



# Addressing disparities in global engagement

**Case study**

November 2024

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# Executive summary

There is a significant disparity in WBA's engagement rates from companies in the North Atlantic and companies in the Majority World, with companies in the Majority World engaging far less. WBA defines engagement rate as the rate by which companies engage with WBA to improve their sustainability and human rights policies and practices. This study explores the reasons behind these disparities and suggests ways to enhance engagement, inclusivity, and representation of non-Western companies.

## Key challenges:

- Despite efforts, engagement from the Majority World remains low compared to the North Atlantic, particularly in regions like the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa.
- Many companies in the Majority World face difficulties in engaging due to the lack of language accessibility, making it hard to fully understand and implement WBA's benchmarks.
- WBA's benchmarks and insights may reflect Western values, often overlooking regional contexts in the Majority World. This presents a challenge for companies trying to align with global benchmarks that don't fully consider their local realities.

## Research insights:

This case study involved interviews with companies in the Majority World including Japan, along with focus groups and discussions with stakeholders. Key findings highlight that companies in the Majority World are actively working on sustainability but often feel that WBA's benchmarks do not fully capture their impact.

## Recommendations:

- Equitable representation: WBA should update its publications to reflect regional priorities and sociocultural realities in the Majority World.
- Language inclusivity: Providing translations and region-specific guidelines can enhance understanding and participation.
- Local partnerships: Collaborating with regional organizations can help adapt global benchmarks to local needs and foster higher engagement.

## Conclusion

While WBA has made progress, there is still work to be done to foster greater inclusivity and engagement from non-Western companies. This study underscores the importance of creating tailored approaches that respect regional contexts, overcoming barriers like language and cultural differences, and incorporating local expertise into global sustainability benchmarks.



# Introduction

At the World Benchmarking Alliance (WBA), we assess the contributions of the 2,000 most influential companies toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and global agendas such as the Paris Agreement and the Global Biodiversity Framework. This is done across seven transformative systems: financial, urban, decarbonisation and energy, food and agriculture, nature, digital, and social. These systems are crucial in guiding society and the global economy onto a more sustainable path to achieve the SDGs.

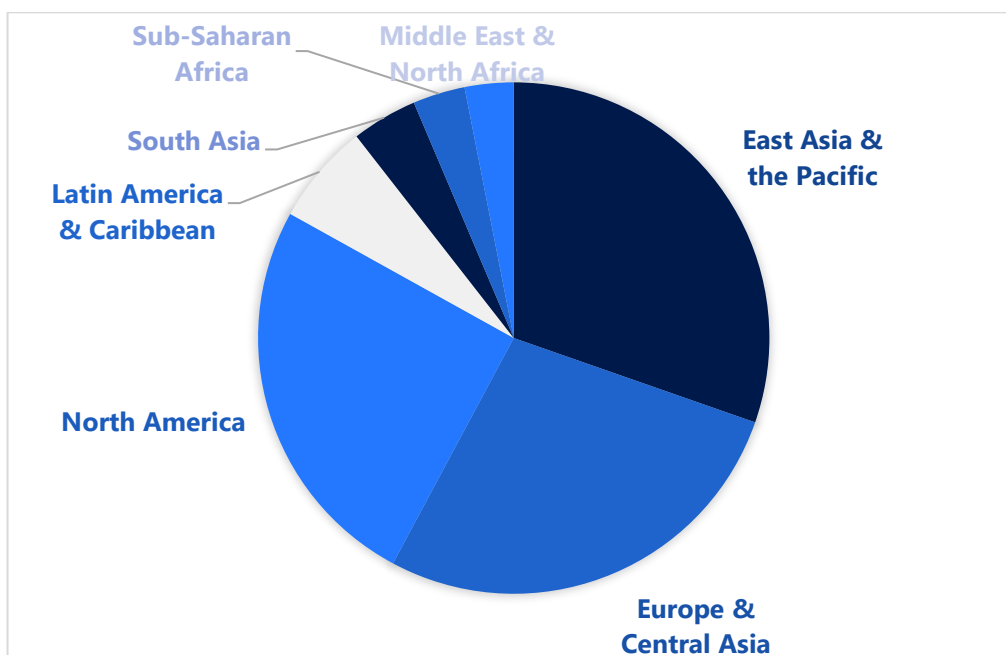
Our mission is to drive positive transformation in the way businesses impact people, workers, communities, and the environment, particularly in developing countries, through our benchmarking and engagement activities. To this end, WBA needs keystone companies to engage with our benchmarks. This is WBA's main direct sphere of influence, and a clear pathway to push and work with companies to change their policies and behaviour to meet their sustainability responsibilities. By showing what good sustainability practices look like, and making this consequential to companies we benchmark, WBA is playing its role in closing the corporate accountability gap.

