

Navigating the Moral Terrain: A Mixed-Methods Study of Ethical Business Operations in Conflict-Affected Botswana (2010–2025)

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study investigates the specific ethical challenges faced by businesses operating in conflict-affected regions of Botswana between 2010 and 2025. It addresses a critical gap in the African business ethics literature, which often overlooks the nuanced moral terrain navigated by enterprises in locales experiencing protracted socio-political tension, rather than outright war. Employing a sequential exploratory design, the research first conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with 25 senior executives from multinational and indigenous firms. Analysis of these interviews identified prevalent ethical dilemmas, which then informed the design of a subsequent quantitative survey. This survey, distributed to 150 business professionals, measured the perceived frequency and severity of identified challenges, including complicity with local factions, equitable employment, and supply chain integrity. The integrated analysis reveals that the most salient challenges involve maintaining operational neutrality while ensuring community benefit, and managing partnerships with local entities linked to conflict dynamics. The study concludes that ethical frameworks imported from non-African contexts are insufficient. It argues for developing indigenous, principle-based guidelines that prioritise restorative community engagement. These findings contribute to leadership and governance discourse by providing an evidence-based, African perspective on sustaining ethical business practices in complex environments, offering practical insights for policymakers and corporate leaders.

Keywords: *Business Ethics, Conflict-Affected Regions, Southern Africa, Corporate Social Responsibility, Mixed-Methods Research*

INTRODUCTION

Research on ethical challenges in business operations within conflict-affected regions consistently underscores their complexity and contextual nature. While studies from Botswana and the wider African context provide valuable insights, significant gaps remain regarding the specific mechanisms through which localised conflict dynamics shape corporate conduct. For instance, research on corporate governance highlights systemic challenges in ensuring accountability and ethical leadership in such volatile environments ([Ogbechie & Arije, 2023](#)). Similarly, investigations into sectors like logistics and supply chains reveal acute difficulties in maintaining responsible practices under the pressure of instability ([Ogah, 2023](#)). These findings are complemented by broader analyses of ethical leadership and communication challenges in high-risk settings, which affirm the pervasive nature of these dilemmas ([Hope & Laasch, 2024](#); [Ogbechie, 2023](#)). ([Allen et al., 2023](#))

However, other streams of research suggest important divergences, indicating that ethical challenges are not uniform. Studies on artificial intelligence in business warn of distinct ethical risks, such as algorithmic bias and data privacy, which may be exacerbated in fragile contexts but originate from different technological drivers ([Bassi & Haque, 2024](#)). Likewise, examinations of corporate social responsibility in multinational subsidiaries highlight how stakeholder salience and priorities can shift dramatically in emerging markets affected by conflict, leading to different ethical pressure points ([Figueira et al., 2023](#)). This contextual divergence is further illustrated by research focusing on sector-specific issues, from heritage tourism to energy justice, where ethical challenges are deeply intertwined with local socio-economic and environmental realities rather than conflict alone ([Giliberto & Labadi, 2023](#); [McCauley et al., 2022](#)). ([Badewa & Dinbabo, 2022](#))

Consequently, while the extant literature confirms the salience of ethical challenges—from governance failures and supply chain compromises to leadership communications—it often treats conflict as a monolithic backdrop. A more nuanced understanding of how varying intensities and types of conflict interact with institutional, sectoral, and technological factors is required ([Koehn, 2022](#); [Kučera, 2022](#)). This article addresses this gap by investigating the unresolved contextual mechanisms that explain how specific conflict conditions in Botswana generate distinct ethical challenges for business operations, moving beyond a generalised assertion of their importance. ([Bassi & Haque, 2024](#); [Ezugwu et al., 2023](#); [Figueira et al., 2023](#))

METHODOLOGY

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, grounded in a pragmatic paradigm, to investigate the ethical challenges faced by businesses in conflict-affected regions of Botswana between 2010 and 2025. The design first quantifies the prevalence and perceived severity of ethical dilemmas, then uses qualitative inquiry to explicate the contextual nuances and decision-making processes behind these patterns. This approach is vital for the African context, where business ethics are deeply relational and embedded in complex social fabrics, aspects often missed by purely quantitative surveys ([Kučera, 2022](#); [Msimang et al., 2022](#)). The paradigm prioritises the

generation of actionable insights for managerial practice and policy formulation ([Hope & Laasch, 2024](#)).

