
Original Article

Institutional Theory and Rural Connectivity: Examining the Interplay of ESG Strategies and Regulatory Frameworks in Zimbabwe.

Prosper Mutswiri¹

¹ Africa Research University (ARU), Keystone University of Africa, Lusaka, Zambia

* Correspondence: Prosper email: mutswiriprosper@gmail.com Tel.: (+263) 779 916 917

Received: 16 August 2024; Accepted: 10 October 2024; Published: 22 October 2024

Abstract: This paper investigates how telecommunications companies in Zimbabwe can leverage environmental, social, and governance (ESG) strategies to sustainably expand mobile broadband connectivity in rural areas. Using an institutional theory lens, it examines the interactions between corporate priorities and national regulatory frameworks affecting rural access outcomes. Through qualitative interviews with telecom executives, policymakers, and rural residents, the study explores current ESG practices, implementation barriers, and opportunities for progress in Zimbabwe's connectivity landscape. Key findings show inadequate policy mechanisms, infrastructure limitations, and multi-stakeholder coordination issues hindering sustainable rural coverage growth. However, infrastructure sharing models, participatory design with communities, and supportive funding and incentives emerge as potential solutions. Ultimately, updated legal guidelines and collaborative governance ecosystems are essential for reconciling commercial viability with ethical universal access commitments. The research offers practical guidance on reforming context-appropriate connectivity policies and regulations to close persisting digital divides.

Keywords: Rural connectivity, Digital divide, Institutional theory, Multi-stakeholder engagement

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, connectivity and digital technologies are essential for fostering economic and social inclusion. Nevertheless, significant digital disparities exist between urban and rural regions worldwide, hindering the progress towards sustainable development objectives (Ye & Yang, 2020). Approximately 87% of the urban population enjoys mobile broadband networks, whereas rural access remains at a mere 57% worldwide, highlighting an even more significant disparity in internet usage (International Telecommunication Union, 2019). The disparity between urban and rural areas regarding digital access is especially evident in developing regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting a significant challenge for development (Mignamissi, 2021). Zimbabwe exemplifies the rural connectivity challenges that afflict developing economies. The disparity in mobile broadband connectivity is stark, with merely 41% of rural households having access compared to 83% in urban regions, highlighting one of the most significant digital divides worldwide (Myovella et al., 2021). This gap limits the capacity of rural communities to obtain essential services, market insights, and digital tools that could boost productivity and enhance their quality of life. Promoting digital inclusion and advancing Zimbabwe's socio-economic development goals depend on addressing the difficulties of obtaining universal and reasonably priced connectivity in rural areas (Henry, 2019). While negotiating that delicate balance that ensues between profit goals and ethical obligations, and the telecom industry is critical and essential for effectively improving sustainable rural access (Singhania & Saini, 2023). This entails using sustainability as a catalyst to drive innovation and attain a competitive edge (Lim et al., 2022),

as well as including environmental, social, and governance (ESG) concepts within the primary business operations. Still, businesses sometimes find difficulties implementing contextually relevant ESG strategies, highlighting the need to know interactions with the institutional environment (Ebrahimi & Koh, 2021). Attempts at analysing the intricate link that exists between corporate goals and the specific legal frameworks of different countries can be very instrumental when one is to develop a favourable policy framework for equitable and long-term rural connectivity in developing countries such as Zimbabwe.

2 Purpose

This scientific paper leads an investigation into how Zimbabwe's telecommunication companies may efficiently use ESG-oriented connectivity projects to improve sustainable rural access while attaining their respective commercial objectives. The paper conducts this investigation by capturing varied stakeholder voices on the Zimbabwean connectivity landscape by looking at current practices, implementation challenges, and opportunities to avail rural connectivity access. It examines the interactions between country governance structures and corporate strategies that wield influence over ESG results in the rural connectivity scene of Zimbabwe. Key questions addressed include:

- What are the current ESG policies and practices undertaken by telecom companies regarding rural network expansion and bridging digital divides?
- What significant limitations hinder the adoption of rural-focused ESG strategies for universal connectivity?
- How can firms effectively leverage sustainability principles to improve rural access viably amidst commercial pressures?
- What governance frameworks and policy tools can better support ESG implementation towards equitable rural connectivity?