As we transition to new ways of working, we are undergoing several internal changes. This presents an opportunity to reassess our strategies across multiple areas, including our engagement with companies and other key stakeholders. WBA defines engagement as the process by which companies and other stakeholders interact with WBA to learn about our methodologies, their scores, our Alliance, and ways to improve corporate sustainability and human rights policies and practices.

However, there is a noticeable disparity in our engagement levels between companies from the Majority World and those from the North Atlantic. Graph 1 highlights this significant difference. While it is understandable that companies from the North Atlantic account for a larger share of our engagement—given that many of the SDG 2000 companies are based there—the average engagement rates suggest a broader, systemic issue. Factors such as ownership (public or private), industry, and geopolitical dynamics can influence engagement rates, but they do not fully explain this disparity.

Table 1 reveal that engagement rates in the North Atlantic are nearly twice as high as those in the Majority World. Certain regions, like the Middle East and North Africa, show particularly low engagement levels, underscoring the complexity of fostering relationships in these areas. Even regions considered more engaged, such as Latin America and the Caribbean, lag behind traditionally low-engagement regions like North America.





**Graph 1.** Number of companies by region of total 313 engaged companies 2023

<b>Global South</b>	
Latin America & Caribbean	26.7%
South Asia	15.4%
Sub-Saharan Africa	25.8%
Middle East & North Africa	10.3%
East Asia & the Pacific <sup>1</sup>	15.7%
<i>Average: 299 companies benchmarked / 55 engaged companies *100</i>	<i>18.4%</i>

<b>Global North</b>	
North America	38.4%
East Asia & the Pacific	43.7%
Europe & Central Asia	39.5%
<i>Average: 639 companies benchmarked / 256 engaged companies *100</i>	<i>40.1%</i>

**Table 1.** Global South and Global North Engagement in 2023

<sup>1</sup> East Asia and Pacific is one of our most diverse regional grouping with countries from diverse sociopolitical background that can be grouped in different categories. Here we divided the group into two, global south countries (including China) and global north according to UNCTAD. Global north: Taiwan, Hong Kong, Australia, Japan, Korea, Singapore, New Zealand. Global south: Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, China.



The stark differences between economic and social regions pose a significant challenge for WBA. We have made efforts to increase engagement in underrepresented regions through initiatives such as spotlights, collaborations with regional allies, and hosting Alliance assemblies in various countries. However, the lack of a formal engagement strategy has led to inconsistent progress. While allowing each transformation to manage engagement independently provides some flexibility, it has resulted in mixed outcomes when it comes to engaging companies in these regions.

In addition to the disparities in engagement rates, feedback from past case studies on the usefulness of our benchmarks and from consultations with companies have prioritised this issue internally in recent years. Challenges such as the lack of regional differentiation, limited understanding of socio-economic realities, and language inclusivity have been identified as areas for potential areas of growth, but they have not yet been explored in depth.

This case study, therefore, aims to address these discrepancies by gaining a deeper understanding of the needs of Majority World companies and identifying ways to maximize our engagement in these regions. By learning how these companies perceive and measure their impact, we can develop more effective methods to capture this information. Our goal is to refine our internal approaches, gain insights into the diverse ways impact is measured, and become a more inclusive organization.

### Scope of the case study

This case study aims to explore at a deeper level how WBA can increase engagement rates across companies in the Majority World. [Past case studies have highlighted the differences in perspectives on impact among Majority World companies, suggesting that our methodologies may exhibit a Eurocentric bias.](#) In a commitment to foster greater inclusivity, this case study represents a continuation of this dialogue by examining how companies perceive, measure and report their impact and what steps we would need to take to improve our inclusivity to different impact models. By focusing on companies from the Majority World, we seek to deepen our understanding of different interpretations of impact, considering local socio-cultural and environmental contexts.

Raising awareness of cultural influences on companies' definitions of impact within their local contexts and data capturing and storytelling approaches, will help WBA to understand in greater depth how can WBA better support companies with their sustainability journeys. Thereby understanding impact through a more inclusive perspective. Results from this case study will be used for two main purposes. WBA is already cross-checking our methodologies to maximize impact, however as we move forward to our new working rhythm we should also think of other ways to be more inclusive, including looking at our other outputs. Second, it will provide clarity in terms of priorities for the engagement team at WBA, which will inform future multi-stakeholder events and contribute further to ongoing discussion on how we get the most value from our Alliance.

