Mobilising multi-stakeholder networks for corporate accountability through our Collective Impact Coalitions (CICs)

Case study

March 2025

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Mobilising multi-stakeholder networks for corporate accountability

Executive summary

Building upon two years of learning and recommendations made by two external evaluations, the Impact, Learning and Development (ILD) team is refining its approach to monitoring and evaluating WBA's impact. A key aspect in this refining, includes evaluating the impact of Collective Impact Coalitions (CICs) as a key output in our pressure pathway in our Theory of change. CICs are time-bound, multi-stakeholder collaborations that work towards shared goals to incentivise corporate action. This case study examines CICs as a tool for collective action, assessing their effectiveness in driving systemic change to advance WBA's broader mission. This case study will be the first of the series, as we continue looking at these coalitions biannually to identify learnings and challenges in order to maximise its impact and guarantee the quality of our work.

CICs bring together a diverse set of stakeholders that have influence over companies, such as CSOs, investors, business platforms and research institution. Positioned within WBA's network, CICs function as an example of collective action, in particular they demonstrate how smaller, targeted initiatives can contribute to long-term transformation. Their success is built on clear objectives, strong stakeholder engagement, and the ability to leverage WBA's benchmark data to track progress and inform advocacy.

The case study explores several key CICs that demonstrate both successes and challenges. While CICs such as the Ethical AI and Violence and Harassment in Supply Chains coalitions have demonstrated the importance of clear and actionable goals, others, such as the Regenerative Agriculture coalition, have faced difficulties due to unclear expectations and misalignment among stakeholders. These challenges underscore the need for strategic coordination, targeted engagement, and sustained momentum to ensure CICs remain effective in mobilising action.

As WBA continues to expand its coalition-building efforts, CICs represent a key mechanism for bridging research, advocacy, and corporate accountability, reinforcing the role of multi-stakeholder collaboration in shaping business practices. Moving forward, ensuring greater inclusivity, stronger governance structures, and more precise goal-setting will be essential to maximising their impact and ensure their long-term sustainability within WBA's broader movement-building strategy.

Introduction

As we transition to a new rhythm in 2025, ILD team is also undergoing significant shifts. With the development of an updated Theory of Change and Results Management Framework, and the incorporation of two years' worth of learnings and external evaluation recommendations, the ILD team is refining its approach to Monitoring, Evaluating & Learning, to ensure greater impact and relevance. One of the tools we will use to periodically evaluate the influence of our engagement and policy teams in the corporate accountability field is a series of case studies. For this particular case study, we will focus on evaluating CICs as a tool for collective action. This will be the first of the series, as we continue looking at these coalitions through time and identify learnings and challenges in order to maximise its impact and guarantee the quality of our work.