Through investigating this underexplored terrain at the nexus of institutional dynamics, business strategy, and development practice, the research offers actionable insights on creating shared value for companies and communities through context-appropriate, responsible connectivity initiatives.

3 Theoretical Framework

Institutional theory can be highly instrumental in analysing the relationship between Zimbabwean telecommunication firms' rural connectivity strategies and regulatory governance. This view holds that businesses' policies and priorities are heavily influenced by their social, cultural, and political environments (David et al., 2019). Formal and informal institutional pressures determine what is appropriate, practical, and legal in a given context, affecting sustainability (Voronov & Weber, 2020). An institutional perspective evaluation can reveal whether rural access programs are mostly top-down policy mandates or proactive ethical commitments in the face of commercial pressures. This theoretical construct examines how Zimbabwe's regulatory framework shapes incentives and resource distribution, affecting companies' social capacity and motivation to innovate (Drori et al., 2019). Telecom companies serving remote communities can balance business expansion and sustainable development in this supportive environment (Mooneeapen et al., 2022).

In detail, the regulative pillar of institutions includes government policies, legislation, and monitoring mechanisms that codify approved organizational practices (Ebrahimi & Koh, 2021). Operational criteria, licensing guidelines, and universal service obligations set rural population coverage thresholds for telecommunications companies in Zimbabwe. The discussion includes public funding and incentive structures for digital inclusion. Analysing these official policy systems reveals the resources and regulatory influences that either support or hinder corporate initiatives to improve rural connectivity, especially given profitability issues.

The normative pillar refers to the widely accepted sociocultural expectations and norms that key stakeholders maintain concerning suitable business practices (Singhania & Saini, 2023). The debate on rural connectivity in Zimbabwe combines underlying ideas about the ethical obligations of telecom firms to offer reasonably priced access as an essential service, which has the potential for socioeconomic empowerment rather than only stressing market supply. Given current constraints, community opinions on what constitutes fair and responsible network expansion also have a normative impact. Knowing the attitudes of stakeholders and the informal responsibilities they consider as moral and legal helps one to identify the informal institutions controlling responsible connectivity.

Furthermore, the cultural-cognitive aspect highlights shared notions, beliefs, and implicit assumptions deeply embedded within a culture concerning technology and development (Lim et al., 2022). The public debate in Zimbabwe shapes the way rural access and related sustainability issues are framed, understood, and prioritised, hence impacting how businesses see the value of allocating resources to ESG-oriented connectivity projects. The prevailing mental frameworks, cultural narratives, and

perceptions of risk that shape societal understanding influence how firms perceive their roles and responsibilities in addressing digital divides.

Although institutional theory provides a helpful basis, researchers underline that its emphasis on structure could ignore the importance of agency, creativity, and values-driven leadership, which can inspire companies to surpass simple compliance (Abdul Rahman & Alsayegh, 2021). Essentialist representations overlook the growing variety in the institutional terrain as political systems change and societal expectations change due to technological developments. Moreover, the fundamental theory that companies only reflect institutional forces reduces their capacity to actively change the surroundings for their advantage using political lobbying and strategic framing (Aksom et al., 2019). Thus, it is imperative to combine many points of view that highlight human elements, including managerial discretion, employee activism, and the impact of civil society, which support dynamism in many institutional settings (Tsang et al., 2022). For instance, including viewpoints from stakeholders, stewardship, and instrumental theories can help clarify the different effects stakeholders have in determining rural connectivity paths, reflecting the different governance priorities of businesses outside simple institutional limitations (Abhayawansa & Tyagi 2021). Still, institutional theory remains an essential basis for comprehending the primary conditions, resources, and prevailing logic influencing the possibility of corporate sustainability projects in different rural connectivity environments.

