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Review

Organizational culture as a catalyst of resistance towards change in developing countries: A systematic review

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Abstract: Organizational change in developing countries often fails because people resist it. Yet it still is not clearly understood how organisational culture drives that resistance. Most change theories come from Western settings where hierarchy is flat and people act as individuals, are not a good fit for most emerging economies. A systematic review was conducted following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, searching five databases for studies published between 2010 and 2025 on organisational culture and change resistance in low- and middle-income countries. Pre 2010 foundational texts made up less than 20 % of the final corpus. Quality was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (2018). Thirty--four studies met inclusion criteria: 28 empirical papers and 6 foundational texts. The review identified six mechanisms through which culture appears to shape resistance to change: preserving hierarchy, collective solidarity, avoiding uncertainty, relying on personal relationships, paternalistic authority, and saving face. Hierarchy was the only mechanism that appeared in every region. Indigenous cultural concepts (like Ubuntu or Guanxi) explained resistance better than Western frameworks. The evidence is generally solid, but no longitudinal studies exist, and Latin America is under represented. Change that ignores local culture damages employee wellbeing, cultural dignity, fair participation, and inclusive governance. Change that works with culture enables sustainable development. The proposed Cultural Catalysis Model suggests that resistance is not the real problem, it is a warning that a change plan does not fit the environment. The model gives practitioners a practical way to align change with culture, leading to fairer, more inclusive, and socially sustainable transformation.

Keywords: organizational culture; resistance to change; developing countries; cultural catalysis; social sustainability; inclusive development; systematic review

1. Introduction

Organizational change is a constant, yet 50 % to 70 % of initiatives fail to achieve their objectives [1,2]. Resistance to change is frequently cited as the primary culprit [3]. While traditionally viewed as a behavioural obstacle to be eliminated [4], contemporary scholarship recognises it as a multidimensional construct [5] and a constructive source of organisational feedback [6]. A powerful, yet often overlooked, driver of this resistance is organisational culture (OC) [7,8]. The relationship between culture and organisational behaviour has traditionally been examined through several influential cultural frameworks. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory highlights how power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance shape organisational expectations and behavioural responses to change [8]. Hall's work on high-context and low-context communication provides insight into indirect communication patterns,

relationship-centred interactions, and face-saving behaviours that influence organisational adaptation [9]. The Schein's [7] model conceptualises culture as a system of underlying assumptions, values, and artefacts that shape organisational meaning and behaviour [7]. Early work on value orientations [10] and cultural dimensions [11] further expanded understanding of cross-cultural variation in organisational behaviour. Collectively, these frameworks have provided valuable foundations for understanding culture in organisations. However, growing scholarship argues that Western-derived models do not always fully capture culturally embedded realities within developing countries, where indigenous constructs such as Ubuntu, Guanxi, paternalistic authority [12], and particularistic relationality often provide more contextually grounded explanations of organisational behaviour. Accordingly, this review considers both established cultural frameworks and indigenous cultural perspectives in examining how culture shapes resistance to organisational change.

Beyond organisational boundaries, cultural values have been shown to influence broader developmental outcomes, including innovation diffusion, entrepreneurship potential, technology adoption, and institutional effectiveness [13–16]. This broader perspective positions resistance to change within wider cultural and developmental processes, suggesting that culturally misaligned change initiatives may undermine not only organisational performance but also sustainable social development [17,18]. Because culture operates at a deeply embedded, tacit level, proposed changes that violate core cultural assumptions trigger defensive responses to restore equilibrium [19]. Thus, culture does not merely coincide with resistance; it actively catalyses it [20,21].

This catalytic dynamic is highly context-dependent, differing substantially between developed and developing country settings [22]. Developing economies frequently exhibit elevated power distance, pronounced collectivism, paternalistic norms, and heightened uncertainty avoidance [23]. These features, interacting with weaker formal institutions and economic precarity, shape how change is interpreted and resisted [24,25]. Consequently, the uncritical transfer of Western change models often fails because it disregards local cultural logics [26]. Beyond operational efficiency, this misalignment carries profound social sustainability implications. Disregarding cultural logics erodes social cohesion, marginalises informal knowledge, and triggers workforce attrition [27,28]. Conversely, culturally aligned strategies foster trust, equitable participation, and sustainable development [29].

Despite this, most empirical research remains anchored in Western contexts [30], where indigenous constructs like *Ubuntu* or *Guanxi* operate differently from Western conceptual counterparts [31]. This fragmentation leaves critical gaps regarding how culture contributes to resistance in developing contexts, regional variations, and the social sustainability implications of these dynamics. To address this, this systematic review asks: How does organisational culture catalyse resistance to change in developing country contexts, and what are the implications for social sustainability? The review maps studies from 2010–2025, synthesises resistance pathways, compares regional patterns, and develops an integrative framework linking cultural alignment to sustainable development outcomes, focusing on nations classified as low-, lower-middle-, or upper-middle-income by contemporary World Bank standards [32].

2. Systematic review

2.1. Search strategy and database coverage

A systematic search was conducted across five electronic databases to ensure comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature and relevant grey literature. The databases included Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, Google Scholar, EBSCOhost Business Source Complete, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. Scopus and Web of Science provided multidisciplinary coverage with strong indexing in management, business, and social sciences. EBSCOhost complemented these with additional management journal coverage, while ProQuest facilitated access to doctoral dissertations containing empirical studies that may not have reached journal publication. Google Scholar was utilised to capture early-access articles, conference proceedings, and regionally indexed publications that might not appear in traditional database searches.