Efforts to dive in this introspective process at WBA come alongside an increasing recognition in the literature that dominant frameworks for assessing sustainability, such as benchmarks and reporting standards, are often ground in Eurocentric perspective that may overlook regional



contexts, cultural differences, and historically marginalized points of view (Keukeleire, et al., 2018; Connell, 2006). Benchmark methodologies might embody Eurocentric norms that do not address the sociocultural reality of many regions (Diaz-Lamboy, 2023; Haley, 2023). These methodologies, while globally influential, can impose Western values, expectations, and priorities on companies and organizations worldwide, particularly those in the Majority World. **However, it must be highlighted that we are not advocating for a move away from core international legally binding human rights and environmental standards which are universally applicable; instead, we are looking to make these more accessible to different languages and cultural priorities.** This can be reflected on the language used in sustainability benchmarks, economic prioritization, and indicators and metric development against Western industrialiser contexts that might not account for local realities in the Majority World (Banjerjee, 2003; Krauss, et al., 2022). Moreover, the mainstream nature of sustainability standards can even prove counterproductive for Majority World companies as what is assessed does not explicitly favor the kinds of investments needed to achieve this end (Hausmann, 2021).

Post-colonial scholars (Mignolo, 2011; Chakrabarty, 2000), have been influential in questioning the universal application of Western-centric frameworks and advocate for a more diverse approach to understanding sustainability and corporate impact through the inclusion of diverse, local and context sensitive methodologies. This involves rethinking: cultural relevance of sustainability benchmarks to cultural and social realities of regions being assessment, global frameworks adaptability to regional priorities and, collaborative knowledge production that includes Majority World stakeholders and local experts (Xinzhu, et al., 2021; Delanty, 2014).

### Methodology

To further this effort, WBA engaged a group of companies that had either participated in our spotlight initiatives or had previously highlighted the differences in perspectives on impact during past case studies and engagements with WBA. We conducted interviews with PLDT and Globe Telecom in the Philippines, CEMEX in Mexico, Safaricom in Kenya, and four companies in Japan (Shionogi, NYK, Nissin Food Holdings., and ANA Holdings).

In addition to these company interviews, we held two focus groups with research analysts from WBA, two discussions with representatives from Caux Round Table Japan (CRT Japan), and three interviews with organizers of the Corporate Human Rights Benchmark (CHRB) national spotlights. We then **analyzed the gathered data using qualitative tools and AI language models, which helped us identify key themes and insights.**

### Challenges and learning

As with any comprehensive study that relies on stakeholders volunteering their time and information, gaining access presented a challenge. We had help from different transformations sending the call for interviews of which only four companies responded positively. To adapt, we incorporated diverse perspectives from outside the Western North Atlantic sphere, including voices from Japan. While most of our discussions focused on addressing cultural differences, regional priorities, and strategies to enhance engagement in regions from the Majority World, Japan served as a key example. Their engagement rate in East Asia is notably the highest (other than Singapore), surpassing even that of many European and North American countries. We



had the advantage that CHRB has been working closely with CRT Japan and they granted much of the access needed.





## Key findings

This research is centred around the following research question: How do companies in the Majority world define and measure their impact, and how can we improve our outreach to include their different perspectives? Following our interviews with participating companies, we have identified three learnings that WBA can implement in its practices to represent more accurately Majority world company's needs and definitions of impact.

### Discussion

The focus groups revealed that internally, WBA knows it faces significant challenges in engaging with global companies, primarily due to language barriers and the Eurocentric nature of current methodologies. The research team emphasized that many non-English speaking companies, particularly in Asia and Africa, struggle with communication and reporting. Existing translation efforts are often inadequate, and the lack of inclusivity and context-specific guidelines further complicates engagement. Although we are pushing to fix this, we will need additional resources, clearer guidelines, and a more region-specific approach to better capture diverse perspectives to become more equitable when conducting our research.

The CHRB spotlights in Chile, Colombia, and Kenya underscore the importance of context-specific adaptations, continuous awareness-raising, and capacity-building to engage effectively with companies across different regions. Government and institutional support are essential for legitimizing these efforts, while promoting a culture of transparency and disclosure remains a challenge. Framing their efforts for corporate compliance as a value-adding activity can encourage healthy competition and motivate companies to improve their practices. Each country's experience highlights the need for tailored strategies to address local challenges and opportunities, incorporating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into their reporting and actions.

