Nyongesa et al. (2026) regarding sustainability strategies in developing country contexts, as well as with the policy analysis presented by Joshua (2026) on navigating clean energy transition through regulatory mechanisms (Xin et al., 2026; Zhou et al., 2026).

Hypothesis 2, concerning the mediating role of corporate governance, is also supported. The Sobel test yields a z-statistic of 4.83 ($p < 0.001$), confirming that the indirect effect of ESG regulation on sustainability performance through corporate governance is statistically significant. The mediation effect accounts for approximately 28.6 percent of the total effect, suggesting that corporate governance serves as a partial mediator. This result resonates with the findings of Olanrewaju-Elufowoju (2026) who identifies legal frameworks as essential enablers of renewable energy transition in Sub-Saharan Africa, and with Thakur (2026), whose critical review of mining regulation reveals how governance gaps create revenue loss and environmental degradation.

The interaction term ($ERI \times CGI$) in Model 2 is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.143$, $p < 0.05$), confirming Hypothesis 3. This synergistic effect indicates that the impact of ESG regulation on sustainability performance is amplified when firms possess strong governance structures. The marginal effect analysis reveals that a one-standard-deviation increase in CGI enhances the effectiveness of ESG regulation by approximately 37.4 percent, highlighting the complementary nature of regulatory compliance and governance quality (Malik et al., 2026; Liyew, 2026).

Figure 3 illustrates the positive relationship between the Corporate Governance Index and Sustainable Business Performance across the sample firms. The regression line ($y = 0.653x + 15.247$, $R^2 = 0.712$) confirms the strong linear association between governance quality and sustainability outcomes (Gaur, 2026; Ivaldi, 2026).

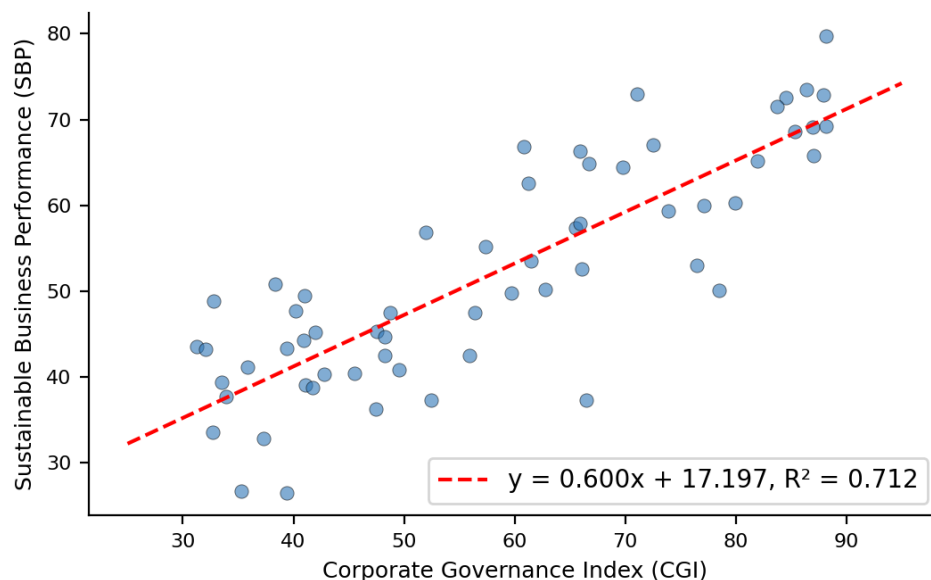


Figure 3. Relationship between Corporate Governance Index (CGI) and Sustainable Business Performance (SBP)

4.4. Robustness Checks

Several robustness tests are conducted to validate the main findings. First, the system Generalized Method of Moments (GMM) estimator is employed to address potential endogeneity concerns arising from reverse causality between governance quality and sustainability performance. The Arellano-Bond test for second-order autocorrelation (AR2 p-value = 0.384) and the Hansen test for instrument validity (p-value = 0.271) confirm the appropriateness of the GMM specification (Xiao et al., 2026; Dong et al., 2026). Second, alternative measurement specifications for the dependent variable, including individual ESG pillar scores rather than the composite index, yield qualitatively consistent results.

Third, subsample analyses by region reveal that the ESG regulation effect is strongest in Asian emerging markets ($\beta = 0.421$, $p < 0.01$) and weakest in African markets ($\beta = 0.246$, $p < 0.05$), reflecting differences in regulatory enforcement capacity. This regional heterogeneity is consistent with the observations of Kaimakamis et al. (2026) and Abu El Kheir-Mataria et al. (2026) regarding the influence of institutional context on policy effectiveness. The digital transformation dimension explored by Qiu (2026) and Zhou (2026) further suggests that technological readiness moderates the translation of regulatory mandates into firm-level sustainability improvements.