The search strategy combined three concept blocks using Boolean operators. The first block captured organisational culture through terms such as organisational culture, corporate culture, workplace culture, cultural values, cultural dimensions, power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance. The second block addressed resistance to change using phrases including resistance to change, change resistance, employee resistance, organisational resistance, resistance behaviour, change readiness, and change fatigue. The third block specified developing country contexts through terms such as developing countries, emerging economies, Global South, low-income countries, middle-income countries, Africa, Asia, Latin America, Caribbean, South Asia, Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Additional search methods included forward and backward citation tracking of included foundational texts, consultation with known experts in organisational culture and change management, and targeted searching of major conference proceedings from 2020 to 2025. The combined search yielded 847 records prior to duplicate removal.

The following are the actual search terms:

(“organizational culture” OR “organisational culture” OR “corporate culture” OR “workplace culture” OR collectivism OR “power distance” OR “uncertainty avoidance”)

AND

(“resistance to change” OR “change resistance” OR “employee resistance” OR “change readiness” OR “change fatigue”)

AND

(“developing countries” OR “emerging economies” OR “Global South” OR Africa OR Asia OR “Latin America” OR MENA OR “middle-income countries” OR “low-income countries”)

Searches were conducted between May and June 2026. Database filters were limited to English-language publications and document types including journal articles, book chapters, and doctoral dissertations. For Google Scholar, the first 300 relevance-ranked results were screened due to diminishing relevance beyond this

threshold. Grey literature was restricted to doctoral dissertations, institutional reports, and highly cited working papers that met the inclusion criteria.

2.2. Eligibility criteria and scope delimitations

Eligibility was determined through a set of predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included if they were conducted in a country classified as low-income, lower-middle-income, or upper-middle-income by the World Bank [32]; explicitly examined organisational culture as a central construct using recognised frameworks or indigenous constructs; explicitly addressed resistance to change as an outcome, moderator, or mediating instrument; positioned culture as contributing to, amplifying, or generating resistance; were published between 2010 and 2025 or represented a pre-2010 foundational text subject to the 20 % cap; were peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, or completed doctoral dissertations; and were published in English.

Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on developed country settings; mentioned culture only as background context without explicit analysis; measured change outcomes solely as success or failure without addressing resistance; exceeded the pre-2010 foundational quota; were published in non-English languages; existed only as conference abstracts lacking methodological detail; or represented duplicate publications of the same dataset. To ensure alignment with social sustainability dimensions, the extraction framework explicitly coded for indicators of employee wellbeing, equitable participation, cultural dignity preservation, inclusive governance, and community impact, allowing resistance constructs to be analysed not merely as operational barriers, but as social sustainability diagnostic signals.

2.3. Screening and selection protocol

The screening and selection process followed a structured three-stage protocol [33]. In the first stage, search results were exported to Zotero reference management software [34], which was utilised to organise the library, retrieve missing metadata, and perform automated duplicate removal, reducing the initial yield to 623 unique records. In the second stage, the deduplicated records were imported into Rayyan, a dedicated systematic review platform, to facilitate independent, blinded title and abstract screening by two reviewers [35]. While Rayyan's AI-assisted features were utilised to highlight semantic relevance and streamline the initial sorting workflow, all final inclusion and exclusion decisions were made exclusively by the human reviewers based on the predefined eligibility criteria. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa, yielding a coefficient of 0.87, indicating substantial agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus [36]. A total of 489 records were excluded at this stage for lacking a developing country focus, omitting explicit culture or resistance constructs, or representing non-empirical opinion pieces. In the third stage, full texts were retrieved for 134 records. Eighteen records could not be obtained despite thorough searches, and 82 were excluded for failing to meet inclusion criteria upon detailed assessment. The final corpus comprised 34 studies that satisfied all eligibility requirements.

2.4. Quality appraisal methodology

Quality appraisal was conducted using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 [30], which provides domain-specific criteria for quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research designs. Each empirical study was evaluated across five criteria assessing methodological appropriateness, data collection adequacy, measurement validity, risk of bias, and analytical rigour. Scores were aggregated to produce a total out of five. For pre-2010 conceptual and theoretical works, modified criteria assessing theoretical clarity, internal coherence, field influence, and citation impact were applied, recognising that foundational texts predate contemporary empirical standards. Two reviewers independently appraised each study, and disagreements were resolved through consensus. No studies were excluded on quality grounds, as even methodologically limited contributions provided valuable contextual or theoretical insights relevant to the synthesis.

2.5. Data extraction and thematic synthesis

Data extraction utilised a standardised template developed and piloted on five studies prior to full implementation. Extracted variables included bibliographic information, country and regional classification, organisational sector, research design, cultural dimensions examined, resistance typology, change type, pathway classification (direct, moderated, mediated), key findings, catalyst strength, study limitations, and social sustainability indicators. These social sustainability indicators encompassed employee wellbeing, psychological safety, cultural dignity preservation, equitable participation, inclusive decision-making, and community-level spillover effects.