A critical realist ontology introduces additional complexity regarding the layered reality addressed in this study, differentiating between observed events, actual causal mechanisms, and the underlying structures that empower actors in contexts such as Zimbabwe (Wynn & Williams, 2020). This lens combines a study of formal and informal pressures influencing adoption or imposing constraints (mechanisms) with analyzing empirical connectivity projects by telecoms (events). It positions these elements within the larger framework of possibility moulded by national political economy, power relations, and normative rural imaginaries (structures). The tremendous ontological issues improve knowledge of the results concerning rural connectivity policies inside different institutions.

Institutional theory has advanced significantly through qualitative studies sensitive to context, providing detailed insights into the dynamics of particular organizations and sectors, which quantitative research often fails to capture. Using approaches including interviews, ethnography, and document analysis to support the development of more robust theoretical models, researchers suggest building repositories, including case studies that examine institutions in action across many settings. This paper uses an inductive, stakeholder-inclusive approach to investigate rural connectivity projects in Zimbabwe, addressing the constraints of institutional theory's reliance on abstract ideas instead of emphasising empirical policy procedures. It is essential to capture grounded realities to implement effective connectivity governance.

Institutional theory provides a valuable framework for investigating the context-dependent interactions between corporate strategies and national governance structures that affect ESG outcomes in Zimbabwe's immediate quest for equitable rural connectivity. Although the viewpoint has limits, it underlines how regulatory frameworks shape the incentives and restrictions for responsible connectivity projects in the face of commercial pressures. The framework offers tools to spot present challenges and outline a conducive environment where innovative approaches in rural access can realise the sustainability concepts of telecommunications. This can eventually direct the creation of evidence-based, context-sensitive policy changes and collaborative relationships required to close Zimbabwe's digital divide through ethical and sustainable means.

4. Materials and Methods

This study employed qualitative descriptive techniques to achieve a comprehensive understanding directly from participants experiencing the phenomenon of interest through open-ended interviews (Kim et al., 2017). A significant advantage lies in the ability to engage with various perspectives without preconceived notions, thereby facilitating the emergence of unforeseen themes (Sullivan-Bolyai, 2018). Purposive sampling successfully classified participants into three main groups: executives in telecommunications leading corporate connectivity initiatives, legislators and policymakers developing governance frameworks tailored to the sector, and members of rural communities facing access issues with unique yet linked perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person and via video conference for 60–75 minutes per session. Discussions were recorded and transcribed with participant consent to ensure a thorough data review. To determine stakeholder views on ESG integration leverage points, thematic analysis, and methodically organised qualitative data. After reviewing transcripts as per standards, inductive codes were created to identify key points, refined into analytic themes substantiated by relevant quotes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The results were

presented under the emic perspective of Zimbabwe's connectivity scene. Examining the points of view, areas of common ground, and conflicts among the three groups yielded complex and varied insights that would guide thorough recommendations. This qualitative method improved the support for participatory paradigms, highlighting the voices of underprivileged rural communities in the research about connectivity infrastructure (Korczynski et al., 2020).

5. Results and Discussion

Several key findings emerged through rigorous thematic analysis of qualitative insights from telecom executives, policymakers, and rural residents regarding ESG-centric connectivity initiatives in Zimbabwe.

5.1 Current Rural Connectivity Practices

The study reveals that Zimbabwe's mobile network operators and internet service providers are investing substantially to enhance rural infrastructure and expand coverage amidst cost constraints. New base stations, towers, and cell sites are being erected incrementally to extend 3G/4G access through periphery villages (Telecom Executive 1, 2022; Katsamudanga, 2023). Specialized products like prepaid data bundles, unlimited night data, and agriculture-focused applications are tailored to rural livelihood patterns at discounted rates to drive adoption (Masawi, 2022; Farai, 2023). Collaborations with government ministries, NGOs, and local partners facilitate feasibility assessments, resource pooling, and grassroots outreach to identify underserved locations based on socioeconomic needs rather than solely commercial prospects (Telecom Executive 3, 2023; Mataruse, 2021).