Similarly, our discussions with CRT Japan highlighted the challenges of adapting our methodology to the local context and the effectiveness of partnering with local organizations to facilitate impact in a country with a distinct corporate culture. They pointed out translation challenges, particularly when certain concepts, like "respect," do not directly translate due to cultural differences in understanding, such as those in Buddhist cultures. However, CRT Japan noted that aligning with UN principles helped clarify our indicators, suggesting that a stronger link to the SDGs could further facilitate translation. Conversations with Japanese companies facilitated by CRT Japan demonstrated the benefits of close collaboration with local stakeholders, including deeper analysis of supply chains, increased participation from companies beyond our SDG 2000 initiative, and more comprehensive monitoring of human rights impacts. Despite language difficulties, most companies reported following UN guidelines and using our methodologies for benchmarking their work. Even companies not currently benchmarked by us have expressed interest in our methodology as a tool for providing accessible guidelines for change.

The four interviews with CEMEX (Mexico), Safaricom (Kenya), Globe, and PLDT (Philippines) reveal WBA is valued for providing external validation and driving sustainability initiatives,



there are notable challenges in applying global benchmarks to local contexts. Companies expressed a need for more region-specific benchmarks, greater flexibility in data requirements, improved communication, and increased support for capacity building. They also highlighted the importance of peer learning opportunities and local partnerships to better align WBA's methodologies with regional priorities, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and equitable approach to reporting and corporate accountability.

Based on the interviews, several regional priorities were identified reflecting on their specific contexts and sustainability challenges. Here are some of the key regional priorities mentioned by the companies and spotlight leads:

### 1. Latin America:

**Human Rights and Just Transition:** The Latin American informants suggest that they have a strong focus on human rights and just transition. As such sustainability strategies should address social issues, such as fair labour practices and community engagement, in addition to environmental concerns.

**Adaptation to Local Regulatory Environments:** Benchmarks should consider the specific regulatory and economic conditions of Latin American countries, which can differ significantly from those in Europe or North America.

### 2. Sub-Saharan Africa:

**Peer Learning Sessions with Regional Focus:** Informants highlighted that they could benefit from peer learning platforms that connect them with companies facing similar challenges across Africa. This would provide opportunities to share insights on ESG practices that are more aligned with their local contexts.

**Promote Local Innovations:** Sub Sahara Africa is home to many innovations and sustainability solutions. WBA should recognize and promote these efforts, offering companies an opportunity to showcase their unique contributions to global ESG goals.

### 3. Southeast Asia:

**Climate Adaptation and Resilience:** Given the region's vulnerability to climate change, there is a strong emphasis on developing strategies to cope with natural disasters and extreme weather events, as well as building resilient infrastructure.

**Social Impact and Community Engagement:** The importance of social impact, particularly in ensuring that their services contribute positively to local communities. Issues such as child online safety and digital literacy were specifically mentioned as critical areas of focus.

**Context-Sensitive Governance and Transparency:** There is a need for benchmarks that reflect the local governance context and challenges, such as limited availability of third-party assessments and resource constraints in conducting comprehensive ESG reporting.



# Recommendations

## **There is a need for more equitable representation of the Majority World in WBA's outputs**

As a global organisation, one of our greatest challenges is incentivising companies from the Majority World to engage with our benchmarks and initiatives. This is a complex task due to varying geopolitical and socioeconomic dynamics, which may limit our outreach to key countries. Our organizational priorities and discourse sometimes fail to resonate with these regions.

However, our case study reveals that companies in the Majority World are actively working to enhance their positive impact and minimise their negative effects, although these efforts are often not reflected in our benchmarks and insights.

As one of our informants noted: “The benchmarks are useful, but they don’t always capture the specific challenges we face in our market. It would help if there was more recognition of our efforts, even when they don’t fully align with global standards. We’re making progress, but it needs to be reflected in a way that’s more relevant to our region.”

As we can see, the companies we interviewed expressed feeling overlooked in the benchmarking process, emphasising the need for more region-specific rankings that allow them to see how they compare within their region, rather than solely on a global scale. They also felt that their sustained efforts, which often reflect gradual and nuanced improvements over time, were not adequately considered.

Institutional changes, such as creating regional benchmarks, reviewing methodologies for inclusivity, and including region-specific indicators and expertise, could help bridge this gap. However, such initiatives often require structural changes that have financial implications. Regional benchmarks could potentially lead to less comparable data, especially when it comes to comparing companies from different regions.