Data synthesis followed a three-stage thematic synthesis approach [31]. The first stage involved line-by-line coding of extracted findings to identify recurrent patterns. The second stage grouped codes into descriptive themes reflecting specific cultural mechanisms. The third stage generated analytical themes that explained how these mechanisms interact with institutional and contextual factors to produce resistance and shape social sustainability outcomes. Subgroup analyses were conducted by geographic region, sector, change type, and the use of indigenous versus Western cultural frameworks to identify systematic variations in catalytic patterns and their social sustainability implications. **Figure 1** presents the results of the process in the form of a PRISMA flow diagram.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Corpus characteristics and methodological quality

The final synthesis comprised 34 studies, of which 28 were empirical publications from the 2010–2025 period and six were pre-2010 foundational texts. The foundational works represented 17.6 % of the corpus, satisfying the predetermined temporal cap. Geographically, the evidence base was distributed across 12 African studies, 10 Asian studies, four Latin American studies, two cross-regional comparisons, and six foundational works with broad theoretical applicability. Sectoral coverage revealed 14 studies examining private organisations, 12 focusing on public

sector or state-owned enterprises, four analysing mixed sectors, and four representing conceptual or theoretical contributions. Methodologically, 12 studies utilised quantitative survey designs, 10 employed qualitative case study approaches, four applied mixed methods, and eight were conceptual or theoretical in nature. Change types examined included digital transformation and information technology implementations in eight studies, structural reform and organisational restructuring in seven, human resource management and cultural change initiatives in six, process improvement including lean and agile transformations in five, and multiple or varied change types in eight studies. This distribution reflects a growing academic and practitioner interest in technology-driven and structural transitions within emerging economies, alongside persistent attention to public sector modernisation and workforce cultural alignment.

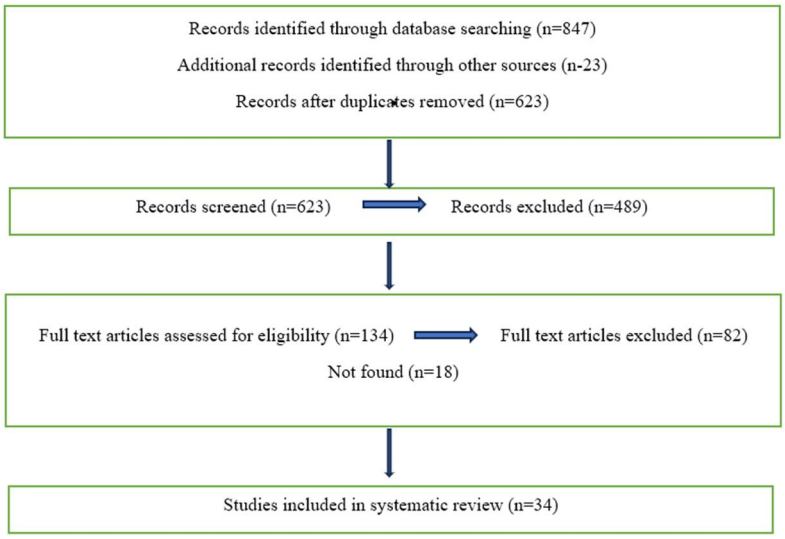


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow diagram.

Source: Adapted from [29].

A detailed summary of all 28 empirical studies, including country context, methodology, sample characteristics, and key findings, is provided in Appendix A. This table enhances the transparency and reproducibility of the systematic review by allowing readers to verify the evidence base underlying the thematic synthesis.

Quality appraisal [30] indicated generally strong methodological rigour across the empirical corpus. Eight studies achieved scores of 4.8 or higher, classified as excellent. Twenty-two studies fell within the good range of 3.8 to 4.6, and four studies were rated moderate, scoring between 3.0 and 3.6. No studies were rated poor or excluded on quality grounds. The mean quality score for empirical studies was 4.2 out of 5, with a range spanning 3.4 to 4.8. Common methodological constraints included reliance on cross-sectional designs that limit causal inference, the use of self-reported resistance measures susceptible to social desirability bias, and single-organisation case studies that restrict generalisability. Pre-2010 foundational texts were appraised using modified theoretical criteria and unanimously demonstrated high scholarly authority, conceptual coherence, and enduring citation influence within the change management and cross-cultural organisational literature. The overall quality benchmark confirms

that the evidence base is sufficiently robust to support theoretical synthesis and practical guidance, though the complete absence of longitudinal designs remains a notable methodological gap that restricts our understanding of how culture-resistance dynamics evolve across extended transformation lifecycles.

3.2. Catalyst mechanisms and resistance pathways

The identified mechanisms can be interpreted through both established cultural frameworks and indigenous cultural perspectives. Hierarchical preservation, collective solidarity, and uncertainty avoidance correspond closely with Hofstede's dimensions of power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance, respectively [8]. Face-saving behaviours align with Hall's high-context communication framework, where social harmony and indirect communication are prioritised [9]. Paternalistic authority and particularistic relationships, while partially reflected in existing cultural theories, are more comprehensively explained through indigenous perspectives that emphasise relational obligations, reciprocal loyalty, and culturally embedded authority structures [12]. This dual theoretical lens allows resistance to be understood not only as an organisational phenomenon but also as an expression of broader cultural logics operating within developing country contexts.

Thematic synthesis identified six distinct mechanisms through which organisational culture catalyses resistance to change in developing country contexts. **Table 1** provides a comprehensive synthesis of these mechanisms, mapping each to related Western cultural frameworks and indigenous constructs, describing characteristic resistance manifestations, quantifying the evidence base, and identifying implications for social sustainability and SDG alignment. Each mechanism reflects a specific cultural logic that interacts with change initiatives to produce predictable resistance patterns, carrying distinct consequences for sustainable social development. The following subsections elaborate on each mechanism with supporting evidence from the reviewed studies.

Hierarchical preservation operates through elevated power distance norms that condition employees to expect directive leadership and view participatory or decentralised change as ambiguous or illegitimate [37]. This mechanism emerged in 19 of the 28 empirical studies (68 % of the corpus) and appeared universally across African, Asian, and Latin American contexts. From a development perspective, hierarchical preservation frequently intersects with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, which emphasises transparent, accountable, and inclusive institutions [38,39]. When change initiatives bypass traditional authority channels or introduce flattened decision-making without cultural scaffolding, they trigger exclusionary practices that undermine trust in organisational governance and erode equitable participation. Conversely, when transformation secures visible endorsement from senior leaders and leverages existing authority structures, hierarchical norms can be reconfigured as channels for socially sustainable implementation, preserving cultural dignity while enabling phased adoption.