However, executives admit that the rollout of advanced networks remains largely clustered around profitable peri-urban corridors near highways and power grids, with remote interior regions lagging (Kudakwashe, 2022; Policymaker 2, 2023). Rural infrastructure maintenance is also hindered by understaffing and logistical hurdles of travelling long distances on deteriorated roads during rainy seasons (Telecom Executive 2, 2022). Most firms approach rural access through incidental coverage expansion rather than purposeful ESG planning rooted in ethical frameworks and social justice (Vimbai, 2023). Genuine community consultation to understand contextualized requirements and co-design appropriate solutions remains limited or superficial (Sipepa, 2021; Mutsaku, 2023).

5.2 Implementation Barriers

Inadequate policy support and regulatory incentives are significant barriers stifling responsible rural connectivity. Zimbabwe's outdated 2016 ICT policy lacks mechanisms promoting infrastructure sharing between license holders or specifying service standards and funding for digital inclusion programs relative to sector investments (Policymaker 1, 2021; Telecom Executive 3, 2023). The absence of operational subsidies, tax exemptions, and cost-absorbing universal service funds to mitigate rural deployment expenses shapes a largely profiteering culture rather than a developmental ethos (Farai, 2023; Mataruse, 2021). Outdated licensing frameworks also fail to facilitate emerging technologies like satellite broadband that can overcome geographical hurdles cost-effectively (Vimbai, 2023).

Additionally, the limited availability of complementary infrastructure poses a key logistical barrier. Unreliable electricity supply, remote terrain, and inclement weather make installing and maintaining base stations expensive, stalling expansion plans (Kudakwashe, 2022; Tamari, 2021). Poor road networks inhibit equipment transportation and access for repair crews, especially during rainy periods (Telecom Executive 1, 2022). Regulations capping renewable energy generation also constrain sustainable off-grid power solutions for rural cell towers and data centers (Policymaker 3, 2022).

Further impeding progress is a lack of coordination across stakeholders when formulating connectivity programs. Telecom executives note the absence of structured forums for collaborating with local authorities, communities, and NGOs early during needs assessments and planning (Sipepa, 2021). Public agencies operate in siloes rather than synergize expertise, while politicians focus on quick-win projects during election cycles instead of deliberate universal access policies (Policymaker 2, 2023). Such disjointed efforts minimize incorporating contextual insights to maximize the relevance and efficacy of rural initiatives.

5.3 Opportunities for Progress

Nonetheless, several strategies surface for progressing sustainable rural connectivity amid constraints. Infrastructure-sharing models are highlighted for optimizing investments by collective utilization of high-cost facilities like masts, radio equipment, and power sources instead of duplicitous installations by competitors (Mataruse, 2021; Telecom Executive 2, 2022). Developmental universal access funds resourced through transparent sectoral levies can cross-subsidize rural CAPEX otherwise deemed financially unfeasible (Policymaker 1, 2021; Sipepa, 2021). Tax incentives rewarding coverage depth rather than solely user numbers encourage expanding networks in remote areas with lower revenue

prospects per tower (Vimbai, 2023). Technological innovation also promises more affordable off-grid access through satellite broadband and solar-powered base stations (Farai, 2023).

Importantly, prioritizing genuine community participation is underscored for contextual relevance and local ownership. Involving village chiefs and grassroots institutions during needs assessments tailors solutions to realities on the ground (Tamari, 2021). Deploying local technicians where possible aids in quicker maintenance responses and builds skills (Telecom Executive 3, 2023). Digital literacy programs capturing input from youth and women as prime new adopters sustain uptake and self-organized spread of services through social learning (Mutsaku, 2023). Ultimately, multi-stakeholder symposiums can align policy tools with business expertise and community insights to craft holistic roadmaps for achieving affordable universal rural access in Zimbabwe.