FIGURE ONE: WBA THEORY OF CHANGE
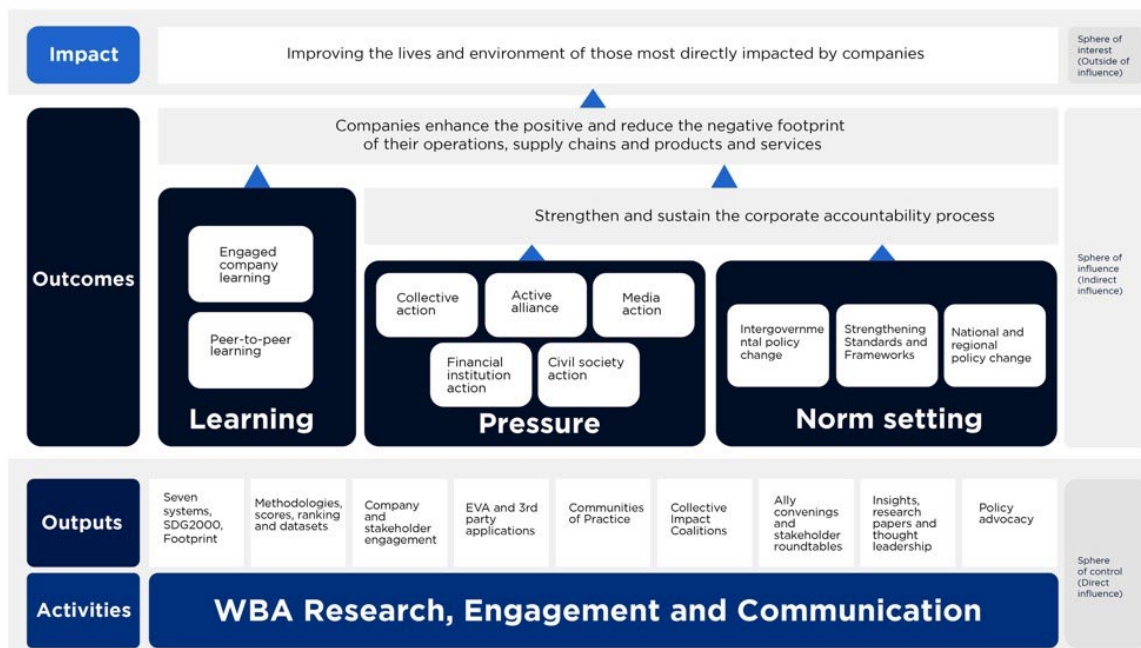
Collective Impact Coalitions represent a cornerstone of WBA's collective action strategy and are one of our primary mechanisms for driving systemic impact. These coalitions function as focused, collaborative initiatives, aligning diverse stakeholders—including Allies from WBA's
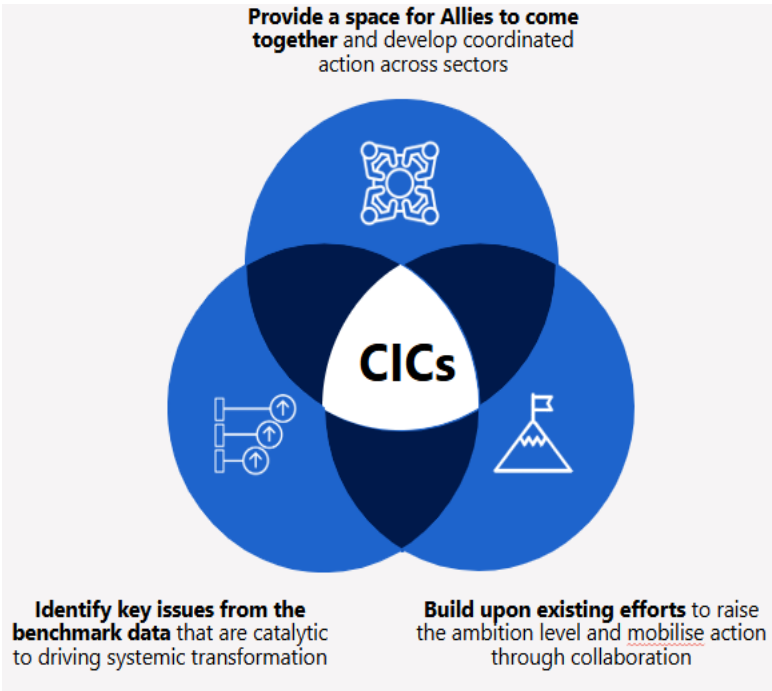
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broader network—around shared goals to address systemic challenges. Currently, WBA has five active CICs, alongside other forms of collective action taking place across the organisation. While many of these initiatives are recent, having launched in 2024, WBA has been conducting CICs since2022, with varied levels of success.

This case study seeks to examine the role of CICs in collective action, highlighting their potential as vehicles for network mobilisation, as well as their inherent risks and lessons learned within WBA. Specifically, it aims to provide actionable recommendations for future collective action initiatives within the sustainability ecosystem, with a focus on advancing corporate accountability through multi-stakeholder collaboration.

In analysing CICs, this study will address key questions regarding their role within WBA, their effectiveness in fostering systemic change, and their potential to inform broader network strategies, including our Alliance. The findings will not only contribute to the ongoing evolution of WBA's Alliance but will also support the development of more effective coalitions that drive accountability and sustainability at scale. Additionally, this study aims to establish the fundamental building blocks for the continual review of WBA's collective action processes, examining how these coalitions evolve, enhance their impact, and adapt to global dynamics.

