



IPSOS VIEWS

BEYOND COMPLIANCE

**Building resilient supply chains through
human-centric assessments**

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The writing is on the wall: ethical supply chains and sourcing practices are good for people and good for business.



Context and landscape: regulatory quagmires and political deprioritization

The era of sustainability-by-slide-deck is over. Regulators want auditable proof – and supply chains are where most organizations feel the strain. The constantly shifting regulatory landscape has made priorities and goals difficult to define. The European Union’s Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and India’s mandatory Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) are raising the bar for how multinationals govern and evidence sustainability across complex supply chains. The intent is clear: growth and prosperity should be sustainable, resilient, and inclusive – balancing economic, social, and environmental outcomes.

In practice, requirements are intricate and evolving, making it difficult to define priorities, maintain consistent execution, and keep pace with change. Though these regulations form an important foundation of structure and accountability, requirements are complex to follow in practice – and changes are difficult to keep up with. What’s more, policy changes and political tides have remapped financial priorities, leading to shrunken sustainability budgets, which in turn affect teams’ abilities to fund efforts that lead to responsible procurement (and its measurement) – and ultimately, supply chain resilience.

Some companies may choose to shift away from prioritizing responsible production efforts in the short term, but our research shows it’s a good long-term strategy and investment to continue embedding sustainability in business practices. Specific regulations may wax and wane with geopolitical and government priorities, but even when mandates fluctuate, exposure remains – to consumers, who are increasingly willing to hold companies to account, and to future market access. The writing is on the wall: ethical supply chains and sourcing practices are good for people and good for business.

In this paper, we show how the tools of formal evaluation and other independent assessments can provide essential learnings for international sustainability programs and how qualitative-forward approaches can deliver the depth of insight needed to refine strategy and retarget investment.



Evidence: why investing in sustainability still matters

Research has shown that it pays off for companies to keep sustainability in the fore for a variety of reasons:

01 Consumers care about ethical production (...to a degree): 59% of global consumers say they are willing to pay for more ethical and sustainable products and 70% say they prefer brands that reflect their personal values.¹

...but sustainability is more of a co-benefit alongside other perceived consumer values such as price or quality; it can also be a tiebreaker when deciding between two purchases.²

02 Employees also want to work in an environment that prioritizes responsible business practices: 81% of communication leaders agree that ESG initiatives provide a

competitive advantage in attracting and retaining talent.³

03 Doing business responsibly is not an impediment to financial growth – research shows quite the opposite: *“businesses grounded in creating value for all their stakeholders (colleagues, customers, the community, and the capital markets) outperform those that do not in revenue growth.”*⁴

04 There are reputational and brand equity benefits to prioritizing ethical production... and potential consequences for failing to do so: this is especially important for companies with complex supply chains, where sustaining the supply chain is imperative to the continuation of the business and, equally, sustaining the value chain is vital to preserving the communities that make the supply chain possible.

Community development is one of the most meaningful actions a company can take to impact corporate and brand perception. According to a 2024 Anthesis study *“corporate reputations are won or lost in these choices far beyond ad campaigns”*.⁵

What’s more, the 2025 Ipsos ESG Council revealed an overwhelming belief among worldwide senior sustainability leaders that embedded sustainable business practices in their organizations bolster financial and brand value for the long term.⁶

It is important for efforts to feel authentic and to connect with consumers and communities alike. As our research has shown, authenticity is particularly important amid moments of polarization.⁶ Sustainability programs that are truly relevant to a business’s core mission – and effective in their delivery – are less likely to be cast as “greenwashing”. Clarity and cohesion of messaging also matter: 50% of Americans and Canadians have abandoned products due to confusing sustainability messages.⁷

But how can companies get to the root of what communities need most and what would make the most impact for preserving the supply chain?



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Getting to the root: tailored, independent assessments are the answer

Familiar certification schemes like Rainforest Alliance and Fairtrade play a useful role for companies seeking to measure and to be held accountable for their sustainability performance. These schemes support standardization across industries and provide a basis for general benchmarking.

But their value often doesn't extend much beyond meeting baseline expectations and supporting regulatory compliance. Many schemes rely heavily on self-reported data, plus periodic audits that can become box-ticking exercises. They're also deliberately broad, which limits how well they capture context-specific risks and performance.