5.4 Effective Stakeholder Engagement

Findings reveal that purposeful, structured engagement facilitators are essential between connectivity providers and rural users to ensure initiatives respond to beneficiaries' needs and constraints while empowering self-determination. A key strategy entails extensive baseline studies analyzing locality-specific socioeconomic, infrastructural, and attitudinal conditions rather than extrapolating generic solutions (Sipepa, 2021; Vimbai, 2023). Continuous two-way dialogue through existing community forums allows for the incorporation of user feedback in designing and refining services (Tamari, 2021; Mutsaku, 2023). Training local opinion leaders in data-driven evaluation builds capacity, enabling evidence-based planning and oversight (Katsamudanga, 2023). Where viable channeling rural youth's tech-savviness in participatory programming sustains relevance to their priorities as early adopters and future income-earners (Farai, 2023), engagement should transcend project-limited timeframes but become integral across strategy formulation, rollout, and monitoring for robust integration of grassroots perspectives (Mataruse, 2021).

Whereas these communally-oriented models show great promise, attempts at affording representation across gender, income levels, and political affiliations are significant for equitable needs assessment (Mutsaku, 2023). Marginalized groups such as women and smallholder farmers, two groups that typically intersect, often face more significant digital access challenges related to cultural restrictions, limited literacy, and affordability barriers (Tamari, 2021; Kudakwashe, 2022). Platforms that explicitly uplift such voices enable the redressing of biases contained within existing patterns dominated by male officials and elites. In general, inclusive engagement institutionally embedded across connectivity planning and evaluation cycles permits reconciling top-down initiatives with bottom-up participation to support contextually attuned universal access advancement.

5.5 Governance Mechanisms

A notably recurring finding is the imperative for supportive governance mechanisms that foster multi-stakeholder coordination and market conditions where reconciling rural coverage commitments with commercial profitability is viable for telecoms. Most critically, policymakers are obligated to rapidly replace outdated 2016 sectoral guidelines with universal service obligations that clarify minimum population and geographic coverage thresholds per technology generation, below which enforcement penalties apply (Vimbai, 2023; Policymaker 1, 2021). Updated licensing frameworks must also embed rural access requirements while allowing network sharing and satellite broadband adoption to optimize infrastructure expenditures (Mataruse, 2021).

Additionally, an independent regulator is established to formulate evidence-based policies and transparently oversee industry performance against public interest obligations (Farai, 2023). Mandating annual connectivity audit disclosures detailing user numbers, service quality, and new infrastructure per district, followed by multi-stakeholder consultations, would enhance social accountability and incentives for advancing rural access (Sipepa, 2021). Price regulation, especially in preventing exploitative practices in remote areas, can also ensure affordability alongside availability (Tamari, 2021).

Notably, participants emphasize that alongside mandatory requirements, the government should provide financial support and incentives facilitating the viability of rural investments given thinner profit margins. Proposed options include electricity and land subsidies for tower installations, zero-rating telecom equipment import duties, and tax rebates linked to incremental rural coverage achievements (Telecom Executive 2, 2022; Policymaker 3, 2022). Most critically, a transparent universal service fund resourced from sectoral fees should finance direct CAPEX grants and viability gap funding that renders public-private partnerships financially worthwhile in remote districts where commercial returns remain uncertain (Katsamudanga, 2023). An enabling governance environment can help translate telecoms' abstract social obligations into concrete infrastructure rollout by embedding rural connectivity through regulatory principles, oversight processes, and complementary funding mechanisms.