FIGURE TWO: WBA COLLECTIVE IMPACT COALITION STRATEGY

Provide a space for Allies to come **together** and develop coordinated action across sectors

CICs

Identify key issues from the benchmark data that are catalytic to driving systemic transformation

Build upon existing efforts to raise the ambition level and mobilise action through collaboration

Methodology

To assess the role and impact of CICs, this study employed a qualitative research approach using participatory observation and in-depth interviews. Researchers attended CIC gatherings across different WBA teams, such as the Social Benchmark and Digital Inclusion Benchmark (DIB), to observe real-time collaboration dynamics and identify key challenges.

Additionally, interviews with Engagement Leads and some of the specific stakeholders who participated in the CIC provided firsthand insights into CIC effectiveness, stakeholder alignment, and network mobilisation strategies. This approach enabled a holistic understanding of how CICs function, their risks, and capabilities to build collective action.

Collective Impact Coalitions (CICs) currently running at WBA

1. **Addressing violence and harassment in supply chains:** The CIC, launched in 2024 by the Social Transformation Team, is working to drive company change to accelerate the recognition, prevention and redress of violence and harassment in global apparel and agricultural supply chains. The CIC builds on the insights from the 2023 Gender Benchmark, which demonstrated that companies are not translating policy into concrete measure to address violence and harassment in supply chains.

2. **Assessing impacts and dependencies on nature:** The CIC, launched in 2024 by the Nature Benchmark, is working to improve how companies are understanding their relationship with nature, through the assessment and disclosure of their nature-related risks, dependencies and impact. This coalition builds on the findings from the Nature Benchmark which in 2022 and 2023 showed that most companies do not understand and disclose how they affect and rely on nature.

3. **Food loss and waste:** The CIC, launched in 2024 by the Food and Agriculture Benchmark, provides a space for Allies and stakeholders to take forward cross-sector, collaborative action to incentivise key companies to improve their performance on food loss and waste. Through the CIC, members aim to improve food systems and deliver on the Paris Agreement and the Global Methane Pledge.

4. **Investing sustainably in emerging markets:** The CIC, launched in 2024, by the Finance transformation, asks asset managers to ensure their approach to ESG is aligned with investing sustainably in emerging markets and developing economies (EMDEs), and does not inadvertently lead to divestment from these markets. The CIC aims to provide insights and actionable recommendations on the importance of increasing private finance capital flows to emerging markets.

5. **Ethical AI:** The CIC, launch in 2022, by the Digital Inclusion Benchmark, is working to push technology companies to advance ethical AI policies and practices. The coalition builds on the findings of WBA's Digital

Inclusion Benchmark, which has revealed large transparency gaps in companies' disclosures on ethical AI. A basic commitment to ethical AI and a consolidated set of principles can serve as a gateway to building trust with users and reducing risks and harms to individuals, societies, and companies themselves. The CIC is currently in its second phase and has shown substantial growth and momentum within the corporate accountability ecosystem.

Learning from the current Collective Impact Coalitions (CICs)

CICs have shown enormous growth since 2022. All transformations in WBA have already started or plan to start their own CICs. As such through some literature review and through a review of our CICs, we have identified five principles that a successful CICs needs to have

- Clear, actionable goals drive success: CICs must define specific, measurable targets to avoid fragmentation.
- Allocating resources to sustain momentum: Ensuring stakeholders have sufficient buy-in is essential for them to commit time and resources to the initiative
- Inclusive and resilient networks ensure sustainability: CICs should balance diverse actors' interests and priorities (e.g., CSOs, investors, business platforms) while adapting to emerging challenges.
- Collaboration amplifies impact: CICs leverage collective expertise to influence corporate behaviour. Strategic co-creation prevents engagement fatigue and ensures accountability among stakeholders.
- Norm creation and dissemination matter: By using benchmark data, CICs help shift corporate best practices and influence policy-making at various levels.