Table 1. Cultural catalyst mechanisms of resistance to change in developing countries - synthesis of evidence and social sustainability implications.

Cultural mechanism	Related western framework	Indigenous construct(s)	Resistance manifestations	Evidence base	Social sustainability implication	SDG alignment
Hierarchical preservation	Power distance [8]	Authority-based deference; Ubuntu (hierarchy as social order)	- Reluctance to participate without leadership approval - Passive compliance with resistance to autonomous decision-making - Delegation avoidance and upward referral of routine decisions	19 studies (68 %) Universal: Africa (n = 9), Asia (n = 7), Latin America (n = 3)	Undermines inclusive institutional governance; change bypassing authority channels erodes trust and excludes lower-tier employees from equitable participation	SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, Strong Institutions) - transparent and inclusive institutional governance
Collective solidarity	Collectivism [8]; Communitarianism [11]	Ubuntu (humanness); Harambee (pulling together)	- Consensus paralysis and delayed decision-making - Group-protective resistance; reluctance to hold peers accountable - Risk diffusion and shared responsibility avoidance	14 studies (50 %) Strong: Africa & Asia Moderate: Latin America	Fractures workplace solidarity; individualistic performance metrics trigger attrition and erode relational equity; collective buffering protects group cohesion but stalls operational progress	SDG 8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth) - decent work conditions, inclusive growth, psychological safety
Uncertainty avoidance	Uncertainty avoidance [8]; Risk aversion [11]	Economic precarity adaptation; Informal safety-net behaviours	- Avoidance of experimentation and innovation - Defensive resistance to ambiguous processes - Stress-related attrition and change fatigue - Preference for familiar, predictable workflows	11 studies (39 %) Universal, amplified by economic instability	Erodes employee wellbeing and livelihood security; weak formal safety nets make organisational stability a primary source of psychological security; job insecurity narratives trigger disengagement	SDG 8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth) - secure working environments; SDG 3 (Good Health & Wellbeing) - psychological safety
Particularistic relationships	High-context communication [9]; Particularism [11]	Guanxi (relational networks); Ubuntu (relational obligation); Wasta (intermediary connections)	- Resistance to universalistic, standardised procedures - Informal network buffering that neutralises formal change - Parallel maintenance of legacy processes - Selective compliance and procedural workarounds	9 studies (32 %) Strong: Africa & South Asia Absent: Latin American sample (data gap)	Marginalises informal knowledge holders; disrupts adaptive governance systems in weak institutional environments; erodes social cohesion and community-level implementation capacity	SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, Strong Institutions) - culturally legitimate, effective institutions; SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities & Communities) - community cohesion preservation
Paternalistic authority	Power distance [8]; Dependency/protection norms	Paternalismo (Latin America); Ubuntu (leadership as care)	- Reluctance toward autonomous change and self-management - Learned helplessness in response to leadership withdrawal - Change fatigue from increased workload without support	8 studies (29 %) Concentrated: Africa & South Asia	Undermines capability development; leadership withdrawal without transitional support triggers resistance; transformation framed as protection enables skill advancement and equitable participation	SDG 4 (Quality Education) - inclusive quality education and training; SDG 8 (Decent Work) - sustainable workforce development
Face-saving and shame avoidance	High-context communication [9]; Dignity/reputation norms	Mianzi (China); Face (Southeast Asia); Saving face (East Asia)	- Silent non-adoption without overt opposition - Ritual compliance and performative acceptance - System workarounds to avoid public failure - Selective information filtering	5 studies (18 %) Exclusive: East & Southeast Asia	Erodes psychological safety; public performance evaluations and transparent failure reporting trigger indirect resistance; private learning opportunities preserve dignity and enable inclusive skill development	SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) - workplace practices honouring cultural dignity; SDG 8 (Decent Work) - psychological safety and inclusion

Source: Authors synthesis.

Collective solidarity emerges from pronounced collectivist orientations that prioritise group harmony, consensus, and relational loyalty over individual accountability or performance-driven reforms [40]. Documented in 14 studies (50 % of the empirical corpus), this mechanism demonstrated a strong presence in African and Asian contexts, with moderate expression in Latin American settings. Collective solidarity presents both opportunities and risks for social sustainability. When change initiatives are perceived as threatening group cohesion or imposing individualistic accountability metrics, resistance manifests as consensus paralysis, risk diffusion, and reluctance to hold peers accountable [25,41]. This collective buffering protects relational equity but frequently stalls operational progress. It further directly engages with SDG 8, which promotes decent work and inclusive economic growth [39]. Culturally misaligned performance management systems frequently fracture workplace solidarity, triggering attrition and psychological strain among workforce populations. However, when transformation is framed as community-beneficial and implemented through team-based co-creation workshops, collective solidarity becomes a powerful enabler of inclusive participation and equitable skill development, advancing workplace dignity and sustainable employment practices.

Uncertainty avoidance reflects cultural discomfort with ambiguity and risk, particularly when change initiatives introduce unpredictable workflows, performance metrics, or job security threats [42]. This appeared in 11 studies (39 % of the empirical corpus) and was universally present, though consistently amplified by the macroeconomic instability and informal employment conditions characteristic of developing economies [33,37,43]. Uncertainty avoidance directly intersects with social sustainability through employee wellbeing and livelihood security [28]. In contexts where formal social safety nets are weak, organisational stability functions as a primary source of economic and psychological security [44]. Change initiatives that introduce ambiguity without transitional support trigger defensive resistance, stress-related attrition, and disengagement [40,45]. Addressing this requires explicitly decoupling change from job insecurity narratives, providing clear procedural timelines, and investing in reskilling programmes that preserve livelihood dignity [23,46,47]. When uncertainty is managed through transparent communication and phased implementation, resistance diminishes and social sustainability metrics may improve, directly supporting SDG 8's emphasis on secure and sustainable working environments [39].