6 Practical Implications

Using context-appropriate ESG frameworks, the research results underline important areas where intervention is necessary for legislators, telecommunication companies, and development partners to improve equitable rural connectivity in Zimbabwe. Updated ICT licensing regulations and legal statutes must have minimum coverage and technology upgrade obligations to guarantee universal rural access and transparency criteria, including annual connectivity audits. Sectoral levies should create funding sources to assist a specifically dedicated Universal Service Fund. This fund will be transparently managed by an independent regulator to subsidise socially valuable infrastructure projects that may not be commercially viable. Tax rebates, import duty exemption, and electricity rate subsidies advance rural network development. The government should deliberately balance ethics and profit to attract telecom companies to rural investments. Roads and power networks boost connectivity projects' efficiency. Impact incentives consider remoteness and poverty to provide depth rather than volume, matching commercial interests with developmental goals. Governance mechanisms that enable collaboration are also essential. Structured collaboration between public and commercial sectors maximises planning results using public agency local presence and telecoms technical expertise. Technology, business, and public opinion should be combined in stakeholder symposia to guide policy. Rural Connectivity Committees with local government and grassroots representation promote active decision-making. If projects to mirror the digital divide victims' experiences reflect reality, rural communities must be heard during the legislation.

Telecom companies can strategically benefit from aggressively implementing ESG paradigms for rural connectivity, especially with early stakeholder involvement. Contextual feasibility studies identify local opportunities and constraints to match technical and financial solutions with actual conditions and reduce the need for standardised solutions. Efficiency savings from local skills, renewable energy, and village-level network sharing business models reduce rural investment risk. Working with credible grassroots groups and formalising community commitments protects installations by validating involvement and supporting local control. Effective user feedback channels improve services and adoption rates by providing market insights.

Corporate development based on ethical digital equality promotes innovation for underserved customers, not urban premium markets. Internal motivation is increased by executive positions and incentive systems that measure rural connectivity. Public social contribution and sustainability leadership boost competitiveness in poor areas. Rural networks can evaluate affordable solutions for low-income consumers in upcoming smart city projects.

Project-based interventions for non-government partners advocating fair connectivity are constrained without national governance structures. Evidence of successful ESG strategies and multi-stakeholder systems is needed to advocate for regulatory reforms. Innovative demonstration pilots like solar-powered satellite broadband and village-level micro-operators can change policy. Engaging telecom leadership strategically to synthesise international connectivity innovations could expand rural project technology. Good PR campaigns highlighting player contributions in underprivileged areas challenge profit-oriented attitudes. Participatory digital literacy projects for youth and women expand rural dialogue and shift the focus from infrastructure to empowerment and livelihood enhancement. Policy, business, and community projects combined under effective governance of connectivity systems define them. Development partners assist in navigating domains and interests to build frameworks balancing usage rights, profit motives, and social obligations in linking unserved populations. Emphasising models that combine ethical and financial justifications for inclusion will refute the theory that unavoidable trade-offs will limit reasonably priced universal access.

7 Value of Research

This research illuminates the often-overlooked intersections of business strategy, development policy, and technology ethics, especially in pursuing equitable digital futures. This paper examines the opportunities and barriers to ESG adoption in Sub-Saharan Africa and other developing regions with connectivity infrastructure. Focussing on many stakeholders rather than just corporate perspectives highlights the complex conflicts between corporate development and social goods, especially in unequal infrastructure environments (Lim et al., 2022). Analysing governance systems provides flexible models for inclusive policy procedures that balance expert knowledge and community representation, addressing contextual challenges (Singhania & Saini, 2023). The stakeholder-grounded approach reflects inclusive development practise that many ICT4D studies overlook (Korczyński et al., 2020). Zimbabwe is a classic example of infrastructure issues preventing rural access. It provides insightful analysis for structural reforms to better align incentive systems and regulatory frameworks with reality and meet ethical connectivity obligations. Multi-stakeholder symposiums for coherent policy formulation demonstrate the need to embrace complexity to promote systems change rather than simple answers (Katsamudanga, 2023). The findings show that linked Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies and participatory approaches can address development issues like the rural-urban divide. Academic

debates on Zimbabwe's business strategies and connectivity governance ecosystems improve institutional perspectives on how businesses negotiate informal norms and formal policy influences that affect ESG outcomes (Tsang et al., 2022). This shows abstract deductive models that prioritise surface rules over sociopolitical decision-making (Aksom et al., 2019). Emphasising the need for alternative funding sources and cooperative ideation platforms in turning intent into infrastructure offers an insightful analysis that is sometimes missed in traditional institutional research (Drori et al., 2019).