We have expounded upon each of these principles in the following pages.

Clear, actionable goals drive success

Discussion

A clear and actionable goal for all stakeholders is essential for collective action, as it provides strategic focus, strengthens advocacy efforts, and ensures measurable impact. As Keck and Sikkink (1998) highlight, advocacy networks bring together diverse stakeholders across regions, yet without a well-defined objective, efforts risk becoming fragmented and ineffective. A concrete goal helps leverage information to drive targeted action, enabling CIC members to apply direct pressure on companies while also pushing for norm changes to ensure the process remains sustainable. It also enhances accountability, allowing progress to be tracked and ensuring advocacy efforts remain credible. Additionally, resource allocation is more efficient when coalitions have clear targets, making it easier to dedicate resources effectively and

sustain long-term engagement. Ultimately, a defined and measurable goal strengthens coalitions' ability to mobilise, influence policies, and drive lasting change.

The 2023 Food and Agriculture Benchmark CIC on Regenerative Agriculture is a clear example of why establishing well-defined and actionable goals is crucial. Without a shared understanding of what is being asked from stakeholders, coalitions risk failure. In this case, there was no consensus on the definition of regenerative agriculture, leading to multiple interpretations and a lack of clear actionable objectives. This created challenges, as corporate perspectives on regenerative agriculture differed significantly from those of academic and advocacy groups. As a result, key stakeholders, such as investors, failed to engage, limiting the initial momentum needed to ensure the CIC's long-term sustainability.

Key insights and summary

- Focus and Impact – A well-defined goal ensures strategic direction, accountability, and measurable progress in CICs preventing fragmentation.
- Mobilising Stakeholders and Resources – Clear objectives help attract funding, engage key allies, and sustain advocacy efforts, ensuring long-term impact.
- Lessons from the Regenerative Agriculture CIC – Lack of consensus on definitions and expectations led to stakeholder disengagement, showing that unclear goals hinder coalition success.
- Successful Application in other CICs – CICs like Ethical AI and Supply Chain Accountability demonstrate that simple, well-defined goals drive stakeholder engagement and tangible results.

Allocating resources to sustain momentum

Sustaining momentum requires dedicated resources to ensure ongoing engagement, capacity-building, and impact. Without adequate resources, even well-structured coalitions risk losing traction as stakeholders face competing priorities. Allocating resources strategically allows stakeholders to remain actively involved, preventing drop-off and ensuring that planned activities, such as policy engagement, corporate dialogues, and advocacy campaigns, continue driving systemic change. Furthermore, securing resources upfront creates stability, allowing CICs to adapt to emerging challenges without losing focus on their objectives. Without a clear understanding of the necessary resources, more specifically the amount of engagement efforts and time needed to continue the momentum, we risk the loosing the necessary momentum to keep the CIC going. The Regenerative Agriculture CIC demonstrates this, as lack of resources from both WBA and from external stakeholders limited the impact of this CIC.

However, as any collective action process, external stakeholders also need to dedicate the necessary resources to sustain momentum. As we shift towards a world where development and multilateral organisation struggle, the momentum of collective action efforts can stagnate. As we can see in the current socio political landscape, civil society organisations are facing complex economic situation. This might prevent them from sustaining long-term engagement, leading to gaps in participation and weakening advocacy impact. Engagement efforts as such should provide the flexibility for this dynamic environment, ensuring that participation is not overly resource-intensive.

Sustaining momentum requires investing in stakeholder engagement and knowledge-sharing. CICs must facilitate ongoing learning opportunities, structured coordination, and clear mechanisms for accountability, ensuring that all members remain invested in the coalition's progress. Additionally, engagement fatigue can set in if stakeholders feel their contributions are not leading to tangible outcomes. By providing targeted support, tools, and structured collaboration spaces, CICs can foster long-term commitment and prevent disengagement. Ultimately, resource allocation is not just about sustaining the initiative itself, but about ensuring that collective action remains impactful, responsive, and resilient over time.