Particularistic relationships operate through in-group loyalty, informal network reliance, and relational trust systems that frequently bypass formal organisational procedures [48]. When change initiatives impose universalistic rules, compliance monitoring, or standardised evaluation systems, they disrupt established informal equilibria and trigger institutional resistance. This was identified in nine studies (32 % of the empirical corpus) and was strongly present in African and South Asian contexts, while entirely absent in Latin American studies, reflecting a notable regional data gap. Particularistic relationships are frequently mischaracterised in Western frameworks as nepotism or inefficiency, yet they often function as adaptive governance instruments in contexts where formal institutions are weak or unreliable [43]. Disrupting these networks without cultural bridging erodes social cohesion and marginalises informal knowledge holders. Socially sustainable change initiatives leverage existing relational

networks as implementation channels, recognising that trust flows through personal connections rather than organisational charts. This approach preserves community equity while gradually integrating formal compliance requirements, directly advancing SDG 16's call for effective, accountable institutions that operate with cultural legitimacy rather than coercive enforcement [39].

Paternalistic authority emerges from leadership cultures that cultivate dependency expectations, wherein employees anticipate managerial provision, protection, and explicit guidance [45]. Change initiatives promoting autonomy, self-management, or digital upskilling are frequently interpreted as abandonment or increased workload without corresponding support structures [23,26,49]. Documented in eight studies (29 % of the empirical corpus), this mechanism was concentrated in African and South Asian contexts. Paternalistic authority carries profound social sustainability implications; when leadership withdraws protection without transitional support, resistance manifests as learned helplessness, change fatigue, and deliberate underperformance [26,28,50]. However, when transformation is positioned as paternalistic protection, wherein change is framed as leadership caring for subordinate welfare and long-term capability development, resistance transforms into cooperative adaptation [24,25,51]. This reframing preserves cultural dignity while enabling skill advancement and equitable participation in digital and structural transitions, aligning with SDG 4's emphasis on inclusive quality education and training, which underpins sustainable workforce development [39,49].

Face-saving and shame avoidance operates through cultural norms prioritising social harmony, reputation preservation, and indirect communication [32]. Resistance manifests not as overt opposition, but through ritual compliance, silent non-adoption, system workarounds, and selective information filtering to avoid public confrontation or perceived loss of dignity [38,40]. This appeared in five studies (18 % of the empirical corpus) and was exclusively present in East and Southeast Asian contexts [23,46,45]. Face-saving tactics are closely linked to psychological safety and inclusive participation. Change initiatives that rely on public performance evaluations, direct confrontation, or transparent failure reporting trigger indirect resistance to preserve dignity and avoid social embarrassment [38,49,52]. Socially sustainable implementation requires private learning opportunities, non-public feedback, and culturally appropriate communication channels that allow employees to adapt without public exposure [23,44]. When face-saving norms are respected rather than violated, resistance diminishes and inclusive skill development accelerates, supporting SDG 10's objective of reduced inequalities through workplace practices that honour cultural dignity and prevent marginalisation [39].

Pathway analysis revealed that the culture-resistance relationship operates predominantly through direct pathways, where cultural dimensions independently generate resistance without intervening variables [33,45,49,53]. Direct pathways were documented in 18 studies, representing just over 64 % of the empirical corpus. Moderated pathways, where culture interacts with other organisational or contextual variables to amplify or attenuate resistance, appeared in seven studies (25 %). Mediated pathways, in which culture influences an intermediate construct such as change readiness, trust, or psychological safety, which in turn shapes resistance, were identified in three studies (10 %) [28,54]. The predominance of direct pathways

suggests that cultural assumptions frequently operate autonomously in catalysing resistance, particularly when change initiatives directly challenge foundational workplace norms or authority structures [24,47,50]. This direct catalytic effect carries significant social sustainability implications, as culturally misaligned interventions trigger immediate defensive responses that erode trust and wellbeing before any mediated psychological processes can mitigate the impact.

3.3. Regional variations and the superiority of indigenous frameworks

For analytical purposes, this review distinguishes between Western-derived cultural frameworks and indigenous cultural constructs. Western frameworks, including cultural dimensions [8], communication theory [9], and organisational culture model [7], provide broad explanatory categories that facilitate cross-cultural comparison. Indigenous constructs, by contrast, originate within specific social and cultural environments and capture locally embedded meanings, relationships, and behavioural expectations that may not be fully represented within universal cultural models. Rather than viewing these approaches as competing perspectives, this review treats them as complementary lenses. Western frameworks offer valuable structural explanations, while indigenous constructs provide contextual depth that enhances understanding of resistance dynamics within developing economies. A comparative analysis of studies employing indigenous cultural constructs versus those utilising Western-derived frameworks revealed systematic differences in analytical depth and practical relevance. Eleven studies (39 % of the empirical corpus) explicitly incorporated indigenous constructs such as Ubuntu, Guanxi, face-saving norms, paternalistic authority, or particularistic relationality [20,25,26,55]. Conversely, 17 studies (61 %) applied Western frameworks, including cultural dimensions [8], cultural levels [7], or the Competing Values Framework [33,48,49]. Studies utilising indigenous constructs consistently identified a broader range of resistance manifestations, demonstrated higher contextual nuance, framed resistance as culturally normative rather than individually pathological, and generated specific, actionable practical implications that advanced social sustainability outcomes [20,25,40]. In contrast, studies relying exclusively on Western frameworks predominantly captured hierarchical preservation, collective solidarity, and uncertainty avoidance. They offered lower contextual specificity, frequently framed resistance as an individual psychological barrier, and produced generic managerial recommendations that often-undermined inclusive participation [33,43,49]. This pattern indicates that indigenous constructs provide richer contextual explanations of resistance dynamics than Western-derived frameworks, proving more effective in capturing the full spectrum of culture-catalysed resistance and in designing transformation strategies that preserve cultural dignity and equitable participation.