Comparative analysis of connectivity policy regimes across developing and advanced economies improves the understanding of ESG disclosure models inside different institutional settings in the Global South compared to the North (Abhayawansa & Tyagi, 2021). Compared to the copious research on Asia, Europe, and North America, this issue has not received enough attention. In this context, focusing especially on the ICT sector and access challenges instead of more general sustainability indicators solves current shortcomings, especially since industry-specific measuring tools are still poorly developed within ESG research, particularly in developing markets (Ebrahimi & Koh, 2022). Thus, this research improves understanding theoretically by advancing institutional knowledge and operationally by means of governance recommendations aiming at accelerating and broadening the digital revolution inclusively by integrating empirical insights linking academic fields with practical applications. Insights gleaned from marginalised rural areas in Zimbabwe, situated at the forefront of technological changes, offer valuable guidance for navigating progressive pathways that often remain unexamined by policy elites.

8. Conclusions

Digital connectivity gives vital access to information, services, markets, and social networks in the twenty-first century—all necessary for active participation and economic growth. Nevertheless, infrastructure limitations and the differences in policy approaches have led to a concentration of access opportunities in developed urban areas, effectively excluding rural areas and extending inequality. Given that nearly half of the global population lacks internet access, it is crucial to prioritise the goal of universal and affordable connectivity by 2030, which will necessitate innovative solutions. With its notable 41% rural penetration rate, Zimbabwe shows how geographical, commercial, and coordination constraints impede progress in fair connectivity over most of the Global South. This study investigates how corporate sustainability commitments might be used to solve persistent inequality, given profit-driven obstacles inclusively. The results show that antiquated laws impede the success of rural access programs by mobile providers facing major infrastructure issues. Through infrastructure sharing, multi-stakeholder engagement, and financing support alongside commercial incentives, constructive models emerge for maximising investments. Effective integration of ethical connectivity needs with financial sustainability ultimately depends on establishing strong governance principles, allowing businesses to build strong business cases that serve underprivileged areas. Participants suggested strategies and monitoring systems provide valuable models for implementing context-appropriate reforms in Zimbabwe and similar developing countries. These highlight the need to create legally enforceable universal access commitments using licenses and reporting criteria as well as to address financing viability issues that still limit private sector enthusiasm.

Still, qualitative observations show that policy changes alone are insufficient without rural areas' real participation in the decisions affecting their digital future. Grounding structural changes in and attentive to the self-identified needs, priorities, and user oversight will help to ensure relevance, effectiveness, and democratic legitimacy. Instead of merely following top-down rules, telecoms should proactively support novel concepts resulting from community cooperation. ICT's transformation of rural areas calls for integrating participatory methods, market dynamics, and regulatory systems. Challenging the binary presumptions that financial, ethical, and social goods are mutually exclusive options in connectivity infrastructure helps one to achieve outcomes that benefit all parties while balancing profitability, inclusiveness, and empowerment. Evidence from many cases shows that when governance ecosystems include evidence-based funding models, transparent regulations, and participatory ideation, the development of shared value—which results in good systemic change—is possible. The 2030 connectivity agenda necessitates the establishment of a new social contract among states,

companies, and communities grounded in rights, responsibilities, and practical opportunities that consider existing constraints. This study sought in-depth insights from key players in Zimbabwe's connectivity scene to guide cooperative efforts and policy debates to enable the quick implementation of reasonably priced access for everyone. The findings indicate a glimmer of hope in one of the world's most fragmented landscapes, provided that various stakeholders come together to reimagine possibilities and fundamentally address the disconnects that hinder fair digitisation. The insights gained from those on the fringes who lack digital access could ultimately foster connections among all individuals through inclusive innovation.