Key insights and summary

- Preventing engagement fatigue – Adequate funding, time, and personnel keep stakeholders committed, ensuring CICs maintain momentum and avoid drop-off.
- Enhancing adaptability and impact – Continuous resource investment enables CICs to stay responsive to challenges while driving long-term, systemic change.

Inclusive and resilient networks ensure sustainability:

Discussion

CICs bring stakeholders together around a common objective, such as addressing systemic challenges within specific transformations. They aim to develop multistakeholder approaches that enable collaborative action to tackle complex issues. However, as time-bound coalitions with focused, achievable missions, CICs require carefully designed strategies to ensure they remain resilient and inclusive.

Flexibility in membership composition allows CICs to adapt to evolving priorities, ensuring continued relevance and impact. It is crucial to tailor stakeholder participation

to coalition objectives. For instance, the DIB and Finance CICs prioritise investors and shareholders as they have the greatest influence on companies and can drive rapid change. Conversely, CICs addressing social or environmental challenges, such as the Social CIC, rely more heavily on bottom-up advocacy groups to apply pressure on companies.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF ALLIES AMONG IN CURRENT COLLECTIVE IMPACT COALITIONS AND NUMBER OF ALLIES THAT ARE CSOS MEMBERS.

Collective Impact Coalition	Transformation	Total number of members *	Total number of members who are allies (inclusive of CSOs')	Number of members that are CSO's (but not necessarily Allies) *
Ethical AI	Digital Inclusion	74	27	6
Food Loss and Waste	Food and Agriculture	11	3	2
Violence and harassment in global agricultural and apparel supply chains	Social	22	18	10
Investing sustainable in emerging markets	Finance	8	3	0
Improving companies' assessments and disclosure of their impacts and dependencies on nature	Nature	25	20	12

However, CICs should not be overly reliant on a single type of stakeholder. Adapting membership composition is essential to maintaining flexibility and avoiding the risk of over-concentration of influence. For example, the DIB CIC initially prioritised investors to achieve rapid, targeted impact. However, to ensure long-term sustainability and expand its influence beyond companies, it is now broadening its network to include more CSOs. This shift includes organising learning sessions on AI governance, best practices, and policies, designed to strengthen collaboration between CSOs and investors. These sessions help build investor capacity by drawing on CSOs' expertise in understanding the real-world impacts of corporate actions.

As demonstrated, diverse stakeholders bring varied expertise, perspectives, and resources to the table. This diversity fosters creativity and innovation, enhancing the

coalition's ability to drive meaningful change. However, diversification should not be limited to stakeholder type—it is equally important to ensure geographic diversity. While WBA is working to broaden its stakeholder base, particularly at a macro level through the Alliance, CICs continue to be predominantly composed of Global North stakeholders. This dynamic risks reinforcing top-down power structures and exacerbating the Global North/South imbalance that CICs aim to challenge. Addressing this gap is crucial to ensuring that CICs remain equitable, representative, and effective in achieving systemic transformation.

Key insights and summary

- Strategic stakeholder composition natters – Effective CICs tailor participation based on their goals.
- Diversity enhances legitimacy and reach – Despite efforts to expand Global South participation, CICs remain Global North heavy. Increasing regional representation is key for ensuring equity and credibility in corporate advocacy efforts.
- Future CICs should actively recruit underrepresented stakeholders to ensure balanced decision-making and bring different perspectives to the coalition.

Collaboration amplifies impact

Discussion

WBA's strategy emphasises collaboration and co-leadership, but successful collective action requires all participants to understand their roles, responsibilities, and intended outcomes. As a broker, WBA facilitates engagements by providing strategic guidance, coordinating activities, and leveraging benchmark findings to navigate challenges and drive action.

From our experience with CICs, we have identified that securing broad buy-in and ensuring goals remain actionable requires all participants to invest necessary resources, both externally and internally. In the early stages, allocating time and space to build networks, identify key stakeholders, and create collaboration opportunities is crucial to maintaining momentum.