Compliance-focused survey data is also important but tends to validate what stakeholders and partners already know. This can be helpful to quantify an issue – or show the degree to which an issue occurs – but can't necessarily illustrate the underlying causes or factors. Survey data also tends to capture outputs rather than meaningful, longer-term outcomes. For example, survey data might capture whether or not an intervention has been received but not how that intervention was received by beneficiaries or what ripple effects might have stemmed from its receipt.

For a more nuanced deep dive that can help drive strategy and purpose, independent assessments are necessary to come away with tailored solutions. These assessments might take the form of full-scale impact or program evaluations, which tend to be more formal and scientifically designed, with larger (often representative) samples and possibly even comparator groups. However, assessments could also be more agile and fit-for-purpose, depending on the goals, resources available, and questions that need to be answered.

Whatever the form, the goal of evaluative assessments done correctly is to move well beyond compliance. In an international supply chain context, it should answer two key questions:

- 01 What are people's lives like at the origin of supply chains?** People's needs must be met for supply chains to have a future, even in the medium term.
- 02 How do we get better at addressing current needs?** Robust evidence is important to prioritize resource allocation.

A core set of quantitative metrics is necessary for compliance. But treating metrics as the main focus can come at the expense of learning and improvement – which are essential for building supply-chain resilience. Government regulations increasingly require narrative or contextual disclosures and evidence of due diligence, beyond numbers alone.

Evidence-backed, storytelling-led methods are also beneficial for internal stakeholder and partner buy-in within organizations. These methods can more readily produce outcomes well suited for communicating to external stakeholder groups, some of which demand information on supply chain activities.

Evaluations scientifically proving causality are the gold standard but are quite resource intensive – and assessments need not be expensive. Moving to pragmatic designs that do not sacrifice rigor but focus explicitly on helping organizations evolve their efforts to benefit supply chains – and supply chain producers – in precise ways is helpful for companies and programs.



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It didn't solve our real problems like water and health. We wish we had prioritized differently.



In practice

A case study from our portfolio

Our client, a large multinational Consumer Packaged Goods (CPG) company, sought to assess the impact and progress of a decade of community-level programs and initiatives for farmers and their communities that were part of its extensive supply chain. They faced a familiar challenge: program structures existed, but outcomes varied widely, and quantitative metrics alone could not explain why. Trusted, fast insights were essential to shape the direction of the programs in the following fiscal year.

We proposed an agile mixed methods design that combined retrospective analysis of existing longitudinal quantitative data with fresh, community led qualitative inquiry. This approach allowed us to test what the numbers suggested against how programs were actually experienced on the ground. The primary focus was immersive ethnographic fieldwork in supply chain communities across multiple countries, enabling us to observe daily realities, understand how program tools were interpreted locally, and surface tensions or misalignments that would not appear through quantitative metrics alone.

To do this, we embedded trained ethnographers in villages for several days of participant led observation and in situ interviews with community leaders, farmers, and families. We followed their routines across homes, farms, markets, schools, and shared spaces, gathering video, audio, and fieldnotes that captured both spoken and unspoken dynamics. We then thematically analysed these qualitative insights and triangulated them with our retrospective quantitative findings to build a holistic, context grounded picture of how the program functioned in each community – and where its intended mechanisms diverged from community realities.

This approach was rooted in a culturally grounded evaluation lens: it both considered the cultural context in which the supply chain programs operate and responded to them. Understanding the context of these communities and programs grounded the assessment in what success, failure, or change might look like within the communities, rather than purely from an academic or top-down program design standpoint. Without this understanding, programs can be in danger

of being culturally irrelevant at best, and ineffective at worst.

Our community-centered approach allowed us to map the community and triangulate the data against:

- Cultural values concerning community development
- Observed behaviors of farming community members

- Physical and infrastructure changes to the community, farm, and homes
- Individual attitudes and opinions of the program's efforts
- Unarticulated and embedded cultural practices
- Observations of community development/engagement/inclusion from two nearby farming communities not part of the company's program

This approach helped to bring about key lessons

After establishing the intent of the program – to build capacity at the smallest administrative level so communities could identify needs, plan projects, and access funding – our fieldwork revealed that the mechanisms designed to support this process were not consistently understood or used.