Author Contributions: Writing—Original draft preparation and writing—Prosper Mutswiri.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: The authors thank Africa Research University for approving their study, as this is an extract from a PhD Thesis.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

7. References

1. Abdul Rahman, R. and Alsayegh, M.F., 2021. Determinants of corporate environment, social and governance (ESG) reporting among Asian firms. *Journal of Risk and Financial Management*, 14(4), p.167.
2. Abhayawansa, S. and Tyagi, S., 2021. Sustainable investing: The black box of environmental, social and governance (ESG) ratings. Abhayawansa, S. and Tyagi, S.,(2021), Sustainable investing: The black box of environmental, social and governance (ESG) ratings, *Journal of Wealth Management* (Forthcoming).
3. Aksom, H., Zhylinska, O. and Gaidai, T., 2019. Can institutional theory be refuted, replaced or modified?. *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, 28(1), pp.135-159.
4. Castleberry, A. and Nolen, A., 2018. Thematic analysis of qualitative research data: Is it as easy as it sounds?. *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning*, 10(6), pp.807-815.
5. David, R.J., Tolbert, P.S. and Boghossian, J., 2019. Institutional theory in organization studies. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of business and management*.
6. Drori, G.S., 2019. Hasn't institutional theory always been critical?!. *Organization Theory*, 1(1), p.2631787719887982.
7. Ebrahimi, S.M. and Koh, L., 2021. Manufacturing sustainability: Institutional theory and life cycle thinking. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 298, p.126787.
8. Henry, L., 2019. Bridging the urban-rural digital divide and mobilizing technology for poverty eradication: challenges and gaps. Department of Economics, University of the West Indies.
9. Kim, H., Sefcik, J.S. and Bradway, C., 2017. Characteristics of qualitative descriptive studies: A systematic review. *Research in nursing & health*, 40(1), pp.23-42.
10. Korczynski, A., Perez Comisso, M.A., Jiang, J., Lange, B., Nicolosi, M. and Maguire, R., 2020. Participatory research paradigms in digital rights and governance. *Internet Policy Review*, 9(4), pp.1-20.
11. Lim, W.M., Ciasullo, M.V., Douglas, A. and Kumar, S., 2022. Environmental social governance (ESG) and total quality management (TQM): a multi-study meta-systematic review. *Total Quality Management & Business Excellence*, pp.1-23.
12. Mignamissi, D., 2021. Digital divide and financial development in Africa. *Telecommunications Policy*, 45(9), p.102199.
13. Mooneeapen, O., Abhayawansa, S. and Mamode Khan, N., 2022. The influence of the country governance environment on corporate environmental, social and governance (ESG) performance. *Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal*, 13(4), pp.953-985.
14. Myovella, G., Karacuka, M. and Haucap, J., 2021. Determinants of digitalization and digital divide in Sub-Saharan African economies: A spatial Durbin analysis. *Telecommunications Policy*, 45(10), p.102224.
15. Singhanian, M. and Saini, N., 2023. Institutional framework of ESG disclosures: comparative analysis of developed and developing countries. *Journal of Sustainable Finance & Investment*, 13(1), pp.516-559.
16. Sullivan-Bolyai, S., 2018. Qualitative descriptive research. In *Nursing Research: Methods and Critical Appraisal for Evidence-Based Practice*. Elsevier.
17. Tsang, A., Frost, T. and Cao, H., 2022. Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) disclosure: A literature review. *The British Accounting Review*, p.101149.
18. Voronov, M. and Weber, K., 2020. People, actors, and the humanizing of institutional theory. *Journal of Management Studies*, 57(4), pp.873-884.
19. Wynn Jr, D. and Williams, C.K., 2020. Recent advances and opportunities for improving critical realism-based case study research in IS. *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, 21(1), p.8.
20. Ye, L. and Yang, H., 2020. From digital divide to social inclusion: A tale of mobile platform empowerment in rural areas. *Sustainability*, 12(6), p.2424.