However, a careful balance between accountabilities and resources is needed to sustain momentum and drive progress. As CICs grow, there is also a risk of stakeholder fatigue as resource constraints may limit participation. WBA must strategically allocate resources while ensuring CIC members contribute without being overburdened, keeping the process active and sustainable.

Despite their effectiveness, CICs face uneven commitment over time. As they expand, free-riding can occur, with some members becoming less engaged while others carry the burden of action. As one participant noted:

"It is important to push members to reflect their commitment through action, ensuring progress is consistently enforced."

Some interviewees stressed that a smaller, fully committed group is often more effective than a larger, passive network.

While preventing this entirely is difficult, our engagement team is committed to facilitating balanced collaboration. However, they cannot do it alone—each stakeholder must contribute resources to sustain momentum and impact.

When stakeholders commit resources, they become more invested, fostering a sense of collective ownership and long-term commitment. This is evident in structured quarterly calls and active discussions.

For example, the Social CIC's strategy is divided into four workstreams, each led by specific stakeholders: investor action, supply chain engagement, policy advocacy, and a repository of resources and tools. These smaller workstreams focus on achievable actions that drive progress toward the coalition's overarching goal, reinforcing commitment and accountability.

Similarly, the Nature CIC has consolidated resources to engage with a sub-group of companies identified as 'next movers' based on benchmark data. The Nature team supports investor CIC members by providing tailored data and insights, using WBA's interim updates to track company progress.

Key insights and summary

- Co-leadership enhances ownership – CIC members should define clear roles and responsibilities to ensure buy-in. WBA acts as a broker, providing coordination without overwhelming stakeholders.
- Avoiding engagement fatigue – Overburdening stakeholders with frequent demands can reduce participation. Successful CICs balance momentum-building with realistic commitments.
- Preventing free-riding – Some CIC members fade over time, placing the burden on a few active participants. To prevent this, CICs must hold members accountable for their commitments.

Having impact: Norm creation and dissemination

Discussion

As a broker, WBA provides data, strategic guidance, and coordination, ensuring CICs remain sustainable and impactful. However, long-term success depends on CICs driving systemic impact beyond company behaviour, monitoring frameworks, and influencing industry standards and policy reforms that uphold corporate accountability. Through diverse stakeholder engagement and structured collaboration, CICs play a key role in shaping norms.

Norm-setting is a core pillar of WBA's Theory of Change. Although most of our CICs have not achieved the maturity needed to make big contributions this pillar, they should be offering targeted pathways to influence specific norms. By aligning stakeholders around shared goals and using benchmark data, CICs can pressure policymakers to strengthen legal frameworks. Collective momentum fuels public awareness and advocacy, leading to measurable outcomes through campaigns, events, and reports. For example, partnering with NGOs and multilateral bodies enables CICs to push governments and institutions to codify accountability standards.

Sustained impact requires long-term momentum, achievable only through strategic resource allocation and clear, actionable goals. Ensuring the right resources are in place allows CICs to drive systemic change and reinforce corporate accountability at scale.

Key insights and summary
- Driving systemic change – CICs can unite diverse stakeholders to push for long-term corporate accountability and policy shifts.
- Creating norms and accountability – By using benchmark data, CICs help stakeholders influence policymakers
- CICs balance high-level advocacy with grassroots action, ensuring both institutional pressure and community engagement.

Challenges and opportunities

Collective action faces inherent risks and challenges. These include: power imbalances between Global North actors, who dominate, and the Majority World; fragmentation due to competing agendas, resource constraints and limited accountability mechanisms, which make sustained impact more difficult to achieve.

Power imbalances within advocacy networks remain a significant challenge. Research highlights that collective action efforts often reinforce Global North dominance, with underrepresented voices marginalised due to resource disparities (Cheng et al., 2021). Likewise, fragmentation of efforts, caused by competing political and professional agendas, weakens collective action (Grosescu, 2019). Addressing these issues requires strong consensus-building mechanisms and a commitment to shared accountability, ensuring diverse voices are represented and influence is more evenly distributed. These concerns are actively being addressed through WBA's Alliance strategy, which prioritises inclusivity, resource equity, and transparency.