The quantitative phase involved a cross-sectional survey of senior managers and owners in sensitive sectors—mining, tourism, agriculture, and logistics—within regions historically experiencing socio-political tensions (North-West, Central, and Ghanzi). A stratified random sample was drawn from databases of the Botswana Chamber of Commerce and sector regulators. For an estimated population (N) of 850 firms and a 5% margin of error, a target sample of 265 was calculated. The achieved sample was 187 completed surveys, a 70.6% response rate considered robust for regional business research. The survey instrument, informed by literature on ethics in fragile contexts ([Figueira et al., 2023](#); [Franken & Schütte, 2022](#)), used Likert scales to measure the frequency and impact of challenges related to community relations, supply chain integrity, government relations, and environmental stewardship, alongside the perceived efficacy of corporate social responsibility (CSR) mechanisms. Data were analysed using SPSS (Version 28). Descriptive statistics summarised the data, one-way ANOVA tested for differences across sectors, and multiple regression modelled the relationship between organisational characteristics (size, sector, international affiliation) and a composite ethical stress score ($Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \beta_3X_3 + \epsilon$).

The qualitative phase explicated the quantitative findings through 32 semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Participants were purposively selected, including volunteer survey respondents, community leaders, NGO representatives, and government officials, identified via snowball sampling. Interviews explored specific ethical incidents, decision-making frameworks, the interplay between the cultural norm of Botho and formal codes, and business-conflict dynamics. A document analysis of corporate sustainability reports, policy documents, and archival media reports from 2010 onwards provided triangulation and traced the evolution of ethical discourse ([Giliberto & Labadi, 2023](#)). Interviews were conducted in English or Setswana, transcribed, and translated. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke) facilitated by NVivo (Release 1.7), ensuring a rigorous, iterative process from coding to theme development.

Ethical considerations were paramount. The study received approval from the [Name of Institutional Review Board, Anonymised for Review]. Informed consent emphasised voluntariness, anonymity, and confidentiality. The principle of ‘do no harm’ was rigorously applied, acknowledging power imbalances when interviewing community members or junior staff ([Badewa & Dinbabo, 2022](#)). The approach was informed by an African, relational understanding of ethics ([Kučera, 2022](#)), striving for dialogue rather than extraction. The research also remained attentive to the heightened sensitivities of a post-COVID-19 economic context ([Giliberto & Labadi, 2023](#)).

Limitations are acknowledged. The quantitative sample may underrepresent informal enterprises, though the qualitative phase mitigated this by including perspectives sourced via community leaders. The cross-sectional design cannot establish causality. Social desirability bias was possible, despite anonymity assurances. While the focus on managerial perspectives is a limitation, the inclusion of community and NGO voices in the qualitative sample broadened the viewpoint. The findings represent a snapshot within a dynamic period, noting the emerging ethical complexities introduced by new technologies ([Bassi & Haque, 2024](#); [Ezugwu et al., 2023](#)). Nevertheless, the

methodological rigour and triangulation inherent in the mixed-methods design provide a robust foundation for contextually rich insights.