Regional comparison demonstrated both convergence and divergence in catalytic patterns and their social sustainability implications. Hierarchical preservation emerged as the only universal mechanism, strongly present in nine of 12 African studies [33,48,50], seven of 10 Asian studies [45,49,56], and all four Latin American studies [46,47,54,57,58]. Collective solidarity demonstrated a strong presence in African and Asian contexts but only moderate expression in Latin American settings [25,41].

Uncertainty avoidance appeared strongly in African contexts, moderately in Asian and Latin American contexts, and was consistently intensified by economic precarity [33,37,43]. Particularistic relationships were strongly present in African contexts, moderately present in Asian contexts, and entirely absent in the Latin American sample, highlighting a regional data gap. Paternalistic authority was strongly present in African contexts, moderately present in South Asian contexts, and absent in Latin American studies [26,50,51]. Face-saving was exclusively documented in East and Southeast Asian studies, reflecting culturally specific communication norms that do not translate directly to African or Latin American contexts [23,40,46,59].

These regional patterns indicate that while certain cultural drivers of resistance operate universally across developing economies, others are geographically bounded and require context-specific diagnostic approaches. From a sustainable development perspective, this regional variation necessitates differentiated implementation strategies that respect local cultural logics rather than imposing uniform change templates, thereby advancing SDG 11's emphasis on sustainable communities through organisational practices that align with local relational norms and preserve social cohesion during periods of structural transition [39,54].

3.4. The cultural catalysis model and alignment with sustainable development goals

Based on these findings, the Cultural Catalysis Model is proposed as an integrative explanatory framework that explicitly links culture-resistance dynamics to social sustainability outcomes. The proposed model comprises three interconnected components. The first component, cultural substrates, consists of deep, often tacit assumptions that exist prior to any specific change initiative. These substrates correspond to the six mechanisms identified in the synthesis and represent the foundational cultural logics that shape how organisational members perceive authority, relationships, risk, and legitimacy [7,8,19]. The second component, catalytic triggers, encompasses change initiatives that are perceived as violating substrate assumptions. When change programmes introduce flattened hierarchies, individual performance metrics, ambiguous workflows, formal compliance systems, autonomous decision-making, or public evaluation processes, they activate the catalytic process by threatening culturally embedded equilibria [4,20]. The third component, resistance manifestations, captures how resistance emerges across active, passive, and systemic dimensions. Active resistance includes overt opposition, vocal dissent, and collective mobilisation against change initiatives [25]. Passive resistance encompasses ritual compliance, silent non-adoption, selective engagement, and parallel legacy process maintenance [28,40]. Systemic resistance involves organisational inertia, decoupling between formal policy and informal practice, and informal network buffering that neutralises change momentum.

The central insight of the model is that resistance is not irrational or pathological. Within this framework, resistance functions as a rational signal that a change initiative violates culturally held assumptions. The intensity and form of resistance correspond directly to the degree of substrate violation and the cultural legitimacy of the change architecture. This dynamic is illustrated in the proposed Cultural Catalysis Model

(**Figure 2**). The Cultural Catalysis Model should be viewed as a theoretically informed integrative framework derived from thematic synthesis rather than an empirically validated causal model.

The six catalyst mechanisms and regional patterns discussed above are directly supported by evidence extracted from the reviewed studies. The Cultural Catalysis Model represents the authors' interpretive synthesis of these findings and should therefore be understood as a conceptual integration of the evidence rather than a direct empirical finding emerging from any single study.

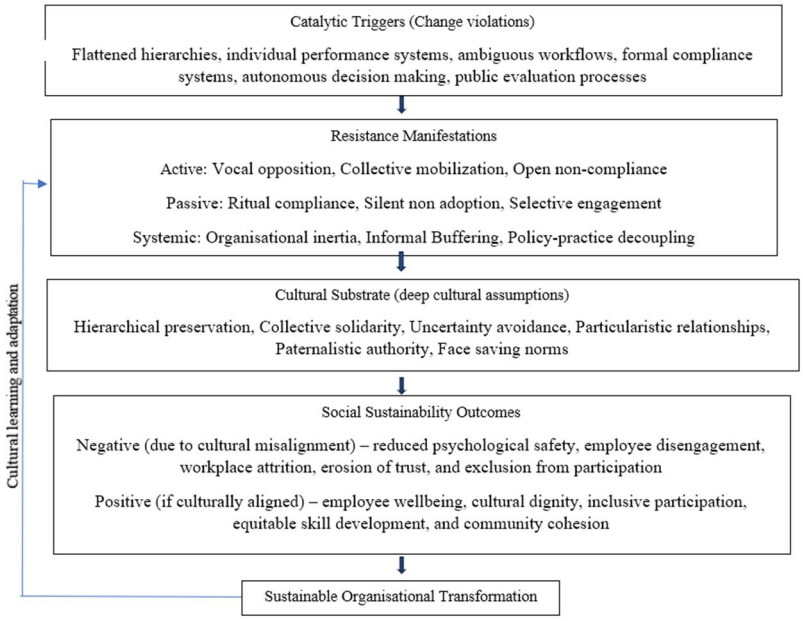


Figure 2. Proposed model (Authors' compilation).