However, global political shifts are introducing new complexities that demand adaptive responses. Rising nationalism, weakened multilateralism, and increasing hostility towards ESG principles and diversity initiatives, are limiting access to policymakers and undermining norm-setting efforts. At the same time, economic competition prioritises short-term growth over sustainability, making corporate accountability harder to enforce. Deregulation trends are further weakening oversight mechanisms, while declining development funding is increasing competition for the already thin resource streams. All these factors place additional strain on collaboration among advocacy group, potentially stalling progress and weakening long-term commitments.

As the political and economic context grows more complex, resilience and adaptability will determine the long-term effectiveness of all of our corporate accountability efforts. Navigating this evolving landscape requires stronger partnerships, agile strategies, and a commitment to adaptive learning. Our engagement and policy teams are already hard at work mapping stakeholders, identifying key norms to influence and building a comprehensive strategy to navigate the new global dynamics. This would help us to build action-oriented coalitions, and strategically engage with key stakeholders—including the private sector—to overcome hurdles and sustain momentum.

Recommendations

CICs are long term and labour intensive, making it a big part of WBA's engagement strategy. As such, it is important that transformations understand the risks and pitfalls of this type of collective action. We recommend engagement teams to:

- Start small in terms of its asks from members when developing a CIC. CICs that begin with modest goals and build on incremental successes—a process akin to paving the road or providing a roadmap—are more likely to succeed and expand as they mature.

- Have a centralised overview of CICs planned across different transformations to ensure resources are used efficiently. This includes preventing member fatigue by carefully managing invitations to overlapping CICs and ensuring adequate internal capacity to support CIC development and growth. This centralised strategy will be coordinated under the newly created institutional engagement team.

- Develop internal processes to ensure continuous communication and collaboration between transformations to guarantee experiences and challenges are crowdsourced. This means holding learning sessions, brown bags and having meetings with the institutional engagement team to guarantee that we are not siloed when conducting our CICs. This can also help prevent stakeholder exhaustion.

- Be adaptable and flexible in a changing landscape. While many transformations are already adjusting to the specific needs of their CICs, it is important to acknowledge the limitations and capabilities of stakeholders. This means that CICs should be able to shift strategies if needed, change their relationship with different stakeholders, and identify better avenues of impact. Given the current sociopolitical climate, this has become even more critical.

- Conduct follow-up case studies if necessary to track how CICs evolve and assess their impact. As part of this study, we propose continuous monitoring over a two-year cycle to examine CIC maturity and capture key learnings and outcomes.

- Maximise CIC effectiveness by ensuring that the right expertise is represented among members. Strategic selection of partners and Allies will strengthen the coalition's ability to drive meaningful transformation, and should be a key consideration as we select future allies and decide future CIC topics.

- Actively include a diverse range of stakeholders perspectives to diversify representation. While the engagement team determines CIC composition, greater diversity will help enhance impact and inclusivity.

Conclusion

We have significant potential to serve as a transformative movement-building force and drive systemic change in the corporate accountability landscape. By uniting a diverse range of stakeholders—civil society organisations, investors and other stakeholders—we aim to build strong and wide-ranging networks to create lasting change. Through initiatives such as the CICs, WBA has demonstrated how structured collaboration can align stakeholders around shared goals, build trust, and deliver outcomes.

CICs exemplify how smaller, focused networks within WBA can mobilise resources and expertise to address complex challenges. By emphasising co-created action plans, measurable impact, and continuous dialogue, CICs have shown how to scale momentum in corporate accountability. These successes not only validate the power of the Alliance but also offer a blueprint for replicating the model across the rest of the organisation.

To further strengthen its collective action efforts, WBA should continue to expand and refine its approach. This includes scaling successful models such as CICs, empowering Allies with tailored resources, and foster visibility and advocacy to inspire broader participation. We should also leverage these CIC communities beyond the specific asks to gain further influence in the corporate accountability process. By maintaining long-term engagement and ensuring adaptability to evolving challenges, WBA can solidify its role as a global leader in the corporate accountability landscape, catalysing meaningful change at a global scale.

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