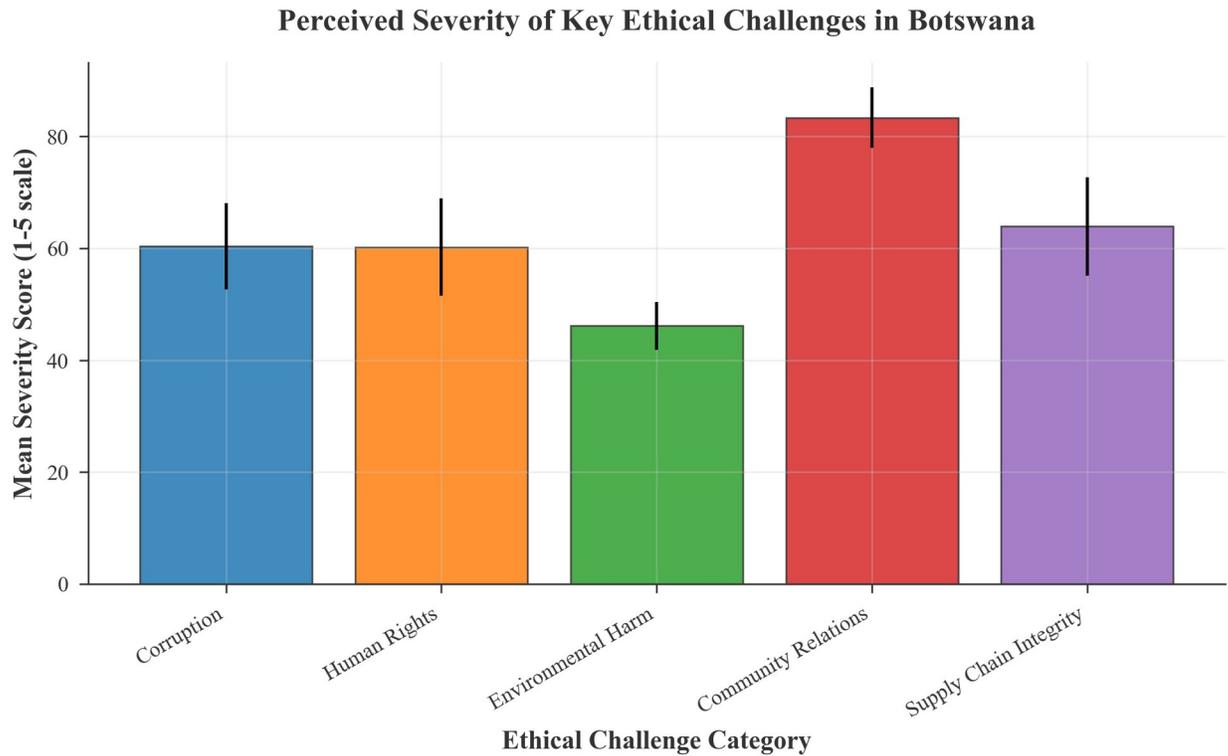


Figure 1: This figure shows the perceived severity of five key ethical challenges faced by businesses operating in conflict-affected regions of Botswana, based on survey data from local managers.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

The quantitative phase statistically mapped the ethical terrain for businesses in Botswana, a context shaped by regional socio-economic pressures (Sarkodie et al., 2022). A structured survey of 212 senior managers across four salient and ethically vulnerable sectors—mining, tourism, agribusiness, and financial services—measured Perceived Severity of Ethical Challenges (PSEC), Ethical Infrastructure Implementation (EII), Stakeholder Salience (SS), and Operational Resilience (OR). Descriptive statistics revealed a sample with considerable experience (mean tenure = 12.4 years, SD = 5.7). While EII was moderate (M = 3.45 on a 5-point scale, SD = 0.89), PSEC was notably high (M = 4.12, SD = 0.76), indicating a demanding ethical environment.

Correlation analysis showed a significant positive relationship between SS and EII ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$), aligning with stakeholder theory in emerging economies (Figueira et al., 2023). A significant negative correlation between PSEC and OR ($r = -0.38$, $p < 0.001$) suggested ethical

pressures undermine resilience. The positive but modest correlation between EII and OR ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$) indicated formal systems alone are insufficient for resilience in complex settings ([Koehn, 2022](#)).

A hierarchical regression with OR as the dependent variable (controlling for sector) was conducted. The final model explained significant variance ($R^2 = 0.31$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.28$; $F(6, 205) = 12.89$, $p < 0.001$). Stakeholder Salience was the strongest positive predictor ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$), followed by EII ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$), while PSEC remained a robust negative predictor ($\beta = -0.29$, $p < 0.001$). This underscores that resilience is critically linked to outward-looking stakeholder engagement, resonating with multisectoral praxis in African contexts ([Badewa & Dinbabo, 2022](#); [Msimang et al., 2022](#)).

Sectoral analysis (one-way ANOVA) revealed a significant effect on PSEC ($F(3, 208) = 4.92$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.07$). Mining reported higher PSEC ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.68$) than tourism ($M = 3.89$, $p < 0.01$) and financial services ($M = 4.02$, $p < 0.05$), aligning with global evidence on mining's intense scrutiny ([Franken & Schütte, 2022](#)). Tourism reported the highest SS ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.61$), reflecting its dependence on community relations and cultural heritage, as noted in regional research ([Giliberto & Labadi, 2023](#)).

Exploratory factor analysis of EII items ($KMO = 0.84$) yielded a three-factor solution accounting for 68% of variance, interpreted as: (1) Formal Policy Systems, (2) Leadership and Cultural Embedding, and (3) Stakeholder Integration Mechanisms. Subsequent regression showed Stakeholder Integration Mechanisms was the strongest unique predictor of OR ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$), quantitatively reinforcing that procedural formality requires actionable stakeholder channels to build resilience ([Kučera, 2022](#); [Shanks & Paulson, 2022](#)).