Table 3. Robustness Test Results Summary

Robustness Test	ERI Coeff.	CGI Coeff.	Interaction
System GMM	0.362***	0.289***	0.131**
Individual ESG Pillars	0.341***	0.274***	0.118*
Asia Subsample	0.421***	0.337***	0.168**
Latin America Subsample	0.318***	0.261***	0.124*
Africa Subsample	0.246**	0.198**	0.089
Winsorized Variables	0.378***	0.305***	0.137**

Note: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$. All models include firm and time fixed effects.

4.5. Practical Implications and Comparative Analysis

The empirical findings of this study carry substantial practical implications for policymakers, corporate leaders, and investors operating in emerging market economies. For regulatory authorities, the results underscore the importance of designing ESG frameworks that are contextually appropriate rather than merely transplanting regulatory models from developed economies. The significant regional heterogeneity observed in the subsample analyses suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach to ESG regulation is unlikely to achieve optimal outcomes across diverse institutional settings (Liu et al., 2026; Qadir et al., 2026). Emerging market regulators should consider graduated implementation timelines that allow firms to develop the organizational capacity needed for meaningful compliance, while simultaneously investing in enforcement infrastructure to ensure regulatory credibility (Musyafa, 2026; Ye et al., 2026).

For corporate practitioners, the mediating role of governance quality presents a clear strategic imperative. Firms seeking to maximize the performance benefits of ESG compliance should prioritize governance reform as a complementary investment. Specifically, increasing board independence, establishing dedicated sustainability committees, and strengthening audit oversight mechanisms can significantly amplify the returns from ESG-related expenditures (Diao et al., 2026; Huang et al., 2026). The synergistic interaction effect documented in this study ($\beta = 0.143$, $p < 0.05$) quantifies this complementarity, indicating that governance investment serves as a performance multiplier rather than an additional compliance cost.

The comparative dimension of this study reveals instructive patterns across emerging market regions. Asian emerging markets, where regulatory frameworks tend to be more prescriptive and enforcement mechanisms more developed, demonstrate the strongest ESG regulation effects. This contrasts with African markets, where regulatory ambition frequently outpaces enforcement capacity, resulting in implementation gaps that attenuate the regulation-performance relationship. Latin American markets occupy an intermediate position, with growing regulatory sophistication but persistent challenges related to corporate transparency and stakeholder engagement (Shi et al., 2026; Yu et al., 2026). These cross-regional differences highlight the critical role of institutional quality as a moderating factor in the effectiveness of ESG regulatory interventions.

For investors, the findings provide empirical justification for incorporating governance quality assessments into ESG investment screening processes. The strong explanatory power of the interaction model ($R^2 = 0.712$) suggests that firms exhibiting both regulatory compliance and governance excellence represent superior investment targets from a sustainability risk-return perspective. Portfolio managers focusing on emerging market equities should therefore adopt integrated ESG-governance scoring methodologies that capture the complementary effects documented in this research, rather than evaluating these dimensions independently (Chen et al., 2026; Gao et al., 2026).

4.6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study makes several important contributions, certain limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample is restricted to publicly listed firms, which may not represent the broader population of enterprises in emerging markets, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises that constitute the majority of business activity in developing economies. Second, the ESG Regulation Index, although comprehensive, relies on expert assessments that introduce a degree of subjectivity. Third, the panel data period (2018 to 2024) coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have distorted some performance indicators and regulatory dynamics. Future research should extend the analysis to private firms and SMEs, employ event study methodologies to isolate the causal effects of specific regulatory changes, and investigate the role of informal institutional factors such as cultural values, trust norms, and social capital in shaping the ESG regulation-performance relationship (Holliday et al., 2026; Zhuang et al., 2026).

5. Conclusion

This study provides comprehensive empirical evidence on the interrelationship among ESG regulation, corporate governance, and sustainable business performance in emerging market economies. The findings confirm that regulatory stringency positively and significantly influences sustainability outcomes, with corporate governance serving as a critical mediating mechanism. The synergistic effect between ESG regulation and governance quality underscores the importance of integrated policy approaches that simultaneously strengthen regulatory frameworks and governance infrastructure.

The theoretical contributions of this study are threefold. First, it extends institutional theory by demonstrating how coercive institutional pressures (ESG regulations) interact with internal organizational mechanisms (corporate governance) to shape firm behavior in emerging market contexts. Second, it provides stakeholder theory with empirical validation by showing that governance structures oriented toward multiple stakeholder interests enhance the effectiveness of regulatory compliance in generating sustainable outcomes. Third, it contributes to the comparative governance literature by documenting significant cross-country variations in the regulation-governance-performance nexus across emerging market regions.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that emerging market regulators should adopt graduated ESG disclosure mandates that account for firm size and sector characteristics, coupled with governance reform incentives such as tax benefits for firms achieving benchmark governance scores. Companies operating in these markets should invest in board independence and audit committee capacity to maximize the returns from ESG compliance investments. Future research should explore longitudinal dynamics of ESG regulation adoption, investigate the role of informal institutional factors such as culture and trust in moderating regulatory effectiveness, and examine how emerging technologies including artificial intelligence and blockchain can enhance ESG monitoring and reporting in developing economy contexts.

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