In one farming community, for example, the president of the development committee searched under a table to locate the official community planning document, noting, *"I don't remember exactly... I should see the paper first."* What was meant to be a living tool for decision making had, in practice, become an artifact. This illustrated a broader pattern: participation alone did not equate to comprehension, ownership, or meaningful progress.

We also saw that NGOs responsible for delivering training and guiding communities were caught between two pressures: honoring community led priorities while also meeting the client's programmatic expectations. This

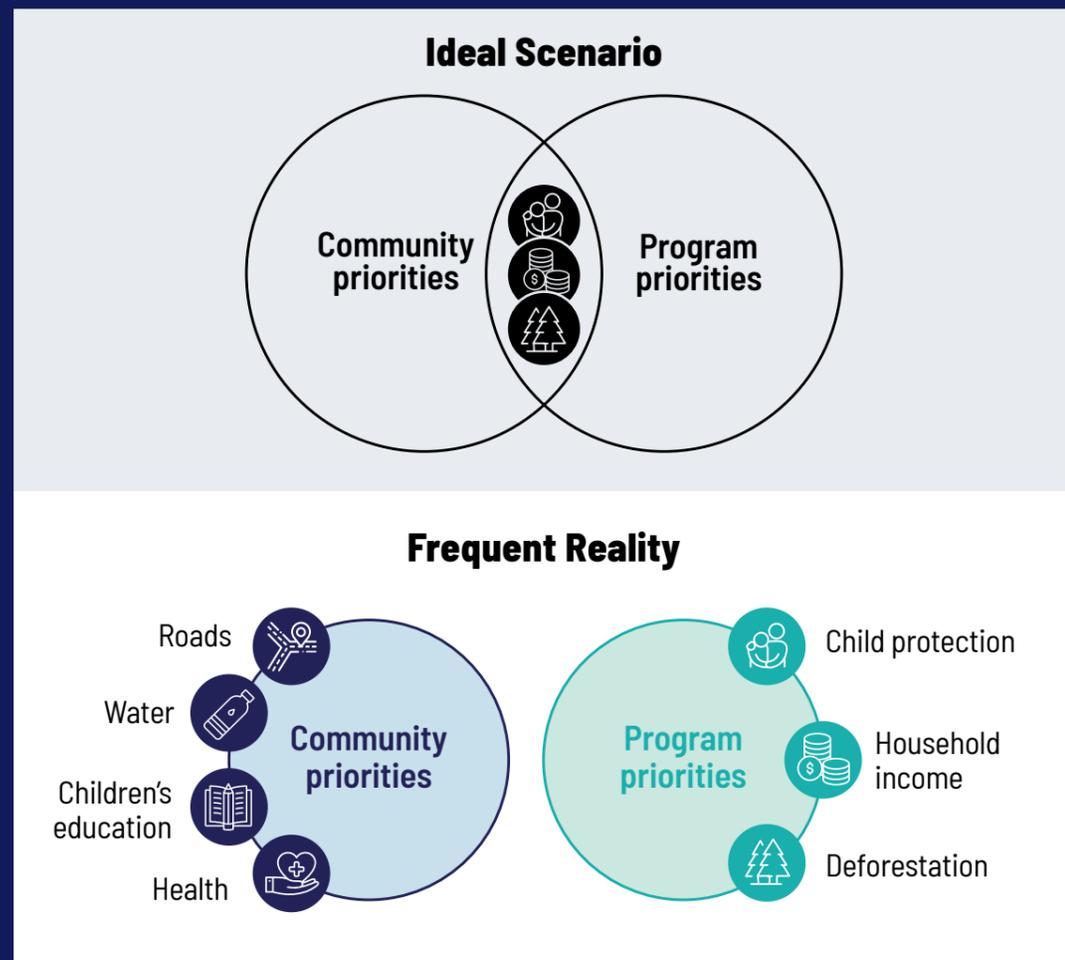
tension often resulted in NGO partners steering communities toward goals that aligned with program KPIs but not with local realities or funding pathways. When communities were encouraged to prioritize projects that were unlikely to be financed by district authorities – or didn't reflect their immediate needs – engagement declined.