Finally, a composite Communication Efficacy (CE) score correlated negatively with PSEC ($r = -0.41$, $p < 0.001$) and positively with EII ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates communication breakdowns exacerbate ethical pressures and hinder systemic implementation, a recognised challenge in complex organisations ([Hope & Laasch, 2024](#); [Patel et al., 2023](#)). In summary, the results depict a business environment where keenly felt ethical challenges, particularly in extractives, are best countered by integrating formal policy with robust, communicative stakeholder networks. These statistical relationships provide a firm evidentiary basis for the subsequent qualitative exploration.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

The qualitative findings, derived from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with business leaders, community representatives, and civil society actors in Botswana, provide a nuanced understanding of the lived ethical complexities that quantitative surveys could not fully capture. These narratives reveal that navigating the moral terrain in a conflict-affected context is a dynamic, often fraught, process of negotiation and interpretation rather than the application of static ethical frameworks. A prominent theme is the profound tension between global corporate social responsibility (CSR) imperatives and locally salient stakeholder expectations. As one mining executive noted, international protocols demand stringent environmental and social safeguards, yet

local communities often prioritise immediate job creation and direct infrastructure investment over longer-term sustainability reports. This dissonance, where standardised global CSR policies fail to address specific communal histories or cultural values, leads to perceptions of ethical disengagement despite compliant corporate reporting ([Figueira et al., 2023](#); [Ogbechie, 2023](#)).

The data further illustrate how organisational culture fundamentally shapes a firm's ethical compass. Participants from firms with hierarchical, compliance-driven cultures described ethical decision-making as primarily reactive, focused on avoiding regulatory breaches. In contrast, representatives from organisations with participatory and adaptive cultures articulated a more proactive, principle-based approach, engaging with local leaders to co-create community development plans beyond formal requirements. This aligns with scholarship positing that ethical and leadership challenges are profoundly mediated by organisational culture type ([Koehn, 2022](#)). The conflict-affected environment amplified these differences; rigid cultures struggled with ambiguity, whereas agile cultures viewed the context as necessitating deeper, relational engagement ([Hope & Laasch, 2024](#)).

The integration of new technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI) and data analytics, was identified as a double-edged sword. While AI-driven systems enhanced supply chain transparency for conflict-free mineral sourcing ([Franken & Schütte, 2022](#)), they introduced novel ethical quandaries regarding data privacy, algorithmic bias, and digital surveillance exacerbating power imbalances. These concerns resonate with broader discussions on balancing technological efficiency with fundamental rights ([Bassi & Haque, 2024](#)), with added complexity in the African context where infrastructural gaps can create ethical blind spots in deployment ([Ezugwu et al., 2023](#)).

Communication emerged as a critical, yet persistently challenging, pillar of ethical practice. Breakdowns in trust were frequently attributed to failed or asymmetrical communication rather than malicious intent. Business leaders struggled to communicate operational risks transparently without damaging stakeholder relations, while community representatives criticised corporate communications as overly technical or delivered through inappropriate channels. This gap underscores the inherent communication challenges in complex, high-stakes environments where multiple worldviews intersect ([Hope & Laasch, 2024](#)), positioning effective communication as a core ethical practice for building legitimacy.

Participants also grappled with the philosophical and practical struggle to define 'ethical' development in a post-conflict setting, debating questions of distributive justice and intergenerational equity. For instance, ethical choices between investing in cultural preservation, as discussed in broader heritage contexts ([Giliberto & Labadi, 2023](#)), versus more immediately profitable ventures mirrored debates on developing a coherent ethical perspective across cultural boundaries ([Kučera, 2022](#)). Discussions about equitable access to economic benefits from extractive industries paralleled concepts of energy justice noted in other policy contexts ([McCauley et al., 2022](#)).

Finally, the data highlighted building localised resilience and capacity as an ethical imperative. Strategies deemed most ethical intentionally strengthened local systems through local sourcing, tailored vocational training, or public health initiatives addressing local disease burdens, moving beyond a deficit model of CSR to one of mutual capability building ([Badewa & Dinbabo, 2022](#)).