Most critically, the Cultural Catalysis Model provides a structured lens for aligning organisational transformation with multiple United Nations SDGs [39]. When change architectures intentionally bridge formal objectives with indigenous cultural logics, they advance SDG 8 by fostering decent work conditions, psychological safety, and inclusive skill development. They support SDG 9 by enabling culturally grounded adoption of digital and technological innovations, reducing implementation failure rates and ensuring that Industry 4.0 transitions do not marginalise vulnerable workforce populations [44]. They contribute to SDG 10 by designing equitable participation mechanisms that prevent the exclusion of informal network holders and ensure that transformation benefits are distributed across organisational hierarchies rather than concentrated at managerial levels. They advance SDG 11 by preserving community cohesion during organisational restructuring, recognising that workplace ecosystems in developing contexts are deeply embedded in urban and peri-urban social fabrics. Finally, they strengthen SDG 16 by transforming informal governance networks from sources of opacity into culturally legitimised channels for transparent decision-making, accountability, and institutional trust-building. The model demonstrates that culturally misaligned change initiatives systematically erode these sustainability pillars, while culturally grounded transformation strategies function as

enablers of sustainable social development across multiple SDG dimensions simultaneously [23,28,50].

The findings also extend beyond organisational change management and contribute to broader debates within development studies. The mechanisms identified in this review mirror many of the cultural dynamics previously associated with innovation diffusion, entrepreneurial activity, institutional reform, and technology adoption in developing economies [13–16]. Hierarchical preservation and uncertainty avoidance may slow experimentation and innovation uptake, while collectivist and relational orientations can either constrain or accelerate transformation depending on how change is framed and implemented. This suggests that the cultural factors shaping resistance to organisational change are closely intertwined with wider developmental processes that influence organisational competitiveness, institutional effectiveness, and socio-economic transformation. Consequently, culturally aligned change strategies may generate benefits that extend beyond individual organisations by strengthening adaptive capacity, innovation readiness, and sustainable development outcomes at community and national levels [17,18].

3.5. Practical implications for development and organisational transformation

The findings carry urgent implications for change practitioners, senior leadership, and policy architects operating in developing country contexts. To navigate these complexities, organisations must shift from compliance-driven change management to culturally embedded alignment that explicitly advances social sustainability [43].

This begins with pre-implementation cultural diagnostics. Organisations must map cultural substrates, including power distance norms, collectivist orientations, paternalistic expectations, face-saving communication patterns, and informal network structures, before designing change interventions [26,33,40,45]. Diagnostic tools should be context-adapted rather than imported, capturing indigenous relational norms alongside formal cultural metrics [20,25,38,40]. Furthermore, universalistic change templates require deliberate hybridisation. This includes blending formal milestones with informal consensus rituals, pacing autonomy transfer to align with paternalistic expectations, and designing digital implementations that preserve face-saving communication channels [23,26,40].

Successful implementation also relies on identifying and empowering informal cultural champions, including respected senior figures, relational network hubs, and team leaders who hold cultural legitimacy [25,41,48]. In high power-distance and collectivist settings, top-down mandates frequently fail without culturally sanctioned endorsement [25,33,45]. To counter economic precarity and change fatigue, leadership must explicitly decouple change from job insecurity narratives [28,37,47]. Engaging in transparent communication, co-creation workshops, and visible leadership modelling can reduce affective resistance by framing change as collective advancement rather than individual disruption [26,44,51]. Change initiatives should also work with hierarchy rather than against it, securing visible endorsement from senior leaders and leveraging existing authority structures to legitimise transformation [33,49,50]. Addressing groups rather than individuals, using team-based change

communications, and reducing ambiguity through clear procedures and predictable timelines are equally important for aligning interventions with cultural substrates [23,25,51]. In essence, positioning change as paternalistic protection, wherein transformation is framed as leadership caring for subordinate welfare, and creating face-saving pathways that provide private learning opportunities (such as non-public feedback), substantially reduces resistance intensity across multiple developing contexts while advancing equitable participation, psychological safety, and sustainable skill development [25,26,40,44].

3.5.1. Policy implications

Beyond organisational practice, the findings carry important implications for policymakers responsible for economic development, public sector reform, workforce development, and digital transformation. Leadership development programmes should incorporate culturally responsive change management competencies that enable public and private sector leaders to navigate hierarchical norms, collectivist expectations, and relational governance systems. Workforce development policies should prioritise continuous reskilling and change readiness initiatives that reduce uncertainty and support employee wellbeing during periods of transformation. National digital transformation strategies may similarly benefit from recognising cultural barriers to technology adoption [14] and incorporating culturally sensitive implementation approaches. Finally, institutional reform programmes should account for indigenous governance practices and informal relational networks when designing accountability and participation mechanisms, thereby improving both implementation effectiveness and social sustainability outcomes.

3.6. Limitations and future research directions

Despite methodological rigour, several limitations warrant acknowledgement. The English-language filter introduces potential publication bias, excluding regionally significant studies published in French, Portuguese, Spanish, Arabic, or indigenous languages. Regional distribution is uneven, with Africa and Asia overrepresented relative to Latin America and the MENA region, limiting cross-contextual generalisability. The predominance of cross-sectional designs and self-reported resistance scales restricts causal inference and may not adequately capture longitudinal resistance evolution or indirect behavioural manifestations such as system workarounds and ritual compliance [28,40,45]. The deliberate cap on pre-2010 foundational texts ensure contemporary relevance but constrains historical trajectory analysis of how colonial legacies and structural adjustment programmes shaped modern cultural-resistance dynamics. In essence, the current evidence base lacks longitudinal social sustainability metrics, making it difficult to track how culturally aligned or misaligned change initiatives impact employee wellbeing, equitable participation, and community spillover effects over extended transformation lifecycles [27,29,32].