More broadly, our fieldwork uncovered a consistent misalignment between program focus areas and what communities considered most urgent. While the program emphasized child protection, deforestation, and income generation, community priorities centered on infrastructure: roads, water, and healthcare. In one village, residents had successfully built improved cooking stoves, yet leaders later expressed regret: *"It didn't solve our real problems like water and health. We wish we had prioritized differently."* Communities were not disengaged – they were pragmatic. They focused on what felt achievable, even when those projects did not meaningfully shift daily conditions.

Despite this, one clear area of alignment emerged across all sites: children's education and wellbeing. Parents consistently described schooling as the issue that mattered most to both their own families and the future of their communities. In one case, a woman explained how savings from a local program initiated group allowed her to keep her son in school: **"Without school he becomes a delinquent."** Children's education became the strongest point of convergence between community priorities and the company's longer term ambitions.

Taken together, these insights showed that the challenge was not a lack of motivation within communities but a misalignment of mechanisms, expectations, and capabilities – amplified by inconsistent communication and limited training. Understanding these dynamics helped clarify where the program was drifting from its intended impact and where strategic focus could produce both community benefit and organizational value.

"Our fieldwork uncovered a consistent misalignment between program focus areas and what communities considered most urgent."



Source: Ipsos



How our research helped the company retool its efforts

Our embedded approach surfaced realities that traditional quantitative research couldn't reveal. We found, for example, that participation or task completion alone did not signal success. Instead, 'success' and 'progress' were far more nuanced; they were best understood through the depth of community engagement, the relevance of activities to people's immediate lives, and the perceived value of the program. These indicators provided a clearer picture of whether the work was making a meaningful difference.

A community-led approach allowed us to see that the client's initiatives and the beneficiaries' priorities were not always pulling in the same direction – but there was enough overlap that they now can begin to move forward. This allowed for a more efficient allocation of resources to maximize community benefit.

Using these insights, we recommended the company anchor future community initiatives around children's education – the key area where community needs and company priorities meaningfully aligned. This focus allows resources to be concentrated where they will have both business relevance and strong community support.

The company and program moved forward to align their community development initiatives around tangible benefits for primary-school-aged children using our insights.

This is the sort of consensus that can be reached when you go beyond the mandatory, surface level reporting to do proper stakeholder engagement and respond to the needs of the communities to understand what's happening holistically and systemically – and with business goals and pressures in mind.

This case study demonstrates why independent, qualitative forward assessment is essential. It moves beyond box ticking and reveals the lived contexts that determine program success or failure. By integrating community led insight with quantitative evidence, organizations can refocus their strategies with far greater precision and ensure their commitments translate into outcomes that matter on the ground.

So what? Moving from insight to action

Leading with rich, contextual qualitative insight helps programs improve in meaningful, targeted ways and enables organizations to redefine what 'success' truly looks like. Qualitative approaches such as ethnography bring clarity to internal stakeholder conversations, help teams socialize findings more effectively, and support smarter alignment of resources.

When supply chain community member voices are heard – and those needs are addressed with direct actions – programs become more effective and more resonant. The result is a stronger, more cohesive supply chain where communities feel supported and companies gain clearer direction, better prioritization, and improved resilience. In other words, what's better for the community is better for your business.

To put these lessons into practice, companies should:



01

Identify 1-2 priority supply chain communities or commodities where decisions are upcoming, risk is material, or program impact is unclear.



02

Conduct a rapid, independent qualitative assessment that goes beyond compliance metrics to uncover community realities, contextual risks, and areas of alignment with organizational priorities.



03

Build a measurement plan that pairs compliance indicators with qualitative learning questions revealing not just what is happening, but why it matters and how to course correct.



Our most urgent need is a school.

04

Focus on the overlap between business priorities and community needs, where investment can achieve both operational resilience and meaningful local benefit.



Companies should not fear the exposure that evaluation or research might bring because understanding challenges is what enables teams to address them. Robust, independent assessments are not just about risk mitigation: they allow organizations to make stronger, more

durable decisions. In a shifting landscape, this combination of compliance, contextual insight, and community centered assessment becomes a critical toolkit for navigating uncertainty in supply chain sustainability with clarity and confidence.



Companies should not fear the exposure that evaluation or research might bring.

Endnotes

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Note: All images in this paper are from Ipsos ethnographic research

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