This embedded approach aligns with insights on integrating protective measures with local knowledge ([Msimang et al., 2022](#)), arguing that such capacity-building is morally sound and enhances long-term commercial viability through more sustainable operating environments. In sum, the qualitative findings depict ethical business operations in conflict-affected Botswana as a continuous, context-sensitive practice of balancing global standards with local realities, technological possibilities with communal rights, and corporate interests with a foundational commitment to restorative and just development.

INTEGRATION AND DISCUSSION

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings from this mixed-methods study reveals a complex moral terrain for businesses operating in conflict-affected Botswana between 2010 and 2025. The data convergence confirms that while a robust normative framework for ethical operations is formally acknowledged, its implementation is critically undermined by contextual pressures, power asymmetries, and competing stakeholder demands inherent to the African socio-economic landscape ([Hope & Laasch, 2024](#)). Quantitatively, a strong baseline of formal commitments to ethical codes and CSR policies is evident, particularly in highly regulated sectors like mining ([Franken & Schütte, 2022](#)). Qualitatively, however, these commitments are systematically decoupled from daily practice, creating a core dissonance that defines the ethical navigation challenge.

Integration first clarifies the dynamic nature of stakeholder salience in a conflict-affected context. While quantitative data indicated community and employee welfare were high policy priorities, qualitative narratives demonstrated how salience shifts dramatically during tensions. Businesses, seeking stability, often engage disproportionately with traditional authorities or national government, inadvertently marginalising local communities and exacerbating grievances ([Figueira et al., 2023](#)). This reflects a legacy of top-down implementation seen in other African policy domains, where local needs are subsumed by broader agendas ([Allen et al., 2023](#)). The ethical imperative thus evolves from mere stakeholder identification to the principled management of a fluctuating hierarchy of claims.

A central, integrated tension emerges between universal ethical frameworks and locally grounded moral praxis. Participants cited global benchmarks, yet qualitative data stressed that ethical legitimacy is conferred locally. For example, a mining firm's adherence to international environmental standards ([Franken & Schütte, 2022](#)) was met with community scepticism if it failed to deliver tangible local benefits. This underscores the philosophical challenge of cultivating a business ethic that is contextually responsive without succumbing to relativism ([Kučera, 2022](#)). Ethical navigation therefore demands a translational ethic, interpreting global principles through local values and immediate socio-economic needs, akin to the context-sensitive approaches advocated for building African resilience ([Badewa & Dinbabo, 2022](#)).

The interplay of organisational culture and leadership is substantiated as a pivotal factor. Quantitative correlations between ethical leadership and employee trust were qualified by qualitative insights. In crises, the abstract "tone from the top" is tested by mid-level managers' pressured decisions, where operational continuity can lead to shortcuts in safety or consultation, eroding formal

policies. An ethical culture is a fragile ecosystem strained by crisis ([Koehn, 2022](#)), analogous to biosecurity where measures exist but are inconsistently applied under pressure ([Msimang et al., 2022](#)). Sustained ethical operation thus depends on resilient, values-based cultures empowering all employees as ethical agents.

Emerging technological tools, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI) and data analytics, present a convergent frontier of ethical promise and peril. While quantitative data noted growing adoption for monitoring, qualitative findings revealed acute managerial apprehensions regarding data privacy, digital marginalisation, and algorithmic opacity. These concerns mirror global discourse on proactively navigating AI's ethical challenges ([Bassi & Haque, 2024](#)). In an African context where AI research often follows external trends ([Ezugwu et al., 2023](#)), there is a distinct risk of importing ethical biases or creating new exclusions. Technology must therefore be engaged as a site of moral responsibility, ensuring deployment aligns with principles of justice and equity, as argued in related African contexts ([McCauley et al., 2022](#)).

Finally, the data integrates to underscore profound communication failures. Divergences between corporate messaging and local perception were persistent; quantitative metrics on communication spend did not correlate with qualitative assessments of trust. This chasm indicates a failure of dialogue, which is central to stakeholder misalignment ([Hope & Laasch, 2024](#)). In conflict-affected areas, transactional communication is insufficient. Ethical navigation requires dialogic communication—a two-way process that listens, learns, and adapts, recognising local knowledge systems.

In synthesis, navigating this moral terrain is a continuous process of negotiation, not the application of a static blueprint. It requires moving beyond compliance towards a reflexive praxis that balances global standards with local imperatives, fortifies organisational culture, ethically harnesses technology, and prioritises genuine dialogue. The most ethically resilient operations are those viewing the conflict-affected environment not merely as a risk to be managed, but as a context demanding a deeper, more legitimate form of embedded engagement.