To address these limitations and advance the field, future research should prioritise several interconnected directions. Grounded theory and ethnographic studies in Latin American contexts are urgently needed to capture indigenous constructs and to examine how these shape resistance and social sustainability outcomes in

organisations [47,59,60]. Longitudinal designs tracking culture-resistance dynamics over 12 to 24 months will enable researchers to observe how resistance evolves across change lifecycles, from initial announcement through implementation to post-adoption consolidation, while simultaneously measuring social sustainability indicators such as psychological safety, equitable skill development, and inclusive governance [28,44,51]. Research in Middle Eastern and North African contexts will address a significant geographic gap and examine how religious, tribal, and post-colonial cultural substrates interact with modern change initiatives to shape socially sustainable transformation [25,41]. Scale development research should produce psychometrically validated measures for paternalism, particularism, face-saving, and other indigenous constructs to enable cross-study comparison and quantitative synthesis [20,26,38,40]. Intervention research should empirically test whether change initiatives aligned with the Cultural Catalysis Model produce measurably lower resistance, higher adoption rates, and improved social sustainability outcomes compared to universalistic templates [23,44,51]. Cross-level cultural analysis utilising multilevel modelling will disentangle the interplay between national culture, organisational culture, and team-level subcultures, clarifying where resistance originates and how it cascades across organisational tiers [7,8,49]. Finally, emerging change domains including artificial intelligence integration, environmental social and governance compliance, climate adaptation, and public digital governance require targeted investigation to capture novel cultural friction points in developing economies and to design transformation strategies that advance both operational resilience and sustainable social development [23,27,32,44].

4. Key takeaways

- Organisational culture does not merely moderate resistance to change; it actively catalyses it through six identifiable mechanisms: hierarchical preservation, collective solidarity, uncertainty avoidance, particularistic relationships, paternalistic authority, and face-saving.
- Hierarchical preservation is the only universally observed mechanism across African, Asian, and Latin American contexts, operating directly in over 64 % of empirical studies.
- Indigenous cultural constructs (e.g., Ubuntu, Guanxi, paternalism, face-saving) consistently outperform Western-derived frameworks in capturing context-specific resistance dynamics and generating actionable, socially sustainable interventions.
- Culturally misaligned change initiatives erode social sustainability by undermining psychological safety, marginalising informal knowledge systems, and triggering workforce attrition.
- The Cultural Catalysis Model reframes resistance as a rational diagnostic signal, enabling practitioners to design hybrid change architectures that align formal objectives with indigenous cultural logics.
- Advancing multiple UN Sustainable Development Goals [4,8–11,16] requires shifting from compliance-driven change management to culturally

intelligent transformation that preserves dignity, equity, and inclusive governance.

5. Conclusion

This review synthesised evidence from thirty-four studies to examine how organisational culture contributes to resistance to change in developing country contexts and to map these dynamics onto social sustainability outcomes. Six mechanisms were identified through rigorous thematic synthesis, with hierarchical preservation emerging as the only universal catalyst present across all regional settings. Indigenous cultural constructs consistently outperformed Western-derived frameworks in capturing the full spectrum of resistance dynamics. This demonstrates higher contextual nuance and generates more actionable practical implications that advance equitable participation, cultural dignity, and inclusive governance. It further led to the proposed Cultural Catalysis Model, which reframes resistance as a rational diagnostic signal rather than a pathological obstacle, offering change practitioners a structured approach to cultural alignment and intervention design that explicitly supports sustainable social development. The evidence base demonstrates generally good methodological quality, yet significant gaps remain, most critically the complete absence of longitudinal studies and the systematic under-representation of Latin American and MENA contexts.

The theoretical contribution of this review lies in its systematic elevation of indigenous constructs, its identification of six distinct catalyst mechanisms, and its integration of pathway analysis into a coherent explanatory model that explicitly links culture-resistance dynamics to social sustainability outcomes. The empirical contribution emanates from the comprehensive mapping of thirty-four studies across more than twenty developing countries, the quality benchmark established through the [30], and the systematic identification of regional mechanism variations and their implications for inclusive transformation. The practical contribution provides six mechanism-based recommendations for change agents. It also provides a diagnostic approach to resistance mapping, and actionable guidance for development practitioners navigating culturally complex transformation environments while advancing employee wellbeing, equitable participation, and community spillover effects.

OC in developing countries is not a static obstacle to be circumvented, but a dynamic substrate that shapes how change is interpreted, negotiated, and enacted. When change initiatives disregard cultural ecologies, resistance emerges as a rational, protective response. This frequently erodes social sustainability by undermining psychological safety, marginalising informal knowledge systems, and triggering attrition among vulnerable workforce populations. When change architectures intentionally bridge formal objectives with indigenous cultural logics, resistance transforms into a diagnostic signal and a co-creation opportunity that advances inclusive governance, equitable skill development, and sustainable community wellbeing.

The problem is rarely the resistance itself. The problem is the change initiative that fails to account for the cultural logic within which resistance becomes rational.

The evidence reviewed strongly suggests that culture is associated with resistance. The task is not to eliminate it, but to understand it, align with it, and leverage it toward sustainable transformation that honours cultural dignity, advances equitable participation, and fosters resilient social development across the Global South.

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