In the short term, however, we can take steps to be more equitable, starting with recognizing and addressing our own biases. This includes evaluating where we can carefully compromise and how our narratives shape our relationship with the global majority. By carefully considering how we represent companies from the Majority World in our publications, insights, and rankings, we can enhance our impact and encourage more engagement from these regions. Our external evaluation did mention that investors/other stakeholders trust our scores for investment decisions, but this may not align with actual regional societal/environmental realities. As such, carefully reconsidering how we publish our work is a necessity.

To be more inclusive, we can produce more nuanced outputs that recognize and reflect these efforts, making our benchmarks feel more accessible and relevant to these companies. Our review of insights from 2023-2024 indicates that only a few reports address the differences between companies in the North Atlantic and Majority World. We should aim to incorporate more regional comparisons and highlight the improvements made by these companies. This



approach will not only foster inclusivity and provide a more equitable perspective in our publications but will also incentivize greater participation from companies in these regions.

### **Language inclusivity as a priority towards a more inclusive benchmarking process**

Language is a significant barrier for companies in the Majority World when engaging with WBA. This barrier impacts how effectively companies can interact with the benchmarks, provide meaningful feedback, and understand how to align their practices with global standards.

Companies may struggle to fully grasp the nuances of the benchmarks and methodologies if they are only available in English, leading to misunderstandings or incomplete implementation of the standards. Non-English-speaking companies often find it difficult to provide feedback in a language they are not comfortable with, limiting their ability to communicate challenges or suggest improvements that reflect their local context.

Language barriers also make it harder for companies to actively participate in WBA's peer learning sessions, webinars, or feedback discussions. This can reduce their level of engagement and lead to a superficial understanding of global sustainability efforts. The complexity of ESG frameworks and benchmarks means that literal translations may not always capture the full meaning or intent behind the indicators, making implementation even more difficult for employees who do not speak English. Translating these documents is a challenge, however as CRT Japan has shown, their efforts to translate the CHRB methodology has really paid off, greatly maximizing our engagement in the country and even impacting other companies that are not in our SDG 2000.

To address these challenges, we can begin by leveraging existing resources to improve language inclusivity. This could include easy fixes, such as publishing the methodology and insights in html instead of a PDF and facilitating or guiding companies in using effective translation tools, which are constantly improving. Mapping each indicator to its corresponding SDG or UN norm can help people understand what each indicator represents and how achieving it aligns with broader sustainability goals. Additionally, WBA's highly multicultural and diverse workforce can be strategically utilized to support translation efforts and minimize miscommunication.

### **WBA's Alliance as a regional circle of influence to bridge the "global-local" and increase engagement**

Feedback gathered from participating companies indicates that a tailored approach to impact measurement and engagement is crucial for fostering a meaningful corporate accountability journey for companies in diverse contexts. A potential recommendation could be to use the Alliance as circle of influences to make the global-local nexus and increase engagement with Allies and companies. Making the global-local means contextualising the use of global benchmarks at WBA, to the local and regional needs of SDG2000 companies and/or not, as part of these company's sustainability journey. This includes translating methodologies to local languages, account for local innovations in sustainability initiatives and the use of indicators relevant to these countries social realities.



As a cluster of organisations working at global, regional and local levels to shape the private sector's contributions to achieving the SDGs, the Alliance is the perfect vehicle to bridge this global-local nexus. Allies are committed to WBA's mission, vision and values, grouping 420+ organisations including investors, civil society organisation, consultancies, think tanks among others. The global and diverse nature of the Alliance facilitates the establishment of dedicated local and regional partnerships with "Local Allies Hub" that can act as connecting bridges between WBA and regional/local companies and multi-stakeholder actors with the objective of:

1. Introducing and socializing WBA, data, benchmarks and systems in local areas during the process of benchmarking and after its publication. This can increase local actors (students, trade unions, CSOs) and local companies' attention and awareness about WBA. Involving local actors helps bridge global benchmarks with local contexts, making them more relevant and legitimate in diverse contexts.
2. By creating regional circles of influence, Allies are able to provide feedback on WBA's methodologies, ensuring they are up-to-date, inclusive and relevant for companies benchmarked. Through this regional feedback loop, local Allies can provide the regional contextualization needed for priority setting in research and engagement activities among relevant actors across different markets. This approach not only builds legitimacy but also utilises the rich insights from peer networks to align our methodologies with regional priorities. This initiative will not only enhance knowledge sharing but also create a support system that fosters continuous improvement in impact measurement and reporting.
3. Establishing regional circles of influence with Allies can also spearhead peer learning and capacity building spaces through regional communities of practice and collective impact coalitions. Such spaces will allow for the exchange of localised insights and innovations in ESG practices, equipping companies with the tools and knowledge they need to thrive amid unique challenges. Participants have articulated a strong desire for opportunities that facilitate discussion on global and regional trends. By prioritising the establishment of these peer contact spaces, we can cultivate an ecosystem of collaboration that empowers organisations and companies across different regions to accelerate corporate accountability.

WBA has already started this process through the Alliance impact mapping and strategy development. The mapping process identified 20-30% of each team's most highly engaged Allies. This process will allow WBA to dedicate resources and time towards organizations that are critical for each team's strategic priorities for the following two years, leading to an increase in quality engagement across the board.

This process provides WBA with an overview of which stakeholder groups and regions are well represented and where there are gaps, allowing for a more targeted and balanced approach to partnerships. These are tentatively visually mapped out [here](#) and [here](#) with full results to be shared with the organization in the coming quarter.



This approach not only builds legitimacy for WBA, supporting strategic pillar 3 (Sustaining), but also leverages the rich insights of local and regional expert Allies through targeted relationship-building and engagement. This strengthens WBA's commitment to being an inclusive and learning organization that fosters impact-oriented actions in countries with distinct corporate cultures. By identifying the critical Allies necessary to accelerate and enhance impact within each team's work, the next steps will focus on understanding and harnessing the potential of each stakeholder group, both globally and regionally. Similar to how the Investor team collaborates with Investor Allies, the incoming Civil Society Lead will be guided by the mapping exercise to prioritise key Allies and areas of focus.

### Summary of next steps for WBA

1. Include a regional perspective in insights and publication: Although including a more nuanced methodology would allow for greater inclusivity, this would require a greater lift by WBA. As such, we should start by including a more nuanced approach to other spaces, such as our insights reports, publications and communications. This will bring a regional perspective to our discussions which in part will facilitate more inclusivity. (Groups involved: TWG1 and 3, Research Leads, Comms)
2. Improve the language accessibility of our methodologies and insights through digital means and through our already diverse workforce. (WS 6, Comms, Digital & Digitalisation Team)
3. Following the completion of the mapping process in Q4, the Alliance team will engage collaboratively with each transformation team in 2025 to develop a targeted engagement strategy for the highly engaged Allies identified. This strategy should focus on establishing regional circles of influence, particularly in key areas such as Africa (specific sub-region to be determined), to strengthen these networks every three years during our return visits for the Allies Assembly. By working closely with these Allies, we can empower them to act as representatives of WBA's methodologies and benchmarks, translating and applying our approaches to support companies in their regions, whether or not they are directly benchmarked by WBA. Additionally, by working with each team, including the incoming Civil Society Lead, to create engagement strategies for relevant stakeholder groups, WBA can ensure the Alliance functions as a mechanism for collective multi-stakeholder action and advancing corporate accountability.

## Conclusion

### Towards increasing Majority World companies' engagement rate

This case study highlighted the complexities and challenges WBA faces in driving engagement and inclusivity in the Majority World. The disparities in engagement rates between the North Atlantic and Majority World underscore the need for localized approaches that respect regional



realities, cultural dynamics and overcome language barriers. This will enhance in turn, the relevance of WBA benchmarks to local contexts and, foster a closer collaboration with local stakeholders ensuring that companies in the Majority World are represented fairly and accurately in our benchmarks.

To bridge these gaps, we recommend that WBA refine its outputs making them more inclusive, equitable and, and reflective of unique challenges and innovations present in regions of the Majority World. By acknowledging and addressing the cultural and linguistic nuances that shape how companies perceive and implement practices, through the use of AI technologies, for example, WBA can evolve into a more globally inclusive organization. Moreover, by carefully considering how we represent companies from the Majority world in our publications, insights and ranking, WBA can encourage more engagement from these region. Lastly, by embracing a region-specific focus, strengthening local partnerships, and leveraging the Alliance as a platform for peer learning and capacity building, WBA can create a more impactful and sustainable engagement with companies from diverse backgrounds.

These short and medium-term strategies, will help WBA to support companies in their sustainability journeys more effectively, ultimately driving meaningful progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals on a global scale.



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