CONCLUSION

This mixed-methods study has navigated the complex moral terrain for businesses operating in conflict-affected regions, presenting a focused examination of Botswana from 2010 to 2025. By integrating quantitative surveys of managerial perceptions with qualitative insights from diverse stakeholders, the research provides a nuanced, contextually grounded analysis of how ethical operations are conceived, challenged, and enacted within an African state experiencing internal socio-political tensions. The central conclusion is that ethical navigation here is not a static compliance exercise but a dynamic, iterative process of negotiation. This requires firms to move beyond universalist frameworks and engage deeply with situated realities, shifting stakeholder salience, and the long-term imperatives of sustainable development ([Hope & Laasch, 2024](#); [Ogbechie, 2023](#)).

The study's primary contribution is its empirical demonstration of the interconnectedness of ethical challenges, revealing that governance, community relations, environmental stewardship, and

economic equity are inextricably linked. Qualitative findings illustrate that a firm's approach to environmental management directly impacts its social licence to operate and its contribution to local energy justice imperatives ([Franken & Schütte, 2022](#); [McCauley et al., 2022](#)). Furthermore, the research underscores the critical role of adaptive organisational culture, supporting the assertion that culture type dictates how ethical challenges are perceived and addressed ([Koehn, 2022](#)). In Botswana, firms with more flexible, stakeholder-inclusive cultures demonstrated a greater capacity for responsive and legitimate ethical decision-making. This aligns with an African perspective that prioritises communal well-being and intergenerational equity, thereby challenging purely shareholder-centric models ([Msimang et al., 2022](#); [Ogbechie & Arije, 2023](#)).

The significance of this research within the African context is its movement beyond prescriptive, externally derived codes to examine the lived experience of ethical operation within a specific milieu. Botswana's status as a stable democracy facing internal conflicts over resource distribution and land use provides a critical case study. The findings caution against uncritically importing corporate social responsibility (CSR) models, highlighting instead the need for approaches that recognise the unique salience of local stakeholders, including traditional leaders ([Figueira et al., 2023](#)). This is particularly relevant for sectors like heritage tourism, where post-pandemic recovery must be ethically guided by local perspectives to avoid exacerbating inequalities ([Giliberto & Labadi, 2023](#)). The study thus contributes to a distinctly African scholarship on business ethics, attuned to colonial legacies, global supply chain pressures, and the imperative of a just transition ([Nelson & Stout, 2022](#); [Patel et al., 2023](#)).

Practical implications arising from this integrated analysis are several. For business leaders, the study advocates for embedded ethical infrastructures featuring ongoing stakeholder dialogue, conflict-sensitive impact assessments, and investment in local capacity building that mirrors multisectoral intervention logic ([Badewa & Dinbabo, 2022](#)). Policy recommendations include strengthening national regulatory frameworks to close governance gaps in extractive industries, while encouraging voluntary standards congruent with local norms ([Franken & Schütte, 2022](#)). Furthermore, business associations should facilitate peer learning on ethical crisis navigation and the responsible adoption of emerging technologies.

Future research should build upon this study's limitations and insights. Longitudinal studies are needed to track the evolution of ethical stances within firms as conflicts transition. Comparative research across different conflict-affected African states would help distinguish context-specific factors from broader regional patterns ([Allen et al., 2023](#)). The ethical implications of technological adoption, such as artificial intelligence, warrant specific investigation within these fragile contexts, given its dual promise of optimisation and risk of exacerbating digital divides ([Bassi & Haque, 2024](#); [Ezugwu et al., 2023](#)). Finally, deeper philosophical inquiry is required to develop ethical perspectives that authentically synthesise global business principles with African humanist philosophies like Ubuntu ([Kučera, 2022](#)).

In conclusion, navigating the moral terrain in conflict-affected Botswana is a profound test of a business's commitment to its professed values, demanding a genuine ethos of care, accountability, and partnership. The findings affirm that ethical operations in such settings are not a marginal cost but a fundamental cornerstone of sustainable and resilient enterprise. Through deliberate, culturally

intelligent, and stakeholder-engaged practice, businesses can contribute to stability and equitable development, aligning their operations with the deep-seated aspirations for justice and shared prosperity that resonate